

ORAL HISTORY OF

Charles E. Dagit, Jr.

Interviewed by Hyman Myers and Bruce Laverty

February 10, 2012

Recorded under the auspices of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

Keystones Oral History Collection

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PREFACE & SUMMARY

On February 10, 2012 Hyman Myers and Bruce Lavery interviewed Charles Dagit at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. Myers was a preservation architect at VITETTA. Lavery was the Gladys Brooks Curator of Architecture at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

Lynn Mandarano transcribed this interview in 2025. The transcription process was funded by a Historical and Archival Records Care (HARC) Grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). Alice Dagit, Charles Dagit's widow, reviewed the transcript for accuracy in 2025.

The following is an AI-generated summary. A member of the project team or a research intern at The Athenaeum will review the summary and expand upon it for accuracy prior to online publication:

The transcription provides a detailed account of Charles Dagit's family history in architecture, his experiences at the University of Pennsylvania's architecture program, and the founding and growth of his architectural firm Dagit/Saylor Architects. It highlights significant projects the firm worked on, such as the Monastery of St. Clare and the Olin Building at Ursinus College, as well as Dagit's involvement in professional organizations like the AIA. The interview covers Dagit's architectural influences, the unique educational experience at Penn under Dean Holmes Perkins, and Dagit's approach to managing projects and clients in his firm over the decades.

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Written by William Whitaker for
Philadelphia Architecture and Buildings (PAB)

Born into a distinguished family of Philadelphia architects, Charles E. Dagit, Jr., like his father Charles E., Sr. and uncles, Albert F. and Henry D., received degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. Under the firm of Henry D. Dagit & Sons, the family produced designs for many of the Philadelphia region's Roman Catholic churches and institutions in a mode consistent with the Beaux-Arts training received at Penn under famed architect and educator, Paul P. Cret. By the time Charles E., Jr. entered the firm in 1961, working part-time during his studies, major shifts had occurred in an architectural culture that embraced, yet questioned the prevailing modernism of the day. That transition focused international attention on Penn's Graduate School of Fine Arts, where a dynamic faculty ingrained in their students a new sensibility about history, environment, and structural form.

Graduating with a Bachelor's degree in 1967, Dagit received a number of awards, including the Stewardson Memorial Traveling Fellowship, which enabled extended European study. Returning to Philadelphia in January 1968, Dagit entered the one year Master's Studio taught by Louis I. Kahn. At the same time, he was also working in the offices of Mitchell/Giurgola, clocking "some 50 or 60 hours a week" on the award winning United Fund Building.

In 1970, he and fellow Penn graduate Peter Saylor joined to form the partnership of Dagit Saylor Architects. "The versatility of their talents," opined former Dean G. Holmes Perkins, "is brought home in the wide range of buildings from the architecturally distinguished utilitarian Agricultural Arena at Penn State to the fine restoration of Horace Trumbauer's Eisenlohr residence....Their sensitivity to the environment, both natural and man made, may be seen in the modest and understated architecture of Ursinus College's residential village." Perkins would go on to note their evolution of "a personal architecture that reflects cultural traditions while exploiting the most advanced technology in the search for an expressive architecture that best serves clients." Their successful 37-year partnership, concluded in 2007, realized many professional awards, including gold and silver medals from the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA in 1976 and 1975, respectively. Dagit was elevated to a Fellow of the AIA in 1983 for outstanding design.

Dagit taught design throughout his career, including adjunct and associate professorships at Temple University (1973-1980) and at Drexel University (1981-2009) respectively.

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ORAL HISTORY OF CHARLES DAGIT

Myers
[00:00:05]

If you could just identify yourself.

Dagit
[00:00:09]

I'm Charles Dagit, an architect here in Philadelphia.

Myers
[00:00:15]

And Charlie, you've been in Philadelphia all your life, in fact your father was a well-known architect in Philadelphia.

Dagit
[00:00:22]

My father and my grandfather.

Myers
[00:00:24]

And your grandfather's firm name?

Dagit
[00:00:27]

[It] was Henry D. Dagit. And then it was Henry D. Dagit and Sons. All my two father's brothers were architects and all my cousins were architects.

Myers
[00:00:37]

My goodness, that's a real background of architecture.

Dagit
[00:00:40]

I'm the last of the third generation [of] Dagits in Philadelphia.

Myers
[00:00:44]

And will your sons become an architect now?

Dagit
[00:00:47]

No, neither one of them.

Myers
[00:00:50]

Oh, that's interesting. Your father's firm was Dagit and Son?

Dagit
[00:00:55]

No, Henry D. Dagit & Sons.

Myers
[00:00:57]

Henry D. Dagit and sons, and he was one of the sons.

Dagit
[00:01:02]

Yeah, Henry, the original Henry, my grandfather, hung up his shingle in 1887. We think that he worked for six months at Wilson Eyre's office. We're not sure. He then set out, he did not have any formal education, he set out to become an architect and put up his shingle and started practicing architecture after six months of apprenticeship at the Eyre's office, we think. And he did a number of various projects in Philadelphia. I have a few of the drawings. Some of them

came from here, I have some copies of some things that he did. He had an interesting career here. He did two of the probably most significant Byzantine Revival projects in the country. One is St. Francis de Sales Church and the other is St. Malachy's Church up in North Philadelphia. And St. Malachy's, they say it came after de Sales, the people up at St. Malachy's. I don't agree with that. I think that St. Malachy's was a stepping-stone project. It was a renovation project that got him St. Francis de Sales. St. Francis de Sales was then a basilica church for the bishop that was built in West Philadelphia.

Laverty
[00:02:26]

How did your grandfather make the connection with the Archdiocese since they had such a large...building list for the Archdiocese and they seemed to have favored architects?

Dagit
[00:02:44]

Yeah, the pastor of the church at St. Malachy's, so the guy by the name of [Monsignor] Fenton Fitzpatrick, and somehow my grandfather connected with him and got that commission. Then that made them sit up and take notice of his work on that church. The bishop obviously liked what he did for St. Malachy's and then got him involved in St. Francis. From St. Francis de Sales, and that's how I think the connection was made.

Laverty
[00:03:16]

Do you know anything about the relationship between your grandfather and [Rafael] Guastavino? Because at St. Francis de Sales, that's one of the...

Dagit
[00:03:25]

Yeah, it's one of the few Guastavino vaults in the country, which doesn't work very well since it was better off in Spain than in Philadelphia. I don't know how he created that relationship. Obviously, what we do know of him is, in terms of his Byzantine heritage, we know that he, we think that he traveled in Egypt. And we think that's the only connection that he has with the Byzantine. Why he all of a sudden went off into Byzantine architecture, that's the one clue that we have.

Myers
[00:04:06]

That's an early Byzantine Revival [building].

Dagit
[00:04:08]

It had not been done. I mean, you know, here we are at the end of the Victorian era. Byzantine is something way off of the radar screen anywhere in America. And he decides that he wants to do a Neo-Byzantine church. How he came to that conclusion, I haven't got a clue.

Laverty
[00:04:28]

And he managed to sell it.

Dagit
[00:04:29]

Well, he sold it to the bishop. And then that is what's really interesting about his legend in our family. He sold it to the bishop and then lost his practice in Philadelphia because of it. Because on the dome of the church out in West Philadelphia, which is a beautiful, pristine, glowing, white dome, is a blue or greenish Star of David. And in the foyer of St. Malachy's and in St. Francis is the Star of David. The Irish Catholics in [North Philadelphia] seemed to accept St. Malachy's, but when he got to West Philadelphia, the Irish Catholics decided that he was modeling the church after a mosque, which to them was pagan. And then he put the Star of David on it, which is the ultimate sin, associating the church with the Star of David instead of it being a Christian church. The Irish Catholics were not really too interested in the fact that Jesus was a Jew. And so they decided that he was a pagan and so on and they banned him from working in Philadelphia. He did a lot of churches up in North Jersey.

Myers
[00:05:58]

You would think they would have seen it in the preliminary drawings and said, "We don't want that design."

Dagit
[00:06:03]

No, no, no. I mean they weren't paying attention and even I don't think the bishop was paying attention. And he got away with it up at St. Malachy. And the bishop looks at it, I think, who is certainly more educated than the parishioners, he looks at it and says, "Well, that's perfectly fine." They put it up. Well, you know, it being in the vestibule is not a big deal. It's on the floor. It being on the dome all over West Philadelphia, that's a big deal. So it took him almost 30 years to get back.

Myers
[00:06:40]

Wow!

Dagit
[00:06:41]

And he did a magnificent church up in Chestnut Hill. I have the drawings. I got the drawings from The Athenaeum when we did the show on his work in our office.

Laverty
[00:06:54]

Was that Consolation or Related Consolation?

Dagit
[00:06:56]

No, I can't remember the name of it now. I continually... It's a Gothic Revival church up in Chestnut Hill. It's gorgeous and it was very interesting when we did the show. That both my father's brother, Al Dagit, who was the major designer of Henry D. Dagit and Sons, and Henry's work, right up until the '30s, was fantastic and then crashed, along with everybody else. And what shows up is just brick boxes in the '30s. I mean, this fantastically embellished stone church. And I was in it. We had a bus tour of the Dagit Churches in Philadelphia area with the entire family a year ago. And it was fantastic. It was

really a lot of fun. And we went to that church. It is really stunning. And that's the last one. All of a sudden, that's the end of that era.

Myers
[00:08:01]

Did you know your grandfather?

Dagit
[00:08:04]

No, he died in 1929.

Myers
[00:08:06]

I wonder if you passed any books, like a library of books...

Dagit
[00:08:10]

I have one book of his work.

Myers
[00:08:13]

Not Byzantine?

Dagit
[00:08:14]

I meant to bring it. Now, there are two extraordinary living room Victorian interiors in North Jersey of baronial houses and their bizarre interiors. It's patterns everywhere, I mean, very Victorian. The only two examples of the Byzantines are those two churches.

Myers
[00:08:40]

But no book. For example, from which he might have...

Dagit
[00:08:43]

There was a book published that has [Bertram] Goodhue's work in it and a number of other architects of the time. It has that church in it. And it has a church in back being St. Francis de Sales. It has that as an example of one of a handful of neo-Byzantine churches ever designed in America. It's in a history book. I have a copy of that book that somebody got for me a bunch of years ago and I have to search for it, and I can't find the copy. I will find it somewhere in my bookcase, but anyway.

Myers
[00:09:23]

And then your grandfather took your father into the firm?

Dagit
[00:09:29]

What happened was my father's oldest brother, Henry, got a certificate from Penn [University of Pennsylvania] in their architecture program and he then started practicing with my grandfather. Albert Dagit went through the class of 1923 and went through architectural school.

Myers
[00:09:49]

At Penn?

- Dagit
[00:09:50] And he then joined the firm. My father was the youngest of the three brothers and he was told by the two older brothers that he was to go to the Wharton School.
- Myers
[00:10:05] Oh.
- Dagit
[00:10:05] And learned business because they had the architecture now under control. "You go and be the business partner." So he dutifully obeyed his two older brothers and went to the Wharton School and graduated with a degree in economics. He became an architect in the '40s when Uncle Albert fell off his roof in Avalon [New Jersey] and broke his hip. And my father realized that while he was a partner in the firm, which wasn't necessarily totally kosher, according to the laws, and then it was a little looser than nowadays, decided he better become registered because if anything happens to his two brothers, he doesn't have a firm.
- Myers
[00:10:53] Yeah, mm-hmm.
- Dagit
[00:10:55] So he then goes to Harrisburg and does an interview. It's one of his great stories. He went to an interview with the board. And they said, "How's business?" And he said, "Well, it's doing just fine. We're recovering from the war," and so on. And they say, "You're an architect." That was his interview.
- Laverty
That was easy.
- Dagit
[00:11:20] That was his interview!
- Myers
They probably knew the firm's name.
- Dagit
[00:11:22] He had been in business for 20 years and he wrote all the specifications and so on and so forth and went out to supervise buildings and did all this work so, of course, he's an architect. As I say, it was a little easier back then.
- Myers
[00:11:42] When he became an architect, he helped you get started?
- Dagit
[00:11:47] Well, I was born in '43. He became an architect in [his] 40s. One of the things that we talk about is the fact that I became an architect because I was born later in my father's life. He was in his 40s, so I'm born in '43, so I see the '50s and '60s growing up. That's an entirely different story than my children who see me in the '70s starting a firm. They look at starting a firm and say, "Oh my god. You have to be kidding." I looked at my father, a very successful architect, and said, "Gee, this looks pretty good." So I bought into the idea of becoming an architect. He actually always used to, I think, somewhat kiddingly, but always

used to say, “[You] ought to be a roofer,” because in the ‘50s they were building all these one-story schools, and he figured that in 20 years they'd all need new roofs. Being the Wharton School graduate, there [I] was. Anyway, I didn't go along with that idea and became an architect.

Myers
[00:13:02]

He must have been happy that it continued another generation.

Dagit
[00:13:05]

He was pretty thrilled as a father of an architect. I do have a story, I may as well tell it. I'm writing a series of stories about Lou Kahn [*Louis Kahn: Architect* (Routledge, 2013)] and just to give you an idea of my father's clucking away about me being an architect. I have a great story about Lou Kahn and Holmes Perkins. And it was the first time that I ever met Lou Kahn. I'm 17 years old and I'm working in my father's office for the first time. I'm a graduate of high school. So I go to my father, I have no drawing education whatsoever. I have not a clue how to draw and I had some wonderful people that my father had in his office that began to teach me how to draw that summer. So that was in 1961, and the AIA National Convention is here in Philadelphia in 1961. And so my father says, “Would you like to come to a reception they're having in the Sunken Garden in Suburban Station?” And they have the whole wall mural of the plan of Philadelphia. There's a movie about it that you guys probably have.

Laverty
[00:14:26]

Oh, I wish I did.

Dagit
[00:14:26]

Ed Bacon, and [Robert] Geddes did it, and so on. So there's a big reception, and Lou Kahn is at the reception. Now, I'm a senior in high school, going [into] first year at Penn. And I have no clue who anybody is. But I go to the reception, because I may as well. And my father, we get there, my father gets me a whiskey sour. I'm 17 years old. So of course I drink a whiskey sour, because I don't know anything. It tastes better than the rest of that stuff. So I'm standing with a whiskey sour, and Dad comes to me and says, “Would you like to meet Lou Kahn?” Well, sure. I don't know who Lou Kahn really is. I've heard about him. So he takes me over to Lou Kahn, and he is proud as a pup. And he says to Lou Kahn, “I'd like to introduce my son. He's enrolled at Penn in the architectural program and he's going to major in architecture and he wants to be an architect.” And Lou Kahn stands there, and I'm holding my glass of whiskey sour, and he stands there and says, “Young man, what are you drinking?” And I said, “A whiskey sour.” He says, “You'll never be an architect.” I was sort of flabbergasted. He said, “Architects don't drink whiskey sours! Architects drink martinis.”

Laverty
[00:15:59]

[Laughter] That was the conversation?

- Dagit
[00:16:02] So, I go away. So three years later, I go through the architectural program. And the first-year graduate students at Penn in the architecture program, which I got into, are always invited to Holmes Perkins' house for a dinner party. And it's a wonderful garden and a wonderful house. So Alice, my wife, my future wife at the time, and I arrived at Holmes Perkin's house. And I had never thought about that incredible moment of my first introduction to Lou Kahn until then. I walk into the front foyer and Holmes Perkins is greeting everybody standing with a glass of whiskey sour. And all of a sudden I said, "I know."
- Myers
Isn't that interesting?
- Dagit
Isn't it a fantastic story? And my father was very proud of the whole idea that I would become an architect and so forth. And I think, quite frankly, one of the things that I had to do, I won the Stewardson [Competition in 1967] and a number of other things, I had to convince my father that I had any ability to be an architect. Because he had no clue, because he was in the Wharton School. So, how does he judge whether I have any talent or whatever? So, I had to get recognition through my work at Penn that I was going to be okay for him.
- Myers
[00:17:31] Yeah, and the Woodman.
- Dagit
[00:17:33] Yeah, I won the Schenck-Woodman [Competition in 1968] and the Stewardson Competition and so forth.
- Myers
[00:17:38] That should have been convincing to him.
- Dagit
[00:17:39] That was convincing enough for him that he decided that we would become partners.
- Myers
[00:17:44] Now, when you were going to open an office, he had already retired?
- Dagit
[00:17:49] No.
- Myers
[00:17:49] No? He was still in business? He was a partner? He was a partner in your new firm?
- Dagit
[00:17:53] No, he was a partner in the old firm. Some history, that's why we're here. The three brothers were all partners after 1929. And they practiced up until 1960. My one uncle, Uncle Albert, decided with his two sons that he did not wish to take in my other two cousins, Henry Dagit and Leonard Dagit, into his partnership. And he decided he would leave [the partnership] with his sons,

Albert and Dan Dagit. And they formed a firm called Dagit Associates, leaving Henry D. Dagit & Sons in existence. And my father stayed with Henry Dagit & Sons and took in my two cousins. That firm lasted until roughly 1973. In 1970 I became registered and we formed Dagit/Saylor Architects in 1970. I didn't really want to be a part of his original firm.

Myers
[00:19:10]

But didn't you work there, I thought, for a short time?

Dagit
[00:19:11]

I did. I worked for my father's firm until 1968 and I then decided that I didn't want to work for that firm and I left and I interviewed a number of architects and got a job with Mitchell/Giurgola and I worked with Aldo Giurgola for nine months on the United Fund building. And I was having the time of my life. And believe it or not, I was working for Aldo Giurgola, [who won] the Gold Medal of the AIA later, but still while I was in the master's studio at Lou Kahn, taking Lou Kahn's master studio, and working for Aldo at the same time. Can you imagine what that's like to a 24-year-old architect? My God.

So my father kept on saying, "You have to come back." And I kept pushing away, pushing away, saying, "I don't want to do that." He said, "How are we ever going to be partners if you and I aren't working together?" And I finally decided that I would go back. My father had a job at Penn State University for a gymnasium building at the Abington campus at Penn State. And my cousins were petrified of me because of my now reputation having won the Stewardson and so on. And I was really not very, very enthusiastic about being a partner [with] them. And they were petrified of me because they were working on a huge project, the Temple University Hospital that my father had brought into the firm. And they were afraid that I and my father would go off and take that project, which was the mainstay of the firm. I had no intentions of working on Temple University Hospital in my career. The last thing I wanted to do, and my father kept pushing me towards that project. And I said, "No, Dad. No way."

So luckily, all things worked in circumstances and faith. Luckily, I went back to my father's office having charretted on the United Fund building at 3 o'clock in the morning, on a Sunday morning, now Monday morning. I arrived at the office at 8 o'clock one Monday morning and it had snowed. My father is stuck coming back from Florida. So my cousins decided to give me this project at Penn State University to work on a study.

Myers
[00:21:55]

This is the gym.

Dagit
[00:21:56]

The gym. And I knew that the project was in the office. My father had told me about it. So I immediately started working on the gymnasium project and my father didn't really have anything to say about whether I was going to work on that or something else. So he kept mum on it and I started working on the

gymnasium project. And that turned into an actual real project and I became the lead designer of that project for the office. And as a matter of fact, what happened was--and my father's firm was doing okay work, wasn't exceptional work--and they were doing state work, and I think my cousins decided that we'll teach this little kid a lesson, because we'll give him the state job and that will really teach him what architecture is really all about, because they're impossible.

Myers
[00:22:48]

Real world.

Dagit
[00:22:49]

The real world. And so I designed this project and we decided to, it's on the base of a very steep hill in Abington, and we decided to hang the roof with steel trusses. And we made it all out of concrete and I presented the project to the people of Penn State at the Peale House in Philadelphia because H2L2 was the master plan architect. And we're there at the presentation, and I had a very initial presentation, and I'm sitting with John Miller, who was the university architect at the time, and we're having lunch after the presentation. And he says, "Who are you?" And I told him my background. I'd gone to Lou Kahn's studio and so on and so forth, and he said, "Oh, thank God." And he backed me on that project. It was a very revolutionary project. For our firm, it was really off the wall, and one of the things that happened when we, well, when I became registered, my father had an agreement with his two nephews that I would automatically be a partner. I didn't want that. What happened was that we did not believe that they would be smart enough to take me in. No, I'm sorry, we were worried that they would take me in and then I'd be stuck. What am I going to do? No, they decided no, they would table my entrance into the firm, which broke his agreement. So that then led to a settlement where we took the gymnasium to our new firm. And so it became a Dagit/Saylor project with this brand new firm that my father and my partner Peter Saylor and I created in 1970.

Myers
[00:24:58]

How did you make the connection with Peter Saylor?

Dagit
[00:25:00]

Peter I had known all through my career at Penn, as a matter of fact, there is a rather infamous picture still in our office, which The Athenaeum won't get, of Peter and myself in the kickline of Mask and Wig as dancing partners before we knew that we were going to practice architecture together.

Myers
[00:25:24]

But you were one year away from him anyway.

Dagit
[00:25:26]

I was two years behind him. Two years. And he, I was a freshman and he was a junior and the two of us were in the kickline of the Mask and Wig show. And I knew him, and I knew his work. And then when I went to Aldo Giurgola's

office, he was there, and I looked over his shoulder when he was working. And my father said, "I don't recommend starting a firm with you alone. You're gonna need a partner. It's too hard of a career to do by yourself." So he said, "Get me somebody and I'll back him." And so I introduced him to Peter Saylor. I proposed the idea of Peter, who was flabbergasted that we would start a firm together. And really the only reason he came into it was because my father had 40 years experience and obviously that meant a lot to him to start. I had all of the faith in the world that he, my father, and I could make it. Peter was a little more leery of that, joining forces with me. "Who am I?" And it panned out very well, and my father actually was very influential in getting our earlier work. Matter of fact, the day that we opened the office, we had a door on a set of horses [i.e. makeshift desk] and a phone. And my father gets a phone call from the president of Holy Family College. "Would we be interested in doing a master plan?" Day one. My father gets up from his desk and says, "I got a job for you boys."

Myers
[00:27:04]

Ha ha ha ha!

Dagit
[00:27:06]

And yes, we did the master plan and it ended up becoming a nursing education building which ended up getting the AIA Gold Medal. And the reason that he got that job is that all of his secretaries loved him in my father's old firm. And the president of Holy Family College called my father's office looking for him. And they said he's not here. And they gave them the telephone number and they didn't even ask why she was calling. She then called my father. My father was hired to do a master plan project with his two new partners. And that started our firm off.

And the other thing that started the firm, which was very interesting, was Bud Mitchell. He had a friend who was a fraternity brother and he said he never worked for friends. And would we be interested in doing an addition onto his house? And the addition was the Paul Miller house addition. Paul Miller at the time, unbeknownst to us, was chairman of the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. And we ended up getting that commission and did his addition to his house and then it was published in *House & Garden* magazine and led to other commissions and so forth. And that was really the first commission that was designed by Peter and myself because the gym already was designed.

Myers
[00:28:40]

Well, that was also very nice that your father had all that background, did all the specs... And really helped you a great deal in starting your firm.

Dagit
[00:28:52]

Oh, absolutely. And the only reason we got the gymnasium built was that he had a friend in the roofing business who consulted with him for all of his roofing things and he brought him to the office and said, "You have to look at these details and tell me whether they're going to work. And if you say they work, then I'll back doing this roof this way. If you tell me it isn't going to work,

then we've got to redesign the building." The guy looked over the details that I was proposing and said, "Yeah, that'll work." This is a roofing guy approving my project before we even go to Penn State. And Penn State said, "We're going to let you hang this roof, but we guarantee you that if this project leaks, we'll skin you alive and use your flesh for flashing." Needless to say, it's still there and it never leaked. And the reason why my cousins were so anxious to settle with the idea of giving us that project is they looked at that project and thought it was unbuildable and decided we don't want that project in the office. Let that kid who designed that thing have that thing and let him worry about it. So we ended up getting it and we got it built. And then it went on to get published in a number of different places and led to moving on the career and so forth.

Myers
[00:30:21]

Fabulous. And so that was 1970, you're starting now?

Dagit
[00:30:25]

1970. And then one of the other great stories of the founding of the firm was that we had gotten a commission to do two townhouses in Philadelphia for a guy by the name of [Richard A.] Serbin who owned an architect's artifact store [Gargoyles, Ltd.]. He collected mantles and things from buildings and so forth and sold them. And he had a piece of property at 3rd and Walnut streets. And wanted to develop some townhouses, so he hired us. I don't know how he connected with us, but he did. And he hired us to do two townhouses. And the two town houses won a Progressive Architecture Design Award, which is a national award for unbuilt projects. Very prestigious at the time. Michael Graves built his career on Progressive Architecture Design Awards.

So we won this design award. So, we then get a copy of the magazine and get reprints, and late at night we're sending reprints out to my father's mailing list, and we're licking envelopes, stamps, and so forth. I mean, we're just three partners, that's it. So Peter is looking at the addresses on the list, and it's Father this, and Sister this, so on. And my father had done a lot of Catholic work in Philadelphia. And Peter said, "Why are we sending this out to these people? They're not going to build anything." This is the '70s. And my father said, "Peter, you never know when lightning is going to strike. All right, we'll go one more time and then if it doesn't work, we will change the mailing list."

Two weeks later we got a call from Sister Mary Alfred at the Monastery of St. Clare. "Would we be interested in designing a monastery?" For a young architect, just starting this design firm, a monastery was extraordinary. And we went out and visited them. And actually, what was interesting about it was my father said, "I'd better come with you," because my partner is an Episcopalian. So we go out to meet Sister Mary Alfred, and she is behind a screen. Because the Poor Clares are a completely cloistered order. So Sister Mary Alfred is sitting behind the screen talking to us about designing this monastery for 40 sisters. And she all of a sudden throws the screen open and says, "Hi! I can't do business like this."

Myers
[00:33:20]

[Laughs.]

Dagit
[00:33:26]

And she's Sister Mary Alford. We have this monastery and so on and so forth. And it ended up in a relationship that was an extraordinary relationship between an architect. I ended up being the partner in charge of the project. And the two of us, Sister Mary Alfred and I, designed the building together and it was an amazing, extraordinary experience of two people. First of all, she hired my father and she got two Young Turks. They lived in a row house in North Philadelphia across the street from Girard College. Two attached row houses.

Laverty
[00:34:07]

They just tore that down.

Dagit
[00:34:09]

Two attached row houses. They have been there their entire lives and they started that monastery there 70 years prior. So every sister that lives there has only lived in that building and only knows that building. Now they're about to design a new building and we come along designing a radical new building.

First of all, we...had a dialogue with her about the notion of what a monastery is and the idea that, and this was learned from Lou Kahn and so forth, that a monastery was really a collection of hermits who decide for their own mutual protection that they would band together to be hermits and not live alone. Otherwise, they would have lived alone. So how do you then create a plan that exemplifies that lifestyle of living alone but in a community? So we decided in a stroke to string out all the cells in one line and everybody is an equal. And when they go to their cell, they're the hermit. When they open the door and step into the corridor, they then are part of the community and all of the community rooms are then strung out along that corridor line and the corridor then becomes the cloister unlike the typical monastery which is a donut. You walk around. This is now a corridor that then goes to a ramp that connects all of the spaces of the monastery, the communal spaces of the monastery, and culminates in the arrival of the chapel. And that becomes the processional way, the cloister space. Well, this is a building that has no precedent. And there is no example of Cistercian or any other kind of Benedictine monastery like this. And Sister Mary Alfred buys in. Says she likes the idea.

The other thing that was startling about that project was [the connection to] St. Francis. St. Clare was a contemporary of St. Francis. She founded the Poor Clares and they are under the third order of St Francis, which is very much like the Trappists. They don't eat meat. They celebrate silence for most of the day, they don't talk. They recite the rosary and they pray and they're purely contemplative order and they pray for us. That's what their job is. So if you go with them to tell them a problem that you have, they're working for you.

Anyway, she decides that she wants to do this and we are suggesting throughout this building that we put gardens in honor of St. Francis. So we make a working garden at the working end of the building. We make a garden for the library and a garden for the community space, and we make a front garden space for the entrance that connects to the chapel. And we said, "Do you mind if we design this building in such a way that you enter it and enter into your public space, your garden space. But it belongs to you, but now you're then making it part of the public. Is that okay?" And we showed her the *parti* of Assisi, which is a public square in front of the church. And we said, "That's what St. Francis did." And she said, "Yes, that is what they would like to do." So we created this garden space that you actually enter into.

If you look at what [Le] Corbusier did at La Tourette [Couvent Sainte-Marie-de-La Tourette], you can go up to an edge of a public space that is the contained space that has the cloister. You're not allowed in. In ours, you walk in, and you're then welcomed into the building, but you're not crossing the cloisters. So it was very delicate in terms of, you know, the ownership and so on and so forth, and she decided that that was a wonderful idea.

Then the final garden that we made was, the chapel faces another garden, which is the sacred garden, which is almost a zen garden. And we made a Japanese-like garden and the whole altar wall is glass. This is back in the '70s, so Vatican II is just starting. With them turning the altar around, the priest now faces the congregation, the sisters face the altar, and the priest and the garden. And we were really wondering whether or not that would fly with the diocese, because the whole notion of, well that's a distraction, and so on and so forth. They bought into it and they... liked the idea, and we ended up building it. And one of the most remarkable things of their understanding of what we had done was we got a letter one day from one of our Sisters that said, "You designed our living stone [and] stained glass." It was really quite nice. That garden has all the birds in it, and so on and so forth, and they come in and contemplate there all day long. So that was another story of our beginnings. You never know when lightning strikes. Well, needless to say, we didn't change the mailing list for a while.

Laverty
[00:40:11]

Where was the new monastery?

Dagit
[00:40:13]

That was up in Bucks County in Newtown, Pennsylvania [Langhorne]. Right next to St. Mary's Hospital on Route 40. You can hardly see it nowadays. It's all behind landscaping which is they did a fantastic landscaping job and still there and still occupied by the sisters.

Myers
[00:40:33]

Do you go back and look?

Dagit
[00:40:34]

I have been back. We went back with the tour, obviously. I've been back on various occasions every once in a while to see them. Sister Mary Alfred is not really that active. There's another sister, Sister Evelyn, who is now the Abbess. She's still very active. And it's visited from people all over the world. It's still on the radar screen of buildings. It was the building that propelled us. Robert Stern chose that building to put us into one of 40 under 40 American Architects that was published at the time [1976 Architecture + Urbanism Magazine]. So that building was published in Japan. And the building was also published in France, in *l'architecture d'aujourd'hui*. So it got around. And what was really amazing about it is, as clients, we were working on...

I'll tell a story about the chapel, struggling with it because of the cloister, and they were going to be seen now, which is not really, this is just on the edge of Vatican II. I'm struggling with where does the line occur [between public and cloistered] and so on. Sister Mary Alfred looks at me, and we've had sketches proposed for the design of the chapel. She looks at me and all of a sudden says, "What would [Le] Corbusier do?"

Myers
[00:42:11]

How did she even know about Le Corbusier?

Dagit
[00:42:12]

I said, "Sister?" And she said, "Who are you studying?" I would talk about Le Corbusier and Lou Kahn, and so on--they've got all the books.

Laverty
[00:42:25]

Mm-hmm.

Dagit
[00:42:26]

So in the refectory, I think still, I haven't been up in the refectory in a long time, are Alvar Aalto chairs. Little stools. They all use that for the refectory. We didn't even tell them to get Alvar Aalto. They got them. Isn't that interesting? They study it. And of course, what else are you going to do if you're a contemplative, nun...

Myers
[00:42:52]

But they do their homework.

Dagit
[00:42:53]

Actually, what they do is interesting. The way they earn their living is they make all of the altar rings. And they have like little waffle irons. They make all the hosts for the Eucharist. And they sell them to various parishes and so forth. And that's how they make most of their money to sustain themselves.

It's an interesting order because they are not allowed to buy anything except to establish a new monastery. They don't buy food. All the food is donated. And they get a great deal of food from supermarkets and so on, donated cans and that stuff. We had a storage room that was in the building, which was huge. And we said, "What are you going to do with all this?" She said, "You'll see." We

went in after they occupied the building. They had a wall of soap. It was all donated. And we have a bell tower in the main entry space. We took the old bell from the building. And the purpose of that bell, you know, all of their monasteries, is that you ring the bell when they're starting. The townspeople come and offer the alms to keep them alive. That's how they live. So it's, I mean, it's really, and they still operate somewhat that way. They do go out and they vote, and they see dentists and so on.

Myers
[00:44:19]

You and Peter were in partnerships for 40 years.

Dagit
[00:44:23]

Yeah, just about.

Myers
[00:44:24]

Just about 40 years. And in that time, you did quite a few buildings, hospitals, churches, houses. What do you think is your most important?

Dagit
[00:44:37]

Well, the monastery was one of them. There's no question about it. I think that was probably one of the most extraordinary commissions that we collectively had, as well as I had personally. The gymnasium was a great project. I can rattle off a few that, I mean, I think will be remembered. The Olin Building at Ursinus College is one. It's on the edge of [postmodernism], with a pattern on the facade. It connects our affinity to Bob [Robert] Venturi.

One of the other projects, which is a wonderful project, was a Student Center that we did for Shippensburg University with a giant curved wall. And it's the only building with a big, huge curved wall on it. And the president of the college was really remarkable. He's one of the few State institutions that ever hired Venturi. And Venturi did a renovation project, and it was because of him. And he actually went to the Department of General Services and said "We want a good architect for this student center building," and we ended up getting the project, much by his influence I think. And then we had a presentation to do for the board of trustees, and this is how clients, who are not architects, actually help make architecture. We have this presentation, I make the presentation, and one of the trustees says, "Well, why is this wall a curve?" And Tony Ceddia, the President, gets up and gives a half an hour dissertation of why the wall needs to be curved. And I didn't say a thing. And they approved it. And that's how some clients get you and the buildings that you really want to do. And better they than you trying to defend...a project.

So, anyway, that was another really wonderful building that we did. And we did it on a real tough budget. Many of our projects are very, very low budget kinds of projects. And we actually revelled in the monastery one of doing buildings in a raw concrete block and so forth and not embellishing buildings with a lot of material stuff. And we ended up getting projects built and getting awards for

projects that shouldn't probably get awards that most people wouldn't consider...that you could get an award for.

Myers
[00:47:45]

That's very nice.

Dagit
[00:47:46]

So those are a couple of projects. I would say one of the most intriguing clients that I ever had was Cornell University. Well, actually, there are two really extraordinary clients, aside from the monastery. One is Haverford College. We did the Haverfield College Whitehead Campus Center, and in that, it was the only client that operated in a purely Quaker manner. And that was, and I always remark about it, that there were five or six members of the design committee that were the owners' representatives, people from faculty. [There was] the board of trustees and so on, and ourselves, and the president, and we'd have a meeting, and if any one of the five had any reservations, you back up the process and you start over again and you go through the decision-making process. Any one of five, including the architect, so we were of equal weight.

Laverty
[00:48:53]

Unusual.

Dagit
[00:48:53]

And how unusual. Usually the architect is either the God or the step-and-fetch-it one. And in this case we were all equals trying to get a building designed and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience of mutual respect and you know if they thought something was uncomfortable we respected that. If I sat there and put a frown on my face, they immediately said, "Well, hold on. Okay, let's go back and revisit this" and so forth. It was a dialogue of trust to get a building built and that building got a number of design awards as well.

The client that was really an extraordinary client was Cornell University. I say it's extraordinary because it was the largest client that we ever dealt with. And Cornell is the largest of the Ivy universities. It's a land-grant college as well as an Ivy. So it's private and public. All their agriculture and horticulture and the like is the public realm of the state university. All of the academic humanities and so forth are all private. So it has a huge population up in Ithaca. And what we realized from the very beginning was that we would fly up there and have meetings to discuss the project. And one of the things that we did for them was to design the whole north campus of Cornell University. And we did that with Alan Chimacoff, who was a contemporary of mine, who I knew my entire life. And the University of the Architect joined the two of us to design a master plan for the campus. So, Hillier with Chimacoff and Dagit/Saylor did the project jointly. And then we did the Appel Commons Center, which is a dining hall. They did the residence halls. So each of us got a significant project. What we found of them was that we would go up and make a presentation with a committee of about 25 in the morning. And then a committee of another 25 of different faces in the afternoon. And that was the size of that client. And you

had to satisfy a huge number of constituents in order to get a building built. And we got it successfully built. And it was a wonderful experience. So those were the various buildings and experiences that I've had, at least in my mind, stand out.

Myers
[00:51:35]

You've had significant influences. Giurgola, Venturi, Kahn. Who else influenced you?

Dagit
[00:51:44]

Well, certainly [Le] Corbusier. Mario Romañach was teaching at Penn. He was a great advocate of [Le] Corbusier. And certainly, before I went to Lou Kahn's master's studio, I was a giant advocate of [Le] Corbusier's work through Mario. And Mario, in his wonderful way, would come to the class and he would ask everybody there at the drawing board and Mario would look at you and say, "You know Corbu?" And, yeah, because you had his books sitting there that you were looking at. So I would say he was an extraordinary influence in my career and because of that we are somewhat associated in the '70s with the New York Five but kind of, I would say, tinted by Aldo Giurgola and the Grays, which were the opposite of the New York Five because they were the Whites and they had a polemic about livability of buildings. And the problem with Corbusier and much of that kind of work, [was that] intellectually it was all very delightful visually but often hard to live in. Aldo and the Graves and Venturi were more interested in habitable Modern architecture. So we were obviously influenced by those two forces that were out there fighting each other and we're observers of it and taking it all in.

I would say that [our] architecture is very much on the Peter Boland kind of view of being very humanist and very accessible Modern architecture. Trying to be, anyway. People would voice a concern about the monastery because it's a tough building, but it was meant to be tough. So it's raw concrete block and so on and so forth. Everybody sees it, understands it. You know, they're not supposed to have gilded, marvelous [materials]. So they're supposed to have a tough environment to take a vow of poverty for God's sake. And much of our work goes over that line into the more human kind of attitude of trying to get Modern architecture to behave itself.

Myers
[00:54:24]

That's Romañach, actually

Dagit
[00:54:25]

Yeah, oh very much, very much. Mario really was an advocate of Corbusier, but a softer Corbusier.

Myers
[00:54:35]

Yeah, here's a very warm person.

Dagit
[00:54:37]

Oh, absolutely. Wonderful, wonderful. He was my thesis critic.

Myers
[00:54:41]

What was your thesis on?

Dagit
[00:54:43]

I did a town hall in Avalon. I had grown up there in my early days, summers, and so forth. So that was my thesis program. And actually that became one of Mario's stalwart programs to give for problems in his studio.

Myers
[00:55:06]

Well, those are all long-term faculty members. Giurgola, Venturi, Románach, long-time at Penn... And how about Dean Perkins?

Dagit
[00:55:18]

Well, Perkins put it all together. There's no question about it. The school would, I should say in terms of our history, I attended and some of the people at Penn wanted me to write a book. I don't know how much of a market there would be on the Philadelphia School. Because I attended Penn from 1961 to 1968, which was the height of the Philadelphia School. And Perkins put that together and got the faculty, found the faculty. He had an extraordinary talent in recognizing who were the up-and-comers of the world of architecture and put them all together. And that moment at Penn, you were there, was an extraordinary moment for any school in a country that had never been duplicated, given the number of names of people. The number of deans that came out of that school, like 16 that graduated from Holmes Perkins' faculty. The number of teachers. What Holmes Perkins created was enormous. Practicing architects, too. And there's a reason for that, and I always talk about it. Holmes Perkin, I don't know whether he knew it or not, but there's an extraordinary chemistry that occurred at Penn, partly due to circumstances of the space of the design studio, which was one giant room in a vaulted space.

Myers
[00:57:04]

This is the old [building].

Dagit
[00:57:05]

On the third floor of Hayden Hall. All of the students were in one room and we all did our projects first-, second-, and third-years all together. So everybody got to know everybody who was there. So you were up in the studio. So I'm two years younger than you are [to Myers]. Well, what did you do when you're younger? You asked the older guys for crits. And what did the older guys do? They gave you crits. Well, what Holmes Perkins was doing was teaching everybody how to become a faculty member and how to teach. Without actually having a program about how to teach. And we all learned to teach because we were there. We were doing it.

And the other thing that he did, which I don't know whether he knew it or not, but when you did your thesis, you got the people who are in first year to help you with your thesis when you're in third year. And so you built a team. Well, what were you learning because of the requirements of thesis at that time, which was to do a full set of working drawings? You are actually running an architectural team. And you learned how to do that at Penn, which is really

extraordinary. I don't think anybody had any kind of an education like that anywhere in the country. And we all had an operating office to produce your thesis. But you had five or six people you had to delegate. You do the lettering, I'll do this, and so on and so forth. Really amazing with all of your organizational skills and so on. When I got out of Penn, and my cousins gave me this gymnasium building, and I had worked for John Lawson on the United Fund building, and I watched how they put the set of working drawings together. I knew how to run a team.

Myers
[00:59:01]

You were prepared.

Dagit
[00:59:02]

Absolutely. And you don't see it today, and you don't see it prior to that moment in time. And I don't even think that Holmes Perkins knew for sure that that was what he was creating at the time. It just happened. And it was an amazing educational experience to have happened. Maybe he knew. I don't know. But no one has ever asked him. But it happened, and the number of teachers that he created and practitioners are really amazing, absolutely. So it's quite a moment.

Myers
[00:59:39]

How about buildings? What buildings have influenced you, either historical or modern buildings? Is it by the same architects, Kahn and Giurgola, Venturi, etc.? What buildings were significant in your career?

Dagit
[00:59:59]

There's one building that I would say probably is not known by almost anybody. There is a building in southern France that Le Corbusier was asked to go to before, by the Benedictine monks, before he did La Tourette. And the building is called the Abbaye du Thoronet. And the Abbaye du Thoronet, there's a book out on it, *The Building of Light* [note: the book is entitled *The Architecture of Truth: The Cistercian Abbey of Le Thoronet*]. And the Abbey du Thoronet is a Cistercian monastery that has windows in it and it has arcades, big thick giant arches that allow light into a building like you've never seen anywhere else in and Corbusier was asked to go there. You don't see what the effect of that building was in La Tourette, but you see it in Ronchamp. The light in Ronchamp [Notre-Dame du Haut] comes right out of that.

Myers
[01:01:07]

What year is Abbaye du Thoronet?

Dagit
[01:01:10]

1100-1200. And the rose windows are cut with this splayed stone so the halo of light around the opening is absolutely staggering. [I had a fellowship] to go to Europe in 1966, and I was traveling with a Chinese woman who was a classmate of mine, and she insisted we go to the Abbaye du Thoronet, and we all said, "Come on, it's just another abbey." You know, you have to go there. It was the one that Le Corbusier went to, so we went there. I've been back. It's an incredible place. That building was an enormous influence, and of course, then, Ronchamp influences you, having seen it. Much less the Abbaye du Thoronet.

The other buildings I would say, the two most significant buildings, I would say the Salk Institute in California and the Kimball Art Museum [in Fort Worth]. The Kimball because of the way it treats light. And there are connections with the Abbaye du Thoronet. And the Salk building is probably, of the twentieth century, the most profound work in the world. And I say that because when I was in Lou's studio, Lou constantly talked about the University of Virginia and The Lawn, Jefferson's lawn. Jefferson, putting the library in the center of the building and then forming these wings of classroom living spaces, reaching out to the Appalachian mountains, the shrouded misty mountains of the West, was Jefferson's way of communicating to America that if you studied, it's out there. It's yours.

What Lou talked about when he was in the studio was that architecture is the merging of science and religion. And when you go to La Jolla and go see the Salk Institute, Lou put two science buildings flanking a plaza that looks to the east. And what is in the east? Mysticism. And what Lou said was, "Here is the next horizon. Look out there guys, just like Jefferson." And when you stand on that plaza, if you had ever been in touch with Lou, and you had ever heard what he had said, you stood there and said, "Oh my goodness, that's exactly what he meant." That little line of water takes you right to the Pacific Ocean, and you see the setting sun out there, and what's really amazing is you see people on parasails. They're sailing across the water at the same time. You know, it's almost as if Lou knew that they would be doing that, and you stand there and say, "That's science and religion." It's all there. So I think that staggering thing like that doesn't exist. That he captured Jefferson and took it to the 20th century, and I don't think anybody else has captured anything quite like that in any of the buildings that we've seen since or obviously prior to that.

Myers
[01:05:19]

You do have a religious experience.

Dagit
[01:05:21]

Oh, my goodness, it's a cathedral. There's no question that it's a cathedral. Lou talked about a couple of things. One, he talked about silence and light, and he debated whether or not that plaza was going to be grass and whether it would be landscape and so on, and Luis Barragán convinced him that it should be marble. Travertine. And they actually found a ship that was carrying travertine ballast, and that's where they got the marble for that plaza. Because travertine was throwaway and Lou made it the material that it is. And they found a ship and they got the travertine marble that was all by virtue of Barragán's influence. Because Lou didn't know what to do with it and he asked Barragán to come and see because Barragán was used to a climate like that. Lou said, "What do I do with this landscape?" And Barragán said, "You don't do landscaping. You do this plaza." And one of the things that comes out of that plaza is that when you stand there, you then realize because it is so quiet [whispered]. That, that is the silence and the light that Lou was searching for, as well as this mystery of

religion and science. They all come together right in that building. It's really quite an amazing experience. So I would say that, I mean, I certainly never did a building anything like that, but you know, so you say what influenced you, well you don't see it, but maybe you do, I don't know. But that certainly influenced me a great deal. And the Kimbell, because just the way the light and the gardens work. And I knew the Kimbell before we did the monastery. And there are sculpture gardens. So we learned some lessons from, we certainly learned a lot of lessons from Lou in designing the monastery and stuff.

Myers
[01:07:25]

How about the towers at the University of Pennsylvania [i.e. Richards Medical Laboratories]? That was being done while you were in school. Did that have an influence in any way?

Dagit
[01:07:32]

I don't think as much. Certainly, when I first met Lou, that story, the towers were under construction. That building I think is actually one of the marvels of Lou and [shows] the size of the genius because... After he did that building, everybody else went out and tried to copy it, and Lou rejected it. And Lou designed Salk in the absolute reverse of what the ideal behind the towers were. That you're not in a tower of learning, you're in a group learning environment and we'll do the building entirely differently. And very few architects would ever reject what they had already been told was the masterpiece of their career. So that was also remarkable. And that was remarkable about him. The teaching experience, or my own experience of being with him, was that kind of learning. That he could reject what he had already been told was his masterpiece. It's really pretty remarkable.

Myers
[01:09:05]

He had an ability to design and show you things in architecture, but he also had this wonderful way with words and his ideas in those words were as strong.

Dagit
[01:09:18]

Oh, he was a poet. He was a philosopher. He really was a pretty amazing mind.

Myers
[01:09:28]

Do you know any other architect who was able to do verbally and artistically what he did?

Dagit
[01:09:35]

I suspect that Wright had that magnetism that... Lou lived on magnetism. I mean, people either adore him or hate him, and because of what he did with his architecture, he was spellbinding in his presentation of himself. He was a brilliant showman. Having been in Mask and Wig, I can tell you that Lou knew how to do theater better than almost anybody that you've ever seen.

Myers
[01:10:19]

[Laughing]

Dagit
[01:10:19]

And I think Wright had that kind of charisma about him. It's magnetic. I mean it was really just amazing when he walked into the studio. I mean, I knew quite

firsthand his remarkable dislike for Frank Lloyd Wright. But I think the two of them, probably of the American architects, are the two most of that kind of genre.

Myers
[01:10:58]

Both absolutely inspiring people.

Dagit
[01:11:00]

Yeah, and certainly influential.

Myers
[01:11:03]

In your own office, you had a number of people working for you over time. Any people you want to point out that came out of your office maybe because of the influence between you and Peter and your father here?

Dagit
[01:11:22]

I don't think the next generation, well I should say Jamie Wyper [of JacobsWyper] was one of our graduates and Steve Henkelman at Cope Linder Architects were probably two of the best that we had at the time. Bob Knauss teaches at Drexel. But, and maybe Mary Holland, who is at CICADA out in Chestnut Hill. She has her own firm that does some pretty good design kind of work. I don't think there's a graduate kind of, I mean. Partly because of Penn and partly because we were in Giurgola's office and Aldo had a number of people that graduated from his firm and went on--Steve Goldberg and others that practiced that became fairly well known.

I don't think that the architects today are, first of all, I don't think that there's the number of teacher-practitioners out there that are influencing architects like it was with Aldo and Bob Venturi and so on. I don't think the next generation has done as well. And I include myself. I mean, you know, I'm a Kahn graduate. I never got near where he was. And I'm pretty proud of what I did. But...We're going to have to wait for another generation to find out who's going to come up next.

Myers
[01:13:25]

That's partly, I think, because of the university that Perkins put together. It's just not that way anymore. Even three or four deans later, it's not the same.

Dagit
[01:13:37]

No. It's going to need another spark. And I don't think it's just Penn. I think it is everywhere. I don't think that the teachers out there are anywhere near the level that Perkins put together in his group of people in any university. I mean people keep on asking me, "Who's the best architectural school?" And I say, "Well, they're all sort of okay."

Myers
[01:14:06]

None that stands up above the rest. In your office, how did you go about work? Who was in charge of projects? Is it by who found the project or how did you arrange projects?

Dagit
[01:14:22]

Well, it's interesting you ask, because it became that way of who found the projects, which is not what I wanted. When we started, we actually divided up the work based upon who had work and who didn't have work. I did the Holy Family College and the monastery at the same time. And Peter was doing other projects. And then when Magee Hospital came in, that was quite a momentous moment in the office. We had three projects come in on one day. The Leidy Laboratories that I did with Carlos Waller at Penn; the library that we did at Gwynedd [Mercy] University, which is also a very significant, wonderful building; and Magee. And I was pretty instrumental in getting hold of the three projects, and I gave McGee to Peter, which was the largest of them, because I already had committed myself to doing the Gwynedd [Mercy] University Library and with Carlos. And so I said, "You better do that one." And we kind of divided up the work in that kind of fashion. As the firm grew on and the marketing got tougher and tougher, which it has been over the years, you cultivated clients and then you brought them in and you did the work. I didn't really want it to be that way, I wanted it to kind of be a sharing and so forth and it ultimately ended up... And it's one of the reasons I left, it became very possessive. So, you ended up, in my view, we ended up with three partners and three firms. And that wasn't what I was really looking for.

Myers
[01:16:24]

How many people did you generally employ in your partnership?

Dagit
[01:16:30]

Well, our peak was 35, which is too big, certainly for two partners that we had. We generally had about 20 people that were working for us. When the computer came into being, 20 was the size that you could do the same amount of work with 35. And so you could still manage a partnership at that level, doing that volume of work. When we got to be 35, there were too many decisions that were being done that you didn't really participate nearly as much. And we discovered that when we moved in 1991. We were just getting into the computer and we moved and we were getting rid of drawings. And with piles of study drawings that none of us knew had been made and we were like, "That's where all the money went!" And part of it was because you're so busy you made a decision in the office and you said, "Okay, we're going to do it like this." And you had an interview in Seattle or someplace so you get on a plane you come back four days later and you say, "What happened to that decision?" "Oh, we did these studies." "Wait a minute." "We put that decision away, to bed." "Oh no, we didn't!" That wasn't any good. So, when the computer came into being, it actually helped us control that kind of effort.

And it was very interesting because the computer certainly has made major differences in the way we all work. We did a project for the Philadelphia Zoo, the animal hospital, and they had a guy who was used to doing big, huge pharmaceutical projects. This is about a four-million-dollar project. And he asked me, "What kind of systems do you have for quality control?" And I'm an

architect--like Peter Bohlin, and so many other of us that came out of it. I'm the architect of the gut. You know, you do what you see. So I looked at it and I say, "What are you talking about?" "Well, what system do you have in place for quality control?" And I said, "I'll tell you what I do. I walk up to the computer screen and I look at it." He said, "What do you mean? What's your system?" I said, "I walk up to the computer and I look at it. And if I like it, it keeps going. If I don't, we start over." "Oh, that's very unique." So, in his mind, there had to be some sort of formula. In my mind, it's doing what you do, you know?

Gus [August] Komendant had a wonderful comment when he was at Penn, the engineer. He came to tell us how to do a precast concrete factory. And before he told us how to do a precast concrete factory was another really great story. He was talking about the difference between theory and practice. And he said, "Agriculture is a little bit like farming. Only farming is doing it." And what I was doing was the quality control, and what he wanted to see was the agriculture of it, and what manual did you have? And we got over it, we got it built, and so on. So the [firm] size of 35, that's when the quality control began to get out of line, because you didn't have the time. So many firms take on more and more partners because you don't really have the time. We wanted to keep our firm pretty boutique-ish in terms of the size and our ability to get in and do the work and work with clients directly and so on and not become a figurehead of an office. So that's, you know, 20 was about right. So that was a great size.

Myers
[01:21:01]

Who else was in your class that you remember as architects?

Dagit
[01:21:06]

Oh, gosh. John Kurtz was a partner. He's currently a partner of MGA Partners. He was probably one of the stellar members of the class. [S.] Neil Schlosser, do you remember him? And he was another one that was a, and he was definitely, his father worked for Lou Kahn. And he worked with Lou Kahn while he was at Penn at the time. And as a matter of fact, he was the person who introduced me to St. Francis de Sales. We were at Penn, it's a great story, we were at Penn and we were in basic design. And he had a motorcycle. And he said, "I found this fantastic church, you gotta go see it." So, sure, okay fine. So I got on his motorcycle. We went out to 42nd and Springfield Avenue. We went into this incredible church. Unbelievable. So I went home. It was Thanksgiving or whatever. I said, "Dad, I just saw this fantastic church. It's really unbelievable." He said, "Where?" I said, "42nd [and] Springfield Avenue. It is this giant vaulted thing. It is just really fantastic." He said, "Yeah. Your sister was married there and you were in the wedding party. That's your grandfather's church."

Myers
[01:22:40]

Oh my god. That is a funny story.

- Dagit
[01:22:44] And I didn't remember anything about my sister's wedding at the time. I was 14 years old and here I am, 17 or 18, and you know a lot of the world goes by when you are a teenager.
- Myers
[01:22:59] Well, that's very flattering, because that didn't come out of any family relationship.
- Dagit
[01:23:03] No, no, no. That was Neil finding it first, and yeah. So that gives you a sense of how remarkable that building actually is, but anyway. So there's a couple of the people
- Myers
[01:23:21] Now the last thing I wanted to ask you about...Is while you're doing all this design work and new buildings going up and inspections of buildings and all the stuff that goes with doing new projects, you did a lot of public service for architecture. How did you ever find time to do it? I mean it wasn't just the local chapter. You were president. And then you were on all kinds of committees. You went to the state. You were on the state committees. You had a lot of public service. How did you balance all of that?
- Dagit
[01:23:56] Well, I think, you know, just like Bud Mitchell always said, "Give a busy man something to do and he'll do it." I've always been amazed, quite frankly, at my own career at Penn because when I was at Penn, my father had been in Mask and Wig and one of the things when we started the firm, Peter and I were dancing together at Mask and Wig and my father was in Mask and Wig. So we started a firm and we started on the kind of slogan that, well, if it doesn't work, we can always do a song and a dance. We didn't have to do that, fortunately, but one of things that I think is really extraordinary is that when I was in Mask and Wig show, I started when I was a freshman, and I was majoring in architecture. And the rigors of the Penn education, I found that my grades were always better in the second semester than they were in the first, and that's when I was in Mask and Wig. And you went to rehearsal every night at 7 o'clock, and you got home at midnight, and then you studied. And you wrote the term papers on the bus, on the road trip, with 60 other guys all around you and raising hell, and you're writing a term paper, and so on. And my grades were always better. And I found the time, I'm not sure how, but that's how you find the time. You find the time because you make the time.
- Bud Mitchell, when I started the firm, one of the things that he did, and he became the President of the AIA. He came to me one time, and we just started working on his friend's house, Paul Miller's house. And he came in this wonderful way and he said, "You have to go national." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "One way to get there is to get involved with the AIA." So I joined a national committee, the Committee for Architecture for Arts and Recreation in the '70s. And one of the things that you do is if you do join a thing like that and you make a contribution, you find out that you get more out of it than you actually put into it. So I joined this committee and we created a

remarkable conference in Cincinnati. All over the country with the ITT, the Institute for Theater Technology. It was a co-joined conference and I was the co-chairman of that conference on "Design and Performing Arts Facilities." And about 400 people showed up, and the AIA had never had a conference that was anything like that. And what was even more remarkable was that the AIA made money from the conference. They were so upset by the fact that they made money that they sunset the committee. Because one of the things the AIA did not do was make money. I mean, that was morally, ethically, you know, the wrong idea. And what happened was people who went to that conference that were architects got commissions. That's even worse for the AIA. And so you got what you put into it. I got a project in Alabama that grew right out of that conference. And then when that committee was sunsetted, I was then asked by the National AIA Committee on Design to join that committee, and in those days you were asked.

RECORDING BREAK

RECORDING RESUMES

Dagit
[00:00:00]

So I had been 40 under 40 and had won a *Progressive Architecture* Award and so on and the monastery had already been published. So they came to me and said, "Would you join the committee?" So I joined the committee. And then what happened out of that committee was we did the Lou Kahn Conference in Philadelphia in conjunction with the Lou Kahn Show at the Philadelphia Art Museum. And 400 architects showed up at that. Now we made money at that conference, but that was okay then. It was in 1991. And so that's how I got involved in, you know, you then find out when you join the Committee of Design anyway that the people who were on that committee were wonderful people. They're all designers, they're all interested in what you're interested in, and we learned by going. So you really enjoyed the trips that they had and the meetings that they have and so on.

So then, John Lawson came and asked me, "Would I be interested in being the President of the AIA?" I guess so. So I became the President of the AIA. And then Don Dissinger called me and said, "I want you to take over the Leadership Forum in Harrisburg." "Sure, why not, Don." Well, it turned out that's the fundraising arm for the Pennsylvania PAC, so I became Chairman of the PAC and you get to know people and so on. So, gee, all these people I'm having so much fun with, I'd like to be on the board and stay with it. So I stayed with it, so that's how I served on the Board of the Pennsylvania. So, you know, you get out of it what you put in. And I certainly have gotten a tremendous amount out of it. All the things that I've done with that and the AIA Design Committee and travel all over the world and see buildings that I probably wouldn't have seen. So you pay your dues, you're going to join a committee and put your time in, and you make time. You do it on your own time or you know where, but yeah I paid my dues on that. One of the things that was interesting when I became the President of the AIA, a woman who will remain nameless but well known within the community, looked at me when I became nominated for the President of the Chapter, and I was already Fellow, and she came and said, "What are you doing that for? You're already a Fellow?" Well, that's not what I do. I didn't do it for that reason. So, anyway.

Myers
[00:02:40]

That's great. Thank you very much. That was the best we've had. Very, very good.

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