



## Interview with Don Worth

**Kathy Hersh**  
**Interviewer**

S1: 00:00

We are interviewing Don Worth at the Art Deco Welcome Center Museum on December 16th, 2019. The interviewer is Kathy Hersh. And thank you very much for giving up some time for this archive. The first question I want to touch on in the first scene is, I know that you are a very serious collector and lover, appreciator of art. So let's talk a little bit about Art Basel and its importance to Miami Beach and have you had any involvement with it directly.

**Don Worth**

S2: 00:37

Involvement in Art Basel. Mostly through the Miami Marine Stadium, which is the project that we've been working on for 12 years. We've had five different exhibits over the years that have occurred during Art Basel. Other than that, I'm like everybody else. I run around and enjoy it all.

S1: 01:02

So how have you linked that? Is it taking advantage of the crowds being here and the additional eyeballs that might see the marine stadium?

S2: 01:16

Well, in the case of the stadium, as you may know this is a preservation project to restore a marvelous building that operated from '62 to '93. And when you're an advocate you're always looking to promote and we figured we could tie it in to Art Basel in different ways. So one year, for example, there was a photographer who did some wonderful high resolution, high definition photos of the marine stadium and we had an exhibit of his work. And fortunately, we got some really good press with that.



- S2: 01:54      Another year, Audemars Piguet, the large watch company approached us with cockamamie idea of placing a full-size inflatable Swiss Chalet on a floating barge opposite the marine stadium and then lighting up the Swiss Chalet in the marine stadium and hosting all of these fancy parties and we said, "Yeah, this is really going to happen within the space of three months." Long story short, we pulled it off and they pulled it off. They spent a lot of money, again, generating a lot of press for the stadium.
- S2: 02:29      Another year, we featured graffiti artists who had done art work at the stadium. We had their photographs for sale. In the last two years, actually, one of our projects has been we've given seats, original seats of the marine stadium to artists to let them create art with found objects. We had an exhibition last year and an exhibition this year. And this year, the story made the front page of the Miami Herald. So like many people, we try to tag along to Art Basel and generate awareness for our project and it's actually worked pretty good. Plus my wife and I have gotten to enjoy the art.
- S1: 03:13      Tell us about the marine stadium preservation. Where is it going? What have been some of the ups and downs, for example?
- S2: 03:22      Well, there'd been a lot of ups and downs because we started this project 12 years ago, just about now in 2008, and the way it happened was my wife and I, Nina and I, we collaborate on pretty much everything. We saw an invitation to a lecture at University of Miami called Preserving the Modern, and on the invitation there was an early sketch of the marine stadium, and I said to Nina, "Well, gee, I wonder what's going on with this thing?" Actually, we've never seen it, but we were aware of it from



another project we had done, and Nina suggested, "Well, why don't you find out."

S2: 04:00

So I called the City of Miami and basically discovered that this thing is in limbo. We then called Dade Heritage Trust, the local county preservation organization, and said, "We'd like to come to your next board meeting and present the stadium. This thing needs a kick-start." So we did. This was in January of 2009. Suggested that Dade Heritage Trust form a little group. They did. They were all excited about it, and then a month later we had our first meeting. And if you know anything about preservation, every preservation meeting there are usually five preservationists and they're all the same people.

S2: 04:38

This meeting I remember walking in, there were 20 people there and I didn't know any of them. And at that point I said to myself, "There's something different about this." So we've had a lot ups and downs in 12 years. We formed a group with the assistance of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the World Monuments Fund, and Gloria Estefan is our spokesperson. It is series of events for six years gaining increasing momentum. Signed an agreement with the city to raise the money.

S2: 05:08

Then things exploded in a bad way five years ago. The group basically blew up because it had brought forth a proposal, which I'll just call ill-advised, but the city has picked up the pieces and now we're at the point where the architectural plans are done. The city is selecting an operator for the stadium. And hopefully, in this year, we're going to be on the verge of getting the financing approval and getting things on track. I guess, when I think about it for the projects that Nina and I have been involved in, and



we've been involved in three large projects.

- S2: 05:53 I've really got three sayings that are sort of my mantra for doing these things. First is by Thomas Edison, which reflects this one, "I haven't failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work." The second one is from the great philosopher Kenny Rogers, "Know when to hold them, know when to fold them, know when to walk away and know when to run." No matter how much you believe in a particular issue, no matter how passionate you are, you got to look at it and see if it really makes sense. Does it make sense economically? Is there a path politically? Can you really do this? And you have to scope that out in a hardheaded way upfront.
- S2: 06:42 And the third saying, I guess, this actually comes from an old ward boss in Boston, which is where I'm from, a guy by the name of Martin Lomasney, "Don't write if you can talk. Don't talk if you can nod. Don't nod if you can wink." Or to paraphrase the saying that my father used to use, "Even a fish wouldn't get into trouble if he'd keep his mouth shut." These preservation battles, and I'm sure you've seen many of them, they tend to get very emotional. Don't say things that you don't have to. Don't ruin relationships with emotional sayings. So, anyway, that's a very long-winded answer to your question.
- S1: 07:34 Are you optimistic that it's going to go forward then?
- S2: 07:37 Cautiously optimistic. This is Miami. You never know what's going to happen. I thought I'd seen it all coming from Boston, but no. But I am cautiously optimistic, and we feel enormously gratified if everyone who's worked on this so we can have some success.
- S1: 07:56 One of the things that I gather from having followed



the story a little bit is environmental impact, and I noted that you all are involved in environmental causes as well like Virginia Key. And do you see the intersection of historic preservation and environmental preservation as being at odds? Or can the focus really enhance both things?

S2: 08:36

I think with the marine stadium it's possible really to thread the needle. I'm not sure there's an enormous environmental impact there. Remember, for example, that the marine stadium basin is man-made. It was dredged out and the land in front of it is filled. It was a parking lot. So in that sense it's not like they paved paradise and put up a parking lot. It was a parking lot. Sea level rise is an issue for the marine stadium as it sits in a very low area of Miami. Although, again, looking at it from a hardheaded point of view, I think that even with the most aggressive levels of sea level rise that stadium should be fine given its potential economic life.

S2: 09:31

Another issue there though that's current is the Miami Boat Show, which I've been an advocate for. But right now they have a very long setup, take down period. It takes them three and a half months to setup and then take down their tents. And that in a sense is an environmental impact and that's an issue we're going to have to deal with. So yes, there are trade-offs in all of these things.

S1: 09:58

Do you think that's been one of the major factors then is the Miami Boat Show and the impact that it has environmentally in slowing down the whole redevelopment of that area?

S2: 10:10

Yeah. This is an example of the perfect is the enemy of the good. If I had had my brothers it would perhaps be a green field in front of the



stadium and so forth. The issue was is that when the group that I co-founded Friends of Miami Marine Stadium essentially failed five years ago. We were suppose to raise \$30 million in 18 months. We didn't do it. We thought we actually could, but we didn't do it. That site was very much at risk. And it's a very valuable piece of land. And it's my sense that if the boat show had not have shown up there would be condos and hotels on that land. It's a practical matter. It's just too valuable to sit from all field. I'm sorry.

S2: 11:02

So I believe that the boat show actually saved the site, and we considered at that time that they would be a good partner going forward. It makes a great signature event for the site. More people actually came to the boat show than had visited that site in the previous 25 years. The environmental impacts from the boat show and the traffic impacts are not significant. That's what people had been concerned about. They're just not. The basin there is very resilient, but the setup and take down time, that's an issue.

S2: 11:42

So with all of these things, getting back to your initial question, there are always trade-offs. I love preservation, but it's got to work economically and environmentally and it has to be sustainable. I think there's a way out with the marine stadium, but it's not simple cut and dry.

S1: 12:06

What brought you to Miami Beach, initially?

S2: 12:10

An accident. When I think of all of our involvement here for 30 years it's always an accident. I've collected over the years Art Deco posters. This was in the late '70s, early '80's. My dad lived in Boynton Beach and I visited him in December of 1987 and I'd heard there was this Art Deco District in Miami Beach. And since I collected posters I thought that





was interesting. So drove down, took a walking tour with the Miami Design Preservation League, when I finished the tour I went to a payphone, which existed at that time, called up a friend of mine and said, "Allen, you said you knew a real estate agent in Miami Beach." And he gave me the number. I was like, "Living in Boston it's cold and I was getting tired of it." So I called the agent and said, "Do you have any condos in an Art Deco building on the water?"

S2: 13:12

Came back five days later, saw one unit at 1390 Ocean Drive, it's the last one bedroom condo on the water, signed the purchase and sale agreement for \$58,000 plus \$4,000 for the parking space, which is probably worth more than the unit, drove back to Boynton Beach, got up the next morning at 6:00 AM turn to my father and said, "Dad, guess what? I'm buying a condo in Miami Beach." To which he said, "You're crazy." So rented it out, bought it, rented it out for six years, then Nina and I got married in '93, brought her down here hoping, tempting that she would agree to a change of life for both of us, which she did, that's how we got here.

S1: 14:05

Wow. Why did your father think you were crazy?

S2: 14:08

Because back then everybody thought that moving to Miami Beach was a crazy idea. Even in '93, when we told all of our friends we were moving here. If you remember this is when tourists were being gunned down. People thought we were nuts. And Nina will tell you what her parents thought of the idea, and they weren't really keen on it. So we've lived on our perch on Ocean Drive and we've seen things change.

S1: 14:39

What's most remarkable to you in the changes?



- S2: 14:44 I don't know. I'm going to let her explain that better.
- S1: 14:49 You mentioned that you had the privilege of getting to know Tony Goldman or having some interactions with him. Could you tell us about that please?
- S2: 15:00 Yeah. We worked with Tony. We've done three big projects down here. We tend to sort of get involved in projects. The first was a photography exhibit of mid-century architecture of Miami Beach and New York City which traveled to The Municipal Art Society back in 2002. And we met Tony then and Tony became the sponsor for that. And our second was a project, again, sister cities Shanghai and Miami Art Deco and Tony became the sponsor of that but in a much bigger way. Basically, we had had this idea to do a photography book of the Art Deco of Miami Beach and Shanghai which you can actually see there. All photos taken by China's first freelance photographer. And this required some money, \$15,000. Not a whole lot, but not something that you're going to find on the street. And there was only one person I knew who would possibly write a check on such short notice and it was Tony. And we pitched him and he said yes.
- S2: 16:26 And then for the marine stadium, I remember going back to him, oh, about eight years later. And at this point I knew him enough not necessarily looking for money, but just to get his idea. So I remember going to him and saying, laying out the project, "Here's the marine stadium. Here's what we're trying to do. If you were me, what would you do?" And Tony said, "Well, if I were you, I would ask Tony Goldman to visit the marine stadium and do a video of him walking through the stadium giving you his ideas." And I said, "Gee, do you think we can really get that guy?" He said, "Yeah."
- S2: 17:16 So that's what we did. And I still look at that eight





minute video. He was so far advanced, his ideas were. I still think of them all the time. They're so true. And what I say about Tony is all of us see the world in black and white, Tony saw it in technicolor. What a gift to this community.

- S1: 17:45 He's had quite an impact down here hasn't he when you think of that?
- S2: 17:48 On so many people I'm just a little pebble, of all of the people he influenced. Just the fact he went to Emerson College, the guy had a theater background. He didn't get any MBA in finance. A wonderful inspiration.
- S1: 18:14 And what was his personality like?
- S2: 18:18 I didn't spend enough time with him to tell you that. The times we had with him were few and precious, but like many people I just sort of listened carefully to everything he said and be honored to be-- he's one of those people when you're in his presence you just felt great.
- S1: 18:41 Well, he must have-- it sounds like he had a sense of humor in the way he said if I were you I would ask Tony Goldman.
- S2: 18:46 Yeah. Sure, he did. I'm sure he did. He was a street guy, but a fun street guy with a big heart.
- S1: 18:56 What do you think of the wall mural in Wynwood, the portrait of him?
- S2: 19:01 All I can say is when Tony started Wynwood, even after all of the success he had, I kept saying to myself, "I don't really see how this is going to work." Little did I know. Little did I know. He took and it-- how he came up with that? I don't know. But he figured it out. Not to say that everything he did work, but a lot of it sure did.



- S1: 19:33      Every time I go there I feel that I'm in a magical place. And do you think maybe he was a magician in some way? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what did he have? He have vision. He saw the world in technicolor. But then he was able to infect other people with his idea.
- S2: 19:54      Yeah. Remember he was a singer also. He befriended jazz musicians.
- S1: 20:00      I didn't know that.
- S2: 20:01      Yeah. He was a crooner. He got at least several albums.
- S1: 20:08      Amazing.
- S2: 20:08      And by the way, if you didn't get a chance to speak to Tony, then interview Marlo Courtney.
- S1: 20:17      We have interviewed Marlo. Yes.
- S2: 20:19      And Marlo in his own right. Everybody always looks at the shining star, but Marlo was sort of the number two guy in the background making everything happen.
- S1: 20:33      I'm glad we interviewed him. So you've been here 30 years you say. One of the fascinating things about Miami Beach we've discovered in talking to people is that it seems to reinvent itself almost every decade. What phases have you seen in Miami Beach? Or what changes in the 30 years you've been here with the ring side seat on Ocean Drive?
- S2: 21:07      Well, a lot because we live on the second floor on Ocean Drive with window seats and we probably spent more time looking at the street literally than anybody else in the last 30 years. And it changes more than every 10 years. It changes more often than that. I can tell you that when I put the deposit on our place there were three restaurants on



Ocean Drive. There was the News Cafe, there was Tropics at the Edison and there was Mappy's Cafe, which was a Cuban cafe in our building 1390 Ocean Drive. The rest of the street, they were metal chairs with elderly people in them. Now, we sit in our fiberglass chairs, so now we are them. I think we've just seen the cycles of things go through and I'm not sure where things will end up.

S1: 22:16

Well, the ocean is going to be closer. That's under our feet right now.

S2: 22:21

Yeah. It amazes me, although, the beach here is so wide. This is actually the highest point, I believe, in Miami Beach. So it surprised me that in the 30 years we've been here we've never had any sort of water penetration at all. The most we have is during hurricanes. The winds are so intense that we might get a foot of sand up against our walls and windows. I'd be more concerned if I'm on the other side. Yeah, we're impacted by nature.

S1: 22:59

So you were here during Andrew then?

S2: 23:02

No. We came a year later.

S1: 23:03

Oh, okay.

S3: 23:04

It's probably 2016 that we're here [crosstalk].

S1: 23:05

Oh, okay. Right. We went for Andrew. Okay. Any interesting people that you feel have been contributing to the kind of color, the brand of Miami Beach let's say?

S2: 23:29

So many people here are from other places. Roger Abramson is somebody who if you haven't interviewed you really might want to. Have you interviewed him? Roger was active in the civil rights movement going down south. A promoter of all the great rock groups of the '60s and '70s knowing everybody, and he's done some events around



here. And from a current cultural point of view, he does the Hannukah menorah on Lincoln Road.

S1: 24:07

He does the what?

S2: 24:08

The Hannukah menorah on Lincoln Road, the one that's made of shells. That's one person that comes to mind. I really have to think. If I thought, I would probably come back. Frank Del Vecchio is another person who you probably have interviewed already. I'm sure you interviewed Marian.

S1: 24:32

Yes, we did.

S2: 24:33

What, of course, you have in Miami Beach is people coming here from some place else and reinventing themselves as my wife and I did. And, I guess, the overall thing I'd say about the beach is coming from Boston and I had spent most of the first 40 years of my life there, it's a great city, but it's sort of the same. There's a power structure there. The same traditions annually. Growing up there was a cemetery a few blocks away that was about 300 years old. Versus Miami Beach in Miami, such a young city with so many people from some place else. Especially when we got here, initially it felt more like a Wild West town. And if you want to do something, if you want to be an advocate, you can. If you push, it will move. Plus there are a lot of people who retired who have a lot of time in their hands of which I count myself as one of those. So it's a very unusual place.

S1: 25:47

How much was Deco and the art preservation movement means of keeping you here, of engaging you? Do you think if that hadn't been operating you might not have stayed, or--?

S2: 26:03

Yeah. It was an initial pull. It was an initial pull because of the posters and the architecture, but then ultimately it really sort of gets down to people.



We couldn't live any other place in Florida other than Miami and really Miami Beach. Couldn't do it as much as we like warm weather. There is a buzz and a vibe here. There's plenty of culture, but it's not conservative culture. I couldn't live on the West Coast. This is more sort of like New York on the beach. There's an edge to it. A melting pot. It's a little crazy and we know that from being on the second floor of Ocean Drive, but we like the buzz. We would be bored elsewhere.

S1: 27:00

We interviewed Jonathan Plutzik the owner of The Betsy and he said, "When people want to go somewhere to be with other people in a sort of celebratory mood, that's Ocean Drive." And he feels that the Super Bowl, it's going to be-- there'd be wall to wall of people here during that because of that need for a central gathering place like when they drop the ball on New Year's Eve at Time Square. Something that where people go where they know they're going to be energized and they're going to party maybe, or celebrate.

S2: 27:40

Yeah. And that by the way will be the Miami Marine Stadium. That's where you'll see-- that will be in my mind sort of the symbol of Miami, the community gathering place, and I think there will be a New Year's celebration there that will rival anything in Time Square and will be more telegenic as well.