

Interviewee: ALBERT LANIER  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]**

**MEH:** [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Al, you know I've interviewed you several times, and now with the Graham Foundation grant I'm sort of chasing down some different ideas and thoughts. And one thing that's interesting is – I was talking to Claude Stoller yesterday, and he was at Black Mountain at a very different time when the architectural program was very different than the architectural program as you knew it.

**AL:** Yes. When they were really building.

**MEH:** Yeah, but you were building when you were there – the Minimum House.

**AL:** [OVERTALK] Well, we only built one little thing. We built the Minimum House, and we gathered in a study and communally designed it. I did the drawings, and Paul Williams' mother gave us a thousand bucks for material, and we launched into building it. It was agreeable to the college. It would be a place for a single teacher or a childless teacher to live, or even married student to live. And we combined stone from the site and corrugated aluminum. And it was essentially one big room with a bathroom, a little counter for a kitchen, a good-sized closet, and a terrace out on the banks of the creek – stream. It really wasn't a creek. It was a stream that came down the mountain. In fact, we probably changed the course of that stream slightly so that we could have a

little bigger terrace. And it was pretty marvelous building it. I was the stonemason. And some days I was able to work all day fitting these stones together and mortaring them together, and someone – particularly Ruth – would come up towards the end of the day and point to one way down there and say "That one is a mistake" – which infuriated me. But generally I changed them. And then we continued on. At any rate, that went on in the spring right on up until the summer, and when it got really warm, which must have been as early as April or May, if we'd been working there in the morning, we would run down to the creek and jump in before we had our lunch. And those people were Paul Williams. In the beginning Ragland Watkins, who left before it was finished. In fact, his father gave us the magnolia plywood for the interior walls. It's a very white wood. Incidentally, the walls inside were plywood. The slab construction – slab on grade for construction. Very inadequate heat. And Paul Williams made the windows, which were sliding. He made them in the woodshop. It's amazing how far a thousand bucks will go if you are not paying for any labor. And I think it was an early forerunner – except we weren't doing it for tenant farmers – of what Mottby [PH] did with the rural laboratory at the University of Alabama. Maybe it's why I'm so enamored of what he did, because I think it's so good. I think there are terribly many kids who choose architecture because it sounds glamorous. They have no knowledge of building. They have really not much interest in building, and not much interest in how things go together.

**MEH:** Just a second. I'm going to make a slight change here. I don't want the camera to jump. [IRRELEVANT REMARKS ABOUT GLASSES] [INTERRUPTION]

**AL:** I enlisted in the Navy and was gone for seventeen months. Came back for another year at Black Mountain College [MEH correction: Georgia Tech] – and discovered a catalogue of Black Mountain College in the library. And a group of us went up for a weekend to see it, because we were enamored. There was Ragland Watkins, myself, a man named Jim Bruce who is an architect in Macon, Georgia, and Si Sillman, I believe, went along. I don't believe Forrest Wright went. He came later. We all went up for a weekend. And that catalogue was in the library probably because the head of the architectural school at Georgia Tech was Harold Bush-Brown, whose son had gone to Black Mountain College. At any rate, we went up and Ragland Watkins went there for the summer. I went home and spent the summer alone out on my parents' farm, which had a camp house by a pond. And I spent a whole summer I think unwinding from calculus and mechanical engineering and physics and all that stuff that I'd been subjected to at Black Mountain College – not Black Mountain College – Georgia Tech. And then I went up in the fall and proceeded to stay for the next twelve months there. That was the extent of my formal education.

**MEH:** You didn't graduate. You didn't get an architecture degree from Georgia Tech?

**AL:** I have no degrees. I have no degrees from anyplace. I have a high school diploma somewhere.

**MEH:** When you came to San Francisco, how did you start practicing architecture?

**AL:** Well, I came with two guys. With – and Ragland Watkins and Peggy Tolk were already here. I came across country with Ray Johnson and Forrest Wright in my open Model A.

**MEH:** You were telling me about that

**AL:** Which has possibly been repaired largely by Forrest Wright. I bought it from a farmer who lived very near Black Mountain College. I think I paid a hundred dollars for it. We painted it. We got it running. And we decided to drive across country. Forrest insisted that we had to go through every mountain range we could find, including the Rockies. And we took a fairly long time to drive across – I would say like maybe as long as a week or ten days even. And we would camp at night. We typically slept in churchyards. I think maybe we bathed in high school gyms and in creeks and rivers. At any rate, by the time we reached – First I'll deal with Rockies. Because I wasn't driving. I don't know who was driving. I think Forrest was driving on a very windy road. Suddenly there was a big white convertible right in the middle of this, road and there was no way to avoid it. So we scraped the side of it with our front bumper, and the guy came to a stop. And he was tugging at the fender so his wheel would turn. And we went over to him and he stood up. I've told you this story before. And he says "Where are you from?" And Ray said "North Carolina." And he said "Well, I'm from California." And Ray stuck out his hand and said "East meets West." There was no changing of licenses or anything like that. I think we had to wire up our bumper, and we went on our way. And by the time we got to Salt Lake City we were absolutely broke. We had no more money. And I remember – I knew that people could sell blood. So we called a blood bank, and they said oh yes, they bought blood. I said there are three of us. We'll all sell a pint of blood and make it on to San Francisco. And Forrest and Ray decided they were morally opposed to this. But I wasn't. So I went and sold them my blood, got the money, handed it to them so they could get some gasoline probably,

and collapsed into the rumble seat of this car – just exhausted. And I woke up the next morning outside a little casino in Nevada, and they were not in the car. I decided they were in the casino. So I went in, and there they were, playing slot machines. And I said "Whose money are you playing with?" And they said "Oh, your money. Look!" and they held out handfuls of nickels that they'd won. And I suddenly looked at them, and they were both wearing very livid red sweatshirts. And I said "Where did you get those sweat – How did you get those sweatshirts?" And they said "Oh, it's your blood money." I said "Did you get one for me?" And Ray said "No, we thought you would be angry." At any rate, we proceeded on to San Francisco over the Sierras, came down to the Bay Bridge. We didn't realize we had a toll bridge to cross. We had one quarter left. That's what the toll was on the Bay Bridge, at that time. We came across, found – with a map – found where the Tolk-Watkinses lived. They weren't at home. We broke in and ate everything in the house. That's how I arrived in San Francisco.

**MEH:** And that was the beginning of your architectural practice.

**AL:** No, I came here to work in the various building trades. By that, I meant carpentry, maybe masonry, electrical, plumbing, roofing. You have it. The trades. That's how naive I was. In one year. And then I was going to go back to Black Mountain where Ruth was going back for another year. And I worked for a while, in the beginning, as a carpenter's apprentice. It really should have been categorized as a laborer, because all I did was tote and lift, and they gave me the most dangerous jobs. And when the rains came, we were on a

job that was exterior. We couldn't work. And I briefly delivered mail, worked for an outfit that set up salesrooms for Christmas baskets of fancy fruit, and was seriously thinking about moving on to Los Angeles. And I got a job with an architect, which was another area (?) ride, because I'd been there a week, knew virtually nothing . He went away on vacation and left the office to me. That's all. At any rate, I proceeded to continuously work for architects after that.

**MEH:** At what point did you establish your own practice?

**AL:** Well, foolishly [OVERTALK] [LAUGHS], with a partner, I went into business in, must have been about 1950, like July of 1950, after I had spent a year working for Mario Corbett. And I had a partner. And that lasted I think till the following February of '51.

**MEH:** Who was the partner?

**AL:** A man named Roy Maru, who had been a Mies van der Rohe student at IIT. He's Japanese. He's a very good architect.

**MEH:** Were you registered at that point?

**AL:** No. No. He was, though, and that's not an uncommon arrangement. Wasn't then and maybe still is today. And then I began working – There were a couple of intervening jobs after that, and – of relatively short duration, a year, year and a half, and then I went to work for John Funk, where I proceeded to work for eight years.

**MEH:** What type of work were you doing?

**AL:** John Funk is a very serious architect. He was a very good architect. The cover of the first book on modern architecture put out by the Museum of Modern Art,

the title of it is Built in U.S.A., the dust jacket is a John Funk house. Is who John Funk was. And I was – I was taught a hell of a lot by John. He was serious. He had no ego. He had no ego. He did not promote. He's really my kind of an architect. And I was supposed to become his partner, and that – That didn't work out. I never became his partner. I left and opened my own office, and that was in 1960. So from '48 to '60, I was working various places for various people, but essentially for John Funk.

**MEH:** So '60, were you registered?

**AL:** No, I still wasn't registered, but Paul Sherrill, who also worked for Funk, became my partner and was my partner until he died. He died in 2000, the year 2000. I was forty years his partner, and he was licensed. And our first job was the house for my sister in Georgia. It's the Pearson House. And later we had another partner who's still, still pursuing it. Mac Morrison. Nice man.

**MEH:** What sorts of things did you do for your practice?

**AL:** We were very heavy on residential. We did some apartments. We did a huge number of remodels in the city, because the city is – as cities go – is pretty old and pretty built up. The choice locations have been used. And we did some restaurants – in fact, quite a few restaurants. A little work for the University of California – the Medical Center – and even some over at Berkeley. And one of the projects that consumed most time, and which I have no publicity on or photographs of, I don't think, was a conversion of old Southern Pacific Hospital to housing for the elderly. And it was a big old six-story hospital that used to treat the employees of Southern Pacific Railway, primarily for tuberculosis, modeled after a sanitarium in Switzerland, where they had a ramp that started

at the basement that went to the roof, so that they could wheel the beds up the ramp and sun them. And a Swiss contractor-client bought it. There were no bidders against him, and he bought the whole block for five hundred thousand dollars. And we converted it – spent years getting HUD approval and city approval and political approval. They wouldn't let him do the project, so he sold it to the Sisters of Mercy. And it's converted to a 158 apartments for the elderly. And they did such a job – the Jewish Community Center did such a job of proselytizing their clients that – and it was by lottery, the first occupancy was by lottery – that half of the tenants are Russian refugees. And they moved in with their grand pianos and their paintings and all the signs are in Russian and in English. They have art shows. They have a daycare center where they take care of little children from the neighborhood. Have gardens. It's a very toney place. And I think a good part of that was my vision. That was one of the things that we did. We also did the first all handicapped-accessible apartment building in San Francisco, which is up here on Diamond Heights. It's not a big building. It's only twenty apartments, but a good proportion of the people are wheelchair-bound. All of those things are terribly hard-fought. I also spent four years on the Landmarks Board of the city and county of San Francisco, and I became involved in the seventies, maybe the late seventies, with American Youth Hostels, through one of my kids. So I spent a lot of time pro bono designing hostels in San Francisco and northern California. And these were, you know, jerry-built. There were used carpets (?) that were given to us. And we developed – we developed more hostels than anyplace in the country, and



it was so all-demanding that I had to give it up. I have a lifetime membership, but I've never spent a night in a hostel. [LAUGHS]

**MEH:** How many years did you do that?

**AL:** God, I must have been over a period of ten years.

**MEH:** I'm interested, you know – In working on this grant I'm not just defining architecture in terms of –

**AL:** Black Mountain.

**MEH:** No– well, not just in terms of Black Mountain but in terms, you know, architects build buildings. Architects play a much broader role in the community, we should hope, and I know that you've been involved through your family and your kids with a lot of different things, and through the gardening movement and whatever. So I think this is an extension of being a member of a community and an architect within a community.

**AL:** Right. Right. I built a garden around the library at Noe Valley, our Noe Valley Library. And I must admit I don't go there. It's gone through many hard times, and Most people's idea of a garden – it's in two stages. First, you plant the seed, and second, you harvest it. There's nothing in between. And gardens don't thrive that way. They don't work. That's my garden experience.

**MEH:** But you were active in community gardening in the city, or just supportive.

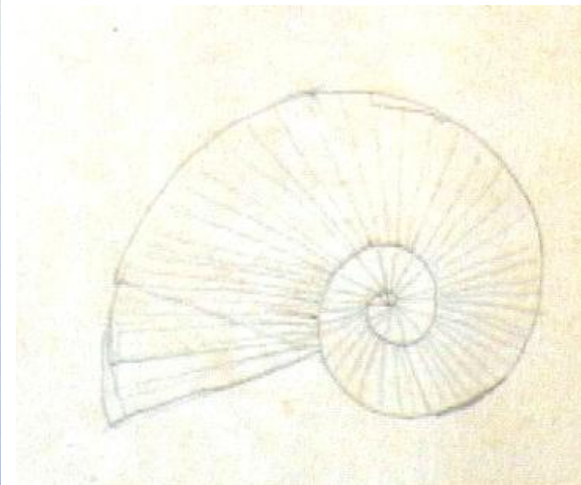
[OVERTALK]

**AL:** Only to the extent of that library, really, and some tree planting, but not really – Ruth was much more involved with SLUG, San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners. And if you had had time, we would have gone to one of their demonstration gardens. June's going to get awfully crowded. It's very

interesting, and it's a very successful program. And they have made inroads. They've had training programs for at-risk young people. They have worked with Catherine Sneed's gardening program at a county jail – which is very, very successful, where the prisoners learn to garden. Might stand a chance of getting some work when they get out. You know, we used to envision – originally we envisioned prison as rehabilitating people. That's a thing of the past, pretty much. We don't rehabilitate anybody. We make bigger criminals of them. That's what happens.

**MEH:** [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING] We're now going to look at student studies by Al here at Black Mountain College. He had others which cannot be found at this recording. Okay, Al, you're on.

**AL:** Yeah, I was going to say. That very much could be a John Cage. [LAUGHS]. One of his smoke, his smoke prints.



**MEH:** You just didn't think about watermarks. I'm sure he would have done it. So what were you doing here?

**AL:** Mary, I don't know. I think we were taking a curved line and by using a series of them, of just one, of just curved line, we were trying to define something.

**MEH:** Well, if you look down here on the right-hand corner, you have a shell that's been bisected, so probably you were [OVERTALK], you were dealing with the spiral – some aspect of the spiral. [OVERTALK]

**AL:** I think we were dealing with spiral. It's even possible that we were thinking of coming at an angle to these with another set of lines, and we were going to be dealing with the – what do they call it on the backs of watches, and it's also the sunflower. The pattern of the sunflower seed.

**MEH:** I'm not sure.

**AL:** There's a word for it.

**MEH:** There's a word for it.

**AL:** Yeah.

**MEH:** So you were working somehow with an aspect of the spiral and how it's generated.

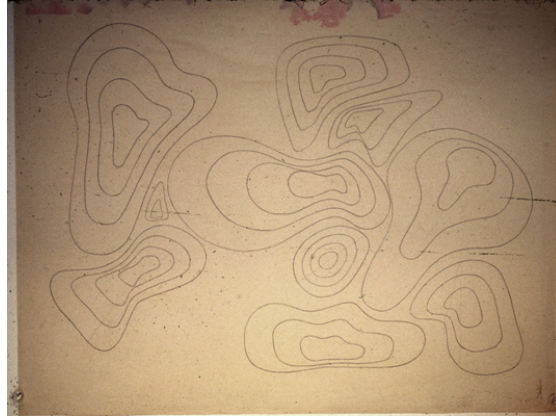
**AL:** Right.

**MEH:** Okay. That watermark is wonderful.

**AL:** Well, I'm sure it can be preserved.

**MEH:** [LAUGHS] Okay. Looking at this study...

**AL:** I think this was the problem of with a repeated shape trying to give a flat surface depth. And probably I was doing this from architecture contour maps, and I don't think this worked. But I kept it.



**MEH:** Do you think it would have been an assignment in class?

**AL:** I think it would have been an assignment. It certainly is not a site contour map.

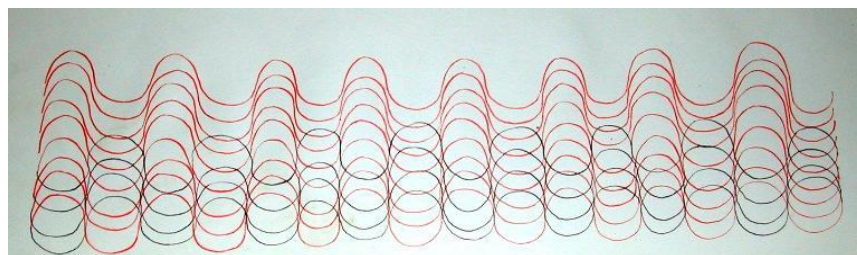
[LAUGHS] I was trying to corrugate this flat sheet of paper, and I think when I started going over it with the black – the red was down there first – with the black, that I saw that it wasn't going to work so I abandoned it.

**MEH:** These are really – I think it's important in looking at all of these to realize that these are student studies, so you're exploring possibilities and seeing what works and what doesn't work.

**AL:** Right. That's dated.

**MEH:** Yeah, it is.

**AL:** '48. November 16th, '48. That's after I was in San Francisco. I was already here. I came in September of '48.

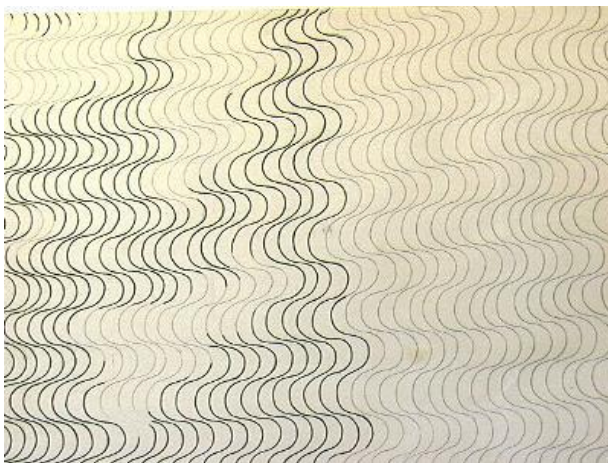


**MEH:** That's right. You were doing that here. But obviously this is something – a study that you did in Albers' class [OVERTALK]

**AL:** Right, and I wanted to play with it some more.

**MEH:** Okay.

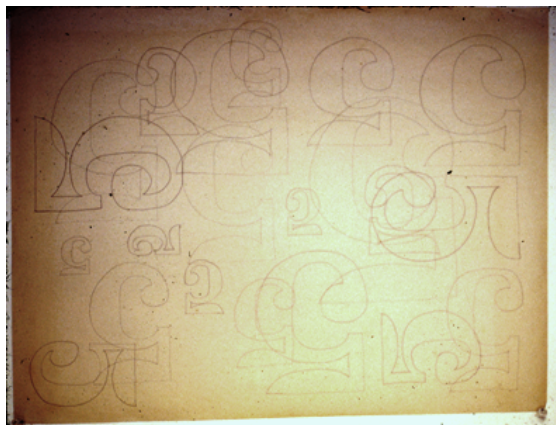
**AL:** Okay, this is corrugating that surface with just a line, a line drawing and – This one worked. And it was obviously done in pencil first and then I was inking it in, and decided to hell with it, I'm not going to ink it all. I like that.



And I like it – I'm not sure if it was at school or was here. We did a series of wallpaper designs and ticking designs that second or third year that we were in San Francisco, and some of them were produced. Both of mine and of Ruth's – particularly of Ruth's. I wish we had some of that ticking. We were paid fifty dollars for each one. Period.

**MEH:** Okay.

**AL:** I'm sure that this was a class project, and it was to take –



The problem was to take one numeral [the numeral 5] and at different scale rotate it, do it backwards, do it over, and may have been, may have been leading up to figure-background, where – It's something like that.

**MEH:** Okay.

**[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 1]**

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**