

BAUHAUS LEGACY – INTERVIEW #2

Interviewee Name: Edward Nilsson

Interviewer Name: Christopher Brown

Interview Date: 8/17/2025

Interview Location: Subject's Residence - Marblehead, MA 01945

Christopher Brown:

This is the Bauhaus Legacy oral history project, interview number 2 with Mr. Ed Nilsson. It is Sunday, August 17th, 2025, and we are here at the subject's residence in Marblehead, Massachusetts. So, we're going to begin with an introduction. What is your name?

Edward Nilsson:

My name is Edward Nilsson.

CB:

And what is your current profession?

EN:

Architect. My profession is architect.

CB:

And can you tell us when you were born and where you were raised?

EN:

I was born in 1947, New York City, and grew up, went to school in Queens, New York, and high school in Brooklyn, New York.

CB:

And when did you make your way to New England?

EN:

Well, I went to Cooper Union for undergraduate, but then I was interested in the buildings in Cambridge, so I came up to Harvard for the graduate program for a one-year master's program.

CB:

Where do you currently reside?

EN:

I reside at Marblehead, Massachusetts.

CB:

Okay. And how long have you been here?

EN:

I've been here 40 years, actually. We built the house in 1982 and an office building next to the house in 1986.

CB:

So, let's get into your educational background a little bit. Where did you study?

EN:

Well, I took an architectural course at Brooklyn Technical High School, which is one of the three exam schools in New York City. They offered a very interesting architectural program. I learned as much there about structures than I did in college, actually. And from there I went to Cooper Union for a five-year program. I took a year off after the second year and went to Stockholm, Sweden to work in the planning department for a year and then came back. And so, I finished up in 1970. After that, I went up to Cambridge to enroll in the master's program at Harvard. I was fascinated by this building, by Le Corbusier, and I wanted to learn more about it. So, I came up to study that building and I spent the first semester writing up how I thought it was designed. And then the second semester, I had the opportunity to go to France to take photographs of the original drawings for Professor [Eduard] Sekler. He was coming out with a book, a 10th anniversary of the building, and he needed pictures of the drawings. So, I went to France, took the pictures, then I found out how it was actually designed, which had nothing to do with [how] I thought it was designed. So, it was a very educational process of how great buildings get built, not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

CB:

And this is the Carpenter Center?

EN:

Yes. This is the Carpenter Center on Quincy Street in Cambridge.

CB:

And you studied at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard?

EN:

Yes. That was the one-year program I studied there, started in September '70 and graduated June of '71.

CB:

And did Corbusier's Carpenter Center have an influence on your architectural education and inspiration?

EN:

Yes, it did. Well, it brought me to Cambridge, essentially, and while I was in France, I lived in Le Corbusier's apartment for about six weeks. So that was very interesting just to get into the weeds and the nitty gritty, how the buildings were built and what the experience was like living there. It was on the border between Paris and the large park, the Bois de Boulogne. And it was just an interesting period of time before Paris got developed in a much larger scale. The apartment was overlooking several soccer fields on one side and the park on the other side. So, visiting where architects lived, it's always interesting to see exactly some of the details and how the space shaped them as well.

CB:

What inspired you to be an architect to begin with?

EN:

Well, my father was a construction foreman in New York City. He came to New York in 1921, and at the beginning of the golden age of bridge building. So, he worked on many of the bridges in New York City, probably six or seven of them. So, he was in construction. And I have two older siblings who are artists. So, I felt architecture, since I was about 10 years old, always seemed to be a desirable field to sort of bridge the gap between construction and art.

CB:

We talked about Corbusier, but are there any other architects or architectural styles that made an impact on you in your early years?

EN:

Frank Lloyd Wright, of course, as an American architect, had a big influence in my later work. He wasn't taught in schools. Le Corbusier was much more didactic. You could learn, you could take his buildings apart and put them together, and it was perfect for teaching. But Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings tended to be more complex, organic, as they say. And there were not a lot of people out there teaching about his work. A few authors wrote about it really well. And so that was very much of interest and I wound up being inspired by the Guggenheim Museum and a later project that I worked on, very similar structural systems, so that was influential. I also admired Alvar Aalto's work; being a Scandinavian, I found that his work sort of struck a chord, and organic architecture too.

CB:

And are there any particular buildings that really stood out to you when you were younger that you remember seeing and having a very striking impact?

EN:

Well, growing up in New York, I guess there's always wonderful buildings in New York City to watch. Not one in particular stands out. Cooper Union is a very interesting building - it's 1859, it had a two-story addition added to it, and that image stuck with me. It actually influenced another project I worked on later overseas while I was at TAC [The Architect's Collaborative], sort of a multiple layer use building that had incremental objects on the top. In this case, it was artist studios [that] were articulated with a saw tooth roof, and that influenced the design of a project that I worked on while at TAC. So, that's probably the main one.

CB:

Now, you were studying at the GSD when Walter Gropius had already passed away, I believe, right? Was this in the early '70s?

EN:

Yeah, I was there '70 to '71. And he had passed away in '69.

CB:

'69, that's right, yeah. Did you feel that his influence was still strong there? Was Modernism the predominant form that was being taught when you were in school?

EN:

Yes, I think it was. Certainly the New York Five was very influential, having come out of Cooper Union where many of the professors were part of the New York Five group. But there were a few other professors who, one of which was a student of Gropius, his name was Richard Stein. He was more of a mentor, I think, than the others. I understand, I'm not sure if it's true or not, but I understand that he worked on some of the drawings of the Gropius House. He was a student who was helping. It may have been the one, I haven't found the exact source of that, but I'd be curious to know if that's the case. And other architects at the school - Davis and Brody I worked for, were very strong architects in housing, providing affordable housing in New York. So, those instructors I thought were very, I learned a lot from those instructors.

CB:

Now, when you were in school at the GSD, did they specifically teach you about Walter Gropius's work and the Bauhaus? Was that part of the curriculum?

EN:

It wasn't specifically. Because it was a one-year master's program, there were three or four courses per semester, and much of it had to do with history of art, history of architecture. One could take computer graphics at that time, that was just starting to be active in the field, and that could be done at MIT. You could cross-register at MIT at the time to do that. But I think his presence was there through TAC. TAC was in the heart of Brattle Square and Cambridge, and so the Gropius presence was felt through TAC.

CB:

And in Gropius's early years around the time that he started the Bauhaus, he was very adamant that the old style of architecture that was being taught - Beaux Arts and those sorts of overly decorative styles, which was the predominant focus in school - was an outmoded philosophy, right? And he advocated for a clean break and for Modernist ideas to take precedence in school. And so, it sounds like when you were at school, that was indeed the case. Here we are decades later that Modernism had become the predominant, perhaps sole architectural style being taught. Were there any historic styles, beyond the history but as far as practicing, the technique? It sounds like that stuff was out of date.

EN:

Yes. Well, at that time, I think '70/'72 was a pivotal period [of] time. What occurred a few years later, of course, was the Postmodernist group, which was basically form-centered using historical prototypes and images from past styles, past architecture. And so that was almost a regression, but still having the form drive the design. In one sense, it was almost similar to the Beaux Arts where the forms were driving the design.

CB:

And do you think that the focus, the predominant focus on Modernism around the time that you were studying, is a positive development? Or do you think that the profession and the academic curriculum lost something of value in moving away from some of these, what had become antiquated styles?

EN:

Well, I don't think there was much interest in what you call antiquated style. I think it was, that was sort of a non-starter. Even what we now look at as Victorian-era buildings, which you can really appreciate the architectural content, those buildings were anathema. 19th-century eclectic styles - Gothic Revival, Greek Revival, the Federalist, the Colonial style, all of that was sort of regressive to architects in the '60s, late '60s and '70s. Technology ruled pretty much most of the decisions and mass production, prefabrication, all of those were the buzzwords I think that people were aiming, striving towards in school.

CB:

So, let's talk a little bit about your introduction to Gropius and the Bauhaus. I know you said it wasn't specifically taught in architecture school, but do you recall when you first learned of the Bauhaus?

EN:

It would probably have been the second year of college at Cooper Union. We had classes, theory classes on occasion, and it was hard to miss. The Bauhaus was obvious by that time to the students, but less so than Le Corbusier. I think they're sort of running on the same track, in some ways. The beauty of the Bauhaus movement was that it produced things that were really well designed, that were economical, that were efficient, and that was many times the formalist, they're calling them formalist architects, sacrificed efficiency in economy and compactness of design for form. And Gropius didn't write a lot about form. There are some sections of books that I've read a little bit about, but since he was not a painter, like Le Corbusier, his relationship to design form was a little different. He didn't opine about that very much. It was mostly into, when designing a building, the building should be a composite of all the specialist fields sort of synthesized into one building, and the form was obviously one of them. I think there were some theorists, like [Christian] Norberg-Schulz was a Norwegian writer who wrote about form and function and aesthetics, and how they were all balanced. But that usually didn't come up very much. We had a teacher at GSD in the Arts Department, Rudolf Arnheim, who wrote books about visual psychology that talked about form and the impression certain forms have, and the vision studies that help people learn about the effect of how people see and how they process visual images. So that was very interesting. But I think Gropius wrote a little bit about that, and that may have been the connection between Gropius and the form-making.

CB:

And these philosophies you're describing - form and function, but also affordability, efficiency, these sorts of ideas, finding beauty in simplicity... Are these philosophies that you've carried over into your own professional work?

EN:

Yes. Well, I think by design in the sense that every project needed to resolve those issues. If you ignored it at your own risk, your buildings might not be as good as they could be. So, I think like Eero Saarinen designed buildings that every building was different because there was no preconceived concept. Every

building had its own style in many ways. And I subscribe to that, that each building had its own demands, whether it be formal or cultural or financial. And that's the beauty of working in the field, is that you're constantly changing, adjusting to new clients, new programs.

CB:

So, it sounds like in your work, actually, you were maybe more shaped by the Postmodernist movement, which came out of the Modernist Bauhaus foundation, but that was more the time period you were becoming a professional in.

EN:

Right, right. That would've been in, for the next 10 years, I think it would've been, or more, maybe 15 years - still mid-80s, late 80s even. That's what you read about in the magazines, in the architectural magazines. But my interest was mostly in housing, and that didn't really affect housing much. It was more demanding of efficiency and cost management, though housing is also more demanding of aesthetics. If people are going to live there, they're going to want to be inspired by their environment.

CB:

And speaking of housing, the Bauhaus was focused on making a better society from the inside out...

EN:

Right.

CB:

...and again, that's where the affordability and efficiency come in - better human living through the design. So, it was a very socially conscious movement, I think.

EN:

Yes.

CB:

Did those principles influence your work as well, as far as creating homes that were livable and affordable and efficient?

EN:

Very much so, because after my second year at college at Cooper, I went to Sweden for a year, and I wanted to learn how in England and Sweden, Scandinavia in general, they don't seem to have a problem building beautiful homes in a way that you don't mind living in a high-rise building because it's surrounded by greenery and natural aesthetics. And there are a lot of lessons, largely because those new towns were new and they were designed from scratch, by 1950s, '60s, '70s standards. In the States, things were already built and there was still empty land, but it hadn't really hit the renovation, restoration era where there's no more land left. So, now we have to repurpose the buildings that we have because they're located well in the community, and it's cheaper to renovate a building than to build a new one.

CB:

Now, have you ever visited any of the Bauhaus sites in Germany, like the main school in Dessau?

EN:

I haven't been to Germany, actually. I had hoped to have gone there for the hundredth, was it hundredth anniversary in 2019, but plans got waylaid.

CB:

So, the Bauhaus closed in 1933 once the Nazis took power and the school was always under threat from people of that mindset, right, that saw it as "culturally degenerate". Do you have a sense of what was so threatening to folks of that ideology about Modernist ideals?

EN:

Well, I think [for] some people, it threatened their vision of the future, and some people chose to live in the past judging by their architectural styles, and that could have made them upset. The progressive movement of the 20th century was always looking forward to the best advantages of technology and anything that would improve the quality of life would be worth doing, if it did improve the quality of life. So, insisting on certain early archaic styles sent a message that the future was going to be different, and that's maybe what offended some people.

CB:

So, we've talked a bit about your schooling and about your influences. How did your architectural career begin?

EN:

Well, it began, as I mentioned earlier, by my trip to France to photograph the drawings of Le Corbusier. Actually, there were 200 drawings, 22 of them were by Le Corbusier, and the rest were by his assistant Julian De La Fuente, a Chilean architect who worked for Le Corbusier in the late '50s and early '60s. And so, I'm not a photographer, but to take the pictures, each picture, I had to take five, adjusting the light meter. So, I took about a thousand photographs. And then when I came back from that trip, I had a twitch in my eye so I went to an eye doctor and he said, "Well, you should see an ophthalmologist." So, they sent me to the Harvard Health Service ophthalmologist, and it turns out he was a doctor who lived here in Marblehead. And he said, "Well, I'm looking to build a house in Marblehead", and I didn't think anything of it. But then when I got back to the office, I contacted him and arranged an interview and then ultimately designed the house, which is my next-door neighbor's house, actually, in 1972. So that started my practice as an individual.

I was working at TAC in '71, and then I left the following year and had my own practice for two years, but I needed my architectural license. And to do that, you needed to show you had practical experience in firms. So, I went back to TAC to get [it], that was the best place to get your practical experience, so I went back to TAC thinking I just needed another two years to take the exam. But I wound up staying there five years, five more years. And so, my individual practice started while I was at TAC and sort of in a gap. But then I went to work for several large firms after TAC, one in Boston. I should preface that by saying the work in TAC was mostly in the Middle East, in Kuwait in particular, and with a wife and family, growing kids, I thought the work that I was doing needed a little bit more remuneration. So, [laughs] I asked them, but there was no response. [laughs]

So, I came across a wonderful opportunity in Boston to work on the Charlestown Navy Yard, the first building that would be renovated since Nixon closed the Navy Yard in '74. One of the first buildings to be renovated was Building 42, which was a 500,000 square foot metal machine shop. And it was to be made into 367 apartments and a 362-car garage and some retail. And I was going to be in charge of implementing that. So, there was a plan that actually was started, and I took that plan and brought it through design and bidding, and it came in too expensive - \$20 million. So, in order to not lose that project with the owner, I decided to propose another scheme which allowed it to preserve a lot of the features of the existing building and was simpler. And actually, that came in at \$16 million so that made it feasible. So, that concept, using some of the principles at the Guggenheim Museum, structural principles, allowed that to be built simpler, cheaper, and aesthetically better by restoring and preserving some of the original character. It was a 700-foot long by six-story high by 30-foot of, I think it was 50-foot-wide gantry crane way. It's just an amazing space. And we were able to preserve most of that in the new design, and that's what actually got built. So that was my experience there.

But I wound up leaving that firm in 1980. That was from '77 to 1980. And then I went, a friend of mine, a colleague, a neighbor where I lived, was Paul Krueger, who was a principal at Sert, Jackson Associates, the firm that actually built Carpenter Center. And he was the one in charge of it. So, I got to know him well and we often talk about that.

CB:

And when you say Sert, Jackson Associates, we're talking about [Josep Lluís] Sert who had succeeded Gropius at the Graduate School of Design.

EN:

Yes, very close connection between those terms, those administrations. But Paul Krueger had actually just started a new firm, I guess he had left Sert, Jackson. He started a new firm with Frank Gehry, the California architect, and that was a project that Frank got through the State Department for a new embassy in Damascus, Syria. And with my own experience in the Middle East with TAC, it seemed like I was a natural for me to help with that project. And so, I was hired there, went to work with him and Frank, and it was a challenging project. It was the first embassy after the Iran, Tehran Hostage Crisis. So, there was a supplement of a lot of security measures that had to be added to it. In fact, TAC had done a wonderful embassy for the United States in Greece. That's I think one of TAC's best projects. And so, part of my task at Gehry and Krueger was to sort of add the security requirements and sort of organize a little bit [laughs] to the detriment of the aesthetic. When it was presented at the State Department, I think the architects hired by the State Department sort of were critical of Frank's style, to use that for want of a better word. So, the project ultimately just didn't get beyond design development. And so, with that project being shelved, then I left there, and then that was when I opened up my own firm here in Marblehead in 1982.

But having learned a lot from these bigger firms, mostly TAC being sort of the professional standard and the Navy Yard project, was with Anderson Notter Feingold, and I think I was hired there to implement a scheme that was already existing because of my TAC experience. I think they may have viewed TAC and me as basically doing the production work of a design that already may have been created. TAC had people like that. TAC had people just fresh out of graduate school or they would be very good designers, they would be less familiar with the practical world. Cooper Union didn't train people necessarily to go right into an office environment. They were somewhat lacking in the skillsets. In fact, I had to spend a year or two unlearning the stuff I learned at Cooper because it put formalism and that sort of thing in

too much of a frontal area, and it needed to be sort of held more in the background when designing a building. So, when I joined TAC, I noticed many of the younger new hires weren't confident in their production skills, so I initiated a program to provide salespersons from the various products in the building industries to come and give a slideshow during lunch hour. It was great for them. They would have all these future architects learning about their product, which hopefully they would use, and the TAC people would get a free lunch and learn something about it, the product. So, that was just a period that younger architects had to go through. How do they learn what's in the field? The argument being that you should do the formalist stuff in school because that's the only time you can [laughs], you can't really do it when you're working in a firm. But on the other hand, if the school doesn't train you for the real world, you're going to get bumped around a little bit before you find a place that makes it a good fit.

When I started TAC, I actually did some lunch... we actually interrelated that with lunch hour talks now and then, it wasn't just people's, what they did on their vacation, but we would have talks about different kinds of architecture. And I did, I think I did at least one, if not more than, maybe two, on Le Corbusier because I was so familiar with his work. So, I would do these talks about Le Corbusier's buildings and it would be a discussion group about learning about what worked, what didn't work. And from what I've read, I think Gropius was aware of Le Corbusier's design, how he really was admired for that. And obviously they knew each other, they worked at Peter Behrens' office in 1911, whenever it was. [laughs]

CB:

Now when we're talking about TAC, The Architect's Collaborative, when it first started and Gropius was one of the original members, there was only, I believe, eight members in it?

EN:

Yes.

CB:

When you started, how many people were at the firm?

EN:

About 300.

CB:

Wow.

EN:

Yeah. And at least that's when I was doing the work in Kuwait. When that took off in '73, the oil embargo caused the financial resources in the Middle East to just blossom and they had money they didn't know what to do with, apparently. They spent a lot of it on real estate and building buildings. And when I went back to TAC to get the experience to take the license exam, I and another fellow named Bill Hall, we joined the same time in July of '73, and that autumn when the oil crisis started, all of a sudden these projects are flowing in. And the fellow I worked with, his name was Basil Hassan, Iraqi fellow who was a GSD graduate, and he wound up being a senior principal at TAC. Being an Iraqi, he had

tremendous connections in Kuwait, and he was flying back and forth all the time, getting new projects. Every time he'd come back, we'd have new projects. So, my colleague Bill Hall and I were given two projects to do, and we learned a lot about working in the Middle East and the metric system for one thing, and the culture of the environment in the Middle East. And then we eventually wound up doing two more projects, very similar projects that were multilevel zoning examples, that what's on the ground floor is where pedestrians are, that's one kind of use. What's on the roof level is another. Housing, that's the best use of the upper level, and parking would be underground or sort of sprinkled in the middle of the building.

So, the idea of using, they had prepared a zoning plan back in the '60s, which made it easy for us to design buildings that fit that zoning where multilevel layers of use were combined in one building, but they were viewed as basically parking garages. And they were designed, they were programmed to fit the problem they had, which was the streets were clogged with cars parking everywhere. There was no place to put their cars. There was so much business and so many cars, it got to be crazy. So, the city hired these consultants, the Italian city planners, and they wound up preparing a master plan that had up to 44 of these garages in downtown Kuwait. And TAC was hired to build four of them. We actually wound up building three of them. They were called parking garages, but when you looked at the building, you couldn't say it was a parking garage. You could barely notice it was a parking garage because it had retail at the bottom two floors, and housing at the top two floors, and the rest was underground, and maybe one level in the middle was parking.

And so maybe because they were viewed as such simple projects, my colleague and I were given these projects to work on our own. The fellow we worked for, Basil, he was back and forth getting new work all the time, and he wound up doing the design of the first, he wound up doing the concept design of the first one. It's called Souk Al-Manakh, a mixed-use building. And then I did the production drawings for that with a team of about five or six people. And then the second one was a much bigger project - that was for a thousand-car garage with retail on two levels and then housing at the top two levels. And that was one that was solely left to myself, and that had about 15 people working with me on that. And so those projects [were] probably like China was 10 years ago, just tremendous opportunities and a place where development and design and buildings were being produced at a rather record pace.

CB:

Now, when you joined TAC, was it competitive to get in? What was the process - did you apply? How did it work to get in there?

EN:

You would send in a letter of inquiry looking for a job, and then you would wait to see if you got called for an interview. And I would think it would be competitive because if you're recent graduates, you need that experience. And whether you liked the architecture they did or not, the more you'd learn, the better. TAC was the best of both worlds; they did pretty good buildings and they actually did very good construction-phase work. The materials they used and the specifications were very tight and very well implemented. I had colleagues who worked at Sert, Jackson; I don't know if they got the same education that they could have gotten at TAC. TAC had a graphics department, construction, administration department, interiors department, and everything was sort of divided out, but then it would all come together when the projects were put together and drawings were sent out.

CB:

True to its name, at least in the early years of TAC, it truly was a collaborative environment where a single architect wouldn't necessarily take credit for a project, it was credited as "TAC". Right? Was that still the case when you were there? Was collaboration a major feature?

EN:

We didn't talk about it. Whatever got the job done, I mean, we're all rushing to get the job done. There was a little bit of [a] question - Well, is the collaboration between the architects, within the architects, or was it collaboration within the hierarchical order of the firm, or was it collaboration with the engineers or the other consultants? I mean, there was collaboration on many different levels, and so they all stuck and they all made sense. But if you want to get a big job done, you'd have to work with a team of people and you have to make them stakeholders in the process and enjoy what they're doing. So, if you want the best results, you have to become one of them, one of the team.

CB:

And the Bauhaus itself had a major focus on collaboration, especially among different disciplines and among different students, and that influence carried over to TAC. Is that something that you have found influenced you in your own work? It sounds like collaboration is just inherently a part of working as a firm, as a team, but has that been influential to you in your work?

EN:

Well, I think one of the main legacies of Walter Gropius is his teaching. I mean, he was a teacher of so many people. Teachers at my school, they were students of his over the years, and so many well-known architects were students of his. And I think he empowered the younger architects with a vision of what a building could be. It looked at the broader scale, from the micro to the macro scale. It's town planning, it goes all the way down. They took an interest in objects of art. And one of the things I noticed [that was] similar between Gropius and Le Corbusier was that the house, Gropius's own house, was beautiful in many ways, but also because of the artwork that was integrated into it. The furniture, I mean, what better furniture designers could you have? [laughs] The fabrics, the textures, and the colors and the materials. Le Corbusier had a project called *Maison Jaoul* in Paris - beautiful, beautiful house. It's actually two houses connected underground with a garage that, it seemed like the house was built to display all these wonderful objects - painting, sculptures - and where there's a seamless line from the planning of the house and the cars and the streets to the art objects on a miniature scale. And there's one continuous thread of, a rather wide thread of art.

CB:

And by the time you joined TAC, the firm was approximately 25 years old, but Gropius had actually just passed away not that long before. And I know that even in the '60s, he was still involved in TAC projects through his work. Was he spoken about there, was his influence felt?

EN:

Not by name. Many of the younger newcomers, colleagues I would associate with, they never knew him because they came after he passed away. And clearly some of the visual items in the building would bring out Gropius's work. But I think he was less familiar and maybe revered as a teacher. Certainly they knew his role in the GSD. Many of the students, many of the workers at TAC were GSD graduates. So, he

would have that Harvard connection, but I think he was less of a designer himself than a teacher and an organizer and a synthesizer, to put it one way.

CB:

Now, to touch on again your mention of the Middle Eastern projects you did at TAC, one of the criticisms that gets leveled against the "International Style", right, the Modernist style, is the similarity between buildings no matter where they are in the world. It's like, a glass office building in Dubai is the same as San Francisco, and et cetera. When you were working in the Middle East through TAC, did you find that you were integrating some local tradition, local style with those buildings? Or were they really just strictly International Style Modernism?

EN:

I never thought of International Style as a style. I try not to use that word "style" much because it's kind of void of meaning in many ways. Because someone said that style can only be used in a term looking backwards in history. That's the only time, at least to me, it makes sense. But the conditions were so different in Kuwait than in Cambridge that you had to start from square one - the climate, the materials. The sand was not good enough to make concrete. You had to import the sand to make the concrete. TAC hired a special consultant out of Texas to design a specification that would produce... the sand would need to meet that standard for the concrete to work properly. So, you would think with all that sand, they'd have no problem with sand, they'd just use the sand they have. But no, it had to be different sand. So that sort of turned things upside down on its head. And the culture, the temperatures - 122 in the shade when I was there - it was a different environment that made you pause and want to rethink everything. And the culture is so different, the language, the manner of dress, the history, so it was only natural just to start over again and to try to learn from the local surroundings, the existing buildings, to study those buildings a little bit.

CB:

Now, you clearly had numerous professional opportunities coming around, it sounds like, during this very fruitful period. But what was it that made you leave TAC? Was it something about the firm you didn't like? Or did you find an opportunity that was just simply better?

EN:

Well, I didn't see much welcome to advancement. Later on, I went back to school for an MBA. My wife is a librarian at a business school, Babson College, and I could go there for free. So, I went and took an MBA program and I had a course about services, the professional services case study, and the first building was The Architect's Collaborative. It was the subject of a case study of the Harvard Business School. And it told a story about how TAC evolved and how going into the '70s, there's other firms in the country that were not so contented, and they were listening to the client more and they were taking some of the share of work that TAC had been doing. And so, I felt there was a slowdown of inspiration and direction that basically we can no longer assume that Walter Gropius was going to sort of tie it all together and march forward. And so, people were looking for other reasons. And the economics with inflation, economics had a lot to do with it. You had to build clean and simple and economically doable, and there wasn't as much ease of building the way there was, I guess in the '50s and '60s.

CB:

Talking about your post-TAC years, I know you had a connection with Ada Huxtable. Can you talk a little bit about who she was and why she was important to you?

EN:

Yes. Well, she was someone who I admired very much. She had very...

CB:

Could you describe a little bit of who she is and what she was known for?

EN:

Yes, she's known as the person who began the field of architectural criticism for the newspapers and particularly the New York Times. She was the first architecture critic on a full-time basis. And starting [in] 1963, she had written, she'd done some freelance work for them before then, but she was brought on as the first full-time, and she received the Pulitzer Prize for that. So, she's become sort of the benchmark of architectural criticism. What I admired about her was that she was not only someone who could understand and digest these new buildings coming out in all manner of shapes and form, but she could also look back at preservation. She could look backwards in saving buildings like Penn Station and other buildings. And locally, Salem - she basically saved downtown Salem from being completely destroyed. They knocked down a hundred buildings in Salem for urban renewal and she wrote almost a full-page article in the Times that showed how the city was losing its heritage. And I think as a result of that, I think the federal laws were changed to allow urban development to include historic restoration and preservation as part of urban development's role. That, not just tear down, build a new building, but if you got a good building, historic building, keep it, add to it and maybe renovate the inside. And that was a huge change that came about in the '70s, mid-70s.

And so anyway, my wife was a librarian at the time, and she worked evening hours sometimes. So, when I would pick her up at night, I would sit there waiting, reading microfilm, reading all of Ava Louise's articles on the microfilm machine, and I sent her a letter on one article that she wrote where I didn't agree with her. I was a student of Cooper at the time, earlier. But fast forward to the 1980s, I understood that she summered in Marblehead. She lived on Park Avenue for six months, and then she summered [in] Marblehead for four or five months. And it turned out she was renting a house just over the hill from me, 200 feet away. And she had written an article about Marblehead among her many topics, mostly against developers, which wrote an article about Marblehead saying that the town is really changing and they're starting to build housing around the cemetery where there's vacant lands and it seemed like it was not a very happy situation for her. And well, here I was, the house that I built for the eye doctor, 1972 to '73-4, she would drive right by it when she went up to her summer place and I was all of a sudden very conscious about, is she going to add that house into her category of woeful topics? [laughs] So I was chairman of the planning board here at the time, so I wrote her a note when she was here in Marblehead in the summertime, asking if she might be interested in learning more or sitting in on some of our meetings, because we're trying to figure out how to deal with growth, unexpected growth in Marblehead's townscape. She respectfully deferred.

But fast forward a few years later, she had a zoning problem with her house. She wound up actually leaving the Times. She got a prize, one of the MacArthur prizes I think, and her mother had passed away. And so, she wound up buying a house here in Marblehead, just down the coast from here, maybe about less than a mile away. And she had some zoning problems with it. So, she called me up and asked me if I

would help her with that, so I was honored and thrilled that she would remember me. And so I did, I worked for her and actually built an addition on her house. And she became very close to my family. My wife and I would see her a lot. We'd have dinners often, we'd have dinners here. And she hired my son to help her learn about computers and software - this was '95 - '96/'97 - and the internet. And that was great for her because she could live here in Marblehead and not have to commute to New York for the Times. And then by '97 she had switched over to the Wall Street Journal. So, I think, in answer to your question - what I learned from her was the connection between architecture and the past and architecture and the future, and that the present is the present, but the past and the future are connected in many ways. And as Faulkner said, "The past is not dead yet, it's not even past." [laughs] So, the connection between that is very important. So, I've been involved in planning looking forward, and I've also been involved in historic restoration looking backwards, and I find it's a healthy mix to mix those two.

CB:

Is that something that, in your current work at your own firm, is a focus or do you just do new designs?

EN:

Both - new design and restoration. And Marblehead, it's a very historic town. It has 200 houses that are before the Revolutionary War. 300 houses, if you include those with parts before the Revolutionary War. And so working in town, you can't help but just have that rub off on you, that historic... dealing with preservation, not to make it into a shrine, but the best advice, the best way you could honor a building is to say it's a working monument where it has a history and it has a purpose, but it also is not frozen in time, like an amber glass kind of thing. It's changing over the generations and treating it as a shrine I think is... can get in the way.

CB:

It's such a delicate balance, I think, of the built environment, which is really irreplaceable - when something is gone, you can rebuild it in the same style, but it's not the same. But that reflection of the human culture and experience of the time, right, the artistry and the techniques and the aesthetics, and how maintaining the past keeps that character alive. These old homes, this is what it looked like in New England at the time. This is our heritage, it's our culture. And at the same time, if that's all you have, you're not reflecting the current culture. You need to build new things that reflect who we are now and what materials we use. Can you talk a little bit about that, because you work in preservation and in current design, as you said - to balance those two must be a difficult thing.

EN:

Well, to get help on that, I think the National Park Service has wonderful guidelines. They differentiate between renovation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. And one of the projects I took a lot of pleasure in is St. Michael's Church here in Marblehead. It's a 300-year-old church building - 1714 - and in 1793, the economy was so bad after the revolution, they noticed some rot on the steeple. It had a 53-foot steeple. So, they took it down on July 1st, 1793, the second term of George Washington's administration. And so fast forward to 2014 where the church was planning its 300th anniversary, trying to figure out how do we celebrate the 300th anniversary. What we did was, we wound up renovating the basement and so forth and other parts of the church, but we wound up putting the steeple back and the National Park Service guideline on reconstruction said, they didn't say that was the wrong thing to do, they said, if you do that, you should get as much factual information about the size and the

dimensions and all that, but you should differentiate between what's there and what is added so that the steeple actually had zinc shingles, not that they didn't have copper in those days, but they built it out of wooden shakes. And so, we put the steeple back so it restored and maintained the profile of the church, which was very visible from the water. From the seagoing town with a fishing industry, the church steeple was always sort of a guideline for the sailors and the profile of the town. So, putting the steeple back, even though it was in a modern form, restored it but had the responsibility of explaining that it was new. There was no steeple for 223 years, and some authors of some very big books on colonial church architecture say that it was never even built, the steeple. They didn't do the research. [laughs] So, it's important to restore those sorts of visual icons and in a way that satisfies the requirements of the past, but also requirements of the future, that when people see the building, they'll notice that it has a steeple that's zinc shingles with, imprinted with what appear to be wood shakes, but it's layered. And when we did it, the town came out and it was really a wonderful celebration of rediscovering the past in a way that they hadn't seen in 223 years.

CB:

So, it sounds like a key is to, if you want to preserve something historic and keep that character and the history and the aesthetics, but to make it modern in the sense of the accessibility of it, right? I'm thinking of wheelchair accessibility, for example, or climate control, sort of modernizing it so that it's comfortable for people of our era, but still maintaining that historical...

EN:

Yes, and if you're putting back in materials, sometimes in some jurisdictions, historic districts, in other towns, other states, you have to put back exactly the material that was there. If it's a brick building, you have to put back a brick, not a two-inch brick, but a four-inch, a full brick, the real brick, [laughs] not the pretend or, has the same surface on the outside that's mortar and burnt clay. But you can get carried away too much treating it like a shrine or without allowing it to grow naturally. Not to diminish either one, but just to keep... each case is an individual case in itself. I think some historical districts may have a blanket policy, and it's not differentiated, nuanced with different projects, but it really needs to be looked at on every project.

CB:

It's not very practical.

EN:

No.

CB:

And what is the name of your firm?

EN:

It's Nilsson + Siden Associates. Gary Siden, who was at TAC also when I was there, he was there before me and he was there a little bit after I left, and he lives here in town. And in 1992, a friend mentioned to me that he was leaving a firm in Salem and was looking for work. So, he joined my firm as a junior partner. I was an individual sole practitioner in 1982 when I left Gehry and Kruger. And that lasted until '92. '92 I incorporated. So that's the technical beginning of the firm in 1992, but I actually started in '82 as a sole proprietorship.

CB:

Going back to Walter Gropius, I know that you had a personal connection to his wife, Ise Gropius. Can you talk about that? When and how did you meet her?

EN:

I was just working at TAC and keeping out of trouble, trying to keep out of trouble. And one of the senior associates asked me for a favor. He said, would I go out and visit Ise Gropius? She wants to make some drawings useful for an exhibit that she wanted to participate in Germany. It was an exhibit about energy theory in Stuttgart, and it sounded interesting. I said, "Happy to help." So she said, "I want you to go to the Busch-Reisinger Museum and get a copy of the original drawings, and I want you to make a sepia copy, a reproducible copy, and I want you to, where the drawing shows the walls and the original drawings show the walls, but the drawings do not show the insulation symbol for the walls." So, she said, "I want you to draw in the insulation symbol to show that the house was actually built with a good insulation in the walls." Coming from Bavaria, in pre-oil crisis eras maybe that was not as important there. But this was 1976, maybe early '77 - energy crisis was everything. So, she wanted to make it known that this building was built with a healthy dose of insulation that made it compatible with contemporary standards. So, I did that. I just made the change on the drawing and put an asterisk on the bottom, which said, "as built", and whether this was an example of collaboration, it was the local builder who actually put the insulation in. It wasn't at the directive of Walter Gropius, it was the builder who, any building in New England would have, even in pre-oil period, would have insulation, rockwool insulation in it.

CB:

Is this Casper Jenney you're talking about?

EN:

Yes. So that was the requirement, just to make these drawings updated to show that it wasn't built without [insulation]. That was the task. And she also said, I guess she was working on a book at the time, and she said, "I'd like to make a survey of the landscaping on the lot just to give a history of what species of flora we have here." And so that meant working with the landscape department at TAC, and it had all the common names of the plants and shrubs and trees, but we needed to outline the botanical names so that was worked into the same task. So, basically doing some consulting work on drawings for her.

CB:

And that drawing, by the way, is in the book that is currently sold in the gift shop at the Gropius House today.

EN:

Right, right. Hopefully it's useful.

CB:

So, it's interesting, you said you met her through TAC, which at the time had hundreds of people. What was it about you that...

EN:

No idea. [laughs] I don't know.

CB:

What was your first meeting with her? How did you first make that connection?

EN:

Well, I was just given her address. I mean, I knew where the house was, but I just went out and met her there and she explained what she was looking for and she was very gracious and friendly. And so, it was very clear that this is something that would help her in her book and the exhibit in Germany.

CB:

So, it was that she was looking for somebody in particular to help her out who had a background with experience in design and architecture, and...

EN:

I mean, I had a particular interest in energy. I built this solar house and I designed it in '76 while I was there at TAC. I don't know whether that had anything to do with it, but I'm certainly an avid admirer of efforts to make the buildings more efficient, energy efficient, and make [them] more contemporary.

CB:

Do you recall your first impressions of her, just as a person?

EN:

Very gracious and businesslike. Very clear. Fairly short meetings. But it was interesting to learn about the house. When you talk about Gropius's presence, nothing can show his character, decision making, more than going through the house. It's a wonderful experience.

CB:

So, you had a professional collaborative relationship with her project and with her book, with the exhibit in Stuttgart. Did you feel that she was a friend? Did you have a personal relationship with her?

EN:

I can't say that I would approach her that way. If there were a social event, I could certainly walk up and talk to her about the book and about the drawings and how the exhibit went, that sort of thing. But [I] didn't really have an opportunity. It may have been just who was available at the time to do an errand, but I always thought that was an interesting example of collaboration because there was a builder who sort of, everybody's the resource and architects like to say, sometimes even the builder's a resource. [laughs] So having access to people at TAC who'd be interested in doing that was convenient for her.

CB:

Did you get some time just to chat with her on a personal level over a cup of tea or anything like that?

EN:

Well, it was mostly about the house, less personal. I was surprised how small it was - the house - very compact, very efficient. I think there's one thing I might've done differently. I might've had more space for a studio. In COVID, it became very comfortable for people to work at home. And his office was a wonderful office. It was still very, very small, but I don't get the sense that he actually painted much, or if he drew, he didn't really display a lot of his own artwork. The house itself was his artwork, I think, because of the wonderful furniture and artwork, and the colleagues at the Bauhaus.

CB:

Did she ever share any personal stories about him that you recall?

EN:

No, I really don't. That was a long time ago. I don't really recall it.

CB:

And do you have anything that you can say about her dedication to preserving Gropius's legacy and her passion for his work and for his philosophies?

EN:

I think there's always going to be a need for his approach - designing, looking at this analysis versus synthesis. So many sidetracks to good design come from just focusing on one thing without the other items that are equally, or would be useful. Again, as a teacher, I think his early writings still hit the nail on the head in terms of what's needed to do a good design, really need to involve all of the disciplines, all of the specialties, and synthesize them into one holistic... make sure you're covering all the bases, that simple term.

CB:

It sounds like when you were working with her, you could sense her passion for Gropius's work and for preserving that legacy.

EN:

Yes. Both the book, I think, and when I saw the book later on, I was surprised at how much detail went into it in terms of the construction, the things you don't usually write about. I mean, architecture books, you usually don't get into the details and the technical things. I know when I was working with Ada Louise [Huxtable], she sometimes would get some criticism that, what does she know about mechanical engineering? But I think she had a sense of how these systems contributed to the building and I think she tried to understand them. I think in Ise's case, she really dug into the detail. Now how she got all that information, whether she knew it all along or whether she just looked at the drawings or whether she had help understanding it... But it's a full picture of the house, no question about it.

CB:

Yes, and I've read it, you're right, it's very detailed. All the materials, the measurements, and all the reasons behind it. It's a great resource tool.

EN:

Like Walter, it would be a great textbook for architects.

CB:

Yeah. Did you ever meet their daughter Ati?

EN:

No, I didn't. No, unfortunately.

CB:

So, you've talked a little bit about the Gropius House. Anything else you'd like to say about your general impression of it? For example, do you remember when you first saw it, what you felt and what your view of it was at the time?

EN:

Well, I do remember, I may have been out there before it was actually turned over to SPNEA. I kind of had the general idea of the house, but when I went out there and saw the house and to meet with her to do the drawings, I was very impressed. It was just synthesizing all of that artwork, the design, the functionality, his office, how it merged with the living area and the kitchen. There was even room for a maid's room, and it had some nice outdoor spaces as well. Again, I think doing something that would display his own work, artwork or drawings, that would've been interesting to see. The drawings did reveal a very simple construction method, very simple standard materials, nothing too complicated. The windows of the house, very much utilized in Le Corbusier's work, like just a band, a ribbon of windows. And these were just held together by these clip angles where the wood studs and the header beams met. Normally, if you didn't have good connections at the corners, the building, you'd think it might rack a little bit or have a tendency to do that, but these steel clips at all the corners made it... That was a very good way to anchor it together. Nowadays, the carpenters wouldn't usually use that. They would probably just try to do it all in wood, but to get the effect that he wanted, I thought it was a very nice, simple detail that allowed the ribbon windows to be implemented and be rigid enough so there wasn't any movement in the walls.

CB:

What year was it when you first saw the house?

EN:

This would've been in '76, '77. I may have [seen it] as a student in architecture coming to Cambridge in 1970. I don't know if I did a pilgrimage out there. I know I did the pilgrimage to Louis Kahn's building in Exeter, New Hampshire and other famous buildings that I'd learned about. I may have gone out there beforehand once before, but I certainly, it wasn't a closeup look.

CB:

You mentioned SPNEA, which is now Historic New England, who currently owns the house. So, when you first saw the house, it had not yet been bequeathed to them?

EN:

Right.

CB:

Do you recall that happening during the time you knew Ise, that she made that decision?

EN:

It attracted attention when it was published that it was now being turned over to SPNEA and it immediately caused a controversy. How could a modern building be called "antiquities", an antiquity specimen? And that's very interesting. It's probably helped it a lot because it's, again, it's looking forward and looking backwards. They're really the same, flip side of the same coin in many ways, that people will look back at it as... in the future they'll probably look back at it as a historic, archaic building eventually, but of the modern movement and of the 20th century. But I think putting it in that context made people think about it, and that's the good part about it, I think, that it caused people to think, "Well, what is an antique and why can't it be an antique?" Even though it was just built, by that time, it was only 40 years ago.

CB:

How old do you think a building would need to be before it's considered historic?

EN:

50 years is what the national guideline is, I think, for the National Park Services. Some municipalities, it can only be nominated if it's at least 50 years old. So, in the Midwest or the West Coast where they don't have a lot of really old buildings, that's one of the criteria that can be used is 50-year.

CB:

Do you agree with that timeframe?

EN:

Well, some buildings in Europe, I know they're made national landmarks 10 years after they're built. So, if people know it's a landmark and it's a brilliant piece of architecture, then why not? But everybody has to agree. [laughs]

CB:

Would you consider the word "historic" to apply simply to the fact that it's old or does it have to have a style that's important or something that happened there that was important?

EN:

It should have something that influenced the way people looked at architecture. Because that's the problem with let's say Salem. Salem may knock down a hundred buildings. They probably knocked down a few gems. Knowing what the difference is between the gems and why it's a gem and why it's maybe a rundown semi-slum type of building. Even though it's made out of brick, it may still not be worth saving.

CB:

Do you think that the donation by Ise Gropius of the house to SPNEA, to Historic New England, was the right call? I'm thinking, for example, right down the hill is Marcel Breuer's house, which has a very similar look and feel, and that's a private home, right? So, guests always ask if they can go in and, "No, no, you can't tour that one".

EN:

Right.

CB:

There are pros and cons, but do you think it was the right decision to have that house preserved as a museum?

EN:

I think so. I think as an owner, I would think you'd want to look for the longevity of the building to last as long as people want it to be there, and it's very costly to do it. And having an institution like SPNEA or Historic New England take care of it is one way to preserve its amenities.

CB:

Given your work in historic preservation, what do you see as the biggest preservation challenges in that house?

EN:

In that house? Well, even though it was built in the late '30s, it has suffered from aging - the rust, windows, the metal, they're industrial Hope's Windows - as a company, they made industrial windows - and there's a debate now whether to put back double-glazed windows. I think Hope's Windows, if they're still around, they can accommodate double-glazed windows. But that's where you have to decide, is the energy retention so important symbolically now that, the fact that we're not preserving it in amber, we're actually letting it grow over time, and that's a judgment that the curators and historians have to make. We want to keep the appearance of it so people recognize it - yes, that's the Gropius House - but some details might not even show, some upgrades might show more than others. People might, if they see double glazing, they say, "Well, they didn't have double glazing to speak of in 1937", but we put up with that all the time. I mean, the whole Postmodern movement is basically designing buildings that might look like they could have been done decades earlier, but they were contemporary and modern. So that's a balancing act between the historians and the curators, and the public too.

CB:

You mentioned the windows and the energy design. Can you talk a little bit about your thoughts on the climatic, energy-efficient elements of that house and why it works well or doesn't?

EN:

Well, I don't have the data. That's what Nevin Summers I think would do. He did a wonderful article on that back in the '70s, I think it was, where he showed how the sunshades were placed in a way that blocked out the summer heat gain, but let in the winter heat gain when you want it. I think one of the nicest details of the building is the fact, on the western wall, the western window wall, they have exterior blinds, which is very clever. I think that's more common in Europe where you put the blinds

down when it's glaring western sun, and that keeps it from getting into the house at all in the summertime. So, it could be just for optical effect. It'll tone down the glare, but it'll also keep out the heat when you don't want it in the summer when the western sun is.... I think it's oriented so that it does pick up late afternoon western sunlight.

CB:

Now, if you were to take somebody on a tour of that house, is there anything in there that you would particularly want to share that you think is off the beaten path, or not commonly known?

EN:

Well, you'd have to look at the drawings and see the details of the windows, just the little clip angles everywhere, but you really don't see that anywhere except on the drawing. I think it probably escapes people's attention, but when they enter the house, they come up the path to this wall of glass block, and that's a product that I've used in the Kuwait projects. Every housing unit on the Souk project I worked on had glass block as a way of getting diffuse light where you don't need your view, where you have housing overlooking other housing. In fact, you don't want the view, you want opaque or translucent glass that you can't see through, but you can let the light in. So, when they walk up the path, I think you see the glass block on the right-hand side, and by the time you walk inside and you walk into the office, you probably don't remember that glass block, but you see another glass block wall between the dining room and the office. And I thought that's an interesting way of connecting the inside and the outside. There's sort of a statement there about, this material can be used inside or outside, and it works both ways and for two different reasons. One of them, the sunlight might actually hit it and, though I think it's on the north side so it doesn't get too much direct sunlight, now that I think of it.

CB:

The house has a very distinctively European Modernist appearance, but can you talk about in what ways it's actually a very New England home?

EN:

Well, the materials, of course... The church I mentioned here in Marblehead before, St. Michael's, it has a parish hall designed by Nelson Aldridge back in 1963. And the parish hall is a beautiful space. The town has art exhibits in that space, it has lots of natural light, but the walls are vertical clapboard, and it's natural wood, and people look at that and they say, "Wow, that's an interesting way to use clapboard." You think clapboard as horizontal, but this is actually vertical. And apparently that's a historic detail that was used in old barns. So, when Gropius used vertical clapboards, he was making a statement about wooden materials and patterns, but it also historically has a use in old barns, is my understanding. And so, the fact that it has a foundation of stones, field stones. They could have made a foundation out of a concrete block or they could have made a foundation of poured concrete, even in those years. But it's fieldstone, which is a very traditional, that's what all the historic buildings have for their foundations. Though at the same time, they used metal railing muntins, I think in the stairwell, in the curved stairwell corner. And they're very contemporary materials that you'd never find in a colonial house. So, there's a mixture of traditional and modern. Big sheets of glass, that's also very contemporary, not very colonial obviously.

CB:

How about the flat roof?

EN:

Flat roof - they've been doing flat roofs for many years and it's been very successful. And it usually fails because it's only meant to last about 20, 30, 40 years. And even shingles have to be replaced after that period of time. You learn about it quicker when you have a flat roof. But in the Gropius House, it doesn't drain to the outside. It drains to the inside, which means you don't hear it or you don't hear it much. Well, you don't deal with the water coming off the eaves and all around the outside of the perimeter. It's a very clever and efficient way of creating space. The building looks smaller. It looks so small from the outside, but if it had a dormer on it, it would be 50% taller, if it had a steep dormer, a steep gable rather. And when you do a flat roof, it's a challenge to the architect to make it attractive and by using glass block and lush landscaping and some aesthetically interesting... that angular canopy going into the entrance door is a very contemporary detail. Well, every colonial building has a very tight plan as well, so I can't say that the compactness of it, they seem to squeeze more stuff into that box than the colonial buildings because he has more things, heating systems, kitchen appliances, a lot of contemporary stuff that takes more space. But generally, there's probably an equal measure of early materials, 19th-century materials and 20th-century materials. I have this theory that people's aesthetics change when it's more economical, it's more efficient. It's amazing how that can modify their desire for certain familiar forms. Like people say, "Well, it *has* to have a gable roof." Well, no, it doesn't have to have a gable roof if you have a proper system. But it's also cheaper because you have less lumber and also less space for expansion. If you wanted to literally add a dormer on a gable, you could easily put a third floor.

CB:

The Gropius house is located in Lincoln, Massachusetts, which is very rural and has a lot of old colonial homes, but it actually has a distinctive collection of mid-century Modernism as well. Do you have any sense of why that area became sort of a hub for that style? Did it come from Gropius settling there?

EN:

Well, certainly he led the charge and was an inspiration for many other people. And the availability of deck houses and other companies that made houses that are sort of prefabricated would've drawn less attention to it, if it hadn't been the first one on the block. But Lincoln also had the Lincoln Labs, which did research during World War II, I think. And that symbolized advanced technological research that helped win World War II. So, somebody researching architecture and changing the field of architecture would've fit right in with the spirit of the town, in terms of the modern attributes it has.

CB:

So, talking about Modernism and preservation challenges, we mentioned that something that's 50 years old suddenly becomes historic, but a lot of Modernism, I'm thinking of Brutalism in particular, is pretty controversial, and there's quite a lot of people - think City Hall for example in Boston - that people just want to tear down. It's not attractive, it's not old enough to warrant preservation. What would you say to people that have that idea about mid-century modern buildings, Brutalism in particular?

EN:

Well, it is old enough now, it's 50 years [laughs], but actually I think it was influenced by the design of a monastery by Le Corbusier called *La Tourette* in France. Very similar features to it. So, I think these young designers, very able and capable, and they were quite influenced by that building and created something similar. Not so much a monastery for politicians as it were, but the building in France is a monastery. But if you look at the design and the background of the design, it didn't spring out of

nothing, it came out of something before it that had a purpose and a function. And you can draw a symbolism between the small cubicles of the city workers and the small monk cells and the room where they all gather for collective meetings and so forth, and meals at the monastery and another room where they have worship space. So, all of those analogous... you can sort of compare the two, looking at the way that City Hall is built. They call it Brutalism now, but it's *beton brut*, was the French word, meaning raw concrete. It wasn't meant to be brutal by design. The journalists kind of created that misnomer.

We have some very well-known buildings that have concrete that's treated as if it were marble. I think the National Gallery of Art by I.M. Pei is like that. It is all stone on the outside, but right over the entrance is a reinforced concrete band, a header beam over it that is polished like marble. And the purpose was to show that a simple inexpensive material that lasts a long time can be held to a higher level of appreciation in buildings. And that's what Le Corbusier did, I think he made concrete buildings acceptable, if they're well designed. But they're not always well designed, and there may be some criticisms of the Boston City Hall, but again, I think it's [up to] the future generations to look back and say what's historical and what's not. It's been interesting dialogue that the City Hall has sort of weathered a lot of the storms from some of the mayors and some of the general public, but I think it'll stand the test of time given the impact that it's had. And what does it contribute to the future? I mean, it wasn't [a] novel prefabrication system. I think aesthetically it's just the proportions, the mixture, a variety of spaces, what it says about town government. The council room is bigger of course, but it's not a sort of sacred chamber the way it might've been addressed. I dunno, this is a long answer to your question. [laughs]

CB:

Well, it's interesting because a lot of mid-century Modernist stuff came about during urban renewal when a lot of old buildings were being destroyed. I mean, City Hall's a great example, right? Scollay Square went down and they put up Government Center. Or, I'm thinking of a lot of schools, a lot of old historic schools got torn down to put in these sort of mid-century designs. But now a lot of THOSE are being torn down. There's some out in the suburbs that I've heard specifically about that, people I know have gone there and those are all gone now. And some of them were TAC buildings in fact.

EN:

Yes.

CB:

So, again, it's kind of ironic now that the thing that replaced the old building that got torn down is now under threat of being torn down, if not being gone completely.

EN:

Well, the good news about the original school buildings is that so many of them... the firm I worked for, Anderson Notter Feingold, when they did the renovation projects in the '70s, they were one of the first ones to renovate old school buildings for apartments. And it was so amazing that you could take... one project, I think it was in Gloucester, where you take a 30 x 30 classroom and you add a bathroom, line the kitchen with some walls, with some doors in it, and you're done. You created a one-bedroom apartment for like \$12,000, which was a very good price in those days. So, the fact that you're reusing the school for another function that solves a public purpose of the need for elderly housing is a happy

ending to that story, where sometimes they tore down the schools and built a bigger school or built a bigger housing project. But there's give and take, I think, in both sides of that.

CB:

Something that I ponder occasionally is, you think of Gropius's philosophy of breaking free from past styles, and starting fresh with a clean slate, in the 1910s and '20s with a style that was befitting of the modern time, and modern society, and modern needs. And here we are, a hundred years post-Bauhaus, post- that philosophy, and we are preserving and celebrating, and in some cases still being inspired by and building, those types of structures. Do you think Gropius would advocate for a break from his *own* style and philosophy to befit our current time?

EN:

Well, there are certainly new developments out there now that - sustainability is one, and some of the changes have to do with the materials; are the materials sustainable that you build a building with? And some of these things won't change the appearance of the building necessarily, or have a minor impact on the change of the appearance of the building. So, architecture is still designing buildings, for better or worse, whether they're sustainable or not sustainable. But I think Gropius would probably support the need to become more efficient. And so, we're not spending lots of money making concrete that is extremely energy dependent in this process and this transportation.... So, all of that I think would be welcome to him. Whether or not the buildings would change style, I think they'll still be building buildings with gable roofs and office buildings with lots of glass.

CB:

We mentioned urban renewal, and it was a particularly destructive period for a lot of different communities and a lot of historic structures and neighborhoods. But really the Modernist philosophies that stem back to Gropius and his contemporaries were influential in that process. City Hall is a great example - modern planning for the mid-century period. But yet, Gropius's philosophies in particular were so socially conscious. How would you explain or reconcile that contradiction between this kind of community destruction that's inspired by socially conscious ideas?

EN:

Well, a good example is the building I worked on at TAC, which was the building in Kuwait, which has housing, mixed-use housing, retail, parking, and some commercial office. And in 1970, I think that Kuwait was dependent upon Western architects to design buildings, especially high-rise buildings, but most buildings were built by Western architects. And TAC in particular came in very early in the game because they had done the University of Baghdad in 1958 and went on through, I think, seven or eight changes of government to produce like 150 buildings, I think, or more. I don't know if they were all built, but they certainly designed that many buildings. And so, TAC had a wonderful stretch of buildings in the Middle East that grew with other countries. So, in 1970, Western architects were needed to, with the technology and the efficiency and the organizational skill, particularly the tech specifications and the accumulated experience. 50 years later, now we're finding that many of those buildings, the country resents that they were designed by Western architects because they didn't have the architects. In Kuwait now, they're doing almost the majority of the buildings because they have Kuwaiti architects who have the skillset now to do these buildings. And the downside is that they're going around and they're looking at these buildings that were built in the '70s and they're tearing them down. Some of them are major projects, major complexes, housing buildings. And so, there's a decision to make - do we

keep these buildings because they're now historic, they're more than 50 years old, not that they use that criteria, but can we do better by knocking it down and building something else? And then we lose our past with that. And the one that was recently knocked down in Kuwait, it's a shame because they could have saved a small portion of it just to show a profile, the scale and the size of it.

And I mention that because the project I worked on, I was invited back to Kuwait in 2016 to give a talk on the building because apparently they like the building because it has a Middle Eastern flavor to it, of this small, individual, like an Arabic city, happened to be sitting on top of a garage or on top of a retail complex. So, in Kuwait's case, they actually tore down almost all of the Old Town, the historic downtown, and then they realized that was a mistake because they lost their history. So now with this building, we're putting back something that reminds them of their history. It's brand new, it's like the reconstruction of this church steeple kind of thing. It looks like what was there before in a certain sense. So, it has value to it, and that might influence whether or not they tear it down and build a big finance center or high-rise building or save it because it reminds them of their long-lost origins. And the fact that TAC was involved in that loop, we could draw upon the experience and the history it required to work in that neck of the woods. You really had to learn about the history to design buildings there.

CB:

My question about the benefiting [of] society and urban renewal - it sounds like people are just kind of doing the best they can with the challenges of their time and the culture that they're in to make those tough decisions about tearing down and rebuilding based on what's needed in that moment, which maybe is not what's needed 20 years later, and then you can debate it, but people are doing the best they can to balance that out.

EN:

Well, the architects should be aware of that, and I think they should consider that when talking to whoever's authorizing or commissioning the building, whether it's a board of trustees or, because some of the buildings are just sort of runaway trains on design, which really don't add anything. They subtract more than they add to the streetscape.

CB:

So, let's talk a little bit about, just to wrap things up here, the legacy of these ideas of Gropius. In your opinion, what is Gropius's most enduring legacy?

EN:

Well, as a teacher, that people can be taught... With the right teachers, students will learn the right subjects and the right way of looking at things. And I think the fact that he got people to think about the macro and the micro and the synthesis of the many specialties into one holistic design, that's what his goal was. So, I think, did all of the buildings achieve that? Not necessarily, but I think if you keep that in mind, I think you can't go too wrong if you acknowledge all of those [things].

CB:

Has your understanding of Gropius and his philosophies evolved over the time of your career and the work you've done?

EN:

Yes. Well, it has caused me to go back and once every now and then reread what he's written about it. And it's amazing how current the buildings are. He has a small book called *Scope of Total Architecture*. It's a little book and it's amazingly contemporary. And when you read it, it's a good lesson, a good handbook for designers and people in school.

CB:

Is there an influence that you can sense of Gropius in the Boston area's built environment today?

EN:

Well, I guess Cambridge, more so. I mean, his best buildings are the Harkness Center at Harvard. The graduate student center is, I got a sense he felt very proud of that complex because it was very early and it was very beautifully done. I lived across the street, I lived on the other side of Massachusetts Avenue at the time, and I would go through that building frequently. And I was always stunned that, like his houses, it had so much artwork in it. It had beautiful brick sculptures by [Josef] Albers. It had [Herbert] Bayer's tile murals. It had a Miro painting in it. And not every building has these pieces of artwork by these very well-known artists. It was just so uplifting because this was a dining hall, but you look around and you say, "Wow, look at that! I didn't notice that last time." But it's very inspiring. And I think that was a symbol of his pulling people together. I don't know how it was made in-house, I don't know how it was made with the other engineers, but the final product was a beautifully composed campus that was wonderful inside and outside. And of course, [TAC's] own building, which they built in, I forget when exactly was it, early '70s. They built an addition, actually, they had so many people... I worked in the new portion on Brattle Street, but I also, for the Kuwait, the last project, the team, we occupied our whole building on Mount Auburn Street, 138 Mount Auburn Street, which was a building TAC owned and it had two floors and each room had two or three people in it. So, that was really sort of hidden in the streetscape but the building on Story Street and Brattle Street was sort of an iconic building that TAC designed. I think a lot of the glamor went to the building on the corner, which was Ben Thompson's glass building.

CB:

The Design Research...

EN:

Design Research. And then Sert, Jackson's next to it was less familiar to people. But the courtyard space that TAC designed I think is a wonderful space. It's still there and it's a magnificent space. It's where the Grope Fest used to be held a lot of times and has a wonderful piece of sculpture in it. And so that kind of space is rare. So, I think the Harkness complex and the Battle Street complex are wonderful legacies.

CB:

If Gropius was alive today, do you have a sense of what challenges he would want to tackle with his philosophies?

EN:

Well, I think the whole trend towards digitalization of design and the electronics of designing the production that his firm was so good at. I guess that all this electric technology, digital software will just

strengthen that. I guess a lot of firms do that now, but I think they'll probably be trying to teach the same lesson that was before - take all the specialists, combine them into one synthesizing of specialties into one holistic view. That's still the goal.

CB:

And Gropius, you mentioned digital technology, Gropius was such an advocate for utilizing technology of the time. The machine era...

EN:

Yes.

CB:

... how to mass-produce things. Do you think he would embrace AI?

EN:

Well [laughs], it's hard to say because AI is sort of, it's very daring and it's very out there, giving you answers that you may not have asked. But that may be helpful. I guess the benefit of AI is using it as an editing tool. My son teaches AI in education as a consultant and he's co-authoring a book on AI in education. So, I hear about it a lot. As he says, the question is not, did you write this? The question is, HOW did you write this? And if you use AI properly, it can be used for a beneficial cause. If you use it to substitute for a paper you were supposed to have written yourself, then that's not so good [laughs]. So, I think it can have good or bad uses.

CB:

Now as far as your own work, when people look back 50 years from now, what do you hope that they would say about your career and the buildings that you've designed?

EN:

Well, I hope looking backwards and forwards, [it] may be visible, may be evident, that I try to learn from history and apply it, the lessons of history. And I think the proof will be whether it all holds together. It's not for me to judge. I guess it's sort of, in the moment, having to deal with it from a variety of different ways, but in time it may wind up seeming prophetic. I know I did a plan called River Vision 2020 back in 1989 and it was written up in the Globe with an editorial advocating it. And at the end of the article, it told a story about a man who had a gardener. The man said there's a certain kind of tree that's very special, and he wanted to have it planted right away. And the gardener said, "Well, if you plant it right away, you won't be able to experience it until, in 50 years, to grow." But he said, "Well, that's the point - in order to get it to grow, you have to plant it now, even though the fruits of it will actually be appreciated decades in the future." So, the plan that we proposed was a certain plan that made a lot of sense, logically made a lot of sense, but with political reasons and other things, it wasn't adopted, but it still has a logic of being able to be implemented for efficiency and clarity and benefit. So, in answer to your question, time will tell. [laughs]

CB:

Well, in closing, is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have?

EN:

I think you've covered a lot. No, I think it's just, it was sad that TAC closed in 1995. And I think that...

CB:

Why was that? Why was that, that they closed?

EN:

Well, what I understood was that the fees that were due from the projects in the Middle East were not forthcoming. So, they were not paid for some things and that caused a bankruptcy issue. And I guess they had to sell the buildings. But the important thing to note is that all the archives were, I think, sent to MIT. And as you probably know, that's where they are being kept and that's good for people to know that if they're interested in researching, that's where to find them.

CB:

Is some of your work archived there?

EN:

Well, these two buildings, at least the two Kuwait buildings, would be there.

CB:

Well thank you, Ed. I appreciate your time.

EN:

Well, thank you.