

## TRANSCRIPT

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**Field Notes:** S. Giacomo Vincelli (compiled April 20, 2012)

**Interviewee:** GIACOMO S. (“JACK”) VINCELLI

**Interviewer:** Yona R. Owens

**Interview Date:** Wednesday, March 28, 2012

**Location:** Raleigh, North Carolina to Canada via Skype

**Length:** Approximately 94 minutes

YO: My name is Yona Owens and I’m interviewing Jack Vincelli via Skype to his home in Canada on Wednesday, March 28, 2012. Jack graduated from the North Carolina State University School, now College, of Design in 1960 with a degree in landscape architecture. He has been in practice for over fifty years. I know he has many interesting stories to tell us. So, Jack, are you ready for some questions?

JV: I’m ready for some questions.

YO: Oh, that sounds great. Okay, the first one is, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how you got interested in landscape architecture.

JV: Well, I grew up in Montreal and of course my father was a landscape contractor, a very well known landscape contractor, and I saw the works of other landscape architects he worked with and of course it gravitated towards me wanting to be one of those guys. I really enjoyed when they would show me their plans and then my father would do the construction, and his men would be out there with the machinery, and so on.

He did large projects, large residential projects, which means that he was equipped with bulldozers and back diggers and a lot of machinery, so I was quite impressed by all of that and that’s why I wanted to become a landscape architect. So, one of the landscape architects, a man by the name of Louis Perron, who was, by the name, a French Canadian, who went to Cornell and he was telling me about Cornell and the School of Design there and so on. So I went there for the first year, but I wasn’t impressed with it. It was teaching one to be more as a landscape contractor than really as a landscape architect and to design rather than just to build. I had really known enough about—well, I felt at the time—

YO: [Laughs]

JV: [Laughs] I knew enough about landscape construction that I wanted to get into design. So from Cornell—Ithaca, New York—I found out about North Carolina State, that they had a good School of Design and that architects, landscape architects, and product designers were all working together on various projects and so on, and I thought that sounded more interesting. So I got on a train and I came down to Raleigh and I heard, [in accent] y’all come see us, heah?

YO: [Laughs]

JV: And I didn't understand a damn thing they were saying and I said, oh my God, where have I come now? How will I ever learn?

YO: What year was this, Jack?

JV: Well, that would have been about 1955.

YO: Still a lot of red clay back then, wasn't it?

JV: Oh yeah, it was great. I enjoyed it, and I found that the Southern person was just someone I really wanted to work with and be with and so on. I really enjoyed them and I love them dearly.

YO: Well, that's wonderful. Do you remember the first time you met Dean Henry Kamphoefner? Did you meet him on that first trip down here?

JV: Yeah. Actually, I met with Mr. Thurlow, Edwin G. Thurlow, who was head of the landscape architectural department at that time, and then of course he introduced me to Dean Kamphoefner and so on. Then eventually I met with Lewis, which was so interesting, and I was in his class. As a matter of fact, in the first years, where we were down there in the basement of the school of—no actually, sorry, we started in the—what do you call those?—the barracks. I don't know, Yona, if you know anything about the barracks.

**05:14**

YO: Oh, I've seen pictures and heard people talk?

JV: Anybody tell you anything about that? Well, that's where I started, actually, in the barracks. That was before—and at that time the School of Design, where it presently is, was just—they were doing all the renovations of the—what's the name of that building now?

YO: Brooks.

JV: Brooks, right, and they were renovating and cleaning up all the old stuff and they were getting it ready for architects, landscape architects, and product designers. But we worked—our classes for sculpturing and painting and that kind of thing was in the barracks, and then it was during that first year that we moved into the present Brooks building, which is now, I understand, called Dean Kamphoefner. Is it called, Dean Kamphoefner?

YO: It's still Brooks Hall and there's a Matsumoto wing and then there's a section that has Kamphoefner's name on it. It's brand new. It's all changed since you were here, Jack. But I want to get back to whenever you got here would be '55, right?

JV: 1955, yeah.

YO: And I think you were one of the married students when you arrived. Is that right?

JV: What's that?

YO: You were married at the time when you got here?

JV: When I got down there, no, I was not married. I got married in 1958.

YO: Ah, so we've got a couple years to cover here before we get to that.

JV: That's right. So I remember I stayed in the Fourth Dormitory, which was a little building that was God knows how old. I don't remember when they built it, but it was old and at present I think it's still there, located right next to the School of Design.

YO: Yeah, there's still some there.

JV: Is that little building still there?

YO: I think so.

JV: Yeah, and it was called Fourth Dorm.

YO: Okay. Was there a set of buildings around called Vetville? Was that still there?

JV: Yes, yes, yes, it was. There were a lot of guys that were coming back from the Korean War, because the Korean War was 1950, and a lot of boys were coming back into school at that time in 1955. So yes, there was Vetville and they all lived out there.

YO: Where was it?

JV: Some of them had trailers. They lived in house trailers, like I—when I got married in 1958 Lucia and I bought a house trailer, forty-two feet long, eight feet wide, and we located just about within the city limits, within the one-mile city limits of Raleigh, and lo and behold—I don't know if I ever told you that story, Yona.

YO: No, I don't think so.

JV: We lived in this trailer and I was at school at that time, I mean I was physically studying at school, and I get a call from my wife saying there's a bailiff at our door and he wants us to move out of here. [Laughs] Because the guy that I rented the spot [from], the location to put my trailer, was this man by the name of Henry Moran and he was not supposed to have a trailer park within the city limits of Raleigh. So the bailiff was there and he handed us an eviction paper to get out of there. So I came home and we found another place, Mendelssohn's—yeah, it was Mendelssohn, I believe—Trailer Park, which is further down the road, outside of the city limits of course.

YO: Right.

JV: We made a deal with someone out there, Mr. Mendenhall—Mendenhall, yeah—and he had a place for us so I got a guy by the name—[Laughs] I'll never forget it. His name was Tex and he

had a truck that had, just like they do in Texas, I guess, with horns built onto the front of his truck.

**10:25**

YO: [Laughs]

JV: He came to load us up and hook up my trailer and bring us to Mendenhall's Trailer Park. I'll never forget that. It was very funny.

YO: Oh my gosh. That is funny.

JV: It wasn't funny at the time.

YO: No, I guess not.

JV: It's funny now. But anyway, so we stayed there in Mendenhall and we stayed there for about a year, if I remember correctly. My wife remembers everything much more than I do. Anyway, we stayed there and then we were able to get back into Mr. Moran's trailer park because they had changed rulings that he could have a trailer park within the city limits because students were coming back from all over, and they needed to put their house trailers there somewhere. So they allowed us to go back into—there was a spot ready for us and in we went and there we stayed for the five years, or four years, left. That's where we made our—

YO: Well, what did Lucia do while you were in classes?

JV: Lucia kept me in line.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: She kept me in line and told me exactly where I had to be and how high do I have to jump, and I would jump and I would do whatever. She kept me in line. Then we had a daughter born like, well, nine months later, and there we were and she was bringing up the baby.

Then we had a situation where our daughter didn't quite like the regular milk feeding that they fed babies in those days and she just kept projectly sending milk out from her mouth. So we had to find out what is going to stay down, and keep her alive, actually. We went to a doctor and the doctor said, well, Lucia, what did you have in Italy? What did you drink? She said, well, I drank goat's milk, and he said, okay, well that's what we're going to try. We're going to try goat's milk.

YO: I'll be darned.

JV: And sure enough, my daughter loved goat's milk, and it carried on for the rest of her baby years and she drank goat's milk.

YO: Wow.

JV: Mr. Clarke was sweet enough to give me a part time job there in his basement so that I could keep up with paying eighty-five cents a can for that Meyenberg goat's milk.

YO: Oh my gosh.

JV: Money I didn't have, and thank God for Lewis to give me some work so that he could pay me and so on. I'll never forget that. God bless Lewis.

YO: That is amazing.

JV: And Lewis said to me, [Laughs] the last time we were there—well, you were there too, when we came through, weren't you?

YO: Not too many years ago, right?

JV: I think it was about four years ago, I guess, that we stopped. Weren't you there?

YO: I think I did come by for just a little bit, yes.

JV: Well, anyway, I was remembering a story about Lewis, but I forget it now. It'll come back later.

YO: Well, let's go back to the story here. The landscape architecture degree, as you mentioned, was a five-year program and it was pretty grueling.

JV: That's right.

YO: During the first two years the landscape architecture and architecture students took the same courses. I'd like to talk to you first about the architecture professors that you had. Do you recall any particular ones, and why do you recall those?

**15:12**

JV: Well, one of the questions that you had asked me or you had put down was what made me decide to attend North Carolina State. I had heard from another landscape architect, who had attended. That was the same, this Louis Perron chap that had told me, after I had come back from Cornell. And he said well, if you don't like Cornell maybe you would like North Carolina State, and that was the first time I had heard really about the School of Design there. So I came down there and met with everybody and so there I was. You got it where I [was] interviewed by Dean Kamphoefner. When I transferred from Cornell to North Carolina State, I was interviewed by what's-his-name, Thurlow, and then he brought me over to meet Kamphoefner. Kamphoefner was quite a guy. He was another chap that had— [Laughs] I've got all these little innuendo stories in between that I want to tell you.

YO: Okay.

JV: He got me to run the Ozalid © machine up on the second or third floor, if I remember correctly, and he gave me this job because again I needed to pick up money wherever I could. He gave me this job to run the Ozalid © machine and all of the professors used to come over and they'd give me their drawings to run ozalids and run copies of these plans that they had drawn, and he was paying me something like about two dollars and fifty cents an hour—

YO: That's pretty good.

JV: —which at that time was great.

YO: Yeah.

JV: Oh boy, I was in heaven. Anyway, one day he comes along and he says, Jack, I've got to take the job away from you. I don't think you really need it. I said why? [He said,] I saw your mother and father come through here because they were on their way down to Florida and they stopped to see me in Raleigh, and of course came by to pick me up at the School of Design. [Laughs] Well, they saw my father driving a big Cadillac and my mother wearing a fur coat and so on.

YO: Uh oh. [Laughs]

JV: So he thought, well, I don't think Jack really needs this. There are other students that need it more than him. I said, no, no, no, no, Dean. I'm sorry, but I'm not asking my father for any help in paying for anything for my schooling. So I said, I need it and I have a daughter to bring up, and so on. He said, well, do you want me to talk to your parents about getting money for you?

YO: [Laughs]

JV: I said, no, no, I don't need you to do that. I just don't want them to. Anyway, so he laid me off and gave the job to another guy where he said that this guy, I don't know, had no mother and no father, so he gave this guy that job. I'll never forget, his name was Roy—I forget. Roy Menshue, or something. I think that was his name. Anyway, this other boy, but he would never show up on time and was never very cooperative with anybody so the dean had a lot of complaints. So the dean came back to me one day and said, Jack, how would you like to have your job back? I said I have no ego. I will be more than happy to take my job back. [Laughs]

YO: Right. [Laughs]

JV: So he did and I got it and I carried on, and that was Dean Kamphoefner.

**19:54**

Another time I had a kind of funny little thing with the Dean. I thought that I should have my—it had come time close to graduating and I thought that on our graduating certificate I should have my name, Jack Vincelli, as I was very well known by then. He said, no, no. He said what's on your birth certificate is going down on that certificate. On the certificate he insisted that "Saverio Giacomo Vincelli" was going to be put down and I said, oh, Dean, but nobody knows me by that. And he said take a look on the wall there. Do you see my certificate up there?

I said, yeah, I see your certificate. He said, well, what do you see? How do you see my name there? What it was, was “Henry [Leveke] Kamphoefner, Henry L. “L” stood for L-e-i-c-k-e, something like that, and he said—

YO: I think it’s L-e-v-e-k-e, something like that.

JV: Yeah, something like that. [Laughs]

YO: But that was his name up there.

JV: And he said, do you think anybody knew me by that name?

YO: [Laughs]

JV: And he said, and my dean made me put down that name on my certificate, the same thing that I am forcing you to put down what your real name is, which is Saverio—what’s the second name? he said. I said, Giacomo. I said, you see, Dean, you don’t even know— [Laughs] And he said I will not put anything else. I just won’t give you the certificate, that’s all, if you insist. I said, well, if you put it that way, Dean, I’ll take it. I’ll do it that way. Anyway, so that was my two little stories with Dean Kamphoefner, of my interviewing with Dean Kamphoefner. [Laughs]

YO: Well, it sounds like you lucked out because some people have talked about him being a real taskmaster and quite abusive and abrasive, but then comes back and does something really nice for you and makes you feel good.

JV: Yeah, that’s right.

YO: Amazing man. Well, what about Willie Baumgarten or Horacio Caminos?

JV: I met Prof. Baumgarten once or twice. I didn’t really meet him very often. I remember him though. He was a professor *emeritus*, if I remember correctly, at that time, but I didn’t know him well. I never really spoke to him. But I loved Dean Kamphoefner, I really did.

YO: Oh, it sounds like it.

JV: He was great.

YO: He was a character. Well, how about Caminos, Horacio Caminos? Did you have him for any classes?

JV: Caminos, yes. I didn’t have any classes with Caminos. I knew Catalano better.

YO: What was he like?

JV: Well, I told him, I said, you’re Italian and I’m Italian [Laughs] so I think— And he said, no, but I—I don’t know if he came from Venezuela or somewhere, [Laughs]—

YO: I think Argentina.

JV: —but he was. It was an Italian name.

YO: Yeah, that's true.

JV: You know, I mean from Venezuela, or something. I'm not sure where he came from. But anyway, he was great, and the remark he made I'll never forget. Near the stadium there is a structure that was designed by, I believe the architectural—no, I don't know who really designed that. But anyway, [Laughs] he made a remark about it that it looked like— [Laughs] He was so cute, the way he would say his words. He said it's like the feet of an elephant holding up the wings of a butterfly.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: So, that was his criticism of it.

YO: Right.

JV: It just didn't relate. Here were these huge structures holding up this very thin butterfly-type roof.

YO: I'll have to look into that. I don't know if that structure still exists anymore.

JV: You know what, I wonder if—the feet of an elephant holding up the wings of a butterfly.

YO: Very descriptive. Well, how about Charlie Kahn? Do you remember Charlie Kahn?

JV: What's that?

**25:00**

YO: Charlie Kahn, K-a-h-n? He was there.

JV: No, I never met him, no.

YO: Or Cecil Elliot?

JV: Yes, Cecil Elliot I did. We had him as a professor. I was more close to Roy Gussow. Oh, Roy Gussow was—I wonder if he's still alive?

YO: No, he unfortunately passed away a couple years ago. He's no longer—

JV: Oh, really?

YO: —with us. Yeah.

JV: Oh, he was great. I really enjoyed [him].

YO: How about George Matsumoto?

JV: And George Matsumoto, yes.

YO: Now, did he teach a class for landscape that you took?

JV: No, no, he did not teach a class to us landscape architects. You know of forty people that started out in 1955, that started out registered in landscape architecture—forty people—only three finally graduated.

YO: Is that good, to have that kind of washout rate?

JV: What's that?

YO: Is it good, do you think, to have that kind of washout rate?

JV: Oh, I thought it was great. I felt very special.

YO: I guess so. [Laughs]

JV: [Laughs] I got to tell you the truth. Yeah, and the three were myself, Jimmy Klutz, and Max Evans.

YO: No kidding?

JV: Yep, and I'll never forget the first time I met Jimmy Klutz and I said, Jimmy, what does Klutz mean in German? And he said a bleep word and he said, [Laughs] it means the same damn thing it means in English.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: I said do you mean you've been a Klutz all your life? And he said, yes, I've been a Klutz all my life. So, yeah, that's what it means.

YO: I think you two were friends when you said that, right?

JV: Oh, of course, we were great friends.

YO: Oh, that's wonderful.

JV: Jimmy and I, we talk on the telephone right up to recently, you know.

YO: No kidding?

JV: Oh yeah, we keep in touch.

YO: That's wonderful. Well, I was asking you about the architect professors because I know that in the fall of 1958 students went all over the state doing as-built architecture drawings of 1700s- and 1800s-era buildings. Do you remember anything about the course or who guided that project, because we have some drawings of yours from that project? We have four of them. It says there are seven, but we have four, of Old St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Catawba County.

JV: Yes, yes, yes, I remember—

YO: Do you remember that?

JV: —that. Yes, and—

YO: What was that project all about?

JV: —the guy I worked with on that was—what was his name—Wilkinson.

YO: Really? Was it Wilkinson that headed that up?

JV: No, it was Richard—what was his first name?

YO: Dick Wilkinson was around at that time [Incorrect. Wilkinson arrived circa 1968].

JV: Okay, so it was him, then he asked me, he said, would you like to work together on that project? And we went to his hometown in North Carolina.

YO: Was it Newton, North Carolina?

JV: Newton, right, Newton, North Carolina, absolutely. How do you know all that, Yona?

YO: We just are good in Special Collections. We just know these things.

JV: [Laughs] That's great. Well, he and I measured up this church, yeah, and we drew that. It's still existing?

YO: Yeah, and it was part of—the project eventually was called, the Historic Architecture Research Project.

JV: Yeah, that's right.

YO: And not too long ago, I mean in the last three to five years, NCSU Libraries' Special Collections Research Center digitized—there's hundreds of drawings of buildings, historic buildings, across North Carolina that you guys went out and drew between 1951 and '76. So those are online. You can go—

JV: Oh my goodness.

YO: —to the Library's website and see digital images online.

JV: That's great. Don't forget, he—

YO: And [when you] click on it, it says, signed by Jack Vincelli, on those four.

JV: Oh, my gosh. That's going to be worth millions of dollars.

YO: [Laughs] Oh, of course.

JV: So you've got to keep that, yeah. That's very important, Yona. [Laughs]

YO: Well, tell me about Wilkinson [incorrect].

JV: Yeah, I wonder where he is now?

**30:01**

YO: I don't know, but he was in landscape architecture, right?

JV: That's right, that's right.

YO: So, how did the landscape—I mean, the drawings by the landscape architecture students are very professional looking. They look like you've been trained as architects.

JV: Yes, right, but he didn't graduate. Wilkinson did not graduate. I don't know what he did. I think he changed or he went off somewhere. I don't know whatever happened.

YO: We'll have to check that out. I don't know.

JV: Yeah, I don't know. I really don't know. All right, what's your next question?

YO: Well, let's see here. I wasn't really quite finished with that one, but I was just wondering if it—but it was a project that you did in the summertime, right, rather than a course that you did?

JV: Yes, yes, it was.

YO: And then you did the drawings in the fall?

JV: We did it during the summertime, and I remember that my father was very angry at me that I didn't come home that summer because he needed me to give prices and quotations for landscape construction work that he was bidding on, and he needed me there beside him. And I was down there drawing up churches [Laughs] in Newton, North Carolina.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: I'll never forget the first time I called my father when I got down to Raleigh. He didn't know where I was and I said, Dad, I'm in North Carolina. [He said,] What are you doing in California? I said, North Carolina. He took it as California. I said, no, no, no, Dad, California's on the other side of the Continent. I said I'm still not far away from you. I'm on this side of the Continent. But he didn't want to hear any of that nonsense. He just wanted me to get my butt back to Montreal to do some work [Laughs] because he was very active in landscape construction.

YO: Well, I'm glad you took the summer off because we do have a very nice drawing, two elevations and a floor plan. So, you guys had to really know what you were doing to take all those as-built measurements.

JV: Oh my God, yeah.

YO: It's pretty phenomenal for student work.

JV: Absolutely, Yona, absolutely. Because they have Wilkinson's and my signature on it, oh, you've got to hold onto that drawing—

YO: [Laughs] I know.

JV: —because that's worth its weight in gold.

YO: [Laughs] Right.

JV: And one day you're going to say, yeah, that's the famous Jack Vincelli and Dick Wilkinson.

YO: There we go, there we go. Well, let's see here. After the first two years of the program, the landscape architecture students moved into their own track of courses and product design went their way and architecture went their way. So, you said there were forty people that started out in your particular class, but who were some of the landscape architecture students in the school with you, because I understand third-year and fifth-year people worked together in the same studio as everybody else, right?

JV: That's right.

YO: Do you remember some of the other people in school with you?

JV: Well, yeah, some of them. One was a fellow by the name of Bob Coles, C-o-l-e-s, and I understand he's passed away, and he was younger than I.

YO: Oh dear.

JV: Yeah, he went to work for the TVA and I understand he passed away. Then there was another chap by the name of Jim Hubbard, and Jim Hubbard—I got from someone, one of my student friends, a chap by the name of Ron Thompson who was in architecture, and Ronny sent me a whole dissertation on Jim Hubbard. And that really struck me because I really wanted to

see that guy again. He was just a great fellow, Jim Hubbard. He was sweet. He came here to Montreal, he visited. I brought him home to Montreal. Well anyway, he has passed away. He went to Las Vegas to work there and he also has passed away, which really—I don't like hearing things like that.

**35:08**

YO: I know, I know. Well, let's see, how about Warren Edwards? He's still very much alive right now. Do you remember Warren?

JV: Yes, Warren is still alive. I did speak to him one time since. He's in Oklahoma and he was a good friend of Charlie Burkhead.

YO: Who's still alive and kicking with us right now, too. [Laughs]

JV: He's still alive and kicking. [Laughs] Yeah, he's a kicker. But Warren Edwards, I just—I haven't kept up a conversation or get together with him, but every once in awhile I speak to Burkhead.

YO: Right, and Jerry Turner, he has had a tremendously successful practice in North Carolina and South Carolina.

JV: Yes, I think I heard that, Jerry Turner. Lindsay Cox.

YO: Yes, and A.B. Moore.

JV: And A.B. Moore. Gee whiz, you're bringing up names.

YO: How about Kent Watson? Don't forget him.

JV: Yeah, Kent Watson, that's right.

YO: And you already said Max Evans, so we got him and Jimmy Klutz with you in the same graduating class.

JV: Yeah. Well, we were very close, Max Evans and Jimmy Klutz. We were together right through, from first year right on up to fifth year, of course.

YO: I noticed, of course, there's no women mentioned in this group.

JV: What's that?

YO: I noticed there's no women mentioned in this group.

JV: Well, there was one girl. Wait a minute now, what was her name? But she wasn't in our class, because girls were just not coming into that school at that time. No, they were over at Peace and—what was the name of that—

YO: St. Mary's.

JV: Right.

YO: And Meredith.

JV: What was the other one?

YO: Meredith.

JV: Meredith, right. I remember that. Yeah, there was only one girl and I can't remember her name. I believe she came into architecture, if I'm not mistaken, but I just don't remember.

YO: We'll have to check that out. I don't remember it right now this minute either.

JV: As my father used to say, Yona, he didn't remember anything he forgot.

YO: That's right. [Laughs]

JV: That's true. [Laughs]

YO: Well, let's see here. We've already talked about that there were two landscape architecture instructors, only two, in the time that you were there, between '55 and '60. One was Gil Thurlow, who had been there since 1947, and Lewis had arrived in the fall of 1952.

JV: You know he was really a Canadian.

YO: That's right!

JV: Did you know that?

YO: I think he was from Nova Scotia, actually.

JV: Yeah, he came from Nova Scotia where they built that famous ship, that boat. What was it called? Oh, very famous one that raced all these other boats, from that town Gil was from [Lunenburg]. But whenever I said to him, you're really a Canadian, [he said,] I'm American. [Laughs]

YO: Really?

JV: Oh yeah.

YO: That's kind of—I've heard other people imitate his voice that way. It must be very close to the way he sounded. What was he like as an instructor?

JV: He was good. He was from the old school, I would say. Lewis was way ahead of everybody. Lewis was just—he was a sweetheart. Lewis really knew how to put new ideas, or make you think about new ideas. He just knew how.

**39:43**

JV: Lewis had a way of getting to you, how to make you think. That's what I'm trying to say, a way to get you to think on your own and not just tell you to do this, do that. He would say, think, you know?

YO: Can you think of an example of something that he would—like a situation where he would use his method?

JV: I'm trying to think of something like that. [Laughs] I'm a dead dunce.

YO: [Laughs] You're doing great.

JV: I wish he was there with you, because he would remind me of things that I know.

YO: Well, we'll see how we can do that maybe in the future, but we'll persevere on this way this time. So, you mentioned that he sometimes hired students to work on projects outside of class and that you did some work for him. Do you remember the names of any of the projects you worked on?

JV: Yeah, one comes to mind now. For instance, he arranged for us to get together with the architects and the product designers to do an overall planning for a university campus. And it was really the most interesting project I had ever done. I don't know if he remembers that. I don't remember the name of that project, to be honest with you, but I do remember that it was so interesting. I know it was a university campus. That's all I can really remember, you know.

YO: Well, what was interesting about it?

JV: Because it was working together with architects and product designers, that here we were each doing our own thing, coordinating it together. That to me was just phenomenal. It was so much more important to do that kind of—because in the real world out there all of my projects that I did—I did the Olympics here in Montreal when they came to Montreal, I did the expo grounds, the international exposé that was here in Montreal in 1967, and I did the layout for the whole thing. And it was that project, that university campus project, that taught me how to get along with the architects that I had to. Like for instance, when the Olympics came and they asked me to be the landscape architect for it my job was, what they wanted me to do, they wanted me to locate the Olympic stadium and the village. So, I wanted to do the exact opposite that the architect, who they had hired from France—his name was Taillibert and he was an arrogant bastard, and it was very hard for me to get along with this guy.

**043:41**

Anyway, I wanted to locate the stadium where the village is and the village where the stadium, because where he located the stadium it was in a hole, off the main road, down lower in a hole, and to me that wasn't—the way the design of the village was, was a step-type project. In

other words on both ends it was a step-down project, so I would put that in the hole and make it look like it's stepping right out of the hole and it would have been more logical to do that kind of thing rather than put the stadium into that hole. And where the village is, it was up on a hill, so by taking the stadium and putting it up on this hill it would have been appreciated so much more. And there I was, trying to exaggerate his building, and sort of work really for him, and he wasn't appreciating it. Just didn't understand, and no, no, he wanted it where—and he derogatively said I'm not going to let some gardener tell me where to put my buildings. Oh, boy. It was almost a fistfight, and Lewis never taught me about a fistfight with the architects. You know why? Because Lewis is an architect.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: [Laughs] And he said, Jack, you're just bigger than those guys. But I never could—I had a hard time to put this man to understand. Anyway, but I was very close to the mayor of our town at that time and it was—really, I repeat, I think it was that university campus project that taught me what I was going to get involved in when I had to deal with an architect who was the architect for the building. How I was going to work, be able to work together with people like that. It was very fruitful, I think. It was a good project, and that was Lewis' idea.

YO: Did the stadium in Montreal get placed where you wanted it to?

JV: No, that stadium never got where I wanted, no, no. And if you come to Montreal I'd love to show you and you, I know, would agree. Jack, your idea was better. It just was one of those things. But he was one of those typical Frenchmen. The ones from France are very arrogant and they're not the nicest people to deal with, that's for sure.

YO: Right.

JV: They're not cooperative. They feel they know everything and that you have to take second place to them.

YO: Well, it varies from person to person, doesn't it? Well, I understand it wasn't unusual for the School of Design faculty and the students to spend time together outside of classes, and I've heard people describe it as being like part of a big family. You and Lucia got to know Lewis' wife at the time, Kit. Tell me a little bit about Kit.

JV: Oh, she was a sweetheart. I loved Kit. When I really, really, really met Kit was when I would come in to work for Lewis in his basement there and Kit would bring us coffee and tea and what have you. She was a sweetheart. I remember her well. Yeah, that was nice. They were nice times, Yona. I really enjoyed those times.

YO: It sounds like it. Well, back at school there was an amazing list of visiting lecturers that came through, people like Mumford and Burle Marx and Eckbo, Royston, Bucky Fuller. I mean, the list just goes on and on.

JV: Oh yeah.

YO: Warren Edwards says that Nervi, the Italian engineer, that he came to lecture, but he didn't speak English. Do you remember that Nervi lecture?

JV: No. Who was it that?

YO: Louis Nervi, the Italian engineer?

JV: Luigi Nervi.

YO: Right.

**49:18**

JV: Luigi Nervi came to our school to give us a lecture, [Laughs] and I, having the closest to an Italian name—and I don't speak Italian. If I do, I massacre it, God forbid. Anyway, the dean thought that I should meet with Nervi and so on, and we all met at someone's house, I don't know who it was. And I'll never forget when some student asked him a question, such as, where do you get your ideas? And he said do you have an artichoke?

YO: [Laughs] He didn't speak English.

JV: Yeah, and the kids were all, an artichoke? Anyway, the kid in the apartment that we were all meeting at, apparently in his refrigerator he had an artichoke. So, he brought it out, and he gave it to Mr. Nervi and Nervi pulled out his little pocket pen, I'll never forget, pocket knife, and he cut it in half and he showed everybody and he said, here, look at the structure of this artichoke. And we all, yeah, oh yeah. [Laughs] We didn't know what we were looking at. We were all young students, wondering where the hell—what was happening.

But anyway, he explained to us that you get ideas from nature and the structure of plant material, of fruits and vegetables, and what have you. Anyway, so he was really very interesting, but what I found very exciting actually, while it wouldn't mean anything to you or anybody it meant a lot to me, that whatever words of Italian that I knew, Luigi Nervi knew where my father, who was born in Italy, where he was from, from just the words that I was using, the way I was saying it, or God knows what. He knew that my father came from a certain place and he hit it right on the head.

YO: No kidding.

JV: Yeah, it's very interesting, that they could tell. If I said to you, Yona, you know with your accent I can tell you come from Newton, North Carolina. Well, that would blow your mind. How the heck—but in Italy, the dialects are so important that you know where people come from in Italy, you know? Very interesting.

YO: Wow, and Nervi knew where—

JV: Where do you come from, anyway?

YO: Oh, I'm from Charlotte originally.

JV: Where?

YO: Charlotte. It's west of Raleigh.

JV: West of Raleigh? What's the name of the town?

YO: Charlotte.

JV: Starwood?

YO: Like Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg, Germany?

JV: Oh, okay. I think I went through there one time.

YO: Oh, I'm sure you have.

JV: Yeah, that sounds familiar.

YO: Where is your father from?

JV: He's from halfway between Rome and Naples, closer to the Adriatic side of the boot.

YO: I see.

JV: Halfway between. You see where Rome is and you see where Naples, draw a line halfway between and then draw it right over to the Adriatic, which is the other side. Rome and Naples are on the—oh, gee, I'll have to ask my wife. Rome and Naples are on the—I forget the name of that ocean, that sea.

YO: Well, we can look it up, right? People can look it up.

JV: Anyway, from the other side of the boot.

YO: Right. Let me ask you this, I'm not sure, but I think that your family owns a large nursery in the Montreal area. Is that right?

**54:04**

JV: Well they did, yeah. My father started that. The way Jack Vincelli, which was my dad, started the landscape business. It came from actually my grandfather. My grandfather came over from Italy sort of at the turn of the century. And he got a job working for a town called Westmount, and Westmount had people that would love to play [on] bowling greens, they had a bowling green and they would play. And he would take care of keeping the grass green and keeping it cultivated properly and so on and so forth.

Well, one day they came to him and they said could you make a graph of what you're using and how you're using it and all this kind of thing. Well, the poor man had no education and he couldn't make a graph to figure out what fertilizers he was using and what was happening and

so on, so he told them, he said, I'm sorry. I can keep your grass green and I can keep it in good shape but I don't think I could do that. So they said, well—they had done that to him because they wanted to get rid of him. They had somebody coming over from England and they wanted that man to do the job. So when he came over, my grandfather was relieved of that job.

So, all the people that used to bowl on this bowling green, they all lived in Westmount. Westmount is a very wealthy people who live on a mountain. Westmount is a mountain. All these people immediately got a hold of my grandfather and said, look, you don't have to make any graphs or any reports or anything like that for us. We just want you to take care of our landscape around our homes. And that's where it began. Then my father came over when he was thirteen years old, came over from Italy. My grandfather called him over. When he was in Montreal, two months after he had arrived, his father was killed in a truck accident.

YO: Oh no.

JV: A hit and run type of thing. My father was on the other side of the street and my grandfather said, stay there, I'll come and get you and bring you across the street, to beat the traffic. And of course my father, the only traffic he knew was the lonely little mule or whatever in the little town. There wasn't much traffic.

So, anyway, this truck came along and hit my grandfather instead and there my grandfather was lying on the ground and he had passed, he was dead, and my father was just thirteen years old and he was sitting on the curb next to his dead father. A lady comes by in one of those kind of—you know, Yona, those kind of cars where she sits in the back and it's enclosed in glass and the chauffeur sits in front?

YO: Right.

JV: To get the picture. And she stops. She sees my father sitting there next to his dead father. He only spoke Italian, he didn't speak any English, and she was trying to get some information out of him to take him [to] his family or wherever, and had a hard time trying to figure it out. Finally my father got what she was saying and said that his name was Vincelli. Well, lo and behold, not too far away, down in another town located next to this Westmount was a very poor section, and there was a grocery store that one of my grand uncles had, the Vincelli Grocery Store. So this lady, when my father said my name is Vincelli, she remembered this grocery store and she put him in the car and brought him down to the grocery store to try to find out what to do with him. And of course they were all relatives and so they got back together again. But it was that—my father came up—now his father was dead and so he had to, at the age of thirteen, take over this landscape maintenance job of these houses in Westmount, and he worked very hard.

**01:00:12**

YO: I can imagine.

JV: Yeah, and at such a young age.

YO: Wow.

JV: And you're talking about like 1909, that period of time. And then of course as he grew older and so on he developed it more and developed the company into a full fledged landscape construction company.

YO: Right. So after you got your degree in landscape architecture you went back home then, right?

JV: I did. I went back to Montreal and worked together with my father and we built up the business together and I also had opened a landscape architectural firm called Environplan Ltd., E-n-v-i-r-o-n-p-l-a-n, Environplan, L-t-d. That's when I started to get projects like the Expo Grounds and the Olympics and so on and so forth.

Then I did a—well, it was funny. When we did the Expo Grounds we did a project for the—what do you call it—for the agriculture pavilion, which was a federal government project, and the federal government had asked me to do this project for them.

What we did was really something. We did a design and we did it in such a way that it was, well, the sheep in the corn and—it was not, I have to admit, was not very creative, and when we presented this to them, they were very upset that we did not introduce computers and that sort of thing into it. And they said we in the agriculture industry, we work with computers just as well, and so on, and we're far in advance of the sheep in the meadow and the cows in the corn and that kind of stuff. So, I took all my drawings and went back to my office and told my guys and they said, oh my God, that's very embarrassing, because we had really screwed up. [Laughs]

So we started to really get into it and we started off by saying, okay, where does energy come from? It comes from the sun, so we will develop from a sun acre and radiate off on this sun acre into these huge sort of plains of mounded areas with flat tops where the agriculture industry would flourish. In order to develop these mounds, we decided to build them up with hay bales. Now hay bales, they were very afraid that something like that could just cause a huge fire.

YO: Right. [Laughs]

**01:04:16**

JV: Well, yeah. [Laughs] Anyway, we did it, we got hay bales, but it was a certain specification. For instance, no alfalfa and no clover and so on, which were more combustible. So anyway, we started to bring in hundreds of thousands of hay bales, coming in on trucks from the United States and all over Canada. We bought [an] unbelievable [number]. They came in and we started to build now these mounds with hay bales, because what we wanted to do was to create the slopes of these mounds in such a way that it would be like a, well, about a sixty-five degree slope.

Now you know the natural angle of repose for soil is forty-five degrees. After forty-five degrees it runs down and it just won't build up to sixty-five degrees. So, the only way we could do that is by on these forty-five degree slopes we would locate these hay bales in a step fashion and then we put chicken wire mesh on top to hold the soil that we would put over the mesh.

YO: Oh my gosh.

JV: Eventually we would staple turf pieces, grass sod, onto this. Now they just thought that was fantastic.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: But now the problem was how the hell are you going to cut that grass during the six months, on a sixty-five slope?

YO: [Laughs] Right.

JV: You know, you just—nobody—[Laughs] So, I called up Jimmy Klutz—

YO: [Laughs]

JV: —and I said, Jimmy, I got a problem. And I explained this story to him, as I've just explained to you, and Jimmy said, Jack, there is a chemical on the market. In Atlanta, they were using it on the side of the roads. [It was] called MH30, and this was a certain chemical that retarded the grass to grow.

Well, I said, gee, that sounds good. This way they won't have to cut the grass during the six months of the Expo time. Then I had an architect who was head of the whole kit 'n caboodle for the Expo grounds and he said, no, no, we can't have that. That's impossible. We don't want a fire and this thing will turn into a real calamity, a mess. Well, Yona, sure enough, one day, one Sunday, I get a call and my poor wife picked up the phone and she said, they're saying it looks like a fire has started in the bowels of these hay bales.

YO: Oh no.

JV: And I said, oh my God, that couldn't—anyway, jumped in the car, ran down there, and the Frenchman that had seen some smoke—really it was steam—coming up out of the crevices in the soil and the sod pieces, and it was the difference in temperature between down deep inside where it was hot and the steam was coming up through. So this Frenchman, he calls down and he says, Smoke! Fume, fume! So that got everybody—and the fire marshals were running down there and so on. When I got down there I said, well, that's not smoke, that's steam, you bozo!

YO: [Laughs]

JV: Anyway, sure enough, [Laughs] they realized that that's what it was, and I got out of that one. [Laughs]

YO: Well, let me ask you this, considering that that was essentially a monster compost pile, what happened to it after the Expo closed?

JV: Oh, that was all just taken away and shredded out onto land that had been growing whatever. Yeah. It was all used.

**01:09:30**

YO: That's great. How would you sum up your School of Design experience?

JV: My School of Design experience, well— [Laughs]

YO: Having had all these experiences in life now that you can look back and kind of think about it.

JV: Again I go back to Lewis. [Laughs] Lewis was the kind of guy that made you stick your neck out so that you would understand and think about what you've got to come up with, a creative idea. You got to come up with good ideas, and Lewis just knew how to tell us how to do that. He's the only guy that he could tell you that you're full of crap, in his English brogue, and you agree with him.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: Because he knows how to tell you. [Laughs] Lewis is something else. He was absolutely an angel in my books, a guy that really knew how to show us and make us think for ourselves, really.

YO: Would you say that's the one important thing to know about him?

JV: Yeah, I would think so.

YO: Well, what's the one important thing to know about Jack Vincelli?

JV: Oh. I'm a bozo.

YO: I don't believe that. [Laughs]

JV: [Laughs] I'll just—well, I don't give up. My wife says you really are something. You just don't give up. I will keep on trucking until it comes through, until I get what I want it to do, I guess what it would be, I guess.

YO: That sounds like a good way to be, I think. Well, I understand that you are considering a project now that you first designed over thirty years ago. Do you think today's landscape architects give enough consideration to the possible longevity of their projects

JV: Oh, absolutely, yes, yes. I think what you're referring to—I was called recently by a—what do you call it—a real estate agent, and she was about to sell or try to sell to a potential client a project that we had done, that we had designed. It was a residential project on a lake in a very prestigious area at the end of the island of Montreal. She calls me up and she says that in all the papers and in all the client's stuff that she had that was handed over by the owners of the property that here was this plan that I had done for that guy thirty years ago.

YO: No kidding.

JV: It had a golf course on it and it had a marina on the shoreline. It had—oh, God, I just can't remember. It was just all kinds of things going on. It was a very interesting project and the guy that I did the design for never built it. He got sick and he—I guess he got sick when he found out how much it was going to cost him.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: Anyway, he never did build it, but here was this lady now. She had this client who said that he was so excited by the plan and he wanted to buy the property and he wanted to do everything according to my plan. And I went out to meet the guy and so on. So there we are and we're waiting for him now to get his money together and buy the property, so we're still waiting actually.

YO: So, you're still practicing these days.

**01:14:06**

JV: Well, that's a very generous thought that you're saying, that I'm still practicing. [Laughs] I get involved. I mean this particular project, I know that thirty years ago you could do a lot of things, but now with the environmentalists and so on you can't put a marina on a shoreline of a lake anymore. The shoreline has to be kept in its pristine condition and so on. So I don't know how much I'm going to be able to convince the city fathers that what I'm going to do for this site will be good, will come out well. But God only knows. We shall see.

YO: There's a lot of politics today that wasn't around in the old days, isn't it?

JV: Oh, absolutely, a big difference, huge difference. But I had a lot of fun with people like past mayors of Montreal, like this man whose name was Jean Drapeau. He was such a good man for Montreal, and when I was fighting with Mr. Taillibert, the architect for the stadium, we would have these big meetings, huge, something like fifty, sixty-five people sitting around a table, and when Mr. Drapeau would come in, he would always come and sit beside me and he would ask me questions like, is that guy telling us the way it really is, Jack? What's your opinion? And I would have to tell the mayor that, no, he's full of crap [Laughs] or whatever.

He knew I didn't like Taillibert, but he told me, he said, you know, I can't do anything about it because I've signed a huge contract with him and to get out of that contract it'll cost the city an awful lot of money, and I just really would like to try to just get along with this guy if we could. And I said, well, Mr. Mayor, I'll try my best, but I don't know. [Laughs] We'll see.

We never did get along and he went back to France and he never was called back again because he really knew nothing about Montreal and Montreal weather, and that was so important because the roof that he put onto the stadium, it was a terrible mistake. It was a film, a plastic—well, I don't know. It was made of some sort of, I forget the name. It was a plastic sheeting that went over the whole thing and then in various locations, he had cables sort of pinching each piece of this ceiling, this roof. If you wanted to open it up and to have it open to the sky and so on these cables would pull this thing up and so on. But during the wintertime snow and ice would hammer away at this plastic cover and it just didn't hold up. I for one was one to say, look, I don't know, I'm not an expert in that, but I don't think that's going to work. He said, look, you stick to your flowers.

YO: Well, you know, that attitude—

JV: When the man made a statement like that I was fit to be tied.

YO: I can imagine.

JV: Oh boy.

YO: Well, this will be about my last question, I think, but your story hits on a problem that seems to be prevalent in the landscape architecture profession today. How would you tell students that are just now at that stage of entering the profession, how would you tell them to go about promoting landscape architecture as a viable and legitimate profession?

**01:19:23**

JV: Well, you've got to really—you've got to really love that kind of work—planning—land planning. You've got to feel—and you know—really I go back to Lewis. I think that [Laughs] I would send them all down to see Lewis, because he knew how to tell you. He knew what was important and what wasn't important. I really felt that way. And I'm sure all of us classmates, I believe we all felt the same. Like when you talked to Warren Edwards, and Burkhead, and Jerry Turner, and Lindsay Cox, and all those guys, didn't they say that, that Lewis was a very important part of their life?

YO: Yes, and they all had different ways of explaining it, and what I try to get to is what can you say, you know, how would you translate what he was telling you? How would you translate that to pass it on to this next generation?

JV: That's a good question. It's a real good question. I guess—from my own experience, you see like I said, like I started off this whole thing, that I was the son of a landscape contractor. And once you get into that kind of work, landscape construction, well then you fall into design and how to plan, how to design, how to lay out so that it will be not too expensive to build, because you know what it costs to build certain things.

So I think that in my case, it was coming out of that rebirth, that coming out of landscape construction to teach me about landscape design, I believe. It was that way for me anyway, and to this day it still comes back, when we plan or we're designing something and the first thing that comes to your mind, yeah, but what's that going to cost? Because reality is that your client is going to ask that question. He's going to say, fine, great idea, but how much is that going to cost?

I remember—well, I had a client one time who, he just wanted to beat me down on my fees, so I would meet him in his office, and I would have a plan that we designed for this shopping center, and I put it down on his desk, and he looked and it and he looked at it, and I knew what kind of guy he was. He was a guy that was not very interested—he just didn't like to pay fees and I knew what he was going to try to do. So he looked at the plan and he said, well, I don't see anything creative here. I think I could probably do better than this. And I said, oh, really? And he said, yeah. So, Yona, I took the plan and I turned it upside down on the back and there was a complete piece of white paper, right?

YO: Yeah.

**01:24:11**

JV: And I said, to him, I said, okay, if you think you could have done better I won't even ask you to do that because you're not an architect and you don't know the—but what I would like you to do is you've seen what I have done, why don't you just repeat it on this blank piece of paper? He said, well I'm not an architect. I said, yeah, I know you're not an architect, but you could just indicate it very simply, where the parking area is and where the entrance is and where this and that are, and just indicate that on this paper. So he said, no, I don't think I can do that. I don't know how to do that. And I said, look, I am going to leave you now and I'm going to walk right by your secretary at the front entrance. I want you to call her now and get her to make the check that you owe me for my fees. That's what I will accept and then I'm out of here. Because I knew this guy just wanted to try to, you know, not honor what he'd agreed to do.

YO: And that's part of the job, too, isn't it?

JV: That is, that is. Because you know you've got people that just have other ulterior motives and you've got to try to offset them or else you won't be able to put bread on the table.

YO: Well, there's no doubt it's a challenging profession, isn't it?

JV: Oh, the most challenging. I mean—oh, unbelievable. I mean some of the things that—we did a project, again for the federal government. It was a research center. When we did this, we were able to tell the architect—it was always a problem with the architect.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: Always. They just think they know better. But we used to outmaneuver them somehow, someway. And you know how we outmaneuvered them? When we were able to come up with ideas that are cheaper to do than the way the architect would do it. Case in point, in this particular project we told the federal government that you will not have to remove the excavations from the site in order to build the building.

YO: Huge savings.

JV: Okay? They said, what do you mean? You've got to remove it. No, I said. You don't have to remove it. I said there is a prevailing cold northwest winds that are coming from this certain direction and we have to use that excavation to create mounds for us to locate these mounds in such a way to shield off this cold weather before it hits the building. [In a voice] Oh, come on now, that's a dream. That's a dream. Anyway, we said, well look, you might as well ride along with it because it's going to be cheaper. It costs you more money to get trucks in here and to load up all of this excavation and take it away. Yeah, yeah, okay. They had to agree with that. So if anything I am going to create these mounds that one time someone called—what did they call them—mice under the carpet.

YO: Oh yeah.

**01:29:01**

JV: I remember somebody [said that.] Anyway, so I said we will shape and grade these mounds around the building and so on and it will be a pleasant sight.

So they agreed to do that. I got them halfway. So, we went ahead and we dug out all this excavation and anything that was not good soil, we would take that away obviously and not put it back on the site. We would carry on and then we would plant evergreen trees, pines, spruces and so on, huge trees, and we would plant them on these mounds to help protect against the cold winds coming up against the building.

Now after this was all done and built and so on, that winter I got the—because the client is in this business of doing research into ways to better however we can live on this planet. So they did all of this checking where the cold winds were coming from, how they were going up against these mounds planted with these evergreen trees and so on, and how much of that cold was hitting the building. And they saw that it was so much less. It went down into their books that the federal government said that this had to be done on all federal buildings because it was a tremendous savings. They were heating by oil, hot water system and they saw just how much they were saving, and this was something that no one would ever even really get involved in.

YO: Right.

JV: And the architects, they'd look at me and say, yeah, that's a pipe dream. Well, you will see what'll happen. This winter we'll see and sure enough—and the architects, they didn't like me.

YO: [Laughs] But you won one for the landscape architects though, right?

JV: Oh, absolutely.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: Absolutely.

YO: That's wonderful.

JV: I said all we want to do is work together. We know certain things, and you know a few things.

YO: [Laughs]

JV: But we landscape architects know so much more because we were taught by Lewis Clarke.

YO: Oh, that's nice.

JV: Yeah, and I mean that. He was a sweetheart of sweethearts, and you tell him that for me.

YO: I'm sure I will. Well, Jack, that's all the questions I have for you today. Would you like to add anything else?

JV: “Did Clarke affect your practice?” is the last question you have here.

YO: Okay. You want to answer that one?

JV: I said, immensely.

YO: Immensely. [Laughs]

JV: And I wrote down, “I blame him for putting me on the straight and narrow path of what landscape architecture was really all about. He messed me up good.”

YO: [Laughs] That’s great.

JV: I had to throw that in there.

YO: Very good.

JV: And, “What was Clarke teaching at the time?” He was teaching landscape design, yeah. “You met Lewis Clarke as one of your professors. What year was that?” Yeah, well it was—was he there in ’55?

YO: He arrived in ’52.

JV: Oh, ’52, yeah, that’s right, a couple years before.

YO: Right.

JV: Yeah. “Who were some of your professors?”

YO: I think we covered all those, Jack, don’t you?

JV: I think we did, too.

YO: Okay. Well let’s stop at that because I think you’ve told some very interesting stories—

JV: Oh, from different angles, from another angle, you know?

YO: Yes, that’s true, that’s true.

JV: Yes. Well, that’s very nice, very good, and God bless—

YO: And thank you so much for doing this interview. I’ve enjoyed our conversation immensely.

**01:34:27**

JV: Oh, it was fun, it was fun. I enjoyed it.

YO: Very good. Thank you.

JV: It brought back a lot of good memories.

YO: I'm so glad to hear that. Take care.

JV: You take care.

YO: Okay, bye bye.

JV: Bye bye.

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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