

BAUHAUS LEGACY – INTERVIEW #7

Interviewee Name: Peter Chermayeff

Interviewer Name: Timothy Mansfield

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Interview Location: Gropius House, 68 Baker Bridge Rd, Lincoln, MA 01773

Timothy Mansfield:

So, good morning. My name is Timothy Mansfield, I'm president of CambridgeSeven, and I am honored to be here with one of the founders of CambridgeSeven and the person who hired me, I dare say, 32 years ago - one Peter Chermayeff. And I am thrilled to be here today with you, Peter, to chat about your experience and relationship to Walter Gropius. And here we are in this iconic house. I'd love to start, Peter, maybe by just sharing a little bit of your early background and about your connection to the Gropius family.

Peter Chermayeff:

Right. Well, it's a pleasure to be asked to think about these things because at this point in my life, I'm spending more time than I ever did before thinking about the past and remembering things, taking me back to childhood and to early days, which I was always too busy to think about otherwise. And moving on to the next thing was my preoccupation, [laughs] no matter what happened...

TM:

Which we'll get to. [laughs]

PC:

But as I think about this house and its beginnings for me, I have to go back to a point when I was hardly conscious. I was four years old, which means that my memories are shaky at best, but I know that it's real, that I came here with my family in 1940, very soon after my parents, with my brother and me, arrived in this country having come from England through Montreal to the U.S., leaving behind the world of Europe and England that they had known previously, and starting a new life in this country just as Gropius had done a few years earlier. And because Walter and Ise Gropius were close to my parents and known to them from their time together in England, as Gropius came out of Germany into England for a few years before he came here, this was a place of refuge and beginnings for my parents. And when we arrived here, this was the first, you might say, island of refuge.

TM:

Right.

PC:

We came to this house and Serge [Chermayeff], my father, was looking for a job. He had been a prominent architect in England. He had had a successful practice. He was well known to the community of architects and intellectual and artistic people of the time. But this was a new beginning, and he wasn't sure what was in store for him, but he was open to everything, and he was just plain looking for a job. And he didn't necessarily think of it as finding architectural commissions. He might be doing some teaching, he didn't know what. And he asked Ise and Walter if they would take care of the two boys,

Ivan and Peter. I was four, my brother was eight, Ivan was eight. They left us here and went to San Francisco because my father had heard there was an opportunity perhaps there for him to do a house, get a commission to design a house. And he went out there and found it was real.

And he called up Walter, and he said, "Would you please send the boys? I have a job. I'm going to stay in San Francisco. I've got something." He was excited, and Walter said, "Send the boys? You must be kidding", or "You must be mad..." or something like that. And my father said to him and to Ise, "No, no. I've worked out a plan. They can come by train and all I ask is that you take them to South Station to a particular train, which is leaving on such and such a day, and they will be going to San Francisco, changing trains four times. And I've arranged with some very reliable people - Catholic nuns. They're going to pick up the boys at each train that arrives. They're going to find them on the train, take them to the next train and see that they're all set and off they go to the next destination, and another pair of Catholic nuns are going to meet them there and do the same thing, take them to the next train and move them on - Cleveland, Chicago, Denver". I've forgotten the other. There was, I think, a fourth stop on the way to San Francisco. And Walter said, "Well, if you want, okay." And he did it. He and Ise took us to the train at South Station and put us on it, and off we went.

TM:

So, before you got on the train, you and Ivan were here at the house. For how long was that period of time, roughly?

PC:

I'm not sure, but I think it was approximately two weeks, two or three weeks. I'm not sure because my father and my mother were looking around, meeting people in San Francisco, talking to people and making sure that this was possible, that not only did he have a job, but that he could find a place to live and make it all work and so on. So, he was taking some time to do that. And he didn't call Walter and Ise to send us until...

TM:

He was sure.

PC:

Right.

TM:

Until he was sure.

PC:

And also until he'd made arrangements, and that took some time. So, when we went, I remember only that it was fun, and I remember the nuns very kindly, people coming and taking us, and I remember a lot of ice cream cones. [both laugh]

TM:

As a 4-year-old boy would.

PC:

As a 4-year-old boy. And I also know from my brother who often talked about it that he was scared and he was a bit angry about it because he was responsible for me. He was looking after me.

TM:

Interesting.

PC:

And that felt like an unreasonable burden.

TM:

A responsibility.

PC:

Yeah, he was a bit annoyed by it, but he got through it too. [both laugh] And we arrived in perfect order and nothing went wrong at all. And it was especially remarkable for me, looking back on it years later, that my father chose to rely so completely and unhesitatingly on Catholic nuns because he was a committed atheist. He had grown up in a Jewish family with a Jewish background, but he had an intellectual life, an independent life, which was completely disconnected to any religious world. But he knew that with those nuns, he was dealing with people of...

TM:

He could trust the nuns. [both laugh]

PC:

He could totally trust those nuns. [laughs]

TM:

So, you've left Walter and Ise and then you've arrived in San Francisco, and your dad has a commission and...

PC:

Yeah.

TM:

Tell us a little...

PC:

They stayed there. I think my father stayed there for about two years. I've not been very good about keeping track of the chronology, but he then came back to the East Coast and found a job at Brooklyn College.

TM:

And that was with the help of Walter, is that correct?

PC:

Yes. Again, with the help of Walter, who introduced him to somebody at Brooklyn College, maybe it was Robert J. Wolf, I think it was, who was at Brooklyn College. And my father was involved there for several years. And during those years in Brooklyn, I think I came with my parents here a couple of times, but I don't recall it. I was too young to recall it. I went to a Quaker school in New York, and Ivan also went to that school, and from that school - Friends Seminary in New York City - Ivan finished, I think, the eighth grade and went to Phillips Academy in Andover. And I remained at Friends Seminary into the sixth grade, the beginning of the sixth grade. It was 1946. And during that time, just before my, I think it would've been before my birthday, which would've been my 10th birthday, [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy came and took Ivan and me. It must've been Ivan, one of Ivan's vacations, because he must have come back from Andover numerous times for vacations. And Moholy took us to the movies, and I remember that, sitting in the movies, with this bespeckled extraordinary man with a strange accent who was quite charming and wonderful, and realizing from Serge that this was very special, that Moholy was taking us to the movies.

TM:

Wow.

PC:

I don't remember what movie it was.

TM:

I was going to ask you if you remembered. [both laugh]

PC:

No, I don't remember what it was, but it was something dramatic. Anyway...

TM:

And Moholy and Serge and Gropius were all...

PC:

They were all friends.

TM:

All friends and connected.

PC:

They were all friends, yes. And [Marcel] Breuer was a friend, and we got to know him in those days too. But about two months later, it must have been '46, Moholy died, which was totally unexpected. And it resonated with me because I had just gotten to know him and it was a shock. It was a shock for Serge and Barbara, and especially for Gropius. And what happened was that Walter called my father at one point, I don't remember the chronology and the books may know it how it went, but he called my father and said, "Serge, I think you should consider going to Chicago and succeeding Moholy as Director of the Institute of Design".

TM:

Oh. That's how that happened.

PC:

He wrote a wonderful letter. I know about this from some things I've read subsequently, but at the time, this is what happened. He declined and recommended a colleague who he said had worked with him closely at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and that Moholy was the right man for the job, but he was there in Germany. And they called Moholy. He accepted and went to Chicago, and he was there for nine years.

TM:

Wow, until his death.

PC:

Then my father went, and when he went to Chicago, I was still in the sixth grade at Friends Seminary, and my mother and my father didn't want me to suddenly change schools. They wanted me to finish the year in New York. So, they asked a friend, an artist, which is very much in the spirit of what Gropius did so many times himself. They asked this artist, Jeanne Reynal, who was a close friend of Arshile Gorky and others doing mosaics in New York, and a wonderful woman married to a man named Urban Neininger. They were asked to come live in the apartment, which Serge and Barbara were vacating...

TM:

And take care of you.

PC:

And look after me.

TM:

And look after you while you were finishing up school.

PC:

While I finished up school. And they did that. They left where they were, came to live in that apartment, which was 301 East 21st Street in Manhattan, five blocks north up Second Avenue from Rutherford Place where Friends Seminary is. So, I could continue to walk down Second Avenue to school, etc. - no change in my life. And I had another surrogate mother. [laughs]

But I went to Chicago then to a school called Francis Parker in the seventh grade, and then I did the seventh grade there. We went out west, we traveled out west. In reading Walter's biography, I realized that he and Ise did something that Serge and Barbara did. They went traveling out west and went to places where the Indians were, the Native American tribes, got among Navajos and Hopis, that my parents did, including riding in the back of a truck to a dance in the middle of the night with Ivan and me in the back of the truck and that sort of thing. [both laugh] They had done that too. But I went to Chicago and that summer when we were staying at the ranch of Nat Owings, who had become a friend in Chicago of my father's - Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Nat Owings had a ranch in New Mexico, and we were staying at that ranch. The cowboys were showing us how to...

TM:

Roping cows...

PC:

Roping cows, right. They roped my dog. I had a wonderful Airedale dog. They roped him. He said, by the firelight, one night, "Left hind leg". He grabbed our Airedale dog about 20 feet away by that left hind leg.

TM:

Oh my gosh. Remarkable.

PC:

I don't understand how that happened.

TM:

Nat Owings did that?

PC:

What?

TM:

Nat Owings did that?

PC:

No, no, the cowboy at Nat Owings's ranch.

TM:

Oh, okay. [both laugh]

PC:

But the most memorable...

TM:

It would've been better if Nat Owings had done it. [both laugh]

PC:

No, but the wonderful thing that also happened there, which connects back to my memories here, is I - 12 years old, or 11 or 12 or whatever I was - climbed into a tree. There was a big pine tree, the top of which was a nest, where a sparrow hawk had a nest. And I could see that they were coming there feeding babies in a nest. I could tell from what they were doing. So, I climbed up there and had a look, and there were these little, tiny, furry things in there, and I stole one. I put it in my pocket, or my shirt or my sweater, or whatever I was wearing, climbed down the tree with it. The hawks were upset, but everything else was intact except they just lost one chick. And I took this chick and fed it hamburger or meat from dog food cans we were feeding to our dog. And I looked after that little bird. And the reason I mention this is that my love of birds was very much connected to my time here. It followed that. It was

part of what I considered my education, because I looked after that bird all through the winter, and that bird was kept in our house in Chicago on a photo stand, you know the kind that photographers use with a bar and a lamp and so on, you could adjust and so on. And that photographer's stand with bars was its perch. And we had a tray, the bottom for its droppings, and other than that, it was loose in the house, not in a cage. The hawk was in the house, and Serge and Barbara would come and go, and I would come and go to school. Ivan was only occasionally there because he was away at Andover.

And there were memorable moments. This hawk one day was in his perch when we had a guest, one of the people my father had brought to the faculty that he was now running at the Institute of Design, was Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller. And Bucky Fuller came, and I went to help. I was asked to do that - "Take Bucky's coat". So, I went to get Bucky's coat and was taking it off Bucky when the hawk came around the bookcase and landed on Bucky's head like this with these little claws, this sparrow hawk. Not a big hawk, a little guy, but there she was - this hawk, Chimmy, was on Bucky's head. And Bucky, to his great credit, was a little bit surprised [both laugh], but he didn't swipe it off or do anything drastic. He just stood there wondering what was going to happen next. And I went and took the hawk on my hand off of Bucky's head and apologized to Bucky. And he hadn't drawn blood, but he had scratched a little. And I took him away and put him on his perch where he belonged, and Bucky recovered. We had a nice dinner and everything was okay, but [laughs] it was a memorable moment.

TM:

I have to interrupt here. When I started at CambridgeSeven in 1993, your office was the corner office of the office, and the door was often shut, Peter.

PC:

Yes. It had to be.

TM:

Because you had a bird, [both laugh] a parakeet or something that you kept in the office and it was free, and it was flying around in your office.

PC:

That's right.

TM:

And I remember walking into the office and wondering, what the heck is going on here? [laughs] This is clearly derivative of your experience with your sparrow hawk.

PC:

Yeah. Yeah. It was.

TM:

Oh my gosh. That's where it came from.

PC:

That's where it came from. And then, I later turned the hawk loose on Cape Cod, returned him to the wild.

TM:

Oh, wonderful.

PC:

And that was a good moment for me because it affirmed the notion that nature could be treated with respect, not just exploited. And I turned that hawk free by training it over a two-week period to feed itself. I took it outside, left it in a tree, and it came and sat on my hand and ate from my hand as it had done for years, for that year, for months, that winter. It sat there and ate. But the next day it came and then [quickly] went. The next day [more quickly], the fifth day [even more quickly], the tenth day - not at all. It had gone back to looking after itself. It disappeared.

TM:

And we're going to talk a little bit about this, how influential this was in your career as a designer, as an architect, and your practice. So...

PC:

Well, I'll be happy to. But coming back now to the story of school and coming back to this house and to the Gropius family - I went to Andover to join my brother in 1949, the fall of 1949, I went into the ninth grade as a junior - they call it a junior, the freshman year at P.A. [Phillips Academy] - and I traveled on an overnight train to get here. And the Gropiuses picked me up at the train once and helped me get to Andover and they told me I could come here any weekends I wanted. And I took them up on that because I was homesick. I was a little guy. I was tiny. I was about 4-feet-11 or 4-foot-10.

TM:

This is around 14, 15 years old.

PC:

13.

TM:

13, okay.

PC:

I was 13 and I had, during that year, I'd had my 14th birthday, but I was kind of a squirt. And I came here on weekends, and I did my first year and second year at Andover when I was 13, 14, 15. I came here a lot. I don't know, I can't count the number of weekends I came. This was my home away from home.

TM:

That's wonderful. So, tell us a little bit about one of those visits. What would be a normal... what would happen when you arrived? You would be picked up? How did you get from Andover to Lincoln? Do you recall?

PC:

Yeah. I remember taking the train and the train got me out here somewhere close by and Ise would come pick me up.

TM:

Okay. Ise would pick you up and bring you to the house.

PC:

Yeah.

TM:

Great.

PC:

And she would look after me, and it was always wonderful. And...

TM:

You stayed upstairs in the guest room?

PC:

I stayed upstairs in this room above here. And Walter would come and go, he was busy doing his thing, working mysterious things that I didn't understand at the time very well. [both laugh] But he was teaching at Harvard and so on, and then developing his architectural practice. And I was totally at ease here. And I came and joined them in an enterprise, which brings me back to the birds. They loved birds. And this house for me is not just about the rooms and the spaces and the artwork and the furniture and all the living qualities that it has - the wonderful, you might say, intimacy of it that I felt at the time. It was, in large part, a connection between inside and outside. I was totally aware, as they were, of what was going on outside in all directions. When the sun did various things, when the wind was doing things, when the birds came and went, and they were both fanatical about the feeding of the birds. There was, I can't see it now because of the screening, it's closed, but there was a kind of stone edge at the end of the bit of grass out there.

TM:

There it is right here, it's a stone...

PC:

There's a stone edge, as I remember, a kind of lintel. And they would put seeds on that. And they had a stand with some bird seed in it, and there was another stand over on the other side of the porch over there, and they would spend inordinate amounts of time on weekends when I was here. And Walter was

relaxing, he would join Ise and me in watching the birds and often identifying new species and having great fun with it.

TM:

[laughs] Did they keep a log? Do you remember?

PC:

Yes, they did. I don't know if it's been found, but they did. They kept a log and I was often delegated to put out seeds. So, I was going out there doing that and finding new ways to plant suet or something out there and so on. And it was great fun, and it became a kind of special project.

TM:

Now, were you here sometimes with Ivan too? Did Ivan come with you or did he...

PC:

No, I don't think Ivan ever did. I think he came on his own a few times, and I don't know, I don't remember even talking to him about it, whether he came here many times at all. But I think he did feel connected here, and he got to know Ati [Walter and Ise's daughter], which I didn't. So, he must have come when she was here, because when I came, she wasn't. There were very few times that I met her. She was away doing something else. I hardly ever got to know her but I did a little bit later. But there were memorable moments. For example, Walter had a .22, and that .22 rifle he kept upstairs and he taught me how to use it. He said, "We have certain choices to make - some birds we really don't want, they're a nuisance, they're bad characters, bad actors". And one of them was a grackle, and one of them was a cowbird, I think. And he would occasionally take a shot and take them out. And he told me that the crows were a problem and he would like to get a crow. And I thought, "Gosh, get a crow... That's quite a challenge". And I remember him teaching me with target practice somewhere down on the hill where it was a safe place to shoot to get my aim better. And then one day when I was on the balcony up here, I was very quiet and I could see that the crows were coming in. And I sat there very quietly. It was, I think, a Saturday or a Sunday, one of my weekends. And a crow landed on one of the trees out here. And I took a bead on him and I did it, and I got him. And Walter was very impressed. But I also remember thinking, I was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. And I remember him being troubled by it too. And that he taught me to do something that was wrong, and he was troubled by it. But we stopped. We didn't do it again. I have done some hunting since then in other places and other times when it was... but not here.

There was a positive moment about the birds that I wanted to remember, and that had to do with Ise. And I remember it vividly because I even remember where I was. I was on the other side of the porch, down on the grassy part there, that I remember. And she was with me. We were doing some gardening or clearing some brush or something. And Walter I don't think was here, but I remember a big bird flying over us, and I looked up at it and I said, "Ise, look at that! That's not a crow, what is it? It's the size of a crow..." And she looked at me and she said, "It's a Pileated Woodpecker - Run! Tell the Audubon!" [both laugh] "Very rare," she said, "Very rare!" She was excited. [laughs] And I did. I came up here and called the Audubon Society in this squeaky little voice of mine and said, "I've just cited a Pileated Woodpecker in Lincoln on Baker Bridge Road. Is that interesting to you?" And they said, "Yes!" Because they hadn't seen one in years, I think.

TM:

Oh, wow. That's remarkable.

PC:

That was exciting.

TM:

Yeah. That's remarkable that she was able to identify....

PC:

She knew. It had red and black and white color, and it was a very huge... a big bird like that.

TM:

Wow, wonderful. Did you spend a lot of time on the porch in the...

PC:

Yes. We had many meals there. I spent a lot of time there, and in the kitchen. [laughs]

TM:

Well, it's interesting to go... You know, the door to the porch is right at the kitchen. It's very interesting. The house feels very comfortable. Even as we walked in today. I know you felt very warm when you walked in. Did it feel that way when you were growing up? It felt like home, a home, to you?

PC:

Yes, very much so, because it was cozy. It was relaxing, not threatening, not cold. Many people think of modern architecture as cold and forbidding, and this house was not that. It was warm in its spaces and its qualities of light and above all, the furnishings and the artwork and the sense of place that you always had in every space, every room. Where we're sitting now, we spent a lot of time here. Those were the days before television, or maybe when it was just starting. And they didn't do any television.

TM:

Well, they had television here. They had these beautiful windows looking out on the landscape.

PC:

[laughs] Well, at night there was reading and there was music.

TM:

Music. Tell me a little bit about that. What kind of music were they...

PC:

I don't remember. I really, I'm a musical illiterate, in part anyway, but I suspect it was classical music more than any other. Mahler is someone that was important to them for all kinds of personal reasons, of Walter and Mahler knowing each other in their younger years. But I can't say that I remember them particularly playing any Mahler or other things, except that they enjoyed it and had an old turntable.

TM:

Yes, that's right. Yes. The whole...

PC:

It was over there somewhere. Yes.

TM:

It's all a wonderful sort of Hi-Fi system here.

PC:

Yep, right.

TM:

So was music on a lot of the time, or...

PC:

No, not all the time, but it was quite frequently there. And we sat and read things together, and I just remember nice times of conversation - me as a little boy, just being encouraged to do whatever I was thinking about doing or whatever, and this family was supportive of whatever the hell I was thinking about.

TM:

So, let's talk a little bit about that. You come from such a rich heritage of design with your father, Serge, and the numerous circles of design people that Serge was part of - Moholy, Breuer, Gropius. That must have influenced you early on in your awareness of design, your appreciation of design. Do you have a memory of that?

PC:

Well, I do. Of course. It was part of my life all the time without my realizing or thinking about it very much, at first. I could take it for granted because it was always around me. Like we were seeing [Naum] Gabo and all kinds of people here. My father had artistic friends, same as Gropius. They were very much of a similar mindset. Their friends were architects, designers, musicians, photographers, engineers - thinkers of all kinds and people of intellectual curiosity. And my father surrounded himself with remarkable people and eccentric characters all his life. I grew up with intimate connections, not just to [Walter Gropius] and Ise, but to Lajko and Connie Breuer, Marcel Breuer, who were neighbors on Cape Cod. When my parents became settled in New York, Brooklyn College, they were introduced to a property, or actually to a person, on Cape Cod, a man named Jack Phillips, who was an artist and a wealthy, you might say, inheritor of things. John C. Phillips had land on Cape Cod, but he was also an artist. And made his living from his inheritance, not from his artwork, even though he was quite talented. He did wonderful artwork.

TM:

[laughs] This is of course, Wellfleet, right?

PC:

Wellfleet, yes. And by the way, his ancestors founded Phillips Academy and Exeter. [laughs]

TM:

It all connects. [laughs]

PC:

But the weekend that my parents went there as guests of a man named Peter Harnden, who was an architect, and I think known to Gropius as well, invited Serge and Barbara down to the Cape, introduced him or them, my parents, to Jack Phillips, who then offered my parents a piece of land with a tiny little cottage on it, which they immediately bought. Never seen anything so wonderful. A tiny cottage with a hand pump and a privy outside and kerosene lamps. No insulation. A summer cottage. It had belonged to a schoolteacher on a pond. They bought it and immediately made it their summer house. And Breuer learned of this about a year later, and a year after that came and bought a property about 300 yards away in the woods on the other side of another pond, and built himself a house, a new house, on that pond. And there was another one on another pond for his friend who became a friend of Serge's, maybe they had known each other before - Gerry [György] Kepes.

TM:

Wow.

PC:

So, Kepes and Breuer, who were close friends, both had Breuer houses. And my father, who was a close friend of both of them - Gerry Kepes and Breuer- they were all back and forth and having dinner and fooling around together all the time on the beach. It was a year of nudity - years of life, Bohemian life, on Cape Cod, which was quite wonderful. I was running around half naked as a little boy, as were lots of women and everything all around me. And one of the more colorful people who came in those days was Xanti Schawinsky, who was another Bauhaus person. Xanti became a close friend, and his son, Ben, was my age and Ivan's age, sort of in between us or something close to us, and he became a friend, and we all hung out together and had a lot of fun as little boys making things with my father. My father teaching at Brooklyn College would come for the summer and have a lot of time off as an academic. Now, not doing much practice, but teaching more. He had time off in the summer, which was terrific for little kids. So, my brother and I were making paintings and sculptures and odd driftwood stuff, and in the pond and learning to sail. And my father had changed a boat that was not designed for sailing into a boat that could sail. And this sort of thing was going on with artists and architects and others all around us.

Eero Saarinen, I remember, coming one weekend and spending the weekend and building a house on the other side for his wife from whom he separated a year later, I think, but they were still together then. And he asked me, Eero did, if I would help him with a project, and he put me in a rowboat, our rowboat on Slough Pond, our pond, which was not the pond he had which was Herring Pond. [laughs] He said, "I want to do a contour map of Slough Pond, will you help me?" I said, "Sure, well, why not?" And I rode him around all day long as he made soundings with a rope with knots in it. And he made soundings all around the pond, and then drew, shaped the contours of the pond so that he knew exactly what it was shaped like.

TM:

Was this a kettle pond?

PC:

A kettle pond. Yeah.

TM:

Very deep.

PC:

And it was quite deep and had a deep cove. And he was fascinated by the deep cove because why would this big pond have this little cove? Clearly the glacier had left a chunk of ice there. [both laugh] And anyway, he made this contour map with this little boy rowing him around.

TM:

That's phenomenal.

PC:

That was kind of the stuff that went on. But there were countless stories like that of... and Gropius came, by the way, I have photographs of Ise and Walter coming and staying the weekend. They did that many times.

TM:

With your dad?

PC:

With my parents, yeah.

TM:

Yeah. With your parents. Wonderful. So, from Philips, you had this wonderful experience of this being home away from home, right? This wonderful house. What happened for you after Andover? Where did you end up? Did you end up...

PC:

Well, after Andover, I went to Harvard, as had Ivan before me, and I was thinking about, what was I going to do? And I took various courses, not knowing what I was about. I was, at that point, preoccupied with going through puberty and wondering if it was ever going to happen. [both laugh] Because I was 17, then, 18 in my freshman year at Harvard, and I still hadn't had my voice change. And I was 5-foot-1, and during that year, I think I reached 5-foot-2 or 3. I may have grown an inch or two during that year.

TM:

You were a late bloomer.

PC:

And I had a pediatrician named Hoffman, a German in the tradition of the Europeans. I had a good pediatrician who was German. He said, "No, I'm not giving you any hormones, you're going to grow". And I said, "Doc, I'm 18, I'm almost going to be 19". And he said, "You're going to grow, you have to believe me". And sophomore year at Harvard, it finally happened. I grew nine inches, and my voice changed, [both laugh] and I entered a final club and I became more relaxed socially, and I started to enjoy Harvard more.

TM:

And then, ultimately, you went to the GSD, right?

PC:

Well, yes, prematurely. I made a great blunder. I didn't listen to people like Grope who would've told me, "Don't do that". And my father was not pushing me hard, but I think he was advising me against it in a way, but also excited that I was deciding it. What I did was I took advantage of a program at Harvard in a field they then called Architectural Sciences to get my degree as a senior at Harvard in Architectural Sciences, while also having that senior year be my first year at the Graduate School of Design. So, in effect, I completed Harvard College in three years and entered the graduate school in my fourth year. And my advisor, a wonderful guy - "Fuzzy Newton", I called him. His name was Newton, I'm not remembering his first name. But Professor Newton, who was my advisor, told me, "No, take economics, take a government course, take this or that other extra course". And I said, "No, I'll do it by reading, so I'll do the reading list, I'll read". And he accepted my protests and allowed me to do it. It was a blunder. I should have stayed at Harvard College for an extra year and read philosophy and anthropology and economics. I should have taken EC1. I should have taken a lot of political science and other basic courses. I should have taken a chemistry course. And above all, I should have taken a biology course. I never did.

TM:

You never did?

PC:

No, only took physics, which was another blunder, because I had had a great physics course at Andover, which Harvard refused to accept for the GSD purposes for credit. So, I had to take physics again, and I took physics with Gerald Holton, which I have to confess I enjoyed immensely because he was probably the best teacher I have ever experienced in my entire life.

TM:

Interesting. Wow.

PC:

Gerald Holton, who's still alive. He's 103.

TM:

Oh my gosh. Wow.

PC:

And he's living in the house that was designed by Josep Lluís Sert.

TM:

Oh wow, what a connection.

PC:

And it was Sert's house where he and Moncha, his wife, lived all their years at Harvard, where my father was at Harvard in the School of Design, and Sert was the dean. That's where Jerry Holton, my favorite teacher, is living now at 103.

TM:

Wow. So, when you were at the GSD, was your father teaching there at that time?

PC:

Yes.

TM:

And was Gropius involved as well?

PC:

No. He had retired a few years earlier, and Sert was appointed to replace [Dean Hudnut].

TM:

So, it was Josep Lluís Sert and your father...

PC:

Hudnut was the dean at Harvard when Gropius was chairman of the Department of Architecture, and Sert became the dean and asked my father to join him in preparing the curriculum. So, my father was the co-author of the GSD curriculum with Sert.

TM:

How influential was that for you, having your father there and did...

PC:

How can I say that? I mean, it's the most...

TM:

It was remarkable, right?

PC:

That was the most influential [chokes up]... Oh, yeah. Yeah. I choke at thinking about that because really, my father was my primary teacher.

TM:

Yeah. Certainly.

PC:

The interesting thing about that, I suppose, from the point of view of Gropius, is that my father considered Gropius his primary teacher. And when he did his book, the culmination of his years of work as a teacher, and what I was a part of in that first year that I did at the GSD in 19... what was it, 1957-'58, I was in that... no, '56-'57. That was the year. It was 1956-'57. I was in that first year at the Graduate School of Design. That was my father's year, and I was just one of the students. And Serge treated me like everybody else. He was quite tough with me. And I became rebellious in the sense that I started not wanting him to give me any suggestions, only to critique what I had done, whether it was good or bad, but I didn't want him making any suggestions until I had done it. So, I became quite, how would I say, reclusive in my relationship to his teaching so that I would be like everybody else. Yet he took me to lunch a lot and plied me with drinks. [both laugh] And I remember my father having a jury critique of one of our classes. Oh, this was after many times when I had gone and had martini lunches with him. My father was at his best when he'd had two or three martinis, and he tried to teach me to deal well with martinis, but I never could get beyond one. [both laugh] If I had two, I was a goner, [laughs] I was not functioning properly. But he was at his best with two or three. That stood me in good stead years later at CambridgeSeven. I'll tell you about that if you'd like.

But one moment that I think Gropius would've enjoyed as well - there was a jury when a man named Bill Drake, who was in the class - tall guy, lacrosse player at Andover, I think. He had been in the army. He was older than I was. He built models that were quite extraordinary, but it wasn't his model building so much as his attitude that my father found amusing. So, he teased him a lot, and Drake took this with good humor, but he wasn't one of my father's favorite students. He just was somebody my father enjoyed as a person. So, they got on well, and Drake thought he was going to have some fun with my father. So, he built this model, and my father was critiquing it and tearing it to shreds, as he often did, [he] was rather a tough critic. And Drake asked my father, would he be so kind as to remove the second floor of the model so that he could see the first floor. And my father obliged and lifted the model up, and there inside was a dry martini [both laugh] sitting there in the model, whereupon the entire room broke into laughter and applause. And my father took it in immense good humor, and they had a very good time. [laughs]

TM:

Oh, wonderful. Did Gropius ever come and critique as a guest critic while you were there?

PC:

Not during the classes that I was in, but I know he did. I think, yes, in other times. And there were others who came from TAC.

TM:

Yeah, because that was very active. TAC was absolutely humming during the '50s, at this point.

PC:

Yeah. Later on, TAC was a big factor in my own life. There was some connection there. Sert and my father were also, very much in the spirit of Gropius, architects who were embroiled with artists. They spent much of their life with artists as well as with architects and working with the mixing of disciplines.

TM:

Well, this is the core of the Bauhaus.

PC:

The core of it. It was very much a part of their lives. And it was something that I subconsciously absorbed, and I'm sure I began absorbing it right here in this house without even knowing it. And it was part of my father's life, because there were [Saul] Steinbergs on the wall, there were [Bernard] Rudofsky things, there were [Costantino] Nivola things, that there were all kinds of artists. John Piper and Henry Moore were a part of my father's life when he did his house in England before I was even born, or at the time I was born. He designed it, I think in '35, built it in '36. We were living it in '37. That was when I was born. He had a big John Piper over the... and a Henry Moore on the terrace. So, this was all part of my life without my fully understanding it at first. And then later on, I not only understood it, I absorbed it fully, and I wanted that to be my life as well.

And something happened to me in those terms that Gropius would've understood, although I never had the chance to talk to him about it. I wish I had. In my last year at graduate school, when I was in the masterclass with Sert and having a very good time because Sert was a superb teacher and I had a good time in that class, I began to become uncomfortable for two reasons. This has to do with my, I suppose getting back to your question, I was uncomfortable because I felt that the other people around me were better than I was. Two or three of them were brilliant, and I was okay. I was doing okay with what I was doing, but I thought others were more suited to this and more brilliant. So, I was uncomfortable thinking about, what am I doing here? And it came back to a moment that I had had between my second year and my third year at the GSD. I took a leave of absence. I decided to quit the GSD altogether for a year and go to England and find out how English was I, really. I still had an English accent a little bit. I still talked about [in an English accent] "tomahtoes and vitamins". I had a few things that were off - "herbs". [both laugh] But I went to England for a year, and I went to the AA in London just to see what an English school of architecture was like.

TM:

Architectural Association, right?

PC:

The Architectural Association at Bedford Square. And there were a lot of smart people there, some of whom were friends of my father, like Peter and Alison Smithson, also known to Grope and Ise. I was uncomfortable there even more than I had been at the GSD. I thought they all talked too much. Well, I was in that school, the AA, I thought, well, this isn't comfortable for me either. I made some friends. I had a friend named Susie, I think her name was Susie Martin, who was the daughter of Leslie Martin, who was a dean of architecture at Cambridge University - friend of Serge, very close friend. Leslie Martin and his wife Sadie were close friends of Serge and Barbara. And I got to know their daughter and a few other friends I made that year during that fall term at the AA. But with that exception, I didn't like the school. They all talked too much and didn't do things as much as I like to get at it. So, I quit.

And then I thought, well, what the hell? I'll see if I can get a job. So, I went round to a firm in a section of England. I should remember... it's where the various, the RIBA offices were, and so on. I've forgotten the name of the area, but it was a firm called Lyons, Israel, and Ellis - three wonderful elderly Jewish guys who had this quite big prominent firm. It was like Emory Roth. They just did work for God knows whom and all over the country and they were a training ground for young architects. James Stirling, and James Gowan, and there were lots of talented people there at that time. And I went there to see if I could get a job there because I thought, that'd be great. I could find out what an architectural firm is all about. And I walked in with an appointment for an interview. They looked me over and I said, "I'd like to have a junior kind of, I don't know anything, I've never worked in a firm before, but I wondered if you'd take me on as an intern or give me a job of some kind". And they said, "You're Serge Chermayeff's son, are you not?" And I said, "Yes". And he said, "Well, there's a desk over there, you can have it". [both laugh] And they just took me on and put me to work. And I spent four months there with all these terrific people overseeing what I was doing, drafting away, doing toilets.

TM:

That must have been an amazing education just in and of itself.

PC:

It was. I was doing locker rooms and toilets and things like that, but it was great. I learned a lot and I knew nothing so everything was new. And I saw the culture of the office and I understood everything quite well, what I thought was going on, at least I thought I did. And at the end of it, I came back to the U.S. to reenter the Graduate School of Design in the third year, treating this as just a year's leave of absence but saying to myself, "That was an interesting experience but I'm not sure I want to do that again". And as I finished the third year, I was relieved because I rather hated the third year. It was with a teacher who I rather despised. He was a pompous old fool in my view. But also, I have to admit, in the eyes of my father, he couldn't stand him. His name was Walter Bogner. He probably wasn't as bad as I thought he was or Serge thought he was. But he was teaching a class that we all learned a lot in, but I didn't enjoy it. I enjoyed the classmates. I learned more from my classmates - Bob Reynolds, Jack Beyer, wonderful classmates. And at the end of the third year, I was greatly relieved. I was finally going to get to the master's class with Sert, and I did that.

But then, something happened to me in the middle of my master's class with Sert. I traveled past a junkyard in Braintree, Massachusetts on my way to the Cape one weekend and I saw all this junk - army tanks, bathtubs, railroad ties - all kinds of stuff piled up, a surplus yard, big surplus yard. And I thought, oh my God, that looks fascinating. I went and looked at it, and then I thought to myself, I'd like to make a little movie here. And I went and saw a friend of mine in a club, a place in Cambridge called the Club 47 - a woman named Joyce Chopra. I knew that she had a Bolex camera and she was not using it because she was very busy. She had someone singing there called Joan Baez and she was busy, [both laugh] so she wasn't using her camera. I said, "Joyce, will you let me borrow your camera? I know you're not using it". She said, "Oh yeah, go ahead". So, I took her Bolex, which is this camera, and I put it on a C-shaped bracket so that I could hang it upside down. And I knew that that would, if I shot upside down, reverse motion, anything that I shot upside down would be right side up would go backwards. And I devised this film with bouncing balls as a visual exploration of this junkyard. And I would throw these balls into bathtubs or over the railroad ties and so on. And I was inventing a little story of balls exploring this yard, but in reverse, they would seem to be accelerating and jumping. So, they became alive. It was kind of an animation device. So, it was my little *Ballon Rouge*.

TM:

When did this happen, during your master's thesis with your father?

PC:

No, no, Sert. So I, on weekends or whatever, I was out there doing this. Instead of doing my work in the school, I was off making this movie. And then I found another friend, a musician I'd gotten to know, a wonderful man named Joe Raposo. Joe Raposo was just then finishing college and doing his work as a young composer around Boston. He later went on to write *Sesame Street* [and] a few other things. But at this time, he was doing, he was looking for work. He was scrambling around in Boston. I said, "Joe, if I complete this crazy little movie I'm making, will you do some music for it? This is a little collaboration that'll be fun". And he said, "I love it!" And we did this together. Joe and I put music to my images of this bouncing ball, finished this movie. And that summer, it was finished, and I felt it was quite not bad. I thought it was okay as an experiment of teaching myself how to make movies. I didn't know what that was all about. I took it to show my father, I wish I'd brought it to show it to Gropius. I took it to [show] my father, to show it to him sheepishly and somewhat ashamed because he had broken his neck to pay my bills, to send me through Harvard College and the Harvard Graduate School of Design on a miserable salary. And it was not easy. He spent a huge percentage of his income on educating his two sons.

TM:

Yeah, both of you.

PC:

Both of us. Anyway, I said, "Pop, I want you to see this thing that I've been doing. I'm hesitating to show it to you because I've been doing this at the wrong time. But I did it because I felt I had to". And he looked at it and was at first quite unsure what to think. And then he looked at it, and then I realized, oh my God, he loves it. And he did. He loved it. And that was a turning point. [chokes up] That was a turning point for me in my life. Sorry to be emotional.

TM:

No, it's okay.

PC:

I went back to Cambridge and I was unsure what to do next year but I thought, I'm not sure what I'm going to do next, I think I'm going to make movies.

TM:

So, this is right after you graduated, right? You finished...

PC:

I had finished the GSD.

TM:

Right. Your dad is still teaching. Is he still teaching at that time?

PC:

He was still teaching, but he had left Harvard. He had gone to Yale.

TM:

Okay. Down to New Haven.

PC:

Because, by the way, I had gone home one day to have dinner with him and my mother. And he had come out of a faculty meeting with Walter Bogner and others there and he was in a rage. He was in a blind rage. He was so angry he couldn't see straight and I said, "Pop, pop, stop". He was so angry. "This is the umpteenth time I've heard you complaining about these faculty meetings. You love Harvard, but this is hell. You're going through hell. What's this? It's nuts". And I said to him, "Why don't you call your friend, Paul Rudolph?" Paul Rudolph, who was then dean at Yale.

TM:

At Yale, right.

PC:

"Why don't you call him and ask him if he'll take you into the faculty at Yale? Get the hell out of here. Stop this complaining, go somewhere you can feel good". And he looked at me and he said, "Good idea". And the next morning, he called Paul Rudolph and said, "Paul, if I leave Harvard, do you have space for me in the Yale faculty?" And Paul said to him on the phone, "Yes, if Kingman agrees" - Kingman Brewster, former dean of the Harvard Law School who was now president of Yale University. Paul Rudolph called Kingman Brewster and said, "Can we give Chermayeff tenure and invite him here? He's prepared to leave Harvard". Kingman said, "Yes". And my father was invited, and he went to Yale.

TM:

Got it. So, now we can transition with your incredible experience of making this wonderful film and having your father wonder at it, and that inspired you to filmmaking.

PC:

And then I went to a post office in Harvard Square one day, and I bought some stamps, just a bunch of stamps, and they gave me a little brochure. This was 1962. Kennedy was President, 1962. And this brochure taught me how to build my fallout shelter. And then it told me all the reasons I should build it and how I should build it. And on page, whatever it was, it told me that I should have a rifle in my fallout shelter because I might need it to defend myself against my neighbor who did not build his. I read that, and I felt a kind of, I don't know what... shudder of horror, not unlike what I think some people are feeling now with Mr. Trump. But I felt that shudder. And I said to myself, "This is crazy, this is a lie". Building a fallout shelter to save self in a nuclear holocaust is a lie. I should do something. What can one do? Maybe I can do something. I've thought about making a documentary film just to give facts, to tell the truth about nuclear weapons, the effects of nuclear weapons. So, I sat down in my little space that I had, and I started writing a script for a kind of treatment about the effects of nuclear weapons. And then I went to see a friend who was the father of a roommate of mine at the GSD. His name was Kaplan, J.M. Kaplan, who had become a very wealthy man with Welch's grape juice. And he had a Kaplan fund, and his son, Dick Kaplan, was my roommate. And they had been...

TM:

There's your source of... [laughs]

PC:

There's my thought, "Damn it, maybe the old man will give me some money to make a documentary film". So, I went to see J.M. Kaplan and I told him what I wanted to do, and he said, "How much do you want?" And I named my figure. And he said, "Okay", and wrote me a check. I went back to Cambridge and I was working away. Working away, making movies.

TM:

Right. In 1962.

PC:

1962. And I was making animation. I was doing all kinds of things. I went to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. I went to Annapolis, and I researched the footage that the Navy had, the Army had, the Air Force had of weapons, of conventional weapons, and then of nuclear weapons, the Bikini stuff. And what I was doing was a quantitative and a qualitative examination of the difference between conventional weapons and fission weapons, and then the difference between fission weapons and fusion weapons, which nobody talked about because all we knew was Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I wanted them to know about Bikini and the qualitative difference that was so immense. And I could make a film, and I was doing animation in Fred Stone's studio, which was on Church Street, and I had a little studio there, and I had the most wonderful office. It was a studio - 50-feet long, 6-feet wide. That was it. And it was a bench. And I was making my little film there and Paul Dietrich came to see me.

TM:

Now tell me a little bit about... so, Church Street, you're right up the street from TAC, which was right down there on Brattle and Story Street.

PC:

About a hundred yards away.

TM:

A hundred yards away, where Walter Gropius had created this incredible firm, which was based on this notion of collaboration, right? This idea of the arts and everything together. And then your friend... how did you know Paul Dietrich?

PC:

He was a student of my father's at the Institute of Design in Chicago.

TM:

Oh my gosh. And so, Paul came and visited you.

PC:

Paul came and visited me.

TM:

So, we have this connection...

PC:

And he said to me, "Peter, I have an idea. We have an idea". We, meaning other people that he didn't mention right away. "I want to start a firm and I'd like you to be a part of it. Would you be interested in joining me? And we could make a firm, and the firm could be architects, urban designers, industrial designers, graphic designers, filmmakers, exhibit designers". And I was pleased to be asked and thought that was a wonderful thought, but that I was engaged in another path. Now I was really into film, and he said, "But you can do film as part of this, you could make films, we could do exhibits, we could do films, we could do graphics. Ivan and his partner, Tom Geismar, could be a part of it. Lou Bakanowsky could be part of it. And the other person who I want you to meet is a Scotsman named Terry Rankine. And you already know Alden Christie. They're with me at TAC - Lou, Alden, Terry and I are all at TAC. Join us. Let's do this together. And you can bring Tom and Ivan". And I said, "I don't know, let me think about it. That's a crazy idea. I'm too busy. I'm doing this film. I'm really excited about film. I don't really think architecture is right for me". And he went away wondering what I was thinking. And I then thought about it and thought, you know, maybe that could work. It's a hell of an idea. And the idea of working with Tom and Ivan also intrigued me to no end. I didn't know the others very well yet. I was beginning to get to know a little bit about Terry and Lou, and I already knew Alden. Lou I had known at GSD a bit. That was really intriguing. And I got a crazy idea, and I went out to the Franklin Park Zoo, cold, and called on the director of the Franklin Park Zoo, a man named Walter Stone.

TM:

Wait, wait. What was your idea of that?

PC:

My idea was that if I could interest the director of the zoo in allowing a group of young guys to form a firm based on redesigning his zoo, we would do it for almost nothing. We could almost offer our services for nothing or very close to nothing - expenses, something so cheap it would be attractive. And we had lots of ideas and talents that he might find appealing. Let's give it a shot. So, I said [to myself], "Let's go, Peter, get yourself going, get yourself underway, go talk to him". And I went to see him and I called on him in the lion house. He had an office in the basement of the lion house, and I told him, "Mr. Stone, I'm here cold turkey, you don't know who I am. I'm here to tell you that I represent a bunch of guys. I'm here by myself, but I'm here to interest you in the possibility of redesigning your zoo, which I expect you agree is godawful. It's a horrible zoo, and it could be a great zoo if it was rethought and recast in some new way with new ideas, a kind of transformation that could occur with young designers who could help you with almost no cost to do that. Would you be interested? And if you think I'm crazy, I'd like you to come and see a presentation that might convince you in my studio in Cambridge. If you'll come. Will you come and see it? We'll show you some slides on who we are. I'll introduce you to some of the others". And he said, "Yeah, okay. I'll come". And he came. He came to Cambridge to my little 60-foot office, and we showed him slides - Lou, Terry, and I. I think it was maybe Lou, Paul, and I. I can't remember if Terry was there that particular day, but the three or four of us showed him slides.

TM:

And I want to pause you for a second. Had you, Lou and Paul and you, had you already sort of connected and thought of this as an idea to bring together, or was it just sort of...

PC:

No, after seeing Walter Stone and telling him, I called them and I said, "Would you guys join me in this? Because he's coming. He's coming and we need to show him something. So, I need to show him who you are and who I am and see if he bites".

TM:

Okay, I want to just make a very, very clear connection here - the influences of what you have experienced up to now in your education with your father and with being in this house with Walter Gropius...

PC:

It was an extension of this place.

TM:

It's an extension of the Bauhaus, came through your father, through Gropius to you, and this was in you, Peter, so that when you pulled these guys together, Tom and Ivan, who were graphic designers who were doing remarkable work, graphic design, you were doing filmmaking, and meanwhile, Paul and Terry and Alden [and Lou] were working with Gropius at TAC, right?

PC:

Yep.

TM:

All of it is coming together. I don't want anyone to lose the importance of this moment and the connection of Gropius to CambridgeSeven.

PC:

No, that's fair. It's exactly what happened. Yeah, that's accurate. I thought this could be the way to realize Paul's idea, but it was born of Gropius, and my father, and Paul was a part of that tradition too, because he had been trained by both of them. He was working for Gropius, and he'd been taught by my father.

TM:

And this book, you've been holding this book, just this connection of your father to Gropius. Read the dedication of this book.

PC:

Community and Privacy, by the way... it's a book about the, you might say, possibilities of a humanistic architecture based on the quality of life and using the computer as a mechanism for applying humanistic thinking, which he developed over many years with his students. And then extended further with the participation of a graduate student, a PhD student, Christopher Alexander, who he asked to help him do a book using the computer and Christopher's brilliant methodology to find a new rationale, a new way of thinking that could argue for high-density housing, low-rise, which he'd been studying for many years, patio houses, and had built for himself at Yale, and Sert had built for himself at Harvard. And this low-rise, high-density housing was an obsession of my father's, which he felt was important to put across to

the world. And he did this book. I helped him with it, designing it, but that's irrelevant. What's important and why I brought it with me today is that this combination of his work and thinking, which for him represented about 50 years of work at the time, maybe 40 years or 50 years of work, he dedicated as follows in the dedication page: "To Walter Gropius, with admiration, affection, and gratitude." [chokes up]

TM:

Yeah.

PC:

I'd like to come back to this reality of the firm that I started with six others as a collaborative firm and its origins with Gropius and my father, in that it was a marriage of people of diverse talents. Terry was an urban designer and planner more than an architect, although he in fact was a very skilled architect. His proclivities were more in urban design. Paul was an architect, but his proclivities were more in exhibit design and interior design. Lou was an architect, but his interests in large part were in sculpture and industrial design and in all kinds of problem solving. Alden Christie was an artist as well as an architect. We were all architects, but we had different interests. Ivan and Tom were graphic designers, but with a knowledge of architecture that most graphic designers never have. And so, we were cross-fertilizing each other and acting as equals. I was in charge because of the first job we got. But I was the junior person. I was the kid. I was a kid brother to Ivan, and I was even more a kid brother to Paul and Terry. They were 10 years older than me. Ivan was only four years older than me.

TM:

[both laugh] It's remarkable.

PC:

Yep, and I learned from Paul and Terry what it really was to be an architect, because I didn't know the first thing about it. My experience was limited to Lyons, Israel, and Ellis in London. That's all I knew. And yet, I was now the principal in charge of the New England Aquarium as our first project, because I had gotten it for us. And that happened because of the peculiar circumstances that had to do with what Walter Stone, the zoo guy, did. He introduced me to a herpetologist from Detroit who was starting a new aquarium and interviewing architects two weeks later. And I got drunk with Lee Finneran, and we hit it off, and he decided to include us in firms being interviewed, even though we hadn't existed as a firm. We didn't exist as a firm. We printed our letterhead the night before and called ourselves Cambridge Seven Associates, because you can't deal with the seven names like that otherwise. [laughs] And we got that job. We were chosen. The Boston Brahmins who interviewed us came to the conclusion that we were more qualified and more interesting than all the other six who had prior aquarium experience and so on. We had no experience, but they liked us better for some reason or another.

TM:

Well, you had an idea.

PC:

We had an idea.

TM:

And that idea was just a remarkable transformation.

PC:

It was a bringing together of many things that would address, rethink what an aquarium was and apply all these things to it. And we went about it that way and combined architecture and graphics and exhibit design as one thing, not as separate disciplines, but as one thing. And that was what Gropius had taught us to do, and my father had taught us to do, even though they themselves never did it except for individual small projects. My father's house in England with Henry Moore doing a sculpture was a combination of that kind. He did it with a landscape architect who helped him think about the grounds around the house and so on. But it was more of an individual statement. Even though he had immense, you might say, passion for the participation of the artists around him in other disciplines, the engineers and the others who taught him about technology and so on, he didn't really do it. And nor did Gropius, except at the Bauhaus in Dessau, he did it. He had equals, he had Oskar Schlemmer, he had [Wassily] Kandinsky, he had [Lyonel] Feininger, he had Breuer. He had extraordinary people who were his equals, but he was their leader, he was their voice. He was the conductor of their orchestra, but they were all musicians together, like this. And that's what we were as CambridgeSeven when we started. We were all musicians together. And I could not have done what I did without Terry and Paul who taught me, and Lou who taught me, and with the talents of others who drew for me because I couldn't draw, not like they could. Alden Christie could draw like an angel, as could later, Chuck Redmond and Peter Sollogub. And their talents for me were like the talents of Breuer and Feininger and Oskar Schlemmer and so on for Gropius.

TM:

Yeah.

PC:

I feel parallel to Gropius because he couldn't draw. He didn't draw. He thought about things. He had magnificent ability to bring those talents together. He did that. And I guess I was lucky enough to have the chance to try to do that too. And so, I made things happen, and we did things together, and it was fantastic excitement. Those first 10 years of CambridgeSeven were mind blowing. When we did the MBTA work and when we did the U.S. Pavilion...

TM:

With Bucky Fuller.

PC:

With Bucky Fuller.

TM:

...which brings you around to Bucky Fuller again.

PC:

Yeah, Bucky Fuller, who treated us badly, by the way. [laughs] Even though I had known him as a child, he treated... and I got him the job because he didn't get the job initially. You know who were appointed for that job?

TM:

No, who was it? Do you remember?

PC:

Yes. It was Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph...

TM:

Oh my gosh.

PC:

And um... [John Johansen].

TM:

It'll come to you.

PC:

It'll come to me. There were three of them. They were chosen [as a short list] to be the architects. We were chosen to be the exhibit designers. And the client who was the head of the project, a man named Jack Masey, said "Peter and Lou and Terry and Paul, we've chosen you first, and we're giving you, because we want an integrated project, we're giving you the choice of these three other architects because they have the stature, established reputation to be assigned architect of the pavilion. You do not". To my partners' dismay, I presumed to say, "Please, none of the above". And Jack Masey said, "Good God, why? What are you thinking?" I said, "Jack, they're all such egos, and their work is so personal that it won't be what you think you're looking for". I said, "What about Bucky Fuller?" And he said, "Good idea".

TM:

[laughs] Just like that.

PC:

Just like that. "Good idea, I'm going to call my boss". And he called the head of the Department of Commerce, who was his boss. He was representing USIA, but the USIA was funded by the Department of Commerce who was in charge. And they had chosen these three architects, one of the three, and us as the exhibit designers. And Ivan and Tom, who were with me, were wondering, "Oh, God, we're in trouble". But no, they liked the idea of Bucky. And their decision was, yes, Bucky. And Bucky was invited, and Bucky came. Bucky got the job. And he never gave us credit for it. He never told that story. And it was never disclosed. But that is the story.

TM:

Wow. Well, it stands today. The dome is there today.

PC:

It's a wonderful building.

TM:

And they've now renovated it into an environmental museum, an environmental science center, which I think is a wonderful transformation from the exhibit to something that people can still enjoy.

PC:

Yeah. Have you seen the film that I made of it?

TM:

I think I have. Yes.

PC:

It's called *Design for a Fair*.

TM:

Yes.

PC:

Yes. A little film. But anyway, the point is that I go back to Gropius on this because his work at Dessau was the kind of collaborative that Paul and we put together, where there are a lot of talents involved. And also, we found that we could address building types that called for it in spades. And one of the things that I liked about the aquarium was that it required science and technology and engineering input and curatorial museum input at the same level as the design input. So, we had to bring those people into the mix as well in making this thing happen. It was as complex a building type as there exists, other than maybe hospitals and other things.

TM:

A vivarium or something, right?

PC:

Vivariums, yes. Whatever. There are other building types, but that's as complicated as it gets. And I found that intriguing over my subsequent years. As you know, I kept pursuing it.

TM:

You did. And I want to share with you that DNA that, I'd like to term it like a narrative architecture - there's a story. We tell a story. And I think CambridgeSeven from its beginnings has always been embracing the story of what the building is, what it's doing, what it's saying, and that the architecture and the exhibitry, the experience of how we experience the building is holistic. It's all one thing.

PC:

Well, that's a very good point. And I also would say that that comes out of Gropius's teachings because experiential thinking was very much on our minds as Lou Bakanowsky and others kept hammering so wonderfully as we did work for the MBTA, the subway system of Boston, it was all driven by experience. What we came to the conclusion of was that each decision we made as designers could be conditioned by the experiential factor, the quality of experience in knowing where you were and where you were going. And if that was a condition of the decision, you were on a path that would solve the problem. You would get somewhere that meant something, that it was fundamentally valid or of value to others. And that humanism is what my father and Gropius fundamentally believed, which is why I think they were great men, not because they were great artists themselves, but because they were great humanists who had immense admiration for artists who they joined company with, but were not themselves. My father was an artist, yes, but not a great artist. Gropius was an artist, yes, but not a great artist. But he pulled people together and made things that mattered, which CambridgeSeven is continuing to try to do, which TAC was doing, which was the passion, and [is] still the passion of many people. Jeanne Gang is doing it. There are all kinds of people doing it in all kinds of ways. It's a valid way of addressing things. And it's highly collaborative. It's not about an individual talent doing his thing. It's about drawing on the talents of many to make things happen.

And one of the reasons that I think of Gropius so warmly in my own life is that he taught me to value the ideas of others while being fearless about your own ideas and even stubborn about your own ideas, but with the notion that somebody else might have a better one. And if you're not prepared to learn from others and to listen to others and work with others, you don't belong in an orchestra. [both laugh]

TM:

Well, this has been phenomenal, Peter. Remarkable. Thank you for your time and sharing all of this.

PC:

A pleasure.