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Pioneers of American Landscape Design® Oral History Series: Julie Bargmann Interview Transcript

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years later in the station wagon still, I started to think about the people that lived there. And the people that worked there, of course. And I was like, wondering about how they lived, which was very different than me. I was in Northern Jersey. So they really had a profound effect on me. And it's only in retrospect that I realize how much I loved them and how much I needed to work with them. It was great.

One of the most exciting, but also frightening things, about going to see my dad on the 44th floor, where we jammed every typewriter on that floor. Sorry. Not sorry. Was this instruction from my father that said, if you get lost, go to the Lever House. So at like age nine or ten, I was like super groovy that I knew the Lever House. So I never had to go there.

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was on the review, and I, and I had little gravestones and stuff. And he just was like, "Argh! I just saw it crack." And the gravestone moved. It was hilarious. But anyway, I just, I was just having a really hard time. That kind of like switch from art to design, and I was really rescued by Cherie Kluesing. (Hi, Cherie.) And Michael, who really supported me in my more intuitive way of working. That, of course, was combined with rigor. And to this day, I love that kind of crazy combination of rigorous intuition, or intuitive rigor. And that helped tremendously. And so by the end of, I remember, the first year, it was like, yep, I'm here. I'm here. I'm in the right place. And then just amazing people. I remember going to Catherine Howett's office and talking about Smithson, a bad situation to have. I talked to her about Smithson. Yeah. And Laurie Olin hating the pink that I painted the stairs. Please don't do that. And yeah. I'm going to dare tell a story now, and it's going to be too exposing.

So I'm in my last year of graduate school, and we have, of course, these options to take different studios. And I actually, I've been working for Michael for, all through graduate school, me and Steve Stimson. We were his first employees. And I remember this one day that George came over to my desk, and he said, why didn't you take my studio? And I said, because I heard you were an asshole. [LAUGHTER] And we were very good friends after that. It was hilarious.

My time at the GSD was really kind of deeply, deeply, deeply formative and just substantial. And that came from all of the folks that were there that were really pushing the discipline. I mean, I felt intensely this post-McHargian, almost anti-design, and so to be with these folks who were saying, make form, make form, don't be shy, let's go, let's tell the world what landscape architecture is, and so I felt really, really charged with that, that I should be part of that, and that I was going to be kind of the next generation doing that. You know, there was really all these layers. Right? You know, because there was Laurie and Pete and then Michael and George, and yeah, and so I really felt like I was a part of this, eh, I don't really want to use family, because they didn't really like each other that much. But a community. Right? That

was really trying to define what it meant to make landscapes, not always plan them or conceptualizing, but boom, make it. You know? And make it with conceptual rigor. With Beth and Catherine being there, and with Anita, my classmate. So there was, yeah, there was kind of almost a mission. You know, and I think that's quite different than the experience a lot of the student have. I think they are in graduate school, and they get trained, which drives me crazy,

was tremendous. Because if I were to go out into the discipline now, graduate and go into the discipline, we all need that support. So I luckily had it. And it reinforced things, like my instincts from when I was nine or ten in the station wagon. I mean, it all builds. It all builds. And I had the chance to work with Michael while I was in graduate school. I needed to make some money. And to buy mylar. And I remember, I built a full-scale model of one of his fountains in his office, and made an incredible mess. I was like, oh-oh. But there I was. I mean, imagine it. Right? An art student at the GSD building full scale unapologetically in his office. So it's meant a lot, and it was going into landscapes that I was witnessing his restraint. But not enough restraint that it was right neutral, but very sensual landscapes, I think. I also have to say, I think that's when I learned the value of gardens as experiments. Because I was like, oh, you know, because we were always doing like big old things. You know? And there I got the chance to see the scale of the garden being majorly deployed. And then I, after graduation, I had the chance to work at Carr, Lynch [& Sandanke sandede-3 (f the)-anidar-1 (r)] a neethaf thng li (?)-(d)1 1 (r)] a sli(ng)1 p-2

And that was when it was really hardcore. He was like, make form. Make the landscape evident, and dah, dah, dah. And I remember, I'd like listen to him, but went in another direction, that he then pushed, which was like, OK, OK, what are you doing? And meanwhile, Martha [UNINTELLIGIBLE] you know, she just, well, we were kindred spirits. She just, she really continued to help with my problem of being a fine arts student there and kilBr-4.1 (rs.(d(r)-1 (e)-2 (a)-1 (n)3 (i-

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TEACHING AT UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

So after Rome, I was just so charged, right? Charged up. I was like, you know, I'm like, and I returned to Michael's office, and I remember distinctly that it was so great to be coming back to his office when he was getting into the larger projects, like Mill Race Park that I worked on. And that was, of course, tremendous. What I started to see was, because I worked with Michael when he was making gardens, what I was starting to see is how he was making garden experiences within larger landscapes. And I was like, wow. That's like killer. You know? To not lose any of the intimacy one has within these larger expanses. And he, they talk about that to this day, the intensive intimacy and the immensity, which is really, it really influenced me, because I'm always thinking about those kind of two scales, right, because you have to deal with like, you know, kind of in a very butch way, deal with those larger landscapes. But it's like, whew, how do you find that place that the person is still kind of enveloped. You know? And I flash back to maybe what I was saying about material evidence that can do that. You know, always looking at like that, I don't know, that intimate little thing that they can just kind of focus on, and then look up, and be intimate. So that was, of course, an amazing experience. Yeah. And then, actually, I got the call to teach. And I was like, that's interesting. You know, I was TA at Harvard, and I was like, teaching, hmm. And it was Minnesota, and I remember calling Beth, and I'm like, hm, should I do this? And she goes, yeah. There's some great people out there. Bill Morrish, Catherine Brown, Garth Rockcastle, Mary Rockcastle. And so it was really hard. I mean, I told Michael in the Oak Room, you know, of the Waldorf Astoria, and yeah, I sobbed. Yet, I was like, I have to do this. I need to do this. And I'm telling you, that is when I realized that you could take adventures with the students. And I was like, I'm not going to teach you. You are going to go on this adventure with me, having no idea what we're doing. You know, we're going to figure it out as we go. And maybe that's that version of me just saying, you know, hey, this is just like how you enter a site. You know? So let's do it together. I'm like maybe one step ahead of you, but not really.

THE D.I.R.T. PATH

The really cool thing I loved was in Minnesota, while I was in Minneapolis, which is a great city, was I, for whatever reason, got intrigued with all the mines that were there. Like, oh yeah, big surprise, refineries, mines, you know? So I did, I got a little chunk of change, and I did the “dirt” path, as I called it, because I had just started D.I.R.T. studio. And I rode around the country looking at all different types of mining. And that is when I said, I want in. You know? I visited, of course, with all the engineers, mostly engineers. Right? And you know, that is when I just saw that they were being treated like machines. And I was like, and have is beer and pasty, you know, and there was this accumulation. And that’s when I went there, had a little idea what I wanted to do with it. And I didn’t, you know, it really just fueled the fire. And this time it was really mine, if I’m so bold to be possessive of mines. But it was really mine. You know, I just was like, oh, boy, that is when, what was so interesting about all of these different mines and meeting with engineers, and seeing all these different people, like the people at the mine, that’s when I started being angry about how the mines and the people who worked there, past, present, were being treated. And then, of course, I went to see the whole thing of what the regulations were, you know, and that’s when I started to see that it wasn’t quite the way that legislation was. And we were talking, the great thing is that we were talking about the critique of the legislation in terms of, well, what I would often say about the law looks like. And nobody was looking at what the law actually looked like, because if they did, it was ridiculous. And so there would be a support group for each other, and kind of keeping it going, because I have started to say, that’s when maybe it was then, or after that, I started to work a lot with superfund sites and the like. Oy, oy, oy. I mean, and that’s what I have started to say, after whatever the decade, I just was like

We, you know, made some headway there. But there was just too much in the way. Also, with mining, you know, they're pretty, sometimes quite remote. And I decided that I wanted to work at sites that were closer to communities, like cheek to jowl, just to really kind of understand and begin to negotiate that relationship, so that's when I went into kind of manufacturing more. But you know, it was teaching that allowed me to really experiment and get into it. You know? I don't know how I would have done it just through practice.

TEACHING AT UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

UVA came into my life with my digging my heels in not wanting to come to the interview, and Beth Meyer saying, you don't dare do that to a friend. Well, OK. [LAUGHTER] OK, I'm coming. So 1995, I'm sitting on a balcony of one of the pavilions, and you know, smart ass as I am, I just said, why should I come here? And each of the faculty members just were so eloquent about what I would bring, where the department could go if I was with them. And I was like, wow. I really don't want to live in the South, but if I want to teach, I have to teach here. And that was when they said, you'll have complete freedom. And I said, OK. So right away, I launched a series of studios on industrialized sites, which was when I really discovered how rich that was to be working with a bunch of students who were just hungry. I also did studios. I'm just remembering one of the first ones that was called DUMP, of course, four letter words. And I told the students, I said, I have no idea what a landfill is. I mean, I just have an inkling. So here we go. So I tried always to create this atmosphere, or the reality of us doing this together, like here we go. And maybe in a way, trying to model being fearless. Like, let's just go. I mean, we have no idea what we're gonna, and that was a year, it was amazing. It was before 9/11. So we got to go to Fresh Kills, and see all that. So from there, it just became a collection, after collection, and in each time, there was a group of folks that we would engage. And it went everywhere from engineers to sometimes the community groups. So it just varied. And man, I was just [UNINTELLIGIBLE GUTTERAL SOUND] you know, I mean, it just charged the practice big time. And I think the students felt that, too. They were like woohoo. We're in on this. So a

manifesto studio. I mean, how fantastic is that? You know, so to demand that they articulate what they're about. And the war stories were full of Julie-isms, and I would hear them repeat them. And when they're, I've always run into them, of course, today, I don't know, they're just like, well, you would have said this. You know? And I've even done things like [LAUGHTER] in the studio, and someone is doing something, and I'm like, really? You know, ugh. That's not productive. And it's, just really hold them accountable. And I have said things like, if you do that, I'm going to hunt you down. [LAUGHTER] Oops. But you know, it made them, again, accountable all through, and I don't know, I like to think they get a kick out of that, and that my voice, annoyingly, is in their ear.

LIVING IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

So when I got dragged, or I dragged myself to Charlottesville, I had to seek out how to live in this Southern town. So I was looking for urbanity. And the place I found first was a Coco-Cola building, I was really lucky to get a place in there. It was absolutely fantastic. Yeah, just wonderful, you know window walls, and it was when I was actually a little bit social, and we had wild dance parties there. It was excellent. The historian, Dan Bluestone, he's a great colleague that really was influential. We did studios together, and actually that's when I really learned the value of working with historians, that landscape architects themselves I think do kind of a hack job. So he was great. He discovered, he come to me, and goes, do you mind if I pull up a piece of the carpet? Because I was studying the Coca-Cola buildings, and there's one place where they put the secret syru.drGoathey 01 (,)TJ-0.002 Tc 0.002 -2 (pfiT (nd the)-2(he)]TJ02001 Tc -0.002 -1 (

rented the top floor. It was a little toasty. But that's where I set up what felt most like an artist's studio. That's what I always wanted it to be. You know, so I have a really hard time, actually, sometimes going to a firm or an office. I'm like, no. It's a studio. So to just really

departments in their cities. They often have no idea what the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] is doing, or this and this. And it's like put them together, man. They're in it. They're an incredible resource. It's not just you in your office. You have these folks that can really look at a project within the city's context, in multiple ways, to make a really good project.

There are so many ways I think my colleagues would attest to that we relate to clients. And it's so variable. And for myself, I always think it's the greatest challenge, I love it, of actually really cultivating this. I mean, there's the aspect of them being patrons, right, and they bestow things upon you, and there's another thing where you really forge the collaboration. I know it sounds maybe hokey. But when they're right in there with you, they're, I think they're even, they even have, I hope, more appreciation for you. They're happy that they bought this painting. Right? And that is when that kind of confidence is built, not just you as a designer, but a confidence in the client, where really, you know, you have the chance to do your best work. When you feel, I think I said it before, but I'll say it again, safe in an odd way. To experiment, you know, I mean, you think about great patrons, you know, of repeated works. I mean, we don't really get that chance, kind of, maybe if they have different properties. But there's just something about when you feel really good, and yeah, when you feel really good, and unafraid. But I think that, I think it's a project in and of itself, that we should work on. I think that there's sometimes too much of this kind of deferral, or this kind of like, I will do as I am told. But it's more fun to forge that.

DESIGN

D.I.R.T. STUDIO

D.I.R.T. emerged when actually I went to Minnesota to teach for just a few years. And I made an immediate connection with Ga

know, I just always have loved to collaborate with architects. And so it was great, because it gave me kind of real projects to work on right away, while also what was emerging was through my obsession with industrial sites, you know, a very important project, Vintondale. I mean, Vintondale to me still is the project that I feel just launched D.I.R.T. and really, even still defines its trajectory.

I was in Minnesota from 1992 to 1995. And actually, D.I.R.T. came to be, well, I was doing D.I.R.T. as an academic, which mean road trip, you know, project. And then I thought, OK, D.I.R.T. Studio, for the name of it. And it came to be because of more of Rockcastle's father. Yeah. He came to me, and he goes, could you look at this project in Las Vegas? I was like, OK. He goes, could you get that critique. I'm like, yeah, yeah, yeah. So you know, I'd like spew about dah, dah, dah, and he goes, you're hired. You know, so, and it just rolled with Garth. So I was like, oh, I guess I have to do what Martha told me to do. She said, get a rubber stamp and just, [RASPBERRY SOUND] a card. Which I do to this day. [LAUGHTER] So yeah, it was wonderful, really wonderful, just all different types of projects. It was also, when was that? Oh, it was at the end of when I was in Minnesota. Oh, I have to say, I have to say, in Minnesota, I would, I was kind of a fellow at the Design Center for the American Landscape with Bill Morish and the late Catherine Brown. And that was also incredible. I mean, I felt like I got an honorary degree in urban design. Probably not the case, but anyway, I tried. So at the end of that kind of foray within Minneapolis, is when Vintondale came to be. So Vintondale, the project, started to take off. And that's when I came here.

So the D.I.R.T. thing, you know, is, I don't know. It's kind of silly, but I always have the periods there, and I'm obsessed with acronyms. And so, and it is several things, like one, on the academic side, it stands for doing industrial research together. And practice is, dump it right there. So. Anyway, I mean, the good thing is, you know, I tell people the name of the studio, the practice, and they're like, it sticks. D.I.R.T.? Yep, right, D.I.R.T.

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Right? But we're going to be looking for a place to regenerate ourselves. COVID was one of the ultimate disturbances. So again, back to kind of polluted landscapes, I have loved them, because they are such a challenge. And I love them because, with the folks that have created these landscapes, if they are still around, you know, are of a generation where that work and the byproduct of it literally was progress. No question about it being progress. So now to work with them and say, well you know, you need, and we need, and the landscape architect needs that next cycle of that landscape, you know, to be healthy, to be strong, which is always one of my mantras. And to, once again I'm going to bring up the words, be unafraid. You know? I also will bring up again the idea of stories, of narrative, because once you know the stories of those complicated sites, you know, you can make sense of it. You can make sense of them. And y

certainly touch neighborhoods and people directly. And I think it's a really cool thing, to work, work, I always say, cheap and cheerful. How do you do that? And I often use wild and wooly. You know, that's what you do. So anyway, I'm optimistic, and I want to get out there. And as soon as D.I.R.T. 2.0, when I'm healthy, and D.I.R.T. 2.0 is all set up, boom. I don't know what kind of avenger, but I think maybe I can just be myself.

a lot and a lot of folks that are at stake. And it's not going away. It's not going away. And hence there's a lot of frigging work to do, still. Nobody is translating this toxic cloud and plume that is looming. You know, so what I really liked doing was making these maps and explaining them to the neighbors so there was no more wool over their eyes. You know? It's like, oh. And I would teach them how to read the data and the toxic levels. And so, they would come to the meetings and, oh my God, I didn't have to do anything. The EPA was like, doh. They know what's going on. And I mean, I also would talk about maybe how to work with the EPA or a corp

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Metasequoia glyptostroboides. [LAUGHTER] I said, OK, here we go. So anyway, that was

necessary fence and the planting in front of it. So you know, you're still in the wilderness. It's really good. I'll bet. So yeah. I think we just still need to be careful about how prescriptive we are. I think folks respond to, respond to being let go.

ACTION PLANS

I loathe master plans. I think they are not kind. I think they paint this pretty picture, this whole finished picture. And there's no room in there, I think, you know, a lot of times there's no room. So I prefer action plans that give some structure to the process of that landscape growing over time. And there's an openness, like it can evolve. It'()

glance. You know? And we added to that, well, very Smithson, about a landscape that was growing according to its own logic, not ours. Respect. So it's that respect, too, you know, that I gain from reading, reading him, rereading him. And also, you know, doing right by the landscape. And I like to think he would hunt me down if I did something funky.

The most important essay by Smithson, in my mind is Sedimentation of the Mind. And that's where he really talks about the value of polluted sites, sort of, not per se. He does talk about mining in there. But again, it's about that deep evolution, which I've become completely obsessed with, this idea of the cycles. Now I feel like work should be about that next cycle. You know? And push it, just mm, set processes in motion, just set them in motion. So I always have the students read that as my number one. I'm not much of a reader. That's why I send students to that. But when it comes to Smithson, that's a required reading.

I was visiting the mother lode of pits in Bingham, the Bingham Pit in Salt Lake City, Utah. And I heard tell that Spiral Jetty was reemerging. So I hightailed out there, and I mean, and it was awesome. The part about it being awesome was having watched the film of the making of it. And that the essence, the important part was the making of it. And dump truck after dump truck, talk about "dump it right there." You know? And what, but what emerged from the process was form. You know? It wasn't form first necessarily, although of course Smithson thought about this infinite form, kind of then becoming a creature, an organism in this shallow water with all its red rocks and algae and crazy stuff. And again, big influence, big influence by combining the film and the place. And the peace.

ARTICULATION AND CHANCE

When I've worked on projects and collaborations, I find that a lot of times I have to try to articulate this, what's the word, just kind of difficult way of seeing difficult projects. And I see

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You know? The fictional ones with the angels talking a little bit. To me, it just, that to me was just amazing that they were inside other people's heads, to maybe kind of understand more of that territory. And I think that understanding went out into what I would call an untitled landscape, because you were like, what is that? And the old Turin Vague or whatever. I mean, they named and claimed it. But I wanted to know more about what this fallow land could hold, you know, in terms of cultural value. You're seeing it framed in the cultural context of the film. So how could that extent out? And I think that's why I have recommended it, and people watch it, so that they might see that land in a different way. Maybe they listened to it like an angel. And just become, always been important to me. I think, I don't know, I think especially now, because the industrial sites, for the most part, are full of stuff. You have some place to start. But these other expanses, like the fallow fields in Detroit, and the fallowness of, actually of Hardburger Park in San Antonio, and of Core City, which was the kind of ubiquitous kind of generic parking lot. So in a lot of ways I think they're great, kind of as is. Like Wim Wenders would have them be, because they kind of , I don't know what it means. Do they kind of explain and exist in relationship, right, to other things? Like my friend and developer and client, you know, we're looking at this idea of the fallow land as is, in relationship to these very urban clusters that he's making. You know? And of Core City Park was also that kind of foil, you could say, for the expanses. But I have to say, I didn't want to be too far away from being, it's not untitled. But maybe the designer

PROJECTS

THE BLUE HOUSE

When I moved into the Blue House, the backyard was a hot mess. It was just a lumpy thing, lumpy thing. It was like insane. So the first thing was to bring in a dozer. A small dozer. And you know, it's funny, the backyard, there are moments of it that are really quite formal, and you know, I have to say, I just like, oh my God, I'm still addicted to that. Whatever you want to make things. But the first thing I did with the dozer was to kind of make this upper plinth, the crisp edge, and the lower, because those wanted to happen, because it was like latently up and

close together, two little poplars and sweet bay magnolias. An attempt at farming with the raised beds. That's, you know, maybe successful, maybe not. But really, you know, it's all, I think a lot of colleagues would talk about their gardens as experiments. Well, maybe not, because I, mine has a lot of failures. And I just go, OK, whoops. That didn't work. And so you know, it's, I have to say, generally with gardens, what I've always appreciated, and D.I.R.T. Studio was like, you do gardens? I'm like, not really. Secretly I do them. It's whatever, the "frouff" factor. But they're fantastic experiments. And I mean, it's all one big mockup. I love mockups. And yeah, and they give you that intimacy and that immediacy that I've realized just has been so important to feed even the big work. The big work. So, and I think a lot of colleagues do that. But I hope, though, I hope, I just hope the role of the garden will always kind of keep that stature of an important thing for us all to do for our soul, right, and for others. And to be able to bestow that level of intimacy and experience. You know, even if you're working on large work. Because we experience the landscape at the scale of the leaf.

quickly. And I think that's why I've always gravitated towards the material evidence. You know? It's almost like I've always felt like, I look at a piece of concrete, and that it's

where we stood in front of this parking lot, you know, with these wonderful one, two story buildings that he had a bakery going a

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And I've been able to, you know, revisit the site, and in a way, I think they're keeping it a little too tidy. But you know, that's OK. And it feels good. It feels good. Yeah, it feels good.

I had an incredible opportunity with the Waterworks project, Turtle Creek, to work with Kate

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My charge, I felt there, was to work with Dick [Hayne] on an action plan, instead of a master plan. Some strategy that would set the framework in place and then let the other stuff evolve, you know, as we began to understand it. I mean, that's, to me, why master plans are premature a lot of the times, and can't be responsive. And Dick was very comfortable with that. I mean, when you think about it, I think about how he works with the designers, and pushes and pulls ideas. So that was great. And we totally bonded. It was crazy. And he'd, when I was on site, especially or even in between, we would really walk around together. That's where mockups were cleaned. The mockups, though, also, what I was really excited about was a way to communicate with the contractors also as being part of that process, you know, not showing the sample in that, in that detail. We kept so m

them, and they'd yell, Julie, is this Barnie or

APPENDIX

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I found in like, you know, looking at Cornelia's work, there was very much that immersive quality that I think comes from no fear of making.

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