



Interview with Nina Weber Worth

Interviewer We are interviewing Nina Worth at the Art Deco
Kathy Hersh Welcome Center Museum.
S1: 00:00

Nina Worth And it's Nina Weber Worth.
S2: 00:05

S1: 00:07 Nina Web?
S2: 00:08 Weber Worth.
S1: 00:09 Weber Worth.
S2: 00:10 W-E-B-E-R space W-O-R-T-H.
S1: 00:14 Nina Weber Worth. And today is December 16th,
2019, and my name is Kathy Hersh. I'm the
interviewer. Tell us about Shanghai and how you
found out about it being such an art deco influence
place, and the book, and--

S2: 00:38 Okay. Well, the original impetus was Don's friends
were head of the-- I'm sorry. Okay. Start over
again. My husband Don's roommates were head of
the US-China Friendship Association, and they
were putting on a tour to China. We went all over
China. This is in 2005. It was a cultural exchange
and we had to have an impetus for a cultural
exchange. And I said to myself, "Here I am. I'm on
the board of Miami Design Preservation League
and we can do an architectural exchange,"
because I knew that Shanghai had art deco and I
lived in the art deco historic district. So I figured,
"Hey, this is a perfect way to do this." So we went
with the intention to have this exchange. Somehow
we lucked out big time and were invited to see
China's most famous architect who did the Pearl

Tower, the Museum of Art. We thought it was his office, but his company owned the whole building and we were invited to the penthouse and we had a cultural exchange with him. And it was a very funny experience because here we are in this very high tech environment and they're showing us their plans for the 2010 World Expo and all of the amazing skyscrapers that they have built, not only in Shanghai but all over China, and we had brought with us presents because we were told to bring presents for our Chinese friends. And I went to the dollar store on Washington Avenue and I bought an oven mitt in the shape of a hand, obviously an oven mitt, and it was the map of Florida, and of course Miami was right at the tip.

S2: 02:59

And we had no preparation for this meeting really. And so I, in my Vanna White imitation, held the oven mitt while my husband said, "Well, this is Miami, and you've never had any representation here and you should see Miami." And actually through that, everybody cracked up and we sort of broke the ice and we had this amazing time together. And, ultimately, in 2006 for Art Basel, we brought over [Jintong Hu?] and he presented his master plan for the World Expo at the Lincoln Theater, which is no longer. It's just now an H&M, but it was a wonderful experience. And then we also had him meet with our city officials and it was just the most amazing thing because we would say, "Oh, look at what we've accomplished," and we accomplished this much. And then he'd say, "Oh, that's very nice," and he'd talk about this much. The disparity, between when you have a government working for you and when you're a private architect, is very different. So the scope and scale of the construction in Shanghai is just-- actually was the most incredible experience going back to the World Expo in 2010. I mean, I'm from New York and when



I went back to New York, I thought that Times Square looked quaint compared to what Shanghai was like with 24 million people. It's swelled to that many with the World Expo. And just the amount of high tech construction and everything, I had never seen anything like it, so big deal.

- S1: 05:07 When he was here, did you give him a tour of the Art Deco District?
- S2: 05:11 Yes. Absolutely.
- S1: 05:12 What were his impressions?
- S2: 05:13 Well, for Art Deco Weekend 2007, it was actually named A Tale of Two Cities: Miami, Shanghai. And at that time, brought over 23 city planners and government officials to show them how preserving art deco has been an economic engine for tourism, and we took them all over. And when we actually returned in 2010 for the World Expo, we actually saw our impact. There were plaques on the buildings. There were so many more buildings that were preserved and rehabbed, and it was a very fulfilling feeling for us.
- S1: 05:57 That's very interesting. That it almost feels like a full circle then because Barbara Capitman and Mike Kinerk did a trip over there and Barbara, who was trying to really solidify the definition of art deco, used Shanghai as an international connection. And then it sounds like it just went full circle back to they're seeing how it was - for lack of a better word - monetized [here?].
- S2: 06:29 Yes. Correct. Right.
- S1: 06:31 That's very interesting. Is there any kind of ongoing exchange between the two countries?
- S2: 06:40 At this point, not according to us. Tess Johnston, who was our woman in Shanghai, so to speak, she



worked for the state department and ultimately retired in Shanghai and she was our go-to person and she set everything up for us. And since about a year or two ago, she has repatriated to the United States because the Chinese government would not, at one point, renew her visa. So, unfortunately, there has been a chilling of many China relations. And when we started in 2005, the world was our oyster, so it's a little bit depressing, yeah, to see how things have cooled down.

S1: 07:34 But here in Miami, Art Basel continues to grow. My understanding is that, initially, it was only going to be a year. They were just going to try it out for a year and it's now in its 17th year. So what do you think is going on there? Why Miami? How did it get to be such a phenomenon here?

S2: 08:00 Well, I think that Miami was ripe for this, really ripe for this, in terms of not only the weather, but the craziness of Miami. It was just so perfect for it because it's a party town. And unfortunately or fortunately, Art Basel has morphed into more of a party than serious art. I mean, it's both, but it's a branding opportunity now and it's a party opportunity and it's a publicity magnet, but in the beginning it was more pure. And Miami, at that time, we remember the beginning of Art Basel, we would go to areas like the Omni or Wynwood and there were just warehouses there, and artists were able to use the rooms for their expositions and it was much more edgy and experimental. And there weren't hoards of people crammed into everything and you didn't need a ticket and you didn't need passes, and it was just more of an adventure. And then it became kind of like Miami, edgy and fun when we first got here, and then it became rich.

S1: 09:28 And you think that necessary takes away the



- edginess?
- S2: 09:31 To me it does. Yes. Yes.
- S1: 09:35 What was your reaction to the taped banana on the wall?
- S2: 09:38 It was a frustration, mostly, because there were all sort of emails going around the world and everything, and even Trevor Noah, on his show, made a point of it. It's kind of like of all the things in the world that we need to know about, this was not high on my list.
- S1: 10:04 Do you think it trivialized, or do you think it made its point?
- S2: 10:08 All or the above, sorry to say.
- S1: 10:13 Well, it was quite a statement actually.
- S2: 10:16 Yes it was. Yes it was.
- S1: 10:18 And then I noticed the hotel cleaners took it up in their march and taped bananas to themselves while marching, saying that they needed higher wages. And apparently if someone was willing to pay \$125,000 for a banana taped to a canvas.
- S2: 10:38 My husband and I do wonder if that really is the case, or that was all kind of made up.
- S1: 10:46 You mean the banana thing was made up?
- S2: 10:48 Well, the 125 grand purchase.
- S1: 10:50 Oh. Right. Could be.
- S2: 10:54 I do have to wonder whether that was--
- S1: 10:56 Interesting. Interesting. I guess I believe everything I read. Bad.
- S2: 11:01 There you go.
- S1: 11:03 Tell us about your career, making films and



documentaries.

S2: 11:09

Well, I went to NYU film school and I worked my way up in the documentary world, which was very difficult back then because there were so few venues for documentaries unless you worked for a network, which I didn't. So I was an independent producer, director, and kind of a starving producer, director in New York. It was very funny because in January, 1992, I'm single, looking for my next job, and I see that New York Magazine cover. And I have a visual of it for you, which has the rollerbladers on the back of an old Cadillac with the tails and everything, on Ocean Drive, and I just said, "Oh my God. This is what I want." This is California dreaming on such a winter's day. I was cold. I was frustrated, so this was my idea of paradise. And, frankly, it's been our idea of paradise. We've been here 26 years and it's changed a lot, but it's still our paradise where we wake up in the morning and look at the sunrise and watch the moonrise in the evening and we know how grateful we are.

S1: 12:34

How did you two meet?

S2: 12:36

Because I was making documentaries, my entertainment attorney is Don's first cousin once removed, and she introduced us out in the Hamptons in New York. So we had a long-distance relationship. He lived in the Hamptons. I lived in New York City. And then when we decided to get married-- I was always looking for my place in the sun and I thought it was going to be Key West, and I had spent a lot of time as a scuba diver in Key West. And then he said, "Well, do you want to go to South Beach and see if you want to live there?" So we actually honeymooned at the Governor on South Beach because we couldn't go into Don's apartment because it was rented out. And he said,



- "Oh, yeah. This is just where I want to live," so.
- S1: 13:23 You just knew it.
- S2: 13:24 Yeah. I did. When I saw that magazine cover-- so every once in awhile, something really moves you like that. It just moved me that that's what I wanted to be. And also, when you live in New York, that weight of the world is on your shoulders. And when you come here, the sun is shining, there's a light breeze, and nobody takes themselves seriously. Everybody's here to have a good time, so it's a very different attitude that I kind of liked.
- S1: 13:56 So, would you say that there's not really a lot of snobbiness here, or?
- S2: 14:01 Oh, there is. Absolutely there is for sure. There's a whole class structure here. And as I said to you, when we first came here, it really was like the Wild West, and then things became very rich. Sure, there's a whole level of snobbism. Walk into any high-rise building and talk to the doorman and you'll see how well you do. We're very lucky because we live in the historic district, number one. Number two, we live in a five-story art deco building with no doorman. We like the hominess of that.
- S1: 14:43 The informality.
- S2: 14:44 Right. And there's also the scale. I remember when one of the high-rises was built at the tail end of Ocean Drive and they painted it a color that wasn't approved. And I remember my husband saying, "Oh, you get to look down at our little buildings, but we get to look at your building and you got to obey the law." They had to repaint it.
- S1: 15:13 [inaudible].
- S2: 15:14 And no small amount of money, but we made them.



Yeah.

S1: 15:18

So it sounds like you've been kind of active in making sure that rules are followed and--

S2: 15:27

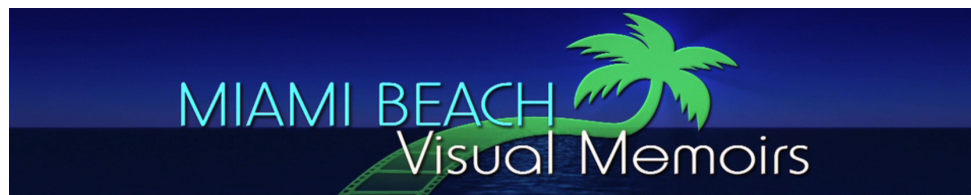
Well, absolutely. I talk about sitting on my perch and watching everything. And certainly, in the beginning, I found that I watched all of the special events happening in Lummus Park. At that time HBO was here, everybody was here. And I just watched them basically trashing the park. And having been in production my whole life, I know the toll that it takes when groups come in and set up and film and leave. So I worked then with James Quinlan, who was head of the arts and culture - somebody else who you should talk to - and he and I wrote the Lummus Park impact fee, which was 25% of the city used services to be used to improve the park. And once I realized like, "My God. That legislation, it would've taken me 10 years to write that kind of legislation in New York." And here, I went like this - like Don said - and it moved. So I was very happy with that, and then James encouraged me to join the Parks and Recreation board before it became a cool thing to do, with the TV series. And then I worked on propagating - Don and I did this together - the Jamaican Tall trees in Lummus Park. The city wanted to put in the big thick-- I call them Boca palms, and upright a few of them. Spend the money uprighting them, and we wanted to repropagate the original Jamaica Talls, the ones that actually worked with the hurricanes or hurricane proof. So we spent a lot of time actually repropagating those trees in Lummus Park. And today, it's lush and rich and really looks great, so that was a very satisfying thing that we did.

S1: 17:41

What other projects come to mind that you take some gratification in?



- S2: 17:47 Well, certainly, as I said, our MiMo work. We really put MiMo on the map. Initially invited the Municipal Art Society to do an urban sharing, and realizing that a big city like New York and a small city like Miami Beach actually have things in common. And one of them was the proliferation of newsboxes on every street, on every corner, and it was really getting out of hand in both cities. And so we invited them down here and took them on a tour of North Beach and they realized that all of these buildings, though they were under 50 years old, were all endangered, as were the buildings in New York City. And they invited us to do this photography exhibit of the mid century architecture in New York and Miami. And I really have to say, MiMo became part of our lexicon, and now everybody knows what MiMo is. When we started, nobody knew what it was, so that is indeed gratifying. And, I don't know, what else? Not helpful.
- S1: 19:09 So you really do feel that MiMo now is established, like art deco?
- S2: 19:14 Oh, totally. And you look at Biscayne Blvd now and, I mean, that's not, I know, Miami Beach, but it's really amazing what is happening on Biscayne Blvd. How many buildings are being renovated. And also as a preservationist, look, we understand that not everything can be saved, but what's nice now to see is, that at least the original buildings are saved, even if a tower has to go up behind it. So that is gratifying too.
- S1: 19:46 I want to ask about the impact of MDPL and your involvement on the board. What is the next challenge, for example?
- S2: 20:00 Oh my gosh. How long do you have?



- S1: 20:04 As long as you have.
- S2: 20:05 Well, the Miami Design Preservation League is started by Barbara Capitman. I never dreamed that I would be able to actually become a part of it way back when, when we first moved here, and make an impact. And certainly MDPL has had its challenges and any non-profit organization has to constantly reinvent themselves, but I think that we've come through a very tough battle and I think that we are now poised for the future to be much more strong and effective. And, certainly, I'm very proud of the advocacy that we have done and continue to do. Also, the educational events and just the tours. Everything is such a vital part of Ocean Drive.
- S1: 21:07 I mentioned that we'd interviewed Harold Rosen, and he actually admitted that he was wrong about Barbara Capitman and art deco. And we have on tape, in the Barbara Capitman video, Abe--
- S3: 21:26 Resnick.
- S1: 21:27 --Resnick saying that he hadn't understood the economic value of the old buildings.
- S2: 21:28 Oh. Abe Resnick. Yeah. Right. Right.
- S1: 21:29 So it seems as if art deco has been, "Okay. We get that," by the powers that be, meaning the purse string people. And yet, there was a struggle for MiMo as well. Do you think that they didn't transition that thought that preservation would also work for the MiMo district, or is each-- I guess what I'm asking is, each era, each thing, a separate battle, like the stadium?
- S2: 22:12 Well, I'm sorry to say, it all boils down to money. And, certainly, our battle with MiMo was that we worked with the North Beach Development Corporation and North Beach, in general, is more



working class people, and so it's not rich. And so there aren't people who have time and money to fight the fight. With developers sort of drooling down the MiMo architecture because so much of it was on the water, it's been very difficult to fight the fight. And so it kind of does all boil down to economics. And here, as Don said, there are more retired people who have time on their hands, and they're also well-educated. That's probably the other part of it. But, certainly, Don and I have been working with a group called Tourism Cares. It's a non-profit part of the tourism industry, and their ethos is that, if we don't preserve places that are interesting and different, there's going to be no reason to ever travel. And so that's how we feel about preserving the architecture here because if it's going to look like every other place, why bother, so.

S1: 23:50

We haven't talked, really, about the process of writing the books.

S2: 23:55

Well, we kind of don't write the books. We produce them. And I don't know if there's a real name for producing a book, but what we've done is, we gather all of the people together. The people who write and the publisher, and we sort of make it all happen. So it's sort of producing the book rather than writing it. Yeah. Making it happen.

S1: 24:21

The Art Deco in Shanghai and Miami Beach, I see Chinese, I presume, on the bottom. Is that the author's name, or?

S2: 24:31

Yes. Yes. So, actually, when I mentioned Tess Johnston in Shanghai, she wrote the art deco in Shanghai part, and MDPL board member [inaudible], wrote the Miami Beach counterpart. And the photographer is [inaudible], was China's



first freelance photographer.

S1: 24:56

Is the book published in China?

S2: 24:58

The book was published in China. It is now out of print, but we did sell out. We sold it here at the MDPL bookstore and at the Wolfsonian, which is just a block away, FIU, their bookstore, and it was a real success. When we did it, I said, "We could charge \$40." Everybody said, "No. You can't charge \$40." I said, "People will not mind paying \$40." And I was absolutely right and we sold out, so that was very satisfying.

S1: 25:31

Congratulations. When did it come out?

S2: 25:34

In 2008. Okay.

S3: 25:42

Have you ever gotten into a political battle between those who live here and those who [develop?] here? It's an on-going political battle and I'd like to hear sort of your thoughts on that.

S2: 25:49

It is. Wow. Well, it's very frustrating because Miami Beach, especially South Beach, everything feels so overbuilt as it is. And then now, to be facing a tower going up on 5th Street where it's like the nutshell game where we have FAR, floor area ratio laws being changed by a board of adjustment where everybody is on the payroll of the developer, and it's just kind of out of a bad movie right now and it's really a frustrating time for us. And in a way, I look forward to an economic downturn because that's our only hope. Preservationists love economic's downturns. It's really good for preservation.

S1: 27:06

I did hear that when the concern was raised about this tall building and this densification and the impact it would have on the immediate neighborhood, that the developers said, "Don't worry. No one will ever live in it." Is that part of the issue, of that's an engine driving this?



- S2: 27:32 This is what's happening in New York City as well. You have many of the new super skyscrapers where they're completely what they call transparent, where people invest but they don't live there. If they live there, literally live there three days a year. And I don't know if that's supposed to appease us? I don't know how I'm supposed to react to that, except what I want to say is something I'm not going to say on camera.
- S1: 28:12 Is there anything you can think of that you would like to say about the present or looking towards the future?
- S2: 28:20 Well, I think that there are some things that are exciting happening on the Beach right now. We have an area where we're going to have a continuous-- I'm a walker. Luckily, I love to walk and bike because driving around here is disgusting. But we have now a walkway that's going to be from the Bay all the way along the canal to the ocean. We're going to have a contiguous path from South Pointe all the way to Haulover Beach. And we are finally going to have our pathway along the Bay, which all the hotels and buildings now have to comply with. This has been another struggle with that same developer who thought of every reason not to comply, and now, I think, finally is being forced to.
- S1: 29:27 So the beach will then be open?
- S2: 29:29 Yeah. It will a real walkable, lovely city where the water is accessible. I think that's always been my beef, is that I have been a proponent where the beach should be accessible, and I've always fought against all of the chairs that you have to rent. Yes, it's nice to have facilities, but it makes people feel like they're intruding, and I think the beach should



be not a place where you have to worry where you're going to sit. And I feel like the hotels really make you feel like you're intruding on their property and it's not their property. The beach is for everybody. So I'm a democratizer of the water and waterfront. I think that's really important. When I was on the Parks and Recreation board, we worked on many of the parks. Flamingo Park and many of the ones in North Beach too, and I think that their exercise areas-- the parks are really flourishing now and I think that that's a very positive part of it too. I don't want this to be a cautionary tale that we-- Miami and Miami Beach are notoriously a [boom bust?] town and I don't want us to bust because of over development and you know we're headed right there, so it's a little bit frustrating.

##