

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

PAOLO POLLEDRI

SFMOMA Staff, 1987 -1994
Curator of Architecture and Design

Interview conducted by
Lisa Rubens and Richard Cándida Smith in 2008

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Interview #1: March 6, 2008

[Begin Audio File 1 03-06-2008.mp3]

Rubens: I'd like to hear from you about how it is that you were hired to be the first curator of architecture and design.

01-00:02:38

Polledri: I learned about the intentions of the museum, Jack Lane's, whom I'd never met, when I was in Los Angeles at the Getty Center. I'd always thought of San Francisco as a city that I particularly admired. So on occasional visits with my wife, who was working here and commuting at the time, we said how nice it would be to be back here. Pangs of nostalgia or something, because I was at Berkeley for about five years. I learned about it through a friend of mine who had applied for the same position and decided he really didn't quite want it. He gave me an announcement. There was a Xeroxed copy—it was typewritten; there weren't any computers then—that described [the job] briefly. I can't even paraphrase it. I can't remember exactly what it said. I wrote a letter to Jack. I said I would be here in San Francisco for a meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, of which I was a member at the time, and would he want to meet to talk about this thing? I didn't even know whether the position was still open, whether they'd hired someone already or what. Jack, or rather his secretary, called me and set up an appointment, and we met. The interview, I thought, went very well. We were all full of ideas, of enthusiasm at the time.

Rubens: The meeting took place where?

01-00:04:53

Polledri: At the old museum, in his office.

Rubens: It was specifically clear that this was a position to—

01-00:05:00

Polledri: To start the department. That's what he'd outlined. He wanted to know what my ideas would be. My ideas, for some reason, I thought for years about what would happen if—At that time, only MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] in New York had an architecture and design department. There wasn't quite a trend. That started afterwards, having different departments around the country or around the world. This would be, that I knew of, only the second one.

What would happen if we had another department of architecture and design in the United States? I didn't quite ever like what MoMA in New York was doing. I visited several times. Of course, I was as excited as anybody else to look at Mies van der Rohe's signed drawings, but I thought if you compare those things to what the other parts of the museum were showing, well, you've got to be an architect in order to appreciate what you're looking at. And not just that, but then I felt, here we are seeing lamps, cutlery, we are

seeing chairs and we are seeing all these things. You go and visit the Brooklyn Museum, and even though the place is entirely different, you're looking at the same things, basically. What makes this a museum of *modern* art, versus a department of *decorative* arts? That started my train of thought. I told Jack that if it were me, I would do something completely different. First of all, all of the masters of the modern movement had died off. Nobody was alive anymore. There was the occasional Frank Lloyd Wright drawing that would go for an exorbitant amount of money. I know that there was a gallery in New York, they were trying to start something, kick start. There was Max Protech, who had this idea that people would buy architectural drawings. He was starting to create a market. I had a talk with him about it and I said, "It's not going to go anywhere."

Rubens: Did you have the talk prior to your—

01-00:07:50

Polledri:

No, I think subsequent to when it started. I started traveling, trying to meet people. What happened was that I said, "Let's forget about comparing ourselves, being the poor cousin, the poor relative of MoMA. Let's start something completely new. Let's start thinking about the fact that there was something here that wasn't replicated anywhere else."

I called it regionalism—an unfortunate choice, because it had many negative connotations at that time. But I said, "It's something that, because of the climate, because of the landscape, because of the culture, because of the attitude of people, didn't quite happen anywhere else." If we look at the two major centers—I was thinking about San Francisco and L. A., at that time—we're looking at the differences between them. But there are some elements in common. I don't want to label it, but there was a spirit of adventure that was visible. There was a no-nonsense attitude. Those people were thinking about the same thing as I was, thinking, "We're here. Let's start something that we haven't done anywhere else."

For some reason, they moved there because they were of that frame of mind. They found a receptive public. Just trying to think about what their train of thought was, at that time, I said, "Well, we go anywhere else, we go to Boston, and people would laugh at us. We go to Europe, and people are so set in their ways, there are so many groups and teams and different types of political parties, that we are going to be crucified if we bring some new ideas. Or squashed to death." Where do they go? They go to L. A. or they come here—places where there are no preconceptions. There is hardly anything. There are all these people who are wacky and who have all these different ideas. It's not coincidentally that the aviation industry got started down south, that the movie industry started there. The attitude that things were possible, that weren't possible anywhere else.

Rubens: I'm not quite sure why you said "unfortunate use of the word regionalism." In your writing and your presentations, right when you were hired, you're explaining that regionalism is not provincialism. You use the word that it's beyond light quality, land. You say *attitude*. How did you come to that thinking? But let me ask you this: When did you first come to California?

01-00:11:34

Polledri: In 1976.

Rubens: The reason was?

01-00:11:37

Polledri: I got a Fulbright scholarship to go to Berkeley.

Rubens: In the letter that you write to Jack, you say, "at the suggestion of Kristof [sic]." Is that who you worked with?

01-00:11:53

Polledri: Spiro Kostof.

Rubens: Kostof, I'm sorry. I see. I see. Spiro Kostof, yes. Did you come to work with him?

01-00:11:59

Polledri: Yes.

Rubens: What were you going to particularly study?

01-00:12:06

Polledri: I didn't know. I wanted to study history because I had this long plan in mind about the fact that I was trying to become a very good architect. And first, I started going to school. That gave me a certain level of understanding. Then I started working.

Rubens: Was your school a traditional classic—?

01-00:12:30

Polledri: Well, it was supposed to be a traditional type of school, but it turned out to be right during '68, and there was a lot of turmoil. It made it anything but.

Rubens: The school was?

01-00:12:42

Polledri: School of Architecture, in Venice [Italy], where I studied with several architects who are now dead, but had become famous. Like Carlo Scarpa, for example, was a teacher of mine.

Rubens: My point was, you had not come to California before. The Fulbright enabled you to come?

01-00:13:28

Polledri: Yeah, I always thought—

Rubens:

I wanted to know what was in your mind about California. The music, the California dreaming?

01-00:13:36

Polledri: Well, no.

Rubens:

Disneyland?

01-00:13:39

Polledri: Sorry to disappoint you. It wasn't anything like that. In fact, the thing that I was very interested in at that point was that several members of the Frankfurt School were in California. That's what attracted me the most.

Rubens:

They were in L. A., mostly, right?

01-00:13:57

Polledri: Yeah, they were. Leo Löwenthal was at Berkeley. I thought, wouldn't it be cool to study with them? I never did. But that's one wise thing, one wise choice that I made.

Rubens:

Kostof was.

01-00:14:21

Polledri: I wasn't in the least interested in that. But Kostof was there, and I met him at Berkeley. I was very intrigued by what he was saying, the way he was thinking about buildings, the way he was thinking about history, the way he was looking at an intersection, buildings as an intersection of different trains of thought, of influences. There wasn't a set method. It was just at a crossroads between urban history and architecture that he was interested in. I was, too. To me, it came naturally to think that way. I took it for granted. I found, much to my surprise, that some teachers, even at Berkeley, weren't thinking at all like that. They were thinking about, this is a building, this is a city, do not mix things.

Rubens:

You pursued a Ph.D.?

01-00:15:36

Polledri: I did.

Rubens:

You wrote one?

01-00:15:40

Polledri: I ended up in writing about eighteenth-century urban history of Venice. I wrote all but two chapters of my dissertation. It turned out that because Spiro died and because I was working at the museum, I lost interest in the doctoral program. The people at Berkeley that were there—I don't know. They seemed

to me that they hated architecture. They were trying to do anything but architectural history. They were interested in material culture. That's not to diminish, but why in heaven are you going to a department of architecture and teach those things? Totally irrelevant for architects.

Rubens: You said were working at a museum?

01-00:16:35

Polledri: Yes, here.

Rubens: Here. The Getty was before here.

01-00:16:39

Polledri: Yes.

Rubens: How did you get to the Getty then?

01-00:16:42

Polledri: How did I get to the Getty? Well, I knew Kurt Forster. We were in Boston at the same time. He was teaching at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. I met him years before, at Berkeley. We became friendly. When I learned that Kurt went to L. A. to head the Getty program, and my wife and I moved back to the West Coast, we went to L. A., I gave him a call, and said, "I need to work."

Rubens: You needed a job.

01-00:17:24

Polledri: "I need a job. Do you have anything for me?" He said, "Yeah, would you want to become my research assistant for a while?" I said, "Sure." I started working there, for what at that time was a princely sum of \$12 an hour. I liked the place. There was nothing. They were on the fifth floor of an office building.

Rubens: '84 to '87.

01-00:18:05

Polledri: We're there, and every day there was something to invent. "How do we do this?" Nobody knew anything. It turned out I had a knack for those kinds of things. Besides, Kurt wasn't quite a people person. He used me as an intermediary to deal with the head of the library, with whom he didn't get along. I would go there and try to explain things. "I need this done. How do we do it?" We established things. Then gradually, he had Mark Mack to design new offices. We moved out to the new offices. That's where the politics comes in. Who's closest to the director's office? There was all sorts of posturing that went on. The place quickly fell apart, in my mind.

Rubens: Then here, you learn about this opening.

01-00:19:19

Polledri:

I learned about that, but I also started communicating a lot with the Getty Museum. It's almost like—think of it as the FBI and the CIA once a week have a meeting together. They don't get along, as a rule, because they have their own turfs, but they have to communicate. I was the delegate of the Getty Center to go there and talk to the Getty Museum people. I would routinely get an earful about how things are done, how things should be done, and why aren't you following the way things should be done? [The museum] was still in the villa in Malibu.

Rubens:

Were plans being drawn up for the [new building]?

01-00:20:16

Polledri:

No, no. It started about the same time that Richard Meier got selected. The process of selection started before I even joined the center.

Rubens:

Were you involved with that at all?

01-00:20:27

Polledri:

Yes, I was. Very much so. I had the job description as a research assistant. Gradually, it was several pages long. "Why don't you draft a plan for the center, Paolo? A program for it." I said, "Okay. I can do that." I started writing it up, and I said, "Well, we need this and this and this and this. This should be closer to this. This needs to be really adjacent to this." I described all of that. It was several pages long. I gave it to Richard Meier, and we talked about things. I started working on that, on the planning of that. That got me, I think, into hot water with the center, the museum, and everybody else. I don't know. This was politics as usual.

Rubens:

In this preparation for this plan, did you then travel to other museums?

01-00:21:51

Polledri:

No, not at all. I got to know some—especially a museum director. To be honest with you, I can't remember his name. Unfortunately, he's passed away.

Rubens:

That's all right. This happens all the time.

01-00:22:07

Polledri:

He was a real nice person. He the former museum director of the Toledo Museum [of Art] in Ohio.

Cándida Smith:

Otto Wittmann

01-00:22:16

Polledri:

Yes. Exactly. We became very friendly because he was a person of exceptional common sense. I think I could see that he was laughing, listening to all these politics going on.

Cándida Smith: Kurt Forster's idea of the Getty Research center was as an "anti-museum." It was also going to be the place where the architecture and design materials were collected.

01-00:22:51

Polledri: Exactly. There were the archives. I don't know that he had a firm policy about what to collect. But I think a little bit of that stuck with me, because he was—I didn't want to have to deal with the archives. I saw what went on, and I saw the people who would be necessary to gather material, archival material, and take care of it, and I wasn't it. But the idea of thinking of art not so much as an artifact, as an object, but as the result of a process that's what really started me thinking about architecture and design. Especially for design. I saw them as two aspects of the same discipline. That's what actually created this idea that the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco should be a different place from what happened in New York. That's what I told Jack.

Cándida Smith: Los Angeles prides itself on its regional architecture and also its regional design. While you were in L. A., were you becoming more familiar—

01-00:24:23

Polledri: Oh, absolutely. I met Ray Eames. We had dinner several times, we had friends in common. The office wasn't working, quite, but was still there on Washington Boulevard. It's still there, in fact.

Cándida Smith: Did you know John Entenza?

01-00:25:10

Polledri: No, I never met John Entenza. I think he'd already passed away.

Rubens: Now, you had already studied at Berkeley, and then went down there. I was wondering—

01-00:25:19

Polledri: What happened in between?

Rubens: I was also wondering about your interest in the Case Study houses, because Wurster is the only Northern California architect who's in the Case Study house project. So did you look at the Case Study houses?

01-00:25:31

Polledri: Absolutely. I worshiped those people. They were my social inspiration. It was looking at them, and looking at [William] Wurster, here in Northern—Because when I was here as a student, there was a friend of mine. When we were both young and single, we used to roam around and go and visit places. He grew up here. His grandmother was one of William Wurster's first clients.

Rubens: What's the name?

01-00:26:10

Polledri: Daniel Gregory.

Rubens:

Oh, well, the Daniel Gregory house.

01-00:26:15

Polledri:

The Farmhouse. I went to visit there. My first year, I think, at Christmas, I went. We were in the same program. We went around visiting. I knew about Wurster, and I had my own ideas about his frame of mind. I looked at those things down there. They were different. But there was *something* in common between them. That's something that appealed to me very much, because all I'd seen on the West Coast when I was in Europe wasn't all that much; there wasn't much published. I knew [Richard] Neutra, of course, I knew a few other things.

Rubens:

[Rudolph] Schindler?

01-00:28:09

Polledri:

Schindler, yes. There was one book published at the time. I learned about his work when I was in London. Because another friend of mine, who actually was in love with the West Coast, we were working together at Pentagram at that point. He made a point of taking me under his wing, and he told me about things that were happening here. It was always in my mind.

Rubens:

Let me then get back to San Francisco and you starting the job. It's Henry Hopkins who announces the plans to establish a department of architecture and design in '83. Of course, that doesn't happen, and then '85, Tom Swift gets on the board. He's the builder, basically, for this one. He's pushing it. But it really isn't until Jack Lane does the nationwide search. I didn't realize that there was a challenge grant from the National Endowment. Here is your letter. It says Richard Bender, of the University of California—

01-00:28:23

Polledri:

He was the dean at the School of Architecture.

Rubens:

I didn't know him. I knew Roger Montgomery very well.

01-00:28:38

Polledri:

Before Montgomery, Dick Bender—who's still alive, by the way.

Rubens:

You say, "Dick Bender recommends me," and you talk about your responsibilities and what you've been doing at the new Getty complex. It's a very succinct letter. You're writing your dissertation and, "I'm very interested in hearing more about the position." You tell us that you and Jack kicked around these ideas. Did Jack have any mandate for you? Did he say, "I want X, Y, Z"?

01-00:29:19

Polledri:

No, Jack had no idea about what the department would be like.

Rubens: He knew he wanted it.

01-00:29:26

Polledri: He wanted ideas. He said, “I know you’re not a curator, and I can live with that.”

Rubens: He knew you were an architect, and he knew that you had worked with Meier.

01-00:29:37

Polledri: Yes.

Rubens: That must’ve impressed him. Did he know your wife works for Olympia and York?

01-00:29:45

Polledri: I must have told him.

Rubens: Had the Yerba Buena Center already—?

01-00:29:51

Polledri: That’s what I was saying. She was commuting, actually, to San Francisco every week, which was a pain. I was writing my dissertation.

Cándida Smith: Jack came to this museum with the idea that he was going to break the provincial focus of the museum’s programming.

01-00:30:58

Polledri: Build a new museum. That was his condition.

Cándida Smith: Develop an international profile for the museum. To some degree, that meant wiping the slate clean and not being as involved with local art as Henry Hopkins or Jerry Nordland had been. How did that affect architecture and design?

01-00:31:21

Polledri: Well, I didn’t realize it at the time, of course, but it did, very much so. One of the problems was that—[pause] It wasn’t so much an artistic direction, but it became a political environment. He wanted people on the board who could pay for a new building. It was right at the time, at the end of the eighties, before a bad recession, when people had made lots of money and they wanted to associate themselves with an institution of international stature. Other cultural institutions in the city were already set in their ways, so it wasn’t possible for them. They came to the museum with the idea, well, we have so much money. We don’t have enough money to buy old masters, but we can buy modern art. This is a good place for us to learn, and at the same time, to build our own collection.

Rubens: Was Jack clear about what direction he wanted people to go, in terms of buying art?

01-00:33:05

Polledri:

I don't know that he was all that clear, to be honest. Because seeing the way he did acquisitions meetings, there was anything but clarity.

Rubens:

Did he say to you, "I want you to raise money. I want you to do something different"?

01-00:33:23

Polledri:

No, I wasn't asked to raise money.

Rubens:

Some free rein?

01-00:33:27

Polledri:

No, I wasn't given free rein, but I was asked to outline, very specifically, the department and the things I would look at, to have a very clear attitude about what I would do. First, I gave him an outline, the way I conceived architecture and design, how many fields. Not an all-encompassing umbrella. For example, I didn't have any interest in glass and ceramics. As far as I was concerned, that wasn't even design. It was just pottery. I'm not quite that way anymore, but I was younger then. I had no interest in arts and crafts because they were—and still are—a provincial undertaking. I was interested in *design*, the way it was conceived. I wasn't interested in decorative arts. I said, "Well, I'm going to limit what I do in design to a few objects." There's Silicon Valley, that seems to be very clearly regional in the culture. Then there is chairs and lighting, you know?

Rubens:

Why chairs and lighting?

01-00:35:01

Polledri:

Because they were complex. Because they manifested a way of thinking on the part of designers that seemed to me very indicative of who these designers were. If you chose other things, well, it was much more subjective. Like for example, flatware design. I had many other ideas, but I said, "Let's start with that." But other things were much more subjective and much more susceptible of being mistaken with decorative arts. Chairs and lighting, they would take a process. They're not easy to figure out. So my hope was to document these objects, not simply with a chair or a lamp, but also with sketches, drawings. I was looking particularly for documents that would illustrate the change of thought on the part of the designer because that would indicate to me how these people were thinking at that time. There you have it. It was more of a way of thinking. I was looking at design more as a way of thinking than as objects.

Rubens:

You're very clear when, here's a letter that you write to *House & Garden* and to Condé Nast.

01-00:36:36

Polledri:

Oh, my God, nothing ever dies.

Rubens: Nothing dies. You say that “I’m not interested in industrial design.” You say that you’re interested in how design is a rational alternative, that it indicates a process. I think you’ve articulated this completely here. I wondered two things. Had San Francisco already acquired the Eames studio?

01-00:37:16

Polledri: No. That was my doing.

Rubens: It’s you who did it. You had met the Eameses in—?

01-00:37:23

Polledri: I met Ray; Charles had already died.

Rubens: Charles had died. I don’t know if you know this, but in the fifties, there was a man named Allon Schoener, who came here to be a curator of painting. He really was given nothing to do, and so he started a TV program. He brought up Charles Eames. There’s a TV program where he’s having Charles Eames show where the chair goes, the chest and the light. I’m sure you knew nothing about that. Schoener remained good friends with Eames for quite a while.

01-00:38:08

Polledri: I knew of them, of course, of the Eameses, for a long time. When I was eight years olds, I saw the lounge chair and I nagged my parents for years to buy one. Because those, to me, were the archetypal modern furniture. Of course, they didn’t like it at all.

Rubens: Were you interested in modern design as a child?

01-00:38:44

Polledri: Oh, yes, always.

Cándida Smith: One of your primary acquisitions were the Kuramata furniture. And Jack selected a chair.

01-00:39:00

Polledri: Jack was *very* denigrating at that time.

Cándida Smith: He just selected a chair—

01-00:39:05

Polledri: When he first saw it.

Cándida Smith: —to talk about as one of the acquisitions he was most proud of. He discusses that chair, not as a piece of furniture, but really as a three-dimensional painting.

01-00:39:21

Polledri: He does, huh?

Cándida Smith: It’s not a piece of furniture, and it’s not an *objet*, even.

Rubens: And no one would let us sit in it. I wanted to sit in it.

01-00:39:36

Polledri: No, you can't. It's not very practical. He wasn't a practical designer.

Rubens: Who identified him?

01-00:39:45

Polledri: I did.

Rubens: How did you know who he was?

01-00:39:48

Polledri: Kuramata, how did I know? Well, one of the things that I explained to Jack was that, okay, the Museum of Modern Art in New York is looking at Europe for everything. They've always done that. I said, "I don't want to do that because this place has very little to do with Europe." I'm European, and there are communities of people who come, but really, it's more of a hodgepodge of things. If anything, it's much more interesting to look at the other side of our own ocean than to look at Europe. Frankly, in the eighties, we didn't know very much about Japan. Nobody in the museum had ever been to Japan.

Rubens: Really?

Rubens: Had you been to Japan yet?

01-00:40:47

Polledri: No. I wanted very much to go, so I made it possible for me to go. I was starting to look at Australia. I said, "Oh, my God. This is like the Case Study houses again. It's happening there." All this tropical architecture that was happening in places like Bali or Thailand, where this is a native culture; that for native culture, there were many things in common with what happened here on the West Coast. Let's look at the Pacific. I did that. Jack grasped the idea. It became a straightjacket for me a little bit, because he said, "Unless it is about the Pacific, you're not going to be able to do any exhibitions." I said, "Come on, give me a break! There is, for example, this Italian designer who's in his late eighties, and I really want to do something there because nobody knows. His name was Bruno Munari. You might not have heard of him, but he was one of the most fascinating designers. I know that in his late eighties, he won't have many years to live, so I want to do it very much." I said, "Let's call him an honorary Californian." Because he has that attitude. It's so wacky that I think it would fit well. But nothing doing.

Rubens: How are you learning about this innovative, wacky work and the Pacific Rim? Are there magazines? Are there people talking amongst each other?

01-00:42:53

Polledri: I can't describe it, but I've always been thinking about it.

Rubens: Somehow you learn of these names.

01-00:43:01
Polledri:

Oh, you talk to people.

Rubens: That's what I'm asking.

01-00:43:03
Polledri:

"You should look at him, you should look at his work." "Oh, I don't know him. What does he do?" Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Then when I first went to Japan, I made a point—I was there for about two or three weeks or something, and every day, I was seeing two or three different people.

Rubens: How early did you go to Japan, in your tenure here?

01-00:43:24
Polledri:

Ooh. I think after my second, third year, I don't know.

Cándida Smith: When you presented the Kuramata chair for acquisition, how did you explain that?

01-00:43:34
Polledri:

I explained it in a way the people there would understand it. Which wasn't at all what *I* was thinking about.

Cándida Smith: Oh, maybe you could make the distinction. What were you thinking about it? Then how did you explain it?

01-00:43:49
Polledri:

Now, I don't remember exactly the words that I told to those people. But I had an acquisition committee that was interested primarily in painting. Can I tell you some gossip here that went on behind those doors? They weren't at all my fans. Those people thought of architecture and design as a total waste of time. I know that a couple of them, who are no longer on the board here, thought—I had bought a Jugendstil chair—I can't even remember what it was—for the museum collection. After I didn't show it for a few years, they asked me, "What are you going to do with it?" I said, "Well, it really doesn't fit very well with what Jack and I thought that the museum should do. We talked about this several times, and we still haven't quite made up our minds. So, its time will come, and we'll figure out something." That was my diplomatic answer to that. They seemed to understand that. But Don Fisher, in particular, at one point, he wasn't supportive at all. I don't know what he liked. He wanted to become the great collector of art. He thinks he is now, by the way. He said, "Why are you wasting all of our time with things like that?"

Rubens: I want to get to who your supporters are and who your roadblocks are. There seems to be a evolution and a strategy in what you do.

01-00:46:07

Polledri: Ah, yes, always.

Rubens:

'87, you come. '90 is "Visionary San Francisco." That had to take some planning. There's the Eames, there's the four firms, and there's the graphic designers. Then of course, that wonderful Shin Takamatsu. Unbelievable. There's also the journal. Was that part of the plan from the beginning, that there would be a journal?

01-00:46:46

Polledri: No, no, no. I can explain how that came about.

Rubens:

I thought maybe we'd talk a little bit more about the structural committees, and then we'll get to the content.

01-00:46:54

Polledri:

That's one of the things I was least interested [in]. But I understood very well that that needed to be done. Two months after I came to the museum, one of the trustees asked me, "Have you thought about auxiliaries for your department?" I said, "No. I don't even know what they are, to be honest." He said, "Well, we used to go on trips." I said, "Okay." Jack and I talked about it. "Oh," Jack said, "Oh, God! I asked them to leave you alone for a little bit. Here we go." I did research, I met with a few people who I thought had some interest in architecture and design, and I said, "What do you think about this? What do you think about that?" I was thinking, these people should raise funds for *me*, so I can do *more* things, and then they can get part of the credit. They said, "Well, now, if you think about just a fundraising thing alone, they'll have no interest in that whatsoever. They give enough money to the museum." I said, "But to painting and sculpture, not architecture and design." I tried to think of it as a program. One of the things that I thought, wouldn't it be nice if we spent the money that they raise in some tangible way, both for the collection, so they put their name, associate their names with part of the collection, but also with this publication that remains as a mouthpiece for the department?

Rubens:

That was your idea.

01-00:48:40

Polledri:

I found some graphic designers who—By the way, I was able to create a community. It was very rewarding to me. I had lunch with Michael Cronan not too long ago, after I hadn't seen him in years. He said, "Well, we were *nobody* until you," he said, "Until you made us part of the museum. I can't tell you how great it was for us to be recognized that way." I said, "Really? Nobody had talked to you before?"

Rubens:

The exhibit takes place in '92, but you'd obviously been talking to them before.

01-00:49:24

Polledri: Oh, for years.

Rubens: Now, Michael Manwaring was doing the stationery. He had been doing their stationery under Hopkins, I think.

01-00:49:32

Polledri: Could be. I had nothing to do with that.

Cándida Smith: Brochures, as well.

01-00:49:38

Polledri: I was interested in these people because they represented a quality that was so radically different from—Of course, I knew Vignelli, I knew the typical modern designers from New York. I was an admirer of their work. But I saw something, an attitude—free form, pastel colors, wacky graphics. Maybe I should edit “wacky.” *Innovative* graphics. It was so different. To me, everybody, at one point or another, did that thing. April Greiman, down in Southern California, she’s semi-retired now, but at that point she was doing that, and a number of other designers. It was very interesting for me to collect those things.

Rubens: Was Jack receptive to that?

01-00:50:50

Polledri: I don’t think he ever understood that. At one point, when we started talking about the new museum, I said, “Well, we have a chance. Let’s do an identity for the museum. Let’s have, rather than having the usual object designed by one designer, let’s have a collective effort.” A little bit like they’ve done for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, which honestly, it was the one phenomenon that put graphic design on the West Coast on the map. I was fortunate enough that I knew David Meckel, who had been a manager of that effort in the Olympics.

[Begin Audio File 2 03-06-2008.mp3]

Cándida Smith: It sounds like you faced an uphill battle. People at the museum might acknowledge conceptually that architecture and design should be an integral part of the museum, they didn’t invest as much in it as they were going to painting and sculpture, the traditional things.

02-00:00:32

Polledri: No, they weren’t interested. Really, they weren’t interested in that.

Cándida Smith: So you had an uphill battle, I think, which was natural, and probably not based on anything other than the normal inertia of these kinds of institutions. But how do you begin to assemble around you people who are going to advocate for you within the institution and within the community?

02-00:01:21

Polledri:

Well, talking to people, first. First of all, I didn't know what to expect about these people. I quickly realized that the uphill battle that you talk about, in fact, did occur. But it was due to the fact that these people knew nothing about architecture and design. They knew nothing, as a matter of fact, about art, either. But what unfortunately became, much to my disappointment here, not knowing anything about art was pretty much the rule of the museum. Especially modern art. Every week there was some new artist that came about. They followed exactly the bandwagon of our criticism at that point, where you don't question anything whatsoever.

Rubens:

Art criticism coming out of the journals, as opposed to the academic—

02-00:02:31

Polledri:

The academics were also partly, in my mind, to blame about that, because it was a—I would be the person to ask, “What am I looking at? What am I supposed to see in this?” Because I understand that this is the expression of someone who calls himself an artist. But beyond that, am I supposed to see some cultural content in it that has ramifications and some relevance to this institution? People weren't asking at all those questions. They said, “Well, who's hot, and who's not? We talk to dealers in New York.” That's the way they made their decisions. Yes, there were some artists who were, in my mind, *very* important, and that were able to express some part of our world. In many ways, it was—what I felt, there was a twisted form of realism that was pervasive at that point, where people would look at the world and say, “Well, which part is expressed by this artist or that artist?” I would say, “Oh, God. After two centuries of discussion, we're back to *that*?” I was the only one who would ask these questions.

Rubens:

Now, why were you in that position, by the way? Were there staff meetings?

02-00:04:29

Polledri:

We had curatorial meetings.

Rubens:

Curatorial, okay. There's a whole new set of you.

02-00:04:37

Polledri:

Oh, God! There was a new set of rules when John Caldwell came aboard. All of a sudden, Jack would only listen to him. Because he had his way of attracting trustees. He was able to talk to them, tell them little stories about gossip. That's what they *liked*, I discovered. They liked gossip about the art world. Who's sleeping with whom, basically. That's what it amounted to. I don't want to sound arrogant about that, but I had absolutely no interest in that at all.

Cándida Smith:

But in the architecture world, in the design world, you have prominent magazines, you have prominent critical writers, you have prestige—

02-00:05:23

Polledri: Yeah, not that many.

Cándida Smith: —you have gossip as well.

02-00:05:26

Polledri: Yes, I do have gossip, but not that kind. Our gossip is how did he get the work? What happened in that competition? What is this manifesting? Or these people are all—

Rubens: But you're talking about Caldwell's relationship to the board, who's going to give money.

02-00:05:52

Polledri: Then all of a sudden, Caldwell thought that he was in his right to tell me what to do.

Rubens: Did he have a vision that was at war with yours?

02-00:06:05

Polledri: He had no vision whatsoever, first of all.

Rubens: What is he telling you to do?

02-00:06:10

Polledri: Well, I explained why I came about collecting what I was collecting. He said, "Well, as far as I'm concerned, what's happening outside New York doesn't matter," he told me. I said, "Oh. Okay. I don't know what to say to that. I'm interested. Perhaps you're not. Okay. Let's leave it at that."

Cándida Smith: Was that specifically about West Coast stuff? So Eames and "Visionary San Francisco"? You had been labeled a provincial?

02-00:06:42

Polledri: In his mind, yes. Yes. I didn't think of it. I was confident enough of my framework of ideas, but he started talking behind my back. He started playing politics, to an extent. I wasn't all prepared. I wasn't interested. I'm not that kind of person. I wasn't thinking at night, how can I get back to him in different ways?

Rubens: Now, how about Allan Temko?

02-00:07:16

Polledri: Oh, God. Allan Temko, yes. He wrote a scathing review about "Visionary San Francisco."

Rubens: Yes, he did. Had you already formed an opinion about Temko?

02-00:07:43

Polledri:

Temko was exceedingly conservative in his ideas. In his mind, he lived in the sixties. So nothing that happened afterwards meant anything to him. If you read back, that's when he was his most prolific and he was most relevant. After that, I don't know. Either he lost interest or he decided that nothing really was important after that. That's why we really didn't—

Rubens:

Not an ally.

02-00:08:28

Polledri:

Not very much an ally. Also he thought of himself as, "Oh, I'm a bad boy." Without thinking about what he was doing.

Rubens:

What does that mean? I don't know what that means, he thought of himself as a bad boy.

02-00:08:46

Polledri:

Oh, he thought of himself as being naughty. "Oh, I wrote that review to that show of Paolo. Oh, I'm sorry, but I couldn't resist. Ha-ha-ha." That stuff. And "Screw you," I told him. "Thank you very much for helping me to create a constituency that didn't exist before the museum, for architecture and design. No thanks to you," I told him. We were never very close friends after that.

Cándida Smith:

Well, who were your allies?

02-00:09:22

Polledri:

My allies?

Cándida Smith:

Your allies.

02-00:09:25

Polledri:

I had allies in the community. I had the architects. I talked to them, I told them what I wanted to do, and I told them what things they could expect. I told them, and they seemed to agree that the direction that I outlined for the museum was a sound one. Maybe they didn't see themselves as being West Coast. But when I talked to Joe Esherick, for example, who was still alive for many years, he understood exactly what I was trying to do. When I talked to people who knew Wurster—I never met Wurster, unfortunately; he died in the late sixties, and I came to this part of the world ten years afterwards. But they knew what he was talking about. They were able to also cut through the BS that was written about him afterwards.

Rubens:

Well, I want to get to this, because you're going to be able to do some wonderful architects.

02-00:10:31

Polledri:

Well, I was able to do Wurster, as well. That was my show.

Rubens: *If you're building allies, part of the strategy is that you have a dream collection, and it's going to be Polk, Wurster, Eames, Church.*

02-00:11:04

Polledri: Charles Moore. I did collect the Sea Ranch, which to me, was very representative of the sixties.

Rubens: You were saying, "We're going to do classic San Francisco."

02-00:11:21

Polledri: But you see, I saw a direct line between those things. I didn't see people doing—all of a sudden we have classical, and then we change fashion and we become—No, no. If you look at some of the early—Coxhead, for example—and then you look at Sea Ranch, you say, "Oh. My God. They're the same." They're different forms entirely, but the attitude. There was an underlying sense of not taking themselves too seriously, that I liked particularly. Not irony. At that point, we are talking about the late eighties, there was an awful lot of talk, especially in artistic circles, about irony, what that means. No, no. Nothing to do with that. There is no distance between them. These are not postmoderns, these are thoroughly modern people. But the wackiness that I was talking about earlier that is so—

Cándida Smith: But a different wackiness than, say, Peter Eisenman, who was very much cresting in the late eighties?

02-00:12:46

Polledri: Peter Eisenman. Peter Eisenman, I don't know what he was doing in the late eighties.

Rubens: Imaginary architecture, I think.

02-00:12:54

Polledri: No, I know exactly what he was doing, but I don't know what he was thinking about. He was thinking about abstract formulas and how those could be translated. I think he was reading the Kabala and thinking about, ah, what a great idea; let's think of architecture in the same way. That's how his experiments with numbers and with different constructions, layers of things—Totally uninhabitable. The few things that were built then at that point, people couldn't live in them, simply because they were not architecture. But at the same time, he was doing all these experiments.

I didn't answer the thing about the allies. Specifically, there were some people who liked what I was saying but who had no interest in what I was doing. The culture of the museum was that, okay, we follow this department or that department not so much because we like those objects, but because we want to start collections. What am I giving them? Architects to collect, so they can build houses? No.

Rubens: You were saying about the Getty that archival is not what you were interested in, it's the process.

02-00:14:38

Polledri: Exactly. There were a few who bought—For example, they disbanded the [Timothy] Pflueger office at some point. One of the trustees gave me some money and said, “Here’s thirty grand, buy things.” I said okay. I wanted to very much, so I bought a few things for the museum, of that. There were wonderful drawings. But compare pencil drawings with paintings. The comparison is simply not there. They weren’t *meant* to be seen as objects of art. From that point of view, I couldn’t provide those people the glamour of building a collection based on architecture and design.

[material deleted]

Rubens: Let’s talk about [Mario] Botta. By the time you’re hired, of course, everyone knows there’s going to be a new museum. Had Botta been selected?

02-00:18:35

Polledri: No. No, no.

Rubens: Were you asked, as this new curator if you had an opinion? Could you reflect on that?

02-00:18:44

Polledri: Very much so. I provided my own list. Jack, for some reason, wanted Botta very much. I said, “Well, you’re sure about that? Because I don’t see, really, the connection here.” But Jack said, “Oh, he’s fantastic.” He saw an exhibition at the Modern in New York, and for some reason, that captured his imagination.

Rubens: Someone had whispered in his ear.

Cándida Smith: Was this after the tour of the architects’ buildings?

02-00:19:27

Polledri: No, long before. Long before. That happened about three or four years later, the tour.

Rubens: Who was on your list? Do you know? Do you remember?

02-00:19:36

Polledri: I don’t know. I think Gae Aulenti was one of the architects. Then I was looking at other Swiss architects. I’m not sure whether I put Herzog and de Meuron in that list. I said, “Why not an American architect?” Botta wasn’t really the prominent figure, in my list, at least.

Rubens: Were you asked to go on any of these—?

- 02-00:20:31
Polledri: No, I wasn't asked to go. There was someone Jack had hired to help him out, to write a program for the museum.
- Rubens: This is now [David] Resnicow?
- 02-00:20:45
Polledri: No, Marcy Goodwin. That was the name. She did a fairly good job, but she was also—I don't know what strange ideas she had about the museum. I think in her mind, she was there to be hired and become director after Jack, or become the second in command.
- Rubens: Caldwell dies suddenly. That shook everyone up. Especially Jack, I think.
- 02-00:21:14
Polledri: Yes. Very much so, yes.
- Rubens: Is there an American you can think of who you had on the list?
- [material deleted]
- Rubens: There had been lecture series. I was going to show you this. Did you continue them?
- 02-00:22:05
Polledri: Yes. I don't claim all the credit for it, because there was yet another committee, but that was one of my duties, to make sure that there would be a continuing collaboration—which at times wasn't all that good—between the museum and the AIA [American Institute of Architects]. The credit I can claim is to start one on design, as well, with the AIGA, the American Institute of Graphic Arts.
- Rubens: Did you have an architectural auxiliary, and you did have a design one, as well?
- 02-00:22:54
Polledri: No, they were mixed. They were mixed.
- [material deleted]
- Rubens: We're still looking for allies for you. It seems to me that the lineup is getting harder and harder.
- 02-00:25:06
Polledri: I didn't have an enormous success in building a political constituency at the museum, I must admit.
- Rubens: They must have known Botta was not your choice.

02-00:25:18

Polledri:

I didn't have any problems with Botta, necessarily. The problems started out in planning the museum. Botta came out with a wonderful plan, and thinking about the lobby as a meeting place. Gradually, with the pretext of money issues, budgets and stuff like that, they started corroding the idea, to the point where I said, "Well, what do we have left here?" Okay. They started designing the galleries, and we had so many meetings about what the museum should be.

Rubens:

You are included in these meetings.

02-00:26:07

Polledri:

Yes, I was included in these meetings. There were many questions that I had. For example, the top floor of the museum. I said, "Well, okay. Where is the grand space of the museum?"

Well, John Caldwell, for example, said, "Oh, they should be all the size of a room."

I said, "Why are you saying that?"

"Oh, because that's what modern art is."

I said, "That's not true. Come on. We need a grand space." We had the rotunda, for example, in the old building. I said, "Where is the comparable space in the new building? We don't have one. Come on. This is a grand space. It's modern art. Let's see something where we can display these huge paintings that you keep buying, in all of their glory, with lots of light."

"Oh, the light in San Francisco is no good."

And Jack would do exactly what John would say. I was *seething*, because I was seeing the possibility of a grand building being disintegrated. The other two—Sandy and Bob Riley, who was the media arts curator at that time—weren't saying much. They said, "Oh, the grid should be square."

I said, "Well, we shouldn't have a common grid. This is not an office building. This is a museum. Think of something more museum-like, rather than this easy way out that the engineers will provide." I didn't make myself very popular with those comments.

Rubens:

Must have been frustrating.

02-00:28:13

Polledri:

Very! Extremely frustrating. That's when I stopped. I said to myself, "Okay, you better start thinking of moving, doing something else, because I don't know if I can stand this for much longer."

Rubens: Did you have anything to do with the Botta exhibition?

02-00:28:27
Polledri:

Yes, I did.

Rubens: It was a MoMA, but it came here. Did you hang it?

02-00:28:34
Polledri:

I did, yes. There were two. The first one, that was about the time when I joined, that was Jack trying, really, to sell Botta to the board. He said, "We are going to have this exhibition." I said, "Fine. That's good." Botta's a friend of mine. I know him well.

Rubens: You did know him?

02-00:29:09
Polledri:

We went to the same school. He's a few years older than I am.

Rubens: He didn't know English.

02-00:29:18
Polledri:

Not at all. But we spoke Italian. I had no problems with Botta. I especially liked the things he was doing during his early years, in Ticino. They were pretty much a kind of—[sighs] They were vernacular buildings. I don't know what came over him. There was one point he got this idea of doing buildings where "people could touch the sky," he said. We don't have that anymore in modern architecture. So all of his buildings had this. In this case, there is this oculus there. It came from the Parthenon, right? Or the great Medieval cathedrals. He said, "That's the space that I want to communicate." But then he started taking that to a literal extent that I didn't find all that interesting. Well, I know that Renaissance buildings in Italy had a striated exterior. That's because they used different courses of materials. So Botta started doing that. I said, "Well, that strikes me a little bit as a bit decorative, shall we say?" I saw that because at that time, there was this movement, postmodern movement, where people were doing [sighs] columns and capitals and da-da-da-da, and they were doing it to such a dismal result that I had—My point is, why aren't we trying to be modern?

I was trying to communicate that. How do you explain space to a person who's never thought of that? How do you explain the fact that a Jackson Pollock, to me, looks like space, and to them looks like modern art? These people have no visual literacy whatsoever. That's what I found at the museum. Starting with the director. He knew a lot about the art history, but what did he know about art? The explanation, especially during the acquisitions, that he would give! They made some phenomenal mistakes, acquisitions. I don't know whether they ever show those things anymore, but they bought some things, with a great deal of money.

Cándida Smith: Do you want to say what they are?

02-00:33:02

Polledri: Some of them, I completely erased from my memory. I think on purpose. But one of them was the worst Julian Schnabel. He's no longer a painter. He's become a film director.

Cándida Smith: So you were part of the acquisition discussions, presumably.

02-00:33:30

Polledri: No, I was there to present my own things. I knew enough to keep my mouth shut during those meetings, always. I wasn't that naïve when I started.

Rubens: I have two acquisition committee meeting presentations that you made. It's '92, '93. That's getting a little late. You're already in hot water or retreating.

02-00:33:58

Polledri: No, I wasn't retreating. I wasn't retreating. No, no, I was going my own way.

Rubens: Retreating from the fight over the building.

02-00:34:09

Polledri: Oh, but that had already been decided at that point. The building was finished in '94. So by '92, I think, pretty much they had plans and everything.

Rubens: Well, even before that, because "Visionary San Francisco" comes in '90. How did that idea come about? Could we talk about that?

02-00:34:28

Polledri: "Visionary San Francisco." Yes, of course we can talk about that.

Rubens: Is it your idea?

02-00:34:40

Polledri: Yes, it was, yes. It started out from pretty early on, I think. I wanted to communicate the idea that first of all, architecture and design are not a question of artifacts. They are disciplines. It's a question of formalizing and following a system with one's own ideas. I wasn't thinking of architecture and design as art, but more as a process of ideas, which I explained before. I said, "Well, I need to have something that communicates to people in this city that there is still time for San Francisco, and that they should know what their history is, to make informed decisions about what their future will be." I took 1990 and said, "Well, this is the last decade of the millennium, and it's time for me to show—" It was two and a half years, I think, about, into my job at the museum. "It's about time to show what I'm thinking and how I can bring all of these things together. What history I see." My major dilemma was the fact I was trying to explain that to the National Endowment for the Humanities, who, as you know—

Rubens: That's where you were going for money to—

02-00:36:23

Polledri: Yes. I was trying to explain to them my ideas for the history of San Francisco, which wasn't quite the history that one would do.

Rubens: It wasn't a Kevin Starr history.

02-00:36:44

Polledri: It wasn't a Kevin Starr history at all. It was more the history of ideas of the city, rather than the actual history, because there were many things that people were thinking for certain sites, for example, that weren't quite what happened in reality. To me, the fact that they made different decisions was as important for the history of San Francisco as what in fact happened in reality.

Rubens: Steve Oliver, was he a supporter of yours?

02-00:37:18

Polledri: He was a supporter of mine.

Rubens: Because at one point, he was on the NEA.

02-00:37:23

Polledri: He was one of the most informed and intelligent supporters, in fact, that I had amongst the nonprofessionals, the lay.

Rubens: On the board.

02-00:37:35

Polledri: On the board. Still one of the smartest people in the museum.

Rubens: But you did get money from the NEA, is that right?

02-00:37:48

Polledri: I didn't get money from the NEA or the other one.

Cándida Smith: NEH.

02-00:37:56

Polledri: NEH. I don't know, I talked to some of the staff, because I was called to be part of panels in subsequent years. I said, "Why do you turn me down?" "Well, people were not clear about your idea of what 'shadow history' was." I said, "Well, I explained it. What were the questions?"

Rubens: I think it was ahead of its time, maybe.

02-00:38:25

Polledri: I think so.

Rubens: Did you have to sell it to Jack and to—?

02-00:38:33

Polledri: They liked it. They liked the idea. Jack liked it. We had a strange meeting with the director of the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial] Museum, because they saw that there was some turf battle there between Jack and—What’s his name?

Cándida Smith: Is this Harry Parker?

02-00:38:54

Polledri: Yes, Harry Parker. There was a meeting at the Modern there, at the Civic Center, at one point. I was brought to the meeting. The question was, “Well, what would the Modern mission be?” The curator of decorative arts at the de Young came up with this thing: “There are so many wonderful drawings that nobody has ever seen, about things that happened and never got built.” Jack immediately said, “Oh, yeah. Paolo, why don’t you explain your idea of ‘Visionary San Francisco’?” That enforced, in Jack’s mind, the idea that I was proposing. It came from a totally unexpected direction, it was something that was supposed to happen.

Rubens: Now, just before I ask you how you picked the people you wrote about, I did read somewhere that there was an effort to get a design competition for the waterfront. Were you involved in that? Was it the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art?

02-00:40:13

Polledri: I was part of the jury of that.

Rubens: You were on the jury, but it wasn’t an initiative out of here.

02-00:40:18

Polledri: No, no. No, I wouldn’t do that. One of the things that I learned in my years at the museum was that, one, I had to tread very carefully around AIA because there were [sighs] so many things going on there. People positioned themselves. I didn’t want to make enemies out of those people. I liked them all. But what they thought of themselves was, I’m better than he is; why am I not getting my show at the museum?

Rubens: By the way, did you form an alliance with the curator at New York, at MoMA, of architecture and—

02-00:41:00

Polledri: Which one?

Rubens: At MoMA.

02-00:41:02

Polledri: When I was a curator here, there were two. The first one, a Swedish guy who didn’t get along with this board, resigned at one point. Then Terry Riley came on. Terry pretty much was a good boy and did whatever they told him to do.

Rubens: So you're going in a different direction.

02-00:41:32

Polledri: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Along that line, while you're here, MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Los Angeles is doing a lot of—

02-00:41:40

Polledri: Is doing a lot of things, yes.

Cándida Smith: I'm sure you went to see the shows, but was there any back and forth between the two institutions?

02-00:41:52

Polledri: Not really. The person who was there, she was an art historian. She was put in charge of organizing these things. Not quite to know how to do it. Like when she did the Case Study houses exhibition there, she came to me to ask me, "How would you—" I told her how I would do those things. But then I couldn't be involved with that because otherwise, it wouldn't be her show, it would have been my show. But I knew all of the people. Some of those people became part of the collection, or they became close friends personally. That's not how I decided, by the way, how to put people together. It wasn't because of friendship. It was people whose work I admired.

Rubens: Like-minded.

02-00:42:44

Polledri: Well, but also who I thought would fit that direction that I set up the department to be. So personal considerations were totally aside.

Rubens: The one other place I wanted to ask you about, that was doing such interesting work, I thought, was SCIArch [Southern California Institute of Architecture].

02-00:43:02

Polledri: Yes. Morphosis. Yes, Mike Rotundi was the chair of SCIArch for many years. I think he's still involved with that. Thom Mayne. Mike and Thom were partners, until they split. Thom became, subsequently, a much bigger name in architecture. He built the Federal Building here, a design that got the Pritzker Prize, before that, and is now doing all sorts of institutional work .

I was thinking about doing a big show about graphic design on the West Coast. That never quite materialized. Because it was a big project, and I think I could only do so many big projects. Then at the same time, this idea of doing something about Japan started, which Shin Takamatsu was going to be only the first. That was totally absorbing. I was just one person. The resources were really minimal at that point. I decided to be very disciplined about how many projects I was starting, because I knew that 40 percent of my time was increasingly absorbed by administration.

Cándida Smith: With the move to the Takamatsu and the Japanese, the Pacific, does that imply, then, that you were being shifted away from thinking about California and local?

02-00:45:30

Polledri: No, no, that was part of this Pacific outreach that I had in my program.

Rubens: I wanted to talk about “Visionary San Francisco,” just a little bit about who you chose. How did you choose these people? Gray Brechin had written for *Focus* magazine.

02-00:45:48

Polledri: Well, they had written about San Francisco. I met them during the years, and I talked to them about these things. When I was thinking about writers, I didn’t want to ask Allan Temko to write because I knew exactly how he would deal with that. I was more interested in people who responded to what I told them the direction would be for what I had in mind. I wasn’t particularly experienced in putting these people together.

Rubens: Well, to include William Gibson, to end with Gibson, that was—

02-00:46:36

Polledri: That was cool.

Rubens: Cool. That’s exactly right. Richard Rodriguez, how did you know Rodriguez, at that point?

02-00:46:45

Polledri: Somebody told me about him. I read his first book. There was something about the first book that resonated with me. That was this talk about this private and public language that he describes during his growing up. Immediately, Lars Lerup came to mind, because I’ve seen projects that he had done exactly on this separation. Then Lars had his own program, so he thought that his wife should be part of the project. At one point, somebody said, “You shouldn’t do a Wurster exhibition.” I said, “*What?*” “You should do something about a woman architect.” I said, “Oh, come on. I mean, are you starting doing politics about—I don’t care one bit about that. It happens that I think that Wurster is the most important architect in the Bay Area, exactly illustrating what my ideas are, rather than any women.” I could only think of Julia Morgan, at that point. Julia Morgan, important; but not on the same level as Wurster.

Rubens: The classic Beaux Arts.

02-00:48:19

Polledri: But then the sexual politics was really—

Cándida Smith: What about Catherine Bauer?

02-00:48:28

Polledri:

Catherine Bauer was a writer, she wasn't a designer. Just as an aside, I spoke to Wurster's daughter at one point, when I was gearing up to do the Wurster show. She told me about Catherine. It was that East Coast period. It was a period of turmoil, of ideas, very dynamic. But everybody was sleeping with everybody else, at that point.

Rubens:

Well, isn't that how Catherine met Wurster? Because she had only eyes for Mumford.

02-00:49:13

Polledri:

Well, she also met Lewis Mumford, and Bill's daughter thought that she was Mumford's daughter.

Rubens:

The response to the show was mixed. I have the critics here.

02-00:50:19

Polledri:

People really found—It was my fault, you know? Because I was new about doing a big show. It was a really big show. It was my first show. In retrospect, I would have done different things that would've made it—

Rubens:

What would you have done? I'd like to hear that. How would you have done it different?

02-00:50:40

Polledri:

Oh, God. Well, eighteen years later, let me think about what I would have done different. Well, for example, there could have been some things about the four writers and the architects that I could have made a little more integrated into the rest of the show than the way I did it. I did it because at that time, the space available was what it was, and how to separate themes and subjects was difficult, given the layout of the old museum. I did it that way. It was probably not the wisest thing to do, because to put those four people in the rotunda by themselves was a big space to fill with writers.

Rubens:

The reviewer at the *New York Times* wrote, "A good idea falls with a thud."

02-00:52:03

Polledri:

I'm sure it didn't build up my reputation within the museum board.

Rubens:

I interrupted you about what else you would do different.

02-00:52:16

Polledri:

Also some people that I chose. Specifically Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, she was a big disappointment to me.

Rubens:

Funny, because in one of the reviews, they say—

02-00:52:27

Polledri:

But that's what Allan Temko loved. I don't know. If I'd been able to steer those people in different directions, I would have done it. But I was too naïve.

Rubens:

Why was she a disappointment.

02-00:52:51

Polledri:

Because I thought that what she did was awful. It was meaningless. She thought that she was being clever. I was trying to indicate this evolution of culture in San Francisco, by themes, with newspaper clippings, some documents of the time, and also what was happening in the minds of these architects, illustrating them.

Rubens:

By the way, Mark Helprin, he's not related to Ann Halprin? Is that a different spelling? The dancer.

02-00:54:58

Polledri:

Totally. Mark, I've lost touch with him, but I really admire his writing. I first read one of his first novels, *Winter's Tale*. There were some wonderful descriptions of New York. I said, "Well, wouldn't it be interesting to have this person write about San Francisco in the same way?" As it turns out, Mark had lived in San Francisco for a few years. He was able to do that. I felt, because Bobbie [Barbara Stauffacher Solomon] had written a book about California, and it illustrated in such a wacky manner that I felt that that was—

Rubens:

Solomon had? Oh, yes. It's about the landscapers.

02-00:55:44

Polledri:

It's about the landscape. I said, "What a great idea to put these people together. Contrary to my expectations, they had met one another at the American Academy, and not liked each other at all. So Bobbie was dead set against him. I said, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you still want to do it, Bobbie?" "Oh, yeah, I still want to do it. Of course." "Well, then these are the ground rules. It's a combination, writers and architects. What can you do with this piece?" "Oh, I don't know. There's nothing that comes to mind." She was being totally childish and difficult.

Rubens:

And Temko, he says of Helprin, "Who seems to have taken a crash course in freshman humanities and architectural history for his callow essay on the truism."

02-00:56:44

Polledri:

Well, that's where I felt, "Temko, give me a break."

Rubens:

Well, that's just a flamboyancy.

- 02-00:56:49
Polledri: No, and he talked about Richard Rodriguez. Subsequently, I've changed minds about Richard, because he's become this very visible "Hispanic American." You hear him on TV now and then.
- Rubens: Sandy Phillips starts about the same time you do. There's an announcement.
- 02-00:57:16
Polledri: Well, actually, exactly the same time. We talked.
- Rubens: To collaborate?
- 02-00:57:22
Polledri: Sandy's very set. She had a very well-structured program. There wasn't much to do together there.
- Rubens: I just wondered, with Wurster, was she involved with the photographs?
- 02-00:57:37
Polledri: She had already done a number of California photographers, like Weston. The timing wasn't right. That Wurster would have been the feather in my cap, if I'd stayed. That was what provoked it.
- Rubens: I don't know how it is that you come to leave.
- 02-00:58:03
Polledri: I was preparing Wurster. I was trying to finish Takamatsu, at the same time preparing Wurster. The way I prepared it, I said, "Well, maybe we should get another person or something to help me out with the conceptual part, with the writing and everything else." I asked Gwen Wright to work on that.
- Rubens: Oh, Gwendolyn Wright.
- 02-00:58:29
Polledri: She would have, except she expected everything to be done for her. Organize visits to libraries. I said, "Gwen, I'm one person.
- Rubens: You knew her—
- 02-00:58:47
Polledri: From Berkeley. "This is your job. This is not the NEA. This is not an institution or the Getty, where they do everything for you. Or the American Academy. This is a museum. I'm the department. I don't have any help." She didn't like that. So option one was eliminated. Also she didn't like the fact that at that point, there were some people here in the museum who couldn't stand the fact that I wasn't doing painting and sculpture. In their mind, I was wasting museum resources. The museum had become so bureaucratic. The fact that Jack's wife [Inge-Lise Eckmann] was the second in command. She

was a bureaucrat. She couldn't stand that curators should have the lead in museum projects.

Rubens: Was she interested at all in design?

02-00:60:03

Polledri: Not a bit. Not in the least. It was very hard for a while because Jack had hired a series of chief curators who hadn't got the foggiest idea of what a museum was about and what we were trying to do. The important thing at that point for him, because his mind was in the new building, was keep the curators in line. Well, keep them in line means don't let them do anything. We were given a series of deadlines. If we missed one deadline, for example, we couldn't accession things. There was a considerable amount of work to be done to bring these things in the museum, with the scant resources that we had. It created all this baggage. The fact that everybody had their own little bit here at the museum, and all of a sudden everybody was taking aim at us.

Cándida Smith: At your department.

02-00:61:22

Polledri: Sandy had her own share of grief.

Rubens: Was Lori Fogarty here then? Had she come yet?

02-00:61:29

Polledri: Yes, she was one of those.

Rubens: Because theoretically, her position was to help curators get grants.

02-00:61:34

Polledri: She was a fundraiser. The person who actually helped me more than anything was Jeanette Redensek, who was a writer and a researcher. She had a great deal to do, for example, of raising funds for the Wurster show. But also I would talk to her as a peer because she had great ideas and she knew an awful lot. She was one of those people, I could tell her, "I'm interested in this." So she would go to the library, or other libraries, get out a bunch of books and start reading. In no time at all, she would know just about as much as I did about those subjects. So she was a phenomenal resource to have.

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03-00:00:00

Polledri: People don't know much about buildings, you know? They're not very interested. But thankfully, the de Young Museum and the new [California] Academy of Sciences, I don't even care about what one thinks of them. The fact is there are new things happening that weren't happening when I was here at the museum. There was such a conservative attitude around that it seemed like there were people who were opposed to *any* change at all. Which is another reason why I wanted to have "Visionary San Francisco." I said,

“Look, throughout history, how many things have gone on, how many exciting things. Why are you in this frame of mind now?” I wanted people to be challenged that way. Think about what we’re doing, and think about the fact, that attitude that made the city, what it was that made it so loved. Now it’s disappeared. There are still people who say, “Oh! High rises, they’re not appropriate. They’re not San Francisco.” It’s like saying, when you work somewhere, “Oh, this is not our people.” Those are comments that really send me up the wall.

Rubens: But let me ask you this, “This is not our people.”

03-00:01:28

Polledri: I really wasn’t the people.

Rubens: Were you a black-tie dinner, European-traveling guy?

03-00:01:41

Polledri: I wasn’t the gigolo type of curator, if that’s what you mean.

Rubens: Were you regularly in the social scene? It seems to me that the constituency of this museum was not—Not the constituency you thought that it might have been, but that what, in fact, it was, was not your—

03-00:02:05

Polledri: By nature, I’m not a social butterfly. But I can do it. And fairly well. I spoke in public, I went around, I shook lots of hands. Since I wasn’t running for office, I never held crying babies in my arms. But I would do whatever was necessary to promote my cause. But some people are more natural at it than others, and that wasn’t really my thing.

Rubens: It does seem that it wasn’t quite the time. You were talking about how you could not get the support for the Wurster exhibit you wanted. So how did your separation from the—

03-00:02:51

Polledri: Oh, it happened, very simply, during a meeting. After John died and Gary Garrels came aboard, Gary wanted to do things his own way, so he started sticking his nose even in my affairs. We set up a meeting to talk about this exhibit.

Rubens: Wurster, about the Wurster.

03-00:03:29

Polledri: About the Wurster show. I said, “Well, we got this grant.” Which Jack seemed to be really disappointed when I got it because it meant that the exhibition had to happen. He said, “What’s happening with that?” I said, “Well, I’ve had some problems with finding a co-leader of the exhibition. It’s a big effort.” First there was Gwen Wright, who decided she wanted to be the prima donna, so things weren’t working out her way. Then Martin Filler, who actually, I

liked very much. At the time, he thought his wife would get a position at Berkeley as an architectural historian there. When that didn't materialize, then he said, "Well, it's not possible for me, from New York, to work together on this thing." I was thinking maybe I have to do it all by myself. Let me think about it.

[material deleted]

03-00:05:22
Polledri:

Wurster is not about surface. It's about a feeling. We had this curatorial meeting with—I found out after I sat around the table, that it was pretty much of a trial. Jack had decided to have my skin there in that meeting. He said, "Well, how's that show going?"

I said, "It's going okay, except for these two leaders. But I'm proceeding with this, and I've just written a piece." It was fifty pages that I wrote, thinking about the catalogue, about Wurster, and before and after, and how he was situated in the context of California architecture. I said, "I think it's pretty good. It's being published already in this European magazine. But I think it would be the lead article, lead essay in the book that I'm thinking about. The problem that I have is that I've been working this Takamatsu show, so I haven't really come to terms about what buildings, the actual logistics of the exhibition."

"Well, I think there's somebody else who should do it," he said.

I said, "Over my dead body."

He said, "No, I think I want somebody else to do it."

I said, "What? After all the work I've done, now you're saying this?" I left. Then he wanted to be friends with me after that.

Rubens: You just walked out?

03-00:07:22
Polledri:

I walked out. No, I stayed that day, and then I wrote my letter of resignation. He did his best to put me down after that. So after that, things deteriorated very quickly.

Rubens: You left in '94. Then the museum was shut down, actually, for six months.

03-00:07:53
Polledri:

It would have been shortly after that.

Rubens: You don't move into this building.

03-00:07:56
Polledri:

No, I don't. I was hoping to.

Rubens: You had two exhibits that were planned, right? You had the Botta.

03-00:08:05
Polledri:

The Botta show was about, basically, models. The museum galleries have been dwindled to a very small space. I had envisioned originally to do something about this as an opening exhibition, which I thought was a fantastic idea, that nobody had thought about. It was totally appropriate for the department and the direction of the department; it was to do the architectural lightness around the Pacific. You would see recurrent themes. Now it's an old idea. But at that point, nobody had had it. That didn't happen.

Rubens: By lightness, you meant?

03-00:08:57
Polledri:

Lightweight materials. You would see things done with almost local materials. I had this picture that I saw in a book, about local indigenous workers in New Guinea changing panels, corrugated steel panels, on a Messerschmitt airplane. I said, "It's that closeness to nature, where there is extremely sophisticated technology, on one hand, but that can really be understood and implement with very little means." That's what the Eames is, the computers, and everything else.

Rubens: This was basically not your show, though you are given credit for it, for the Botta.

03-00:09:53
Polledri:

I had collected all those pieces. It was just a question of exhibiting four models.

Rubens: Then there *was* a Wurster show.

03-00:10:00
Polledri:

There was a Wurster show, but it wasn't at all what I had in mind. I didn't even see it, I was so disgusted.

Rubens: Did you stay away from the opening?

03-00:10:09
Polledri:

Yes. I did.

Rubens: What we did not discuss was the reaction to that phenomenal catalogue on Takamatsu. Who had ever seen him?

03-00:10:30
Polledri:

Nobody. Well, some things had been published.

Rubens: What was the reaction to it? You told us how you had come upon him. But was it well received?

03-00:10:44

Polledri:

I would say it was. It wasn't poorly received. Everybody saw the catalogue and saw the show, they liked it very much. It didn't have the resonance that I was hoping that it would have, but it represented pretty much what I wanted to do with the exhibitions, what I tried to do with exhibitions, which was how important the way you display things in a museum is, not just *what* you do. Because it contributes to enriching the experience of what a three-dimensional idea would be.

Rubens:

Why don't you describe a little how you showed it.

03-00:11:31

Polledri:

Well, what I showed was a three-dimensional installation that also took care of showing all of the work. All of the drawings and models were shown in the context of this installation. So people entered—If I have a firm principle about designing exhibitions, it's that when you enter the show, you have the impression the rest of the world is left outside. You enter a moment of suspension of belief, and you experience something that you wouldn't ordinarily. I always tried to explain that to my colleagues at the museum.

Rubens:

Did Jack appreciate the exhibit?

03-00:12:52

Polledri:

He did. You were asking me earlier about who were my allies at the museum. It was the staff and the crew. They liked working on my shows. Because they felt that I was doing the best shows, modestly speaking. At least that's what they told me.

Rubens:

There were a couple other critics I wanted to ask you about. Just elaborate your ideas about what our architecture and the relationship to design and space can really say about how people live, how they think, the whole social process of it. What about Robert Venturi? Was Venturi someone who was—

03-00:13:55

Polledri:

No, he was from Philadelphia. He was much more interested in a cartoonish type of modernism. He'd done some chairs that I didn't particularly like. I actually still think, still thought at the time, that he was a very important architect, being extremely influential. But I didn't think that his built work was particularly significant.

Rubens:

But what about his writing? *Learning from Las Vegas*.

03-00:14:36

Polledri:

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture was more important to me than *Learning from Las Vegas*. But yes, *Learning from Las Vegas* was also very important.

Rubens:

What was it that you liked about his writing?

03-00:14:51

Polledri:

It was almost, in architectural terms, a discussion about the readymade. That was important.

[materiel deleted]

Rubens:

I want to come back to your intellectual position and, then, development. But you said how hard it is, I would say probably still, for people to understand space and process. The Bauhaus certainly was an effort, in certain ways, to—

03-00:17:13

Polledri:

Very much so. You had to bring it all under one roof.

Rubens:

Would you say that you were influenced—

03-00:17:25

Polledri:

By Bauhaus? Who isn't? If you think about the modern movement, modern architecture, it's hard to escape the influence of the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus itself wasn't the beginning. It was a middle point, where things came together in a particularly significant way. The beginning went back into the eighteenth century, with the arts and crafts. That's why we find, all of a sudden, all these arts and crafts influences on the West Coast, as well, with the Greene & Greene brothers, Gamble House in Pasadena, for example; there are some houses here. Neutra. If you look very closely at Neutra and Schindler buildings, they are more influenced by the arts and crafts in Europe than they are by a way of thinking particularly related to the West Coast. Wurster is a different case, you see.

Rubens:

Explain that.

03-00:18:27

Polledri:

Wurster, he grew up in this area, so he was very much in love with the vernacular buildings. He knew about the vernacular buildings in this area. He was able to see the potential that these materials had, very humble materials. Boards and battens, shingles, industrial window systems, corrugated metal. That had nothing to do, really, with the prevailing idea of modern architecture, which for people on the East Coast—and I put Frank Lloyd Wright on the East Coast, almost—the people on the East Coast think about modern architecture. So my essay on Wurster was about that. It starts out with Lewis Mumford, who gets into a problematic dispute because he writes in the *New Yorker* about the International Style, and tried to put that into a context of the discussions of the time, and tried to see how Wurster relates to that. Probably, it's one of the things I'm most proud of, to have created the intellectual framework to explain that, and Wurster's subsequent influence out to Sea Ranch. That's where I stopped.

Rubens: How would you define regionalism now? You were very clear that you were making a distinction between provincialism and arts and crafts. Would you frame it differently now?

03-00:20:39

Polledri: Yes, I would. Labels change their meaning over the course of years. What they mean at one point, all of a sudden it gains a different context and a different meaning, after. What was important, I think, what I was hoping would happen with Wurster, especially, was to see the influence; not just that he had at the time when he was practicing architecture, but the potential that he could have for today's architecture. This was particularly important at the time, because I saw the proliferation of subdivisions and suburbs that had absolutely nothing to do with California, around Sacramento, Vallejo, other places.

Rubens: You're talking about in the nineties.

03-00:21:35

Polledri: In the nineties. What I felt at the time were, first of all, the result of financial operations. They were also a very poor choice, because they represented a waste of natural resources. Turns out that now everybody is thinking about the same things. Which leads to the increased density in our city, and other cities as well, because it leads to a much more efficient use and management of natural resources. It's much easier to build vertically. It's much easier, and also interesting, to build vertically in an existing conglomeration than to start a new one, all of a sudden, of single-family dwellings that look—if you're *lucky*—like many Cape Cod houses in the middle of nowhere, because there are tax breaks for the developer.

Rubens: How would you use the language now? Is there another word you would use, besides regionalism?

03-00:23:02

Polledri: I would say the nature of the place. It's hackneyed, but that's what I was trying to explain, that that's been California architecture. The times of Wurster and contemporaries meant there was a sense of place that they had about the inside and outside, the fact that there was a relatively mild climate.

Rubens: Pattern on the land is a good phrase.

03-00:23:46

Polledri: Well, there was a husbandry of the land that they felt particularly compelled to adopt, that today's developers, unfortunately, have completely lost sense of. Look, for example, at the Oakland Hills after the fire, right? First you have 2,000 square foot houses. Then all of a sudden you have 6,000 square foot houses, after the insurance. The landscape has changed because of that, because of the property patterns. You see these things from the air, but also you see them from a distance. They change. People in the nineties were

getting their ideas from *Architectural Digest* and *House & Garden*. From magazines. I wanted to show them that there was a much richer source of ideas than that, to spur an understanding of space and the ways of living, that was much more interesting than that of looking at movie star houses and, I'm going to have a Santa Fe house style in Beverly Hills. That is the meaningless way of thinking. Unfortunately, it went against the grain of many of the trustees, who thought exactly along those lines.

Rubens: Were there any other specific exhibits?

03-00:26:04

Polledri: The Eames, the Eames. It's a little show. If there is one thing that I'm so proud of, it was after I bought the things I bought from the Eames office, I wanted very much to display them. Lucia and her then husband, Demetrios, gave me about ten grand to put together a show.

Rubens: Who's this? A board person?

03-00:26:38

Polledri: No, no, Lucia Eames, Charles Eames's daughter. They were trying to manage the legacy of the Eames. I said, "I'm sold." So, I did a little show. It was done with, basically, plywood. It turned out to be one of the things I was most proud of. We spent nothing. That was done with nothing.

Rubens: It didn't work out that you could show the workroom.

03-00:27:16

Polledri: Not together, no. I wanted to have that as my permanent installation in the museum. I had organized, for example, the survey, measured drawings of the existing projection room, with all the artifacts, the many experiments, half-baked things, ideas, sketches. I don't know whether you ever met Ray, but she loved the little things, souvenirs, objects. In some way, they represented a continuity in their thought, a way of thinking. Everything couldn't be explained, but they were chosen in such a way that explained that there was a profound philosophy of living behind that. That's what I wanted to illustrate. It wasn't done. I couldn't forgive Aaron Betsky for that. He didn't get it at all.

Rubens: How would you describe to us what you decided to do and what has been your legacy?

03-00:28:44

Polledri: What I decided to do? Well, I was an architect before I joined the museum, so I still am now. A designer. I've been partners for ten years for a design company called Eight Inc. Younger people. It was very exciting. We did a tremendous amount of work. You know the Apple Stores, for example?

Rubens: Sure, of course.

03-00:29:13

Polledri:

That was our work. We did other things. I decided to leave this past January, in the middle of the month. There were a few years where I was doing freelance writing, and some teaching at CCA [California College of Art]. Then I decided, well, really, to write and not do is not really what I'm about. I decided to return to the profession. That's what I did. It was important for me to select a company that wasn't particularly—I couldn't have worked at SOM [Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill], for example, because you know exactly what they do. There is no way to influence their process. I wanted to have a voice, and I wanted a smaller, more collegial type of environment, where ideas were debated, still it was possible to have a say in what—

Rubens:

It's San Francisco Bay?

03-00:30:38

Polledri:

Now, they have three offices. They've become more corporate. At that point, it was about four people.

Rubens:

Anything you want to announce that you're thinking about doing now?

03-00:30:50

Polledri:

No, it's just too preliminary. I'm talking to some people, but I really don't have anything specific to—

Rubens:

You were very disappointed in Betsky.

03-00:31:06

Polledri:

Betsky was about himself, was about promoting. Apparently, people have a very high regard of him here. He was a very good speaker. From a social point of view, he was everything that I was not. From an idea, substance point of view, also. Joe Rosa, whom I met before I came, he was Betsky's successor, proved a great disappointment to me because in the four years, he did nothing. I can't think of a single show that he did. He wasted his time. And nobody thought of continuing the ideas that I had. They succumbed, I think, to the pressures of the museum. The fact that people want to have *objects* and shows where they can show pictures, rather than a discussion of ideas. My commitment was to this state, this region, this culture that I think is disappearing. I wanted to show what was so valuable about that, that could help us out of the quagmire we are in now. I think now my work is done for me. I don't know that I had any part of it, but I hope that I did, in steering the aesthetics of architecture. But also the discipline, in the way it's turned out to be now. I'm thinking about the many young architects in L. A. and here in town. I'm not a curator anymore.

Rubens:

Takamatsu, do you have any sense of if the exhibit here on Takamatsu had an influence on his recognition internationally, or in Japan?

03-00:34:16

Polledri:

I think briefly. It's disappeared from the scene now. He was a difficult subject to deal with, to be honest, as a person.

Rubens:

Who is Tadao Ando? His star sure seems to be rising.

03-00:34:38

Polledri:

Oh, it's risen. I think it's leveled off. It's probably retired now. I think that much more important than graphic design is that people veered off to the web. There has been a lot of that. Partly because it was such an explosion in the economy, the dot.com bubble. There were many things graphically interesting then. But also when that exploded, or burst, the people were still around. They're still doing things today. That culture has remained. There are many snippets that I see that were influenced by what was going on at the time when we did our show.

Rubens:

What do you think was driving that excitement, that dynamism that you were able to exhibit in that show? What were the roots of that here in the Bay Area?

03-00:35:46

Polledri:

I think people were doing things that were light and not self-important. They were light, they had a sense of humor to them. They had a sense of color. They were very attractive to look at. They were fun. They expressed, in a way, the wackiness I was talking about earlier.

Rubens:

You said that earlier. This was different than New York, of course.

03-00:36:19

Polledri:

Oh, very much. People are very self-important in New York.

Rubens:

You had a relationship with the Herman Miller consortium?

03-00:36:34

Polledri:

I talked to them because there was a controversy between Lucia and her husband, who were the trustees of the Eames estate, and Herman Miller, who claimed ownership of many of the things that were in the office. To be honest with you, I tried to stay out of that as much as I could, even though I had to field some phone calls from Herman Miller. I said, "Well, we just got what may seem a few bits and pieces that were of no interest to anybody else, whereas most of the things that have already gone to Vitra, so talk to them. Don't complain to me." They wanted them back, whatever I had bought. I said, "Not on your life."

Rubens:

The museum had, you were saying auxiliary, and they called it the architecture and design subcommittee.

03-00:37:44

Polledri:

There were a few architects who were part of that, a few designers. Steven Oliver and a few more museum trustees, who weren't particularly interested

in—You know what they were interested in, museum trustees? They were interested in going on shopping sprees to Europe, accompanied by John Caldwell, who had made previous arrangements with the artists, who would have a stash of work so the trustees could buy it and bring it back to the United States for their own homes. That's what he would do for them.

Rubens: With the hope that they would then give it to the museum.

03-00:38:29

Polledri: I'm not sure whether that hope was really there.

Rubens: I wanted to finish up with the idea about who has visual literacy. [Siegfried Giedion] in *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, tried to raise that.

03-00:39:00

Polledri: But for most people, that was far too complicated to grasp, I think, as an idea. Intellectually, they could. But then emotionally and in terms of making that part of their vocabulary, it wasn't. It was an uphill battle for him, too. So most people understood, took it in *stylistic* terms. That's where you found it. For example, Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock took it literally in stylistic terms. White walls, pipe railing, what they thought was the vocabulary. They published a catalogue of the 1932 exhibition that was very influential in promoting that visual *vocabulary* to people in this country. Most people reacted—such as Wurster, for example—reacted against it. Frank Lloyd Wright was vitriolic in his dislike. He was talking about organic, and people never understood. They thought organic was everything about curves and not straight lines. But it wasn't. It was about the materials that you have, the place that you have, the function, and also how you transform that into an architectural set of visual elements.

Rubens: How it corresponds with your living practices. So visual literacy.

03-00:40:47

Polledri: It's still virgin territory.

Rubens: What could promote that?

03-00:40:55

Polledri: Well, a slightly less superficial program of museum exhibitions than we have, much more interest in architecture and design than we have. People are beginning to make inroads. For example, *Dwell* magazine is trying to do things like that, exactly. I wish I had supporters such as that at that time, because they are doing the right thing. What technology do we have available? How do people live? What economy does allow us to do what? That stuff. People latched on, on the fact that perhaps prefabrication—In many ways, prefabrication was what the Case Study houses was about. So you see the continuity there. But I doubt many people see it, even to this day.

Then, of course, there has been a number of publications done about this idea of lightness I was talking about, afterwards. So some of the names I was thinking about now have become much better known than they were before. And publications such as [*Architectural*] *Record*. Not *Architectural Digest*; they're still doing the same thing.

Rubens: But *Architectural Record*. The architect and design forum was in '89, before the subcommittee. Mark Hornberger and his wife presided over a dinner for you.

03-00:42:42

Polledri: That's right.

Rubens: What was the forum?

03-00:42:45

Polledri: The forum was the auxiliary group at the museum that gave origin to the subcommittee for acquisitions. They were related. They gave me the money, the forum gave me the money, for the purchase of the Eames material.

Rubens: Do you see San Francisco as a Pacific Rim city today?

03-00:43:13

Polledri: Oh, I don't know. It's much more looking inward than it is looking outward, than it was at that time. People were talking about the connection—People were talking about Asia as an unknown still, in the late eighties, early nineties. Despite all the immigration that we had, people here had very little idea what was going on in Japan. There's been a lot since. Now it's commonplace to go there, to go to Shanghai, to go to other places around. That's the proof that I was on the right track, rather than the other way around. Because I think there are an awful lot of connections. But as a culture, California is much more inward-looking than it was then. I think we are interested about our own problems with money, our own problems with the environment. Now people are fretting about budget cuts and what that means for our state parks and other things of that nature.

[End of Interview]

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