

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Frederic E. Stresau (compiled February 18, 2011)

Interviewee: FREDERIC E. (“FRED”) STRESAU

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

Interview Date: Thursday, November 18, 2010

Location: Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Length: Approximately 82 minutes

A native of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Frederic E. “Fred” Stresau began his landscape architecture degree in 1961 at North Carolina State University School of Design (now College of Design) and graduated in 1966. Except for a two year period when he worked for Lewis Clarke Associates, Stresau has spent his professional career at Stresau, Smith & Stresau. He is the son of Frederic B. and Ann Stresau who were also landscape architects in Florida.

YO: I’m Yona Owens and I’m interviewing Fred Stresau in his office in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on November eighteenth, 2010. I’d like to start off with our standard first question. Tell me a little bit about where you’re from and how you got interested in landscape architecture.

FS: The short version is that I was born in Miami in 1941. My parents were graduate landscape architects from the University of Illinois in 1935 and had a practice in Miami Beach until 1940. My dad had to close the practice because of the war and in 1946 he reopened the practice in Fort Lauderdale and the office has continued to function until this day. I graduated from Fort Lauderdale High School in 1959, went to Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina for two years and then transferred in 1961 to North Carolina State School of Design. Graduated in 1966, joined my dad’s firm in 1966, and have been in continuous practice until this interview today.

YO: Very good. What drew you to the North Carolina School of Design?

FS: It was recommended by one of my dad’s employees, Taft Bradshaw, and Dick Bell. Dick had graduated from North Carolina State I think in 1953 or ’54 [1950] and had come to Fort Lauderdale to work for my dad and was the reason that Taft was recommended to come and work for my dad. And Taft absolutely would not have me do anything other than to go to North Carolina State.

YO: How many students were there when you went there, in the landscape department?

FS: In the landscape department there were probably sixteen in third, fourth, and fifth year. I think there were four in fifth year and maybe four or five in fourth year and I think there were six in third year.

YO: So, it was a substantial department by that time.

FS: It was fairly sizeable although we were pretty isolated from the rest of the architectural and product design students as far as school was concerned.

YO: What do you mean by that?

FS: Well, I actually had an apartment for two and a half years with a product design student and an architectural student so we had an apartment in a two-story house on Maiden Lane, which was right across from the Bell Tower. And on the whole second floor of a very old building right next to the professor in architecture whose name was—I can't remember [Harwell Hamilton Harris]. We can go back and fill that in later. Okay.

YO: Did you take any cross discipline classes like drawing or painting?

FS: In the School of Design?

YO: Mm hmm.

FS: Oh, yeah. It was a five-year program and actually we had mechanical drawing, we had all kinds of freehand drawing, we had sculpture, and, we'd have to say it, probably the Dean's course in the philosophy of design was—in my opinion I never really understood why we were taking it, but it would not classify, I think, as a technical class in landscape architecture.

YO: And what was that class?

FS: It was philosophy of design, I think, and I think we talked in general at his house about the different areas of design and people that had excelled, I think, in design around the world. I don't actually remember. I was not really interested in the class and I think most of us just traipsed out to his class for the cookies and coffee after the meeting.

YO: [Laughs] Right. Well, which cross discipline faculty do you think were most valuable to you? Do you remember some of their names?

FS: When you say cross discipline I think you have to look at the school in general and say that as a five-year program that the first two years we all studied, I guess general design, and in my instance, we had two architectural professors that I had my first year and second year before we got into landscape design. And the first year was probably the most enriching because we didn't talk about architecture. We talked about materials, we talked about colors. We talked about how planes intersected one another. The guy's name was Shaw. Probably the other person that I got more out of than almost anybody was in a painting class, which was George Bireline's class, and I think that George was an interesting character, "character" is underlined, and in his painting and drawing classes he was absolutely superb.

YO: What was he like as a person?

FS: A beatnik. And I remember that we had a young fellow who had long hair and never wore shoes and his jeans were always in tatters and Karl Gaskins was in product design and he always sat in the back of the room, and one day he criticized Mr. Bireline because he couldn't hear him and George turned around and threw an eraser at him and said, if you want to speak to me you'll

have to speak softer or you're going to have to listen louder. And that was an example of the fact that he just wouldn't put up with anybody in his class telling him what to do. It was very interesting.

George, I think other than drawing figures, which we had, spent a great deal of time in his painting classes and was very informative because he never hesitated to sit down and pick up a brush and paint on top of what you were working on if he didn't think you were going in the direction that he felt the class should be going. At one point, he took one of my paintings and he spent almost two hours saying, look, I want to show you what I'm trying to get you to do. And he painted over my painting and he painted a painting, and I'm sitting there thinking all the time, this is going to be wonderful because I'm going to have an original Bireline. And after we got done and did a critique on it and everybody thought how great it was he took the white paint and painted over it and said, now you start and you do it.

YO: Oh, no.

FS: So, that was kind of interesting, and that's just the kind of immediate hands-on professor that I think he particularly was.

YO: Do you remember Henry Kamphoefner? Do you remember anything about him?

FS: Henry, my dear friend, Henry. Yeah, because I was always in trouble with him. As a matter of fact I got thrown out of school twice by Henry, expelled as a matter of fact. But at any rate that's another story for another day. Henry was quizzed very early on by my dad and by Taft Bradshaw as to whether or not I would be accepted into the School of Design because my grades in high school and my SAT scores were absolutely minimal. And Henry's explanation was that he couldn't possibly admit me into the School of Design where roughly ten percent of the students were from out of state and they were the selected few that had good grades and high SATs. He apparently cut a deal with my dad that if I went to a small liberal arts school in North Carolina, which was Catawba College in Salisbury, for two years and showed him that I could do college work then he would admit me.

I didn't know at the time, and I didn't know until about 1980 that at the time my dad was on the ASLA evaluation committee for the different colleges that they went around and evaluated to find out whether they would be accredited or not, and when I was cleaning out some of my dad's files I found a letter from Henry saying that he enjoyed my dad's visit and was glad that he had been able to accept me into the school.

Henry was different. I considered that Henry was the consummate administrator in the fact that he was able to put together what I know now to be probably the most talented group of professors, teachers, sculptors, painters, that I know of, of any school in the country at the time. There was no doubt that North Carolina State was equivalent to the best school in the country, and how he managed to keep those people there is beyond me, but he ran the School with an iron fist. He never lacked to show up at three o'clock in the morning when the security people would say that the school was out of control and partying, upsetting the rest of the campus. Henry would show up in his tie and berate everybody and close the School down.

YO: You partied while you were trying to work?

FS: Oh, yeah, all night long. It was—you got to let loose somehow or another and the students in Watauga and the rest of the adjacent dormitories would always complain and the security would come and Henry would call everybody out and line them up on the second floor balcony on the staircase and tell them that he was going to close the School down and throw everybody out of the School if they didn't do what he was saying. So, he was very strict. I think he was very fair, and a pleasure to be around, other than if you crossed him, which I did several times.

YO: And what was one example of when you crossed him?

FS: Oh, I broke out a window in the landscape design department at one point and Liz, who was the secretary, managed to have a new window ordered because Henry was out of town, and he came back three hours early and found the guys putting the window in. And he wanted to know how it had happened, and of course I had to own up to the fact that I had broken a window out with a baseball bat while we were playing baseball at three o'clock in the morning, so that didn't sit well. I think I ended up having to pay two hundred dollars for the window.

YO: Oh, no.

FS: But at any rate, I think other than that Henry was very fair and he was a neat guy to be around. We didn't necessarily always agree with what he wanted, but I think everybody benefited from his talent of being able to put together a group of professors that were quite good.

YO: Did he ever do any student crits?

FS: Not to my knowledge.

YO: He left that mostly to the professors.

FS: Yeah, I think it was left to the different professors, and I can't remember specifically who we had that would have done the critiques. I think once we got into third, fourth, and fifth year most of the critiques were from the professors that were in the school [department] of landscape architecture, and of course in the first and second year the crits were mostly interior to each one of the classes so there might be somebody that was visiting. On occasion I think that we had maybe some of the fourth and fifth year landscape architectural students critique our first and second year design projects, as I recall, on a couple of occasions. We had other upper level students come in and be part of the jury.

YO: What was Gil Thurlow like? [Pause] What did he look like, first of all?

FS: Oh, Gil? Old, had a mustache, I think, had glasses that sat out on the end of his nose and always had a ruddy complexion, I think from spending too much time down at the beach in his cottage. Gil was one of my dad's better friends and Gil was probably the most direct and down-to-earth professor that we had at the school. He did not take any excuses and I always use an example that when he was teaching drainage, he'd always wait until it would rain and then he would tell everybody to get their umbrellas because we were going to go walk the campus and learn about grading. He was down-to-earth in that matter. Our fifth year, LaMarr and I got into—

YO: That's LaMarr Bunn?

FS: LaMarr [Bunn] and I got into a tangle with an assignment at Easter that was conflicting with Dick Moore in what he wanted in design and what Gil Thurlow wanted in landscape technology. And LaMarr and I stayed over Easter vacation and produced, I don't know, ten or fifteen drawings as a set and never even hit a lick on what Dick Moore wanted. We were both trying to get As in Gil's class and when he graded it out I got a B because I had left a hose bib off of a building and he said, lad, your plants would die because you don't have any way to water them once the contractor leaves the job. And he said, that's not "A" work, and he gave me a "B-plus," and that was indicative, I think, of the way Gil—

YO: Just a real stickler then.

FS: —taught his students the importance of details and of specifications and the influence of what you were learning really on what landscape architecture was. He on several occasions took us out to jobs in the Raleigh area that were under construction and tried to show us problems that he foresaw in the construction, not of his jobs but just random projects that were under construction. And I think for the most part it was very informative and probably to this day, I know that that's one of this office's strengths, is how you get your landscape design implemented and put in the ground.

YO: What was Dick Moore like?

FS: That's difficult. I have maintained some contact with Dick Moore over the years, over thirty-five years, and have called him on many occasions, or lately sent him an email, to compliment him on what he taught us actually in fifth year, because he took the class in fifth year. Our entire fifth year we had to deal with Dick. I think that Dick liked to let you find your own way.

In our fifth year, the last three or four weeks of our fifth year, he told us, we're not going to do a major project. I want to make sure that you know how to draw. And he said, I don't care whether you draw with a pencil or a pen or a dirty sock, but that's what you're going to draw with the rest of the semester. He said, go out and buy thirty or forty twenty-by-thirty boards, bring them to class, and every afternoon we will do a five-hour sketch problem and you will turn it in at the end of the day and get graded on it accordingly.

It was because Dick taught that design class and a drawing class at the same time that I believe that I now can walk onto a project and draw almost anything with any tool that's available, including a piece of chalk on the side of a concrete building, because he said, sooner or later when you're in business you're going to have to draw something to explain to somebody what you want. And he said, you're going to have to prove to me as the head of the department that you can actually do that before I'm going to let you graduate. It was interesting.

And the other thing that occurred, which was this conflict between LaMarr and Gil Thurlow, was the fact that he walked in at two o'clock in the morning—and he was the only professor in school that I know of in any department that would come in at two o'clock in the morning to see what the students were doing.

Over this Easter break he [Dick Moore] came in on Sunday night, which was the day that everybody was returning from vacation, and he said, that looks pretty good, when he was talking

about Thurlow's drawings, but he said, where's my design? And I said—LaMarr and I had tables side by side and we looked at him and we said, we told you before the vacation started that we couldn't finish Gil's project much less even start on yours. And Dick's words were, we have a jury at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. He said, either you guys hang something up or I'm going to give you an F for the course and you can come back next year. Then he said, if you've only got three hours, I want the very best that you've got in three hours, and if you have three months then I want to see the very best that you can give me in three months. And LaMarr and I, between two o'clock Monday morning and three o'clock Monday afternoon, both of us spent about eight or nine hours doing the design and we hung it up and he gave us a "C."

YO: That was good.

FS: And he said, understand what I said. Your result, or what you hang up, is the best that you can give me in the time that you've got. And I learned more that day than from anybody else in the School of Design. It's very simple that when somebody asks you a question or they give you a certain amount of time or you're in a charrette that you sit down and apply yourself and you hand it to them and you don't make any excuses whatsoever for what you've got because what you've given them is the equivalent to the amount of effort you could in the time period that they've given you. I've conveyed that to Dick again and again and I know LaMarr's in the same boat.

YO: Yeah, I've heard LaMarr say that same thing about Dick Moore, about doing it in the allotted time.

FS: Pain in the ass.

YO: Yeah.

FS: But he taught us some things that were absolutely critical to running our own business.

YO: Quite a character.

FS: Understand that—I'm surprised that LaMarr would mention that. [Laughs]

YO: You met Lewis Clarke as one of your professors. What year was that?

FS: I don't think I was aware of Lewis our first and second year in school because there wouldn't have been any reason for us to have crossed. I couldn't place it, but I suppose that Lewis taught third year landscape design, and as third year and fourth year went on, or fifth year, I think I learned quite a bit from Lewis.

The best part I think is that number one he taught a history course, a landscape design history course, that I just threw all my notes away a month or two ago, but he taught me that you need to be aware of what has been done in the past and how it might affect your design philosophy, and that you really had to learn to travel in order to be able to see what other people had done. And I believe that if you don't travel and you don't review or look at or experience what other people have designed, whether it's in your own town or in the next city or it's the

ASLA design awards, that you really can't raise the level of your professional qualifications amongst the rest of your clients to the level that I think you could possibly do.

Lewis' history course went on for one semester, I believe, and two years after we got out of school, I spent four months in Europe and visited every garden and every building that Lewis had shown us or reviewed in our history class. I made a list and it took us four months to get around through Europe to see all the—and in my opinion the influence that it had on me is that my landscape design, overall, is more of a very informal kind of design rather than formal and lining trees up in rows and hedges and clipped things. Almost all of my design has been recognized as informal, very casual, very comfortable, and the kind of design where we are in South Florida where if you have a hurricane or trees die that it doesn't affect the overall design of the project, and I think that's important.

Lewis used to talk about the fact that we would be responsible for the overall design of the project, and from the overall design of the project that included his favorite saying, "that includes right down to the design of the Dixie cup." It was Lewis' influence on me that through my entire professional career that I have been very detail oriented because of that. And as I have said to many, LaMarr and I and one or two other people had the unique opportunity to visit with Lewis and work for him for a number of years after we got out of school and were able to see exactly what he was talking about because he demanded that not only were you aware of the whole project, but you were also aware of all the small details that ultimately made a successful project.

I often laugh because many of the few residential projects that I have done I always end up getting right down to questioning what the architect or the owner's going to do with the doorstep jamb, because that affects the paving out towards the street. And you have to somewhere or another marry the two of them together, and it's that detailing of the architectural elements of a building that reflects pretty much what you do on the outside.

YO: So, besides the history class, did you have him for design classes as well?

FS: Yeah, we had—and I don't remember actually. I mean, I couldn't sit here without giving it a lot of thought. There was no doubt that we had Lewis for design, but I can't remember a specific semester or what we might have done with Lewis on design.

YO: Were you working at the office during the same time you were a student? Some of the students did work in the little office that they had created.

FS: No, I don't think so. Actually, after I graduated in '66, I came to South Florida and worked for my dad for a couple of years and then my wife applied for and was accepted at Carolina for her PhD work. And I talked with LaMarr and Lewis and they said, sure, we'll hire you. With that, Christine, my wife, and I left to go spend four months in Europe, came back Christmastime, and when we got to Raleigh, Lewis didn't have a job for me. So, I was without a job for almost six months because, obviously, the economy had gone downhill and he didn't need somebody even though he had agreed to hire me. Eventually, six or eight months later, I was hired and I worked for him for almost two years.

YO: Do you remember some of the projects you worked on?

FS: Ironically, the two projects specifically—I came back with a beard. And I didn't know it at the time, Lewis was upset because he didn't want to take a beatnik out on a project and introduce him to the people at Sandhills Junior College or—I guess it was Sandhills. At any rate, somewhere along the way I shaved my beard off and the next day he said, go get in the car because we're going to go to the airport and go somewhere. And that somewhere was Palmetto Dunes, which was in the process of being designed. It's a twenty-five hundred acre project down on the ocean. The other project that I worked on absolutely the entire time I was in the office was Carolina Trace, which is in—

YO: Sanford.

FS: —Sanford, and ironically, it turns out later that my wife's sister and her husband actually bought a house and built a house in Carolina Trace. And actually, it was that time plus working on Palmetto Dunes that Lewis really drilled into us that it was important not only from a land planning standpoint or with a golf course, because we worked with Jones, the golf architect—

YO: Trent Jones.

FS: —Trent Jones, and his son. We had worked with him up at Runnymede on two or three projects up there, but it was particularly at Palmetto Dunes that we got to decide where the golf course went because Lewis made us evaluate the property. And he was focused on delivering to the client as many lots as they possibly could that had the highest value and that did not include where the golf course went. The golf course went where the crummy property was, and it was very interesting. I had never even given that any thought and here Lewis is laying out for the clients the fact that we had located the golf course in the areas which were poor for residential building construction, and that's why. Then he got into all of the intricacies of designing the graphics, and the Dixie cups, [Laughs] for Palmetto Dunes and the manual that we produced that was some hundred and sixty pages, I think, a booklet as to how they should develop Palmetto Dunes.

So, those were actually two projects that I worked on a great deal. The Palmetto Dunes was kind of funny because LaMarr and I were working on the drawing that was almost nine feet long down in the basement on Hillsborough, and the client was on the second floor waiting for us to bring the drawing up and as LaMarr and I brought the drawing up, we turned the corner and it snagged on the door jamb and we ripped a nine-foot colored rendering in half in front of the client.

YO: Oh, no.

FS: And we looked at each other and Lewis said, that's okay. Just pin it up in pieces and we'll just put some tape on it and don't worry about it. And it was sort of detailed but casual, fun to work with. That, and when we had the snowball fight inside the office.

YO: Oh, you had a snowball fight?

FS: Oh, yeah, it was terrific. Lewis wasn't there and so we broke several windows and it was sort of like—because on the ground floor it was all administrative stuff and Lewis' office so we just closed his office door and it was like a bunch of kids. So, it was a very loose office at the time.

YO: You were very young at the time.

FS: Well, yeah, we were all twenty-two, or something like that.

YO: And working on Palmetto Dunes, which has turned out to be the ultimate—

FS: Premier.

YO: Yeah, the premier piece in his repertoire.

FS: Absolutely, no doubt. I have no way of knowing whether he ever made any money on that project or not. We went and designed it again and again and again and again, and it was sort of like we'd all look at one another and say things like, gee, we did this in school and here we are. I have no idea fifty years later whether Lewis kept track of the time or he was just paying us, not well, but paying us to do what he'd taught us to do in school and if he didn't like it we'd do it again.

I know that as my office has gotten larger and now quite small that I look back on the thousands and thousands of hours that were wasted by young students and understand more about where we were really at the time because Lewis didn't spend a lot of time with us in critiques until we were ready to hang it up and look at it. And he treated it just like the classroom. It's really quite surprising. Maybe that's why everybody likes him, I don't know.
[Laughs]

YO: Well, you mentioned Tysons Corner one time. Did you work on that?

FS: Tysons Corner was the reason I got hired. Tysons Corner at the time was in Alexandria, Virginia and it was the largest shopping center in the country. I don't remember—interesting, because each one of these has a side story, but Lewis was in the process of designing the interior of the mall, and basically I guess I spent quite a bit of time in Lewis' office working on malls for people over in Chapel Hill.

But Tysons Corner was almost nineteen hundred feet long from one end to the other. It was two or three stories including the delivery areas on the lower sides, and each of the courtyards, he had determined, was going to have Florida plant material. So, when he got to the point where they needed to start doing some landscape design on the Florida plants, I was hired. So, that would have been I guess in the spring of 1978 [1968]. Ironically, when the time came to implement the design I was the only one in the office that knew what was on the plans so I got to go up and work in Alexandria for several weeks organizing and directing the semi-trailer trucks full of tropical plant material. Then as the project progressed actually Lewis and I became very involved in trying to keep the stuff alive through the use of a PhD in entomology from the University of Maryland, that the owners finally fired, and lost most of the plant material in the mall because—

YO: Oh, no.

FS: —they had kids that were watering that were more interested in looking at the women in the mall rather than what they were doing, and they'd over water the plants or under water the plants. For the size of the investment—I don't remember, it was probably four or five hundred thousand dollars worth of plant material at the time. They purely did not understand how to take care of what Lewis had talked them into, and really was a draw for the mall because nobody in Washington, for the most part, had seen Florida plant material. Plant material that's planted in a mall never really grows, it just exists, so if it's attacked by bugs and fungus and not fertilized or watered properly gradually it dies and it has to be replaced. And nobody ever sets money aside to replace the plant material, so it never looks better than the day you finish.

YO: Right. Who were some of the other people working in the office at the time?

FS: One of the key people I think was Don Basile, and I've actually lost track of Don. I think he was from New Jersey [Pennsylvania]. I don't know whether the School—does the school ever keep track of people and where they go?

YO: No, not really.

FS: Don Basile was there and Tom—Tom, Tom, Tom—Jones. David, David Jones, I think, worked there, and Tom—I'll have to remember his name—was a short kid who always was so short that he had to letter upside down on the tables because he'd label as far as he could up the drawing and then go to the other side of the drawing and label upside down, which was really kind of clever. But other than Don and LaMarr and Tom and myself I don't recall. Was Sangster there at one point?

YO: Well, it was a small office to be turning out so much work.

FS: It was huge, and it really had to do I think with the fact that Lewis had encouraged us to draw on yellow trash or yellow paper and use magic markers on it. And in my opinion today, it's still the best way of conveying to a client what your design looks like in an absolute minimum amount of time. My dad, for thirty-five years, did pastels that my mom colored, perspectives and sketches and stuff that were done in pastel chalk and then sprayed that were actually almost like etchings. Lewis taught us to draw on this yellow paper and mix and match dozens of colors of magic markers on it that really is quite easy to present.

YO: Can you tell in hindsight why some of the projects you worked on at Lewis Clarke Associates were now important, besides Palmetto Dunes? We know that one holds its place in history.

FS: I think that when I first started working in Lewis' office, he was involved or had been involved in several community colleges—and I don't know because I was never at, nor do I know much about the community colleges, but I know that in talking with LaMarr and looking at the drawings that Lewis was intimately involved in the site planning of the different community colleges that he was working on and this really had nothing to do with landscape architecture. It

was pure planning and site design, and it's ironic that I got there somewhat after that work was done and got to work on a few of them because in 1968 or '69, I had to write the design section for the first state of Florida registration exam.

My dad had volunteered because he was on the governor's board of professional regulation, and he had volunteered to do the site design problem that was the bulk of the test. And he came to me and I actually designed the project to be a community college and wrote the number of students and developed a site plan that had grading on it that would have been reminiscent of what they had down at Sand Pines [Sandhills]. And everybody was amazed because it was a very difficult project, but it was purely a planning project that had to do with the location and traffic circulation, pedestrian circulation.

I think that if I look back on it, although Palmetto Dunes is certainly a large project, I would think that maybe some of the community college design that he did was more important in my aspect than a golf course community because it serves the general population rather than a resort kind of thing.

But you know when we did Palmetto Dunes it was Lewis that said, oh, I think that when we excavate for the fill for the golf courses that maybe we should do a water village. And everybody looked at one another and he said, well, draw up something to show the client for a water village. And we all looked at one another like, what is he talking about? So, he'd sit there and do little sketches and we'd sort of know what a water village looked like and I guess if you visited the specific today, you'd know what a water village looked like. But in 1968 or whenever I didn't know what a water village looked like, but Lewis says, oh, obviously this should be a water village. I don't know whether they ever built it or not but the entrance to the project, the commercial area, the separation of the multifamily areas from the commercial, and from the single family—it was a real experience to actually be doing work on a design just like we'd been doing in school, and it didn't seem to me to have the historical impact then that it obviously does today.

So, it's interesting to look back and to visit Palmetto Dunes. I've been back a couple of times to see a project—and Carolina Trace—to see a project that you worked on forty years ago, or almost forty years ago now, that actually got built that I didn't realize was being implemented. It's an enlightening experience as a student or a young professional to all of a sudden see your project come to fruition and to have a project that's twenty-five hundred acres actually built—and built pretty close to what it was designed—is a real enlightening experience. It is for me.

YO: I think it is for anybody.

FS: [Laughs] Well, Ed Stone's office, EDSA, and some of the bigger design firms today have obviously been doing it for thirty or forty years, but I chose to come into an office that was more oriented towards landscape architectural design and not planning. And so, it's enlightening to me to see that had I chosen to go a different road in the profession and gone with a landscape planning firm, I'm sure that that was a really fascinating part of the profession that I guess I never really experienced other than Lewis' office.

YO: What made the group of people that went through Lewis' office, what made that group of people, their design, different from other people? Was there some underlying philosophy that you were trying to convey or that you operated on?

FS: I don't know because I, at that point, didn't have the experience in other professional offices. There's no doubt in Palmetto Dunes that Lewis drove the resultant design. I had never heard about taking a piece of property and cutting it up into pieces and sections and putting a dollar value on the land. And he said that will dictate how we use the land, and we didn't do that in school. So, that was the first time I'd ever seen anybody say, hey, I don't want to design it. I want to write a dollar value on every square foot of a piece of property and decide where it's valuable, and what's it's valuable for and let that dictate what the design is.

It sounds very simple, but then you have to say, okay, well, the golf architect isn't going to put all of his golf course down in the slum pit, so you're going to have to give him a bone and let him take the course out to the ocean so he has a couple of signature holes to go along with the ones that run along the water on the inside of the project. Certainly the value of the land had something to do with the size of the lots. It had a great deal to do with where the urban core in Palmetto Dunes was located and how and where you put the multi-family so that you didn't destroy the casual atmosphere of the development, which was supposed to be low key with oak trees and not certainly three-story condominiums that other projects had done.

I think Hilton Head was a good example because on the golf course they've got multimillion dollar houses along the golf course and its impressive, but it doesn't do anything for the golf course. And I'm not sure it does anything for the single family homes that look onto it because people are constantly in people's backyards playing out of the back of their three million dollar house, and that doesn't sit well either. I don't know. It seems to me as though in the two years that I was in Lewis' office that Lewis drove the design philosophy of every project that we were on. We implemented it, but he drove the design philosophy.

YO: So, after you worked in his office you came back to Florida.

FS: Came back to Florida and got mired in landscape architecture, in planting design, and we were very successful. In hindsight, I'm not sure we made any money, but we were very successful in the fact that we were involved in dozens of projects from the Miami airport, which won a national design honor award, and ultimately we spent somewhere in twenty-five to thirty million dollars worth of development at the airport.

We had several parks. One was North Shore Open Space Park, which won a national honor award. It's located in North Miami Beach on the ocean. We got selected as the prime landscape design consultants to the Kaiser Transit, which is the Dade County rapid transit system. The Tampa airport; I was intimately involved in the design of the Fort Lauderdale airport; and we worked for almost every major developer in South Florida from Arvida to the work that they did in Palm Beach and Broward County, and the new city of Weston, which was basically built in an area that was nothing but saw grass and today is one of the major new metropolitan areas of Broward County. We worked for banks, we worked for shopping centers, but I would say that most of our work here is all commercial. I probably have only done three residences in the last twenty years because I don't like to deal with people who can't make their minds up.

YO: [Laughs]

FS: And when you're dealing in the commercial area or dealing in public works, it's pretty easy to have the decisions made and then you implement whatever the decision is.

YO: What do you think is your most popular project?

FS: That's difficult because I can tell you, and it has been disturbing to me and probably disturbing to some architects in the fact that most of our work doesn't last very long. I would say that the average—obviously landscape design deteriorates. It improves for awhile if you've done it correctly and then after fifteen or twenty years it starts to decline. And I've had clients threaten to sue me because plants that were planted in full sun are now in full shade and they die.

And so, you have to understand that landscape architecture for the most part is a continually involving palette of plant material if you do what our office has been focused on. I have had projects that I thought were quite good and fifteen or twenty-five years later the project sold, and the new owners plow up everything that you've done and there's literally nothing left. And a very good example of that is the Fort Lauderdale airport, which we spent three quarters of a million dollars on and today there's only a few trees that are left in the areas between the terminal and the parking garage that were really quite nice.

And I thought at least got several awards, but it doesn't exist today. The land's there, but the vegetation isn't there. I have a very good project, small projects, very good projects, a lot of them are shopping centers and one that I've just finished in the last five or six years, which is a corporate headquarters for the largest private bank in Florida. And there they spent the money that I told them that they had to spend in order to do the project right and it is maturing into I think one of the better projects. It was a project that I submitted as an example for my review for fellowship [into ASLA] in this last twelve months.

But rarely do projects continue to look good. They seem as though somewhere along the way we have a hurricane. I had a series of four twenty-two-story residential towers in Boca that we worked for years on, big, big, roof decks over parking garages, and at one time as we finished the project the client, who is a good friend and somebody that I'm working on his house today, said, I think we need some big trees. And we actually moved thirty-five or forty trees that were in excess of forty feet high up to his project on a barge, up the Intercoastal [Waterway], and planted them, used them at the entry way, the gatehouse area, to form a hammock, and today they've all been removed because they were destroyed by one of the hurricanes.

And the homeowners didn't know enough or didn't care enough to go to replant them or selectively prune them so that they would come back and they just had them removed. And that truly was a very good project, so it's kind of discouraging. We had a project that had acres of natural pines that I was able to convince the people to save. It was sold to—that was Harris Computers in 1974 or '5, and today the Calvary Church owns the property and has removed almost all of the original sand pines that almost don't exist in Florida anymore.

And it's very discouraging to know that you designed what was a corporate headquarters to leave all the existing trees and another client comes along and pretty much destroys everything that you worked on. So, it's disheartening to me. It's probably no different than an architect that has a house or a building that is sold to a new client and they rip all the façade off of it and paint it a different color.

YO: It's always just a little snapshot of history, isn't it?

FS: I think that if you don't take pictures of your work and maintain a photo gallery that you never know when something that you consider to be one of your better projects is just going to

get destroyed. We've had clients that have had somebody come in and rip everything out and what they put back is awful, and they don't know the difference. So, it's not a rewarding profession in my opinion. [Laughs]

YO: Well, how did your experience with Lewis influence your own practice, or did it?

FS: Oh, I think that there is no doubt that Lewis' focus overall in detailing, in the individual detailing once you get off of the master planning, has probably affected my stuff. I mean, you're looking at sketches on the table right now, the deck on a house that my wife and I have bought for our kids. And I never hesitate to design well beyond what I would consider anything that we learned in school, and that was only Lewis and Gil Thurlow's focus on attention to detail that I think had a huge impact on what I do.

YO: Looking back has the definition of a landscape architect changed?

FS: Oh, there's no doubt in my mind. My dad opened a firm in 1936 in Miami, and it's a long story, but in 1936, and I'm not sure today that anybody knows what landscape architects do in South Florida, or the country, for that matter—everybody still thinks we push bushes out the back of a truck, but I can tell you that the work that my dad did in 1936 through 1939, he was romancing clients that lived up north that were building vacation homes in South Florida. And they didn't know what they wanted, but they knew that they wanted it to look tropical.

There were no nurseries as such so any plant material had to be collected from the native plants. There were no tree cranes. They used A-frame lifts to move trees and put them onto farm carts and haul them down the street and lift them off and push them in a hole. For three years in the late '30s and from 1946 until about 1950, my dad's practice was all residential. And interestingly enough as I really have the perspective that many people don't have, the same clients that he was doing houses for that had money, came to Florida, decided they liked Florida, moved to Florida, and they were the people that in the mid '50s built all the big hotels out on Miami Beach.

For twenty-five years we were the landscape design consultants to Marriott Hotels because my dad happened to meet Willard Marriott and design his backyard in Philadelphia. And he said, damn, you're pretty good. We were hired, the office was hired, and there were only four people in the office, as the design consultants to Marriott for twenty-five years. And we did every Marriott from St. Louis to Boston and from Chicago to Miami Beach and developed a pattern much like I refer to McDonald's today—because we do all of McDonald's work in South Florida—is the fact that they knew exactly what they wanted to do. They had design standards that were established with the corporate office, and those standards and details were used on every, every development.

It wasn't until Marriott went to franchise, and the franchisees decided that they didn't need to do what the corporate, because it was basically their project, that they eliminated our firm and made a mess out of the corporate image of what they'd spend twenty-five years developing.

I think that it wasn't until the mid '70s or '80s that land planning really came to the forefront of landscape architecture. You got away from doing residential design and the residential design led into little corner of grocery stores, and cafeterias, and maybe some commercial buildings, and if you think that in 1975 or '80 they began to build shopping centers

that encompassed areas—ninety acres, Tysons Corner was ninety acres, and that was a huge project at the time. And I don't know that anybody ever said, let's take a golf course. Let's take Palmetto Dunes. It's twenty-five hundred acres. I don't think in 1950 and 1960 anybody designed, other than Columbia, that people designed large planned communities.

And there is no doubt in my mind that as the green element, sustainability has crept into the design that landscape architecture really has changed completely from my dad's era and from what I was taught. There were lots of things that we were taught that seem like they're primitive today, and there are also a lot of things that are primitive that are what make a project successful that the young kids today can't do because they don't know. So, it's interesting.

As I get toward retirement, I'm a bit sad over the fact that we've got an awful lot of information that the young kids don't know because they don't care. They really don't. They can't draw. They can't go onto a job and know how to manage a project. They know nothing about soils and the relationship of irrigation systems, and the amount of water delivered by an irrigation system to the different kinds of plant material.

For many, many years, I think that this office was recognized as one of the primary firms in what they call, "being able to put it in the ground," which is pure landscape planting design, not planning. And certainly there's been several offices locally that have excelled. At EDSA, Ed Stone worked for my dad for about four years in the early '60s, along with Taft Bradshaw, and he went on to open his own office. His dad was Edward Durrell Stone. He managed to actually focus his group—that until a couple years ago was almost three hundred professionals in practice—planning all over the world. And that was certainly something that I guess I could have done, would have done, had I not had a firm to come back to that was more plant design oriented.

YO: Right. Well, what do you think landscape architecture is going to look like in the future, the profession?

FS: I have no idea. And part of what's frustrating is I don't think that the young students, at least the students that I see coming out of some of the local schools, have any plant knowledge so that if you want to talk about planning, p-l-a-n-n-i-n-g, they certainly get that. They're exposed to a lot more ecology, but they don't know plants. They couldn't do a planting plan, and it's very discouraging to me, because obviously, we've lived in Fort Lauderdale for sixty years, to see for instance, the landscape architects that work for the parks department don't have a clue when it comes to planting design so that they put plants in median strips that aren't functional. They don't work, they eventually die.

I don't have any idea where the practice is going to go. It's interesting because in the last week I started to respond to CLARB because they're looking for people to grade the CLARB exams, and I thought, you know, I filled out a questionnaire, survey, for CLARB last week that took almost an hour to fill out. And they were questioning the importance of various sections of the CLARB exam, and almost without exception I was able to say that those elements that have to do with planting design, that have to do with grading, that have to do with drainage, that have to deal with paving, aren't optional. They need to be absolutely required. And I haven't gotten yet to the point where I'm willing to volunteer because I volunteer a lot of my time in the city of Fort Lauderdale. But when you have the ASLA and CLARB asking whether or not grading is important or not, I think that tends to tip a hat towards the fact that somebody's decided that maybe, they put that question in there, maybe the exam might not even address grading.

It's interesting that I learned more about grading from Gil Thurlow than anybody, and particularly in South Florida it's difficult because instead of having thirty feet of grade change across the site you might have twenty inches. And believe you me, if you don't know what you're doing when a site's got only twenty inches of grade change then you're going to be in trouble. I see all of the engineering firms that I deal with have no idea how to draw contours and no idea how to direct water other than by putting spot elevations on the parking lot. And when you ask them, what's the grade in this corner or which way is the water going to go, they don't know.

YO: That's kind of scary.

FS: I don't understand it, and as I said, I haven't thought about design and what's being taught in the schools. I have juried several projects at the local college in architecture. And the kids that are in the classes in these local classes, when you talk about grading and drainage in architectural classes, they don't even know what you're talking about. They have no clue what they're talking about. And the manipulation of spaces by the use of trees isn't any different than the use of design in a building, and they have no idea what you're talking about. They have no idea about the relationship of traffic flow and pedestrian traffic and how you design a site to separate those two elements so they're not in conflict. And they look at you like, what are you talking about?

So I don't know. It's not landscape architecture like we were taught by Dick and Gil and Lewis, so I—[Laughs] I don't know how you could improve it other than to tell the professors that they're not doing their jobs. And you write up a critique and give it to the kids and they either learn or they don't learn, and maybe as they get out of school—if they're lucky enough to get out of school and find a job in today's world—maybe they'll learn something on the job but certainly not—I have not seen—I have not entertained, but I have not seen a student's work in the last ten years that I would be willing to hire.

YO: That's kind of scary, too.

FS: Yeah, yeah. And as I said, I mentioned I think before that my roommate was Brooks Breeden all the way through school. Actually Brooks was in our wedding. Brooks went on once he graduated from State to be a professor of landscape architecture at Ohio State and I hired at least two of Brooks' students sight unseen because Brooks said, believe me, they are the best students that we've got. One was a very talented, good looking young lady who worked for me for about eight years and she eventually got married and she's not practicing landscape architecture anymore. And she was, by Brooks' admission, probably one of the most talented students to come through Ohio State, and that's a good school, and she gave it up. So, you sure don't make any money. [Laughs]

YO: Right. There is a lot of discontent at the present time then, you'd say.

FS: Well, there sure is down here because there's no work.

YO: Right. We're in a down time now.

FS: It is. It's as bad now, in what will become the early part of 2011, as I've seen it in sixty years. And I frankly don't know what the offices locally are going to do. Many of them have closed. They've all downsized. I know that EDSA is down almost sixty percent from their size three years ago, and that was almost three hundred professionals.

YO: Well, hopefully the economy will turn around and we'll all enjoy ourselves again.

FS: [Laughs] Find something better to do.

YO: Probably.

FS: I mean, I don't think anybody kidded themselves that it wasn't going to keep humming along like it was four or five years ago. That was insane. I know my secretary and bookkeeper pointed out to me that when I took a day off or took an afternoon off that that was the first time I'd done that in months, that working ten or eleven hours a day was common if you had to try to keep up with what you were doing, but not working one hour a day isn't the answer either.

YO: Well, it's across the board, that's for sure. What's the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

FS: What a neat individual he is. How's that?

YO: How is he a neat individual?

FS: I think he's very perceptive. I think he's eager to teach. Even when he's not in school, he's eager to teach in his office. Extremely low key, unlike my father who probably never managed to impart much to me in the four or five years that I was in the office that he was here, before he left to go to a different county to open a branch office.

Lewis is just an interesting person to listen to because of his ideas and I don't know that he was ever overbearing. He'd always end up asking you a question that when you walked away from his office you'd have to say, gee, I'm going to have to think about that before I want to continue the conversation because it's a different angle that I never thought about before. I think a teacher, whether it's in a classroom or in the office—and certainly if you're a principal in the office you're a teacher—that you can't walk in and say, guys, look, this is how you have to do it. Otherwise you might as well be drawing it yourself.

Lewis was always questioning, or having [you] question what you were doing, and why. I mean, Lewis is one of the—I did. I left that part out. I did an awful lot of design work for a company that was located in Chapel Hill and they built malls all over North Carolina, and I'll never forget that after working on Tysons Corner we came back and we were working on some silly little mall over on the coast. And I took the drawings over with Lewis—and I don't think he saw this coming—took the drawings for the development of the interior of the mall over and we sat down in their office. And Don Schaff said to me, you know, this is really neat, but I'm not sure that it's satisfactory or that it's appropriate for Elizabeth City, North Carolina because that's where the Coast Guard station is and there's nothing else there. He said, if I ask you a question and ask you to be honest, he said, if I ask you to design something that was really special for Elizabeth City, would you give me what you got?

I guess what he was trying to say was it was so fancy and so neat that he didn't want to pay to build it in Elizabeth City. He was looking for something that was a little simpler and a little bit more down to earth for a K-Mart and a Dollar Store. And I have never ever forgotten that comment. If I had all the money in the world and wanted to do it the best way possible, is this what I would have done, or is there some way to improve it. And you tend to walk into a client's office and give them your best shot.

And I will say I don't know that Lewis ever asked us to run a cost estimate on anything, and I don't know—that's the school of hard knocks because I've never gone into a client's office, whether it's a residential client or it's a city project and you have to stand before a city commission, I've never not known what the cost of a project was, because you get it beat into you. And Don Schaff was doing his best that day to tell us that what we had designed and were showing was really not appropriate for the thing and to go back and do it simpler.

And that's not something that I learned from Lewis, other than through the school of hard knocks. I've only had one other case like that and it was really pretty ugly and it was my dad and I went down to a project in Hollywood and we met with Bill Horowitz who is the head of Hollywood Inc., big time developer. And we walked into his office and my dad started to present something and Bill, who was seventy years old at the time, and just ruled the development company with an iron hand, looked at it and he said, how much does that cost? And my dad started telling him and he said, you know, we've only got about ten thousand dollars to spend. My dad looked at him and, unlike Lewis, he took the drawings and he ripped the drawings up and put them in the trash can and he said, you didn't have enough money in your budget to even paint the buildings much less pay us. And we turned around and walked out.

YO: Oh, no. [Laughs] Right.

FS: And I said, I don't think Lewis would ever do that.

YO: Two different styles, right.

FS: It was different as night and day. I mean, my dad would fly off the handle and Lewis would have probably sat there and tried to convince them that it was a good idea and they really should consider it. Not my dad. He wadded that sucker up [Laughs] and put it in the garbage can and we walked out. He never said another word to the guy and that was the end of working for them, but they weren't truthful about hiring us and never set a program up.

And I think Lewis always had a program, at least he did in his own mind if he didn't make it on what we were kidding the other day about all his little funny notes. He always had a direction that he thought you should go, but I don't know that he ever beat on you and said this is what you have to do. He was really dependent on us to add our own design talent and if we hadn't had that design talent I don't think we would have been working there because he wasn't carrying anybody at that time. We were really doing the design that he didn't do, wouldn't do, I guess. I don't know.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Fred Stresau?

FS: I had a great time. At the ripe old age of seventy, have done pretty much what I wanted to do. Raised two great kids, coached soccer for ten years, contributed to the city of Fort

Lauderdale to the point that last year I was recognized as the most distinguished citizen of the year by the City Commission.

YO: Congratulations on that.

FS: I think that says a lot. I know that in my travels to the University of Florida that we've spent time up there that I've tried to convey to the students that would listen that when they eventually settle in a town that they need to contribute because they're the ones that ultimately will make the town look better. And they need to be able to look back on their profession and say, how did I make the city that I lived in look better because of it.

I have spent almost forty-five years of collective service on planning and zoning, board of adjustments, the community appearance board, and of late the utility advisory committee, in trying to use my design ability to make the city look better. My wife and I have gotten rid of the kids, they're all successful, they're on their own, and in the last ten or fifteen years we've done nothing but travel, which is how we started out in 1967 out of school. We've got a beautiful house that is one of the most significant houses in Fort Lauderdale in the fact that it doesn't have air conditioning and is entirely green, that won't satisfy any of the energy calculations so you couldn't rebuild it today.

I think that overall I'm probably recognized as the authority in landscape architecture in Fort Lauderdale and have not really tried to expand my impact on the profession much beyond the city of Fort Lauderdale because I know that as my kids were growing up I sailed or raced more than fifty percent of the weekends when they were young. And I realized that they were growing up without me and decided that I would focus on stuff right here in Fort Lauderdale and in Broward County and not Palm Beach and not Dade County, and certainly not in the Caribbean.

Ed Stone's principals, when I call over there, very difficult to reach them because they're always in Nicaragua or they're over in the Middle East somewhere or they're in Moscow because they've got a new project going on in Moscow. And they travel and they work when they travel. They don't travel for fun. When my wife and I travel I don't take my phone with me, I don't call the office to find out what's going on. I have told my clients months in advance that I'm going to be gone and I'm gone. I'm not available.

So, it was important to me to separate my personal life from the practice and to focus on trying to be honest for the two of them. And I know it annoyed my partners when I coached soccer for ten years and left the office at three o'clock in the afternoon, but I don't know that either one of their kids are in drugs or in jail, and my kids look back on their life in the YMCA Indian Guide program and the T-ball and soccer and stuff like that and I think that they generally are repeating that same experience with their kids.

And I don't see that very often in a lot of other people. I spent an inordinate amount of time with my kids when they were growing up once I quit sailing, and that was a big step because that was one of the primary reasons that I moved back to Fort Lauderdale was to sail, and it was easy. I just gave it up, cold turkey, quit.

YO: Sounds like you put your heart in the community though.

FS: There's no doubt about that, no doubt about that. I know all the city commissioners. I was appointed for the first time in 1972 when we came back to Fort Lauderdale and that commissioner's daughter's grandchild just hired me to do their house. [Laughs]

YO: [Laughs] So, it goes around.

FS: So, that stretches over forty-five or fifty years of—

YO: Well, that's a heck of a reference, isn't it?

FS: Yeah. It goes a long way. It was fun.

YO: Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add?

FS: No. I said I'd like to reserve the right to have rebuttal at some later date, and maybe as we go through today and look at some pieces of Fort Lauderdale that maybe we'll come up with some more stuff, but I think that we've covered a great deal of information. And I don't know, other than to vent my just pure frustration in the fact that the landscape architects today don't know how to direct planting. They don't know how to go onto a job and manage a job. They don't know how to go into a construction meeting or pre-construction meeting and run the meeting and make decisions when it comes down to contract problems.

I mean, you're sitting over here looking at soil samples and mulch samples that I have rejected and rejected and rejected. And I've got a project today that the city of Hallandale wants to use on the first of January and I won't approve the soil because the contractors had eight months to get the soil samples approved and they still haven't done it, and they're blaming me. I said, don't blame me. I said, the specifications are right there and you've had them since January, and I said, you're not done, it's not my fault, but I'm not going to approve something that the agricultural people that I use are going to tell me or going to tell the client that we messed up because it wasn't the right soil.

I'm one of the few people that insist on having the right soil, and it's like Gil Thurlow used to say, lad, you need to put the money in the hole. It's not what you put in the ground it's what you put in the hole. He said, the tree's going to grow or the plant's going to grow if you drain it properly, and you've got the right soil, and the right fertilizer, and it's braced properly, and it's the right choice of plant material, then your project's going to be successful. And I don't see that today. People are planting oak trees ten feet away from palm trees and it's a mess, and I don't think the young people today have the ability—and it's taken me awhile—have the ability to look at a project fifty years from now and say how did my project mature and what mistakes did I make.

And being able to look back over fifty years, there's no doubt that I made my share of mistakes, just like the physicians say, but it's important to be able to have the vision to look way into the future and say if I'm successful in what I've done, is it going to look good? And I don't think anybody does that today. We'll look at that on the way back to the house, new projects that are being planted on a daily basis that even the city codes that I haven't been able to change, require them to do a planting design that's going to be a mess later. The landscape architects today, there are people that are my age that are landscape architects in Fort Lauderdale and

Broward County that still don't look to see if there's overhead power lines when they do a planting design and get turned down on a regular basis because of it.

It is beyond me how good landscape architects, or what people think are good landscape architects, make absolutely stupid mistakes about trying to plant trees on top of exfiltration trenches because they didn't work with a civil engineer to tell them that that was wrong. Or the lighting. Lighting is a terrible problem down here because all lighting engineers think that the lights go in the landscape islands. They don't realize the landscape islands are there to put trees in because it's required by code. And you have to say, well, you have to move it. Well, are you going to move it over here or move it over there, and you can't because now there's an exfiltration trench underneath it and you can't dig down forty-eight inches to put a footer in for the light pole. So, it's this constant coordination of the other disciplines that I don't see anybody doing, and that's what's required to make a successful project.

So, where is it going? I don't know. People just make mistakes and the clients spend money and then they tear it out and do it again, and that's not right. That was part of my lunch philosophy with the prime partner in EDSA several months ago, and we both talked about the fact that we had a large amount of professional knowledge that's being lost because we retire and the young kids don't want to pick it up. So, I guess they have to go through the school of hard knocks and have the client ask them, like Don Schaff asked me, how would you have done it if you'd really tried to do it right?

YO: Right.

FS: And you have to ask that question on every line that you draw. Okay.

YO: Okay. We'll end at that.

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date Transcribed: February 1, 2011