

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Susan J. Suggs (compiled November 2, 2008)

Interviewee: SUSAN J. (“SUSAN”) SUGGS

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

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Location: Beaufort, North Carolina

A native of Raleigh, Suggs lived in a neighborhood that was populated by North Carolina State University faculty. From a young age she knew she wanted to be a landscape architect. Suggs graduated from the NCSU School (now College) of Design in 1976. She worked at Lewis Clarke Associates (LCA) as a draftsman. She was one of the few women that the firm ever hired and was one of the few women practicing landscape architecture at the time. Her firm, Coastal Planning & Design, PLLC, provides planning services and design assistance to North Carolina coastal governments, developers, and property owners.

YO: This is a oral history with Susan Suggs in October, 2008 at her home near Beaufort, North Carolina and I'd like to start off with our first standard question, tell me a little about where you're from.

SS: I'm from Wake County just outside of Raleigh in North Carolina. I grew up on Trail Wood Drive, which is a really nice area. Most of the people that lived on the road, most of the husbands, worked at NC State so I grew up really close to NC State.

YO: So, how did you get interested in landscape architecture?

SS: I always was interested in design and I thought I was interested in urban design because I'd heard of that. I hadn't heard of landscape architecture, but it was just something I was always interested in, exterior spaces, how things are put together. I have an essay from about the fourth grade where I talk about what I want to be when I grow up, and I describe landscape architecture even though I didn't call it by that.

YO: Were you drawing at an early age?

SS: Was I drawing? Yeah, a little bit, sure, I always had a sketch book.

YO: So this was something that you looked forward to for a long time?

SS: Yes.

YO: And so you picked NC State to go to school.

SS: I went to NC State because it was the in state place where you could go and study design and I felt very fortunate to be able to go there.

YO: Who were some of the students in school with you?

SS: Meg Holton was in the class with me, and Anne Boggs was, Scott Ross was, those are some of the people that I was in school with.

YO: And they've gone onto the landscape architects on their own, right?

SS: Actually, Meg became an engineer. Scott got a degree in architecture and then got a degree in urban planning and he works as a landscape architect.

YO: Wow. So, do you recall any of the projects you worked on when you were a student?

SS: Yeah. [Laughs] And I think, you know one aspect of these projects was a lot of model building and that was where I was always challenged because I wasn't real adept in the shop with the model building aspect. But I did work on a lot of interesting projects and especially some of the projects that I worked on my basic design classes where your brain is stretched.

YO: What, do you remember? Were they projects on campus or projects around town?

SS: One of the first projects that I worked on was to retro-fit some low income housing and to look at it and try to make it better. That was an interesting project that the whole studio looked at. So, some of them were public. Another project my second year, we worked at an elementary school. We worked with the faculty and students and that interactive thing and ended up designing a playground and actually building some of the playground equipment.

YO: Oh, wow, so there were projects that you worked on as a student that definitely were like of the real life type?

SS: There were some that were like that and then there were some that were more just academic.

YO: Well, after you graduated from State which was in what year?

SS: I graduated in '76.

YO: And after you graduated you went to work for?

SS: My first job after school was being a planner for the Town of Greenville. If you remember, 1976 was not real good economic times and when I was in school I worked for Jeffrey McLean. It just seemed like it would be a better thing to do, to go into the public sector for a while so, I worked there for two years and then after that I came back into the private sector.

YO: So, when did you work for Lewis Clarke Associates?

SS: I worked for Lewis a little bit summer of '78, and then I worked for Jeffrey for a year, and then I worked for Lewis for two years, I guess starting early in '79 through about '81.

YO: What were some of the projects you were working on in his office?

SS: I worked on a big variety of projects while I was there. I did some high end residential. I did two industrial sites.

YO: Do you remember the names of them?

SS: I did an industrial site that was outside of Wendell that was a German company, and then I did another one outside of Oxford and it was like Max Factor and then I think it became Revlon. So, I did those two industrial sites. I worked some on some master planning and some site design at Elon College. I did some residential work. I did a little bit of subdivision work, just a big, really big variety of things.

YO: So, the office had a variety of jobs? It wasn't focusing in on any one particular type of job at the time?

SS: Not really.

YO: Well, there was an airplane involved with this company. As I understand they had an airplane. Did you ever fly on the plane?

SS: No, the airplane was a little bit before my time.

YO: Was it?

SS: Yeah. So, I didn't fly on the airplane.

YO: But you heard about it though?

SS: Yeah, I knew about it. [Laughs]

YO: Was it unusual for women to be landscape architects at this time?

SS: There were a few women that were landscape architects, but it was mostly a male domain then. Linda Jewell was a landscape architect who was local. There really weren't a lot of women that were landscape architects in the mid-seventies and there weren't a lot of women in design school when I started, but it changed while I was there. It opened up, which was good.

YO: How do you attribute a factor that opened up the school to more women?

SS: Well, I really think it was a trend because I remember how my brother is four years older than me and his wife wanted to go to UNC Chapel Hill. She couldn't get in and then by the time she was a senior, she could get in. So, I think it was like one of those trends that it was evolving where they were trying to have it more equal as far as admitting women to different schools.
[pause]

YO: Do you have any other projects that you can think of that you'd like to comment on?

SS: Hmm, let me think a minute. It was so long ago

YO: I know.

SS: We had one project where we took a designer and an artist and then we did a project on them and tried to understand how they thought and everything. And at the end of the project we were supposed to design different things as these people would design them. So, we had to design a mailbox and a chair. And the person that I had picked was Bernini who's a sculptor, a classical sculptor. There again the challenge. I could design, but then actually having to build the thing I had to weld and all this other kind of thing so—

YO: Oh, my goodness.

SS: —it was pretty wild. But it was really neat to see what everybody came up with. There were some really creative things from the studio.

YO: Well, I guess—

SS: And I guess that was one of the things in design school you know just seeing what other people came up with was part of the fun.

YO: They didn't give projects that were cut and dry then? They gave projects that pushed your imagination quite a bit?

SS: A lot of times a lot of the project was trying to figure what the project was because it wasn't prescribed what you were doing especially in your first couple of years of design. So, a lot of it was just trying to determine what the design problem was.

YO: Well, that's rather metaphysical, isn't it? [Laughs]

SS: [Laughs] It can be.

YO: Changing directions just a little bit, what kind of boss was Lewis Clarke?

SS: I always enjoyed working for Lewis. He was usually in a good mood. When you got stuck, he could help you. I'll just relate one story. One of the first projects I worked on was this factory and I was having trouble with the courtyard at the factory. I just was stuck. I didn't know what to do, and I was trying to do something that was just super duper. And we went out to the factory. It wasn't that far from Raleigh and when we got there, he just went, well, you know this courtyard is where people are going to eat their lunches that they bring from home, their paper bag lunches. Then it was crystal clear how I needed to solve the design problem there. So, he could explain in simple terms where you needed to be headed and that was very helpful. I think that's one of his real strengths.

YO: Insight into the problem?

SS: And then being able to—not tell you what to do but giving you guidance on how to think about it.

YO: So, what did you come up with for the courtyard?

SS: Something very simple. Very simple pavers that you could just put picnic tables in and with nice planting around it, but nothing frilly or fancy and no fancy paving patterns just real basic.

YO: Place to eat lunch.

SS: Place to eat lunch that was a decent setting.

YO: What made the associates' designs different from other landscape architects? While you were there you had insight into that.

SS: Well, and I won't say every landscape architect, but other landscape architects, have learned from Lewis and so, I think a lot of them tried to approach design in a way like he did. I mean, he taught a lot of us, but I always felt like, in addition to good design that's workable that type of thing, Lewis brought to it a broad range of view where he didn't just pigeon in on the design solution, but he thought about big parameters. I think that's one thing and another thing that we were encouraged to do at LCA was to stretch the client. And if the client came in and they wanted X, we could show them how to do the project better than they envisioned it. And often they went, yeah, I want to do it better than I thought I could, and that's something that—is not every firm does that, but Lewis often did that. He would try to make the project better than even the client envisioned it.

YO: Did you have a lot of interior crit of your work? In other words whenever you had a project going did everybody get together and kind of crit on it?

SS: It wasn't always formalized. Sometimes it was, but it was open studio and so everybody was looking over everybody's shoulder and you'd ask somebody, what do you think about this. So, there was a lot of interaction and sometimes it would be more formalized, but a lot of times it was just very informal.

YO: Do you remember some of the people you worked with?

SS: Yeah. [Laughs] I worked with Sam Reynolds, Sam was there when I started and Joel Moulin was there. Jud Newbern was there for a while and then he left and then we had some people that just kind of came and, and went. Dick Paton was there part time the summer when I was working there, and Wayne McBride was there. So, the office was fairly small when I was there.

YO: And where was it located?

SS: It was located off of Glenwood Avenue right at the beltline.

YO: Oh, at the National Drive location?

SS: Yeah, at the National Drive location.

YO: Were there any other women working in the office at that time?

SS: We had a student that came in part of the time and worked and I can not remember her name.

YO: Was it Pat Hale by chance?

SS: No, it wasn't Pat, but that was really it. Oh, one other person that worked there part time was David Swanson.

YO: Oh, yeah.

SS: And he was a student at that time.

YO: So, quite a full house of alumni of NC State?

SS: Yeah.

YO: Was that a qualification that you had to be from NC State? [Laughs]

SS: No, no, no, not at all. [Laughs]

YO: How did Clarke's philosophy affect your own practice?

SS: I think that idea of stretching the client is one that I try to do. With any client, whether it's a municipality or someone that wants a built landscape is the idea of education and just showing them how they can do something better than they envision it. I'd say that that's the main thing.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

SS: The guy is brilliant, very, very brilliant. He's not a shallow thinker. He's a deep thinker and he doesn't preach, but he's a very thoughtful person and he's very intelligent and he brings a lot of experience to this profession, but he also thinks about other things. I think that's the thing to realize that he's very intelligent and he's a deep thinker. He doesn't just jump to conclusions.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Susan Suggs?

SS: I really don't know. Well, I guess, it's that professionally I really try my hardest and do the best I can.

YO: I want to go back one for just a minute to your job history because it's—I'm leaving out, not letting you tell the, the rest of the story. After you finished working at LCA where did you go then?

SS: I worked for myself a little bit and then I jumped around a while. I'm trying to think where else did I work? I worked about a year at UNC Hospital doing renovation design. I worked for McNeely Associates for about a year. Then I went into public work. I worked for Durham for a while and then I worked for the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance for quite a while.

During this time my husband and I had a business where we grew woody ornamentals. So, we had that side of it too, which that was always—the green industry is just a wonderful industry. We did that and then we also had a company that did irrigation control with the automation and hardware and software. So, for the last year and a half, I've been in private practice with some public clients, some private clients.

YO: And municipalities are one of your clients, right?

SS: Municipalities are one of my clients.

YO: And what kind of things do you help the municipalities with?

SS: Well, my background is kind of dual with landscape architecture and planning. I help them with regulations. Some of my other projects are pedestrian planning. I really enjoy that and right now I'm doing quite a bit of parks and recreation planning, master planning for parks that type of thing.

YO: Well, that's all the questions I have for today. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

SS: I just think when you're thinking about Lewis, I think it's important to realize that he brought to North Carolina what has become to be known as landscape architecture in North Carolina. That before that we really didn't have landscape architects here and that his influence through not only his practice but his teaching is really broad. He influenced a lot of people that are my age and older. I really think that's part of his legacy is what he brought to North Carolina and then it spread because people move around.

YO: Well, that's really nice of you to say, and I think we'll close out with that comment then.

SS: Thank you.

YO: Thank you.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi

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