Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Neville Agnew at the Mogao cave temples of Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China in 2010. Agnew and the GCI have collaborated for nearly 30 years on site preservation, management, and wall painting conservation at Dunhuang.

Photo Credit: Getty Conservation Institute.
Neville Agnew is a senior specialist on field projects at the Getty Conservation Institute. Raised in South Africa, he earned a PhD in chemistry and, after a decade of teaching, became one of the pioneers in the developing discipline of heritage site conservation. In 1980, he became director of the conservation department at the Queensland Museum in Australia. There his work included the preservation of dinosaur fossils, the wreckage of an 18th century British warship, and the ruins of a 19th century penal colony. In 1987, he joined the GCI as the Deputy Director of the Institute’s science program. His work in heritage site conservation has spanned the globe over the decades, from the Laetoli hominid trackway in Tanzania, to the Queen’s Valley in Egypt, to the Mogao Buddhist grottoes in China. In this oral history, he discusses the significant projects of his career, the rise of conservation science and the significant role of the GCI, as well as the future of the discipline.
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[End of Interview]
Holmes: This is Todd Holmes, with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. I have the great pleasure of sitting down this morning with Neville Agnew, for the Getty Oral History Project. Today is Wednesday, July 27, 2016, and we’re here at the Getty Conservation Institute, in Los Angeles. Neville, welcome and thank you for sitting down with me today. This is the first of our four sessions together that seek to document your career, your achievements, and of course, your many contributions to conservation, particularly conservation of cultural heritage sites. And of course, through this, we also want to document the great work that has also been happening here at the Getty Conservation Institute. So as a historian, I usually say that we like to start from the beginning, so maybe let’s start with exploring your background, your childhood and family background and education.

Agnew: Well, I was born in South Africa, a long time ago. In 1938, in fact, so I’m getting on. I grew up there. My parents were British—mother Scottish and father Irish-English—although they’d both been born in South Africa themselves. So I grew up there in Durban, on the East Coast, in Natal and partly in Pretoria. My father was a civil servant, and so we lived in both cities. During the war years, World War II, we were in Durban, and then went to Pretoria afterwards. We’re an English-speaking family, so in a way, you have to see it in the context of politics and racial strife and so on in South Africa at that time. Of course, in 1949, the apartheid era began, with the election of the Nationalist government. It was D.F. [Daniel François] Malan who was the architect of apartheid. So everything changed and really, the English-speaking—let alone the black Africans and the East Indian community in South Africa, and the mixed-blood people called the Coloreds—all became kind of second-class citizens, in various ways. But white South Africans of English extraction were, of course, discriminated against to some degree, as well. Nonetheless, I went to a Catholic school, a private school. The education was quite good in many ways; but in other ways, it was deficient, I think. But that’s by the way. I think for the times and for the place and the culture at that period, it was not a bad education at all, including seven years of Latin!

When I finished school, I worked for a couple of years before going to university. I worked mainly as a geological field assistant, for the South African Geological Survey. So at the bright young age of eighteen, I was out in the field in northern Zululand, in the northern part of Natal, close to the border with Swaziland. I was doing survey work there—by myself, really, but with a team of Africans. We were doing geophysical work—mainly prospecting for underground water, through magnetometer and seismic resistivity, looking for dolerite dykes, which were the indicators of underground water—for development and for drilling and for farming purposes. And then I went to university, in the University of Natal, and I
graduated with an honors degree in 1961 and joined the National Chemical Research Laboratory in Pretoria, and started a master’s degree while I was working there. They sent me to London for a couple of years. I was somehow thought to be promising material, I guess. They sent me to London. I started my PhD work there, which I finished in South Africa, at the University of Natal, when I came back.

Holmes: And that was in chemistry?

Agnew: In chemistry, yeah, sure. My PhD is in an interesting area, polymer chemistry, with coordination chemistry, with heavy metals and so on.

Holmes: I want to have you discuss that a little bit, because I think your early academic work is very interesting. But before we do that, It seemed like from an early age, if we look at your early schooling, and even some of the work you were doing in South Africa, as well as in London, that you were drawn to science, and science broadly speaking, right?

Agnew: Sure. Well, I had a great advantage as a child growing up, in that my father was a great naturalist himself. At least an amateur naturalist. And every year in July, we would go on safaris to private game reserves, if you like, that bordered on the Kruger National Park, which is this huge park in the eastern part of what was then the Transvaal Province. It’s 200 miles long and it’s just one of the great treasures of Africa, as a reserve for wild animals. Our property—it didn’t belong to us, but my father was friends with the owner—abutted that. There were no fences, so we would camp on the banks of the Olifants River, which is the Elephants River. It’s a beautiful, clear river that runs off the high plateau down towards the Indian Ocean. So we just led lives there for weeks on end, usually in July, which is the winter months, running wild and studying animals. We slept on the ground. We slept on grass around a campfire. At night, lions would come by and elephants would come up, circle the camp, continue up the river, there were hippos and crocodiles in the river, and lots of game. It was paradise.

Holmes: Oh, indeed.

Agnew: Yeah. It was amazing. So we never liked to go to the Kruger Park, because you have to stay in your car there. We thought that was a kind of drive-in zoo, and we had the real experience. Which is true. It was really wonderful. I think it was, in many ways, formative for me. So we had a rich life, in that respect. In those days, kids, we just ran free. We were feral, in many ways.

Holmes: Well, how wonderful. So in your studies, what shifted you towards a focus in chemistry?
Well, I did a double major. Geology was the other one. I thought for a while that I might be a field geologist, because there was so much of work opportunity in Africa, in central Africa, mainly, in geological exploration, mining and mineral exploration. Then it kind of cut back a bit and I thought, well, I’ll do chemistry instead. I was actually more drawn to chemistry. We also, as children—I had two older brothers and a younger brother, just four boys—we dabbled in chemistry and made concoctions. Today, we would be arrested and taken away and locked up, because we’d make bombs, literally, for the fun of it, and explode hydrogen and this stuff, and acetylene. We were just crazy. A lot of this was under the radar of parental supervision. It was a wonderful life.

Holmes: Oh, wow. So talk a little bit about after your PhD work. You graduated in 1967?

Agnew: Yeah. Almost immediately, I left Pretoria and the National Chemical research Laboratory, which I think still exists, I’m not sure; but it did undergo transformations. I worked there on a variety of projects. But I went to Rhodes University, which is in the Cape Province. It’s a small, basically teaching university, in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape Province. And I taught there. It’s a very nice place. It’s a lovely university. Now it is open to all races; I’ve been back several times, it’s a pleasure to go there. But when I went there and was teaching, it was whites only, of course. No Indians, no colored people, no blacks. Although there was a black missionary university at Fort Hare, which is about an hour’s drive away. It had had its origins with Lutherans, I think, missionaries. I had a master’s degree student there at one point—I co-supervised her—her name was Mrs. Tshabalala. Lovely name. I went to her graduation. She just did a master’s degree in chemistry. She was actually supervised, in the main, by her lecturer there, her professor, who was of German origin. He himself was the son of a missionary. I forget his first name; Ernest, I think. Gisseke was his name. He was a very fine person, and he encouraged her. She really had a rural upbringing. So we co-supervised her. But a great experience was going to her graduation, where her entire extended family arrived.

Holmes: Oh, what a great achievement.

Agnew: It was a celebration that you wouldn’t believe. The joy that they showed at seeing the only one in the family ever to go to university, let alone get a master’s degree. So it was fun, yeah. After ten years, I decided I really didn’t want to live in South Africa anymore, so I went for sabbatical, to Monash University in Australia, to look it over. Came back and packed up and left, and went to Brisbane. There I worked, for a couple of years, on research money from the Australian Research Grants Council or whatever it was. It was adequate, but there was no long-term prospect for employment. I’d left
Rhodes as what would be called—what was called then—a senior lecturer. It’s a grade below an associate professor, after about eight or nine years at Rhodes University. I was bored there, to tell you the truth, as well, because I saw it as not enough research and a lot of teaching. So one of the things I did to make some money, as well, was create a laboratory for the production of biological specimens—culture materials, microscope slides, histological stuff, skeleton material, and algae—and sell it to schools and to universities. So I had a thriving cottage industry, by the time I left. I sold it, and then it kind of withered, I think. But it was great fun and taught me an awful lot about biology. My older brother was a professional biologist, so he was always available by phone or letter, to provide advice and guidance when I didn’t know anything about certain things. But I learnt a lot.

Holmes: But that really showed the kind of multidisciplinary affinity that you had for learning.

Agnew: Well, actually, it turned out to be very useful in the end, because when I applied for the job at the Queensland Museum, I could speak with the director not only on the basis of chemical knowledge, but also I could relate to the natural history side of the museum’s collections. I knew about preservation of specimens, I knew about their storage; I knew enough about biology to be able to really, I suppose, talk my way into the job. That’s what it was; I talked my way into the job.

Holmes: There at the Queensland Museum. Was this 1980?


Holmes: So was having not just the background of your childhood, but also your own kind of study of dealing with natural history and these kinds of things, really, did that ease the transition from going from being an academic chemist to working in the museum and starting a new career in conservation?

Agnew: Yeah. There was no hardship in the transition for me. I was very happy to get into the museum. They were some of the happiest years of my life, working there, because it was just the variety of the collections they had, not only in natural history, but in archeology and anthropology and industrial technology. There was a huge industrial technology department there, early agriculture and early development of the state of Queensland. The museum was started, I think, in about 1860. So it’s a venerable institution and has got tremendous collections in all sorts of things. We did a huge number of projects. There was cellulose nitrate cine film. They had very early film, just the earliest cine film on nitrate, which is notorious for the fact that it autocatalyzes and decomposes. To our amazement, we found it was actually in quite good condition, even though Brisbane is subtropical and there was no
environmental control in the storage. It’s now in the national vaults in Canberra, I think. They have a nitrate film vault there. So looking at this material and getting it properly stored and a variety of things like that. Another one was, we found paintings, early paintings, 1860s. Somebody said, “Do you know, those paintings are probably on top of photographs.” But how to know? They had gone to the, I think, London Exposition, in the mid-nineteenth century. They showed rural scenes in Australia. There would be a kangaroo and there would be an aboriginal with a spear and so on. We sent them to Lucas Heights, which was a nuclear facility in Sydney. When they’re radiated, if there’s silver from the silver photograph, it activates the silver, and you can then put the exposed painting on a negative. If it creates an image, you know that there’s activated silver. And sure enough, they were overpainted photographs—except that the aboriginal with the spear and the wallaby or kangaroo were not on the photograph; they’d been added. They were Daintree photographs. Really a large collection. So there was always something new, and the colleagues there were extremely congenial.

Holmes: I want to talk a little bit about your colleagues. You obviously had the intelligence and burning curiosity and multidisciplinary kind of draw, to make that transition from, in a sense, a chemistry lab or classroom to working in a museum, which would, again, begin your career in conservation. But at this time, what did conservation look like? Did you have mentors who kind of taught you the ropes, or maybe those who influenced your thinking about conservation, during those early years?

Agnew: Yeah, it was very much seat-of-my-pants, I must say. But I did have a colleague there who also had a PhD in chemistry. He’d been a graduate of Queensland University, Dan Robinson. He’d been taking care of the conservation needs of the collections when I arrived. He gave me a lot of help. In addition to that, there was, at that time, being established in Canberra, a heritage conservation training course, by another chemist, Colin Pearson. That flourished for a while, until it closed some years ago, I believe, because of government funding cuts again. So I made contact there. They looked a little askance at me, because they would really have preferred to have had one of their graduates take the job that I got. But the director of the Queensland Museum at that time wasn’t terribly impressed with them, because they really didn’t have the kind of background and depth of knowledge that he thought I had. And I must say in fairness, I think he was right. Really, I could do things that they weren’t aware of—mainly in terms of preservation of the natural history collections and advising the curators on things. Some of them were pretty clueless, the curators. There were bad things happening. Mary Wade, who was doing microfossil research with shale dissolution—microfossils in shales—she had a technique, which involved chemically digesting the shale to release the microfossils, by using strong peroxide and caustic soda. But she didn’t realize the amount of heat that was generated. So she’d been doing it on a bucket scale.
Fortunately, she walked away when it blew the lid off the bucket, because she didn’t stir the mix to dissipate the heat and so on. She would’ve been maimed or blinded. It hit the roof. So I said, “Mary, you can’t do that. You can’t do that. You seek advice before you go blundering around with chemicals and so on.” There was all sorts of stuff—cyanide and arsenic and all sorts of things—that they’d use to treat the specimens in the nineteenth and twentieth century. So we did some analysis on these spears from New Guinea, because there’s a big collection of New Guinean artifacts there, from the Highlands. This was an incredibly important collection—is one. It’s called the MacGregor Collection, made in about the early 1980s, just at the point of contact of European with the Highlanders.

Holmes: Yeah, first contact.

01-00:20:10
Agnew: So it was all authentic stuff. Except for one thing. As far as we could see they, the New Guineans, took a liking to a blue dye called Reckitt’s blue. It’s used in washing, as a brightening agent for white shirts and so on, white garments. But it’s blue. You add it to washing. When I grew up, we had Reckitt’s blue. It’s an intense blue. They loved it for their masks. So you could find Reckitt’s blue in many of the painted artifacts and so on. Anyway, there was just a wealth of stuff going on in Queensland Museum.

Holmes: As you mentioned, there was an early conservation training program that was going on at this similar time. What was your view of how conservation was being taught at this time?

01-00:21:12
Agnew: I thought it was okay. I never really treated objects very much, unless I knew what I was doing, which I did when it came to working with the Pandora, because I read the literature very carefully and I had to do it, and that was fine. But I would never, ever attempt to treat a painting or something. That’s highly skilled kind of conservation, very specialized oil painting conservation or any of those things. My job, a lot of it, was analytic and chemistry analysis, and also advice and guidance on issues of safety in the museum, on storage, how to maintain the fluid levels in wet storage containers—a whole variety of things like that, which were really, in a way, more collections management than they were conservation. But I thought the conservation work that was being done in Canberra was good, because they had a paper conservation training component, paintings conservation, artifacts conservations. It was a master’s degree program. Their students specialized, I think, after a basic year introduction, which was chemistry and so on. So yeah. It was an interesting transition for me. I never felt uncomfortable about my role in the Queensland Museum, vis-à-vis other conservators who might think they actually knew more about the physical act of conservation. Nor do I pretend nowadays to be a conservator as such. I’m a conservation professional, right? I know about the
theory and background of conservation of objects, whether it be
deacidification of paper or various other techniques and methods.

Holmes: Now, did the Queensland Museum establish a department of conservation?

01-00:23:33

Agnew: Yes, yes.

Holmes: And you headed that up?

01-00:23:35

Agnew: I headed that up, yeah.

Holmes: Can you talk a little bit about that?

01-00:23:38

Agnew: Well, it was a creation because there was an awareness now, suddenly, that
the Queensland Museum was falling behind, in terms of the care and storage
and management of its collections. This is the end of the seventies, the
beginning of the eighties, when Australia was expanding and evincing more
mature aspects of collections awareness and its own cultural heritage. This
was occurring across the country. So the Queensland Museum had been a very
backward institution, despite its wonderful collections. At that time, also,
there was a very rightwing state government, and a guy called [Johannes,
“Joh”] Bjelke-Petersen, who was a very rightwing politician, not very
amenable to the more sensitive aspects, whether it’s aboriginal culture or
culture in general. He was a white supremacist; let’s put it that way. He
would’ve felt very happy in South Africa, with the apartheid regime. I never
for one moment regretted leaving South Africa, where I had to uproot my
family and it was a really difficult transition. It was a very difficult transition.
I’m the only person I ever knew who left the country without a job.

Holmes: Oh, wow. Yeah.

01-00:25:13

Agnew: Yes. They all said, we’re going to go. Or they went, we’ve got a job, now
we’re going. I went without one. Although in fairness, my wife at that time
did have a job. And it didn’t take me any time. I’d laid a groundwork when I
went on sabbatical to Monash University in Melbourne. So I had some
contacts there. And I have a younger brother there, who had gone a year or
two before me, to Sydney. So I wasn’t really disadvantaged in many ways.
But still, I didn’t have a job.

Holmes: Well, we were just talking yesterday with your colleague Jim [James] Druzik,
and that’s one of the aspects he says, that science is about risks. So I guess
that was surely an example of risks.
Agnew: Sure. It was a big risk, but I was in my thirties, so—. I had family to look after.

Holmes: I’m curious. You mentioned this time of right around 1980, early eighties, that there was the development of the department of conservation at the museum. You also have, I believe, the Burra Charter, which was created around 1979?

Agnew: Something like that, yeah, around that time.

Holmes: There seemed to be, I guess, a recognition that conservation needed to be taken a little more seriously.

Agnew: Sure, sure.

Holmes: Or it was developing into a kind of discipline. Could you talk a little bit about that? Or at least your observations there at the museum, as well as in Australia.

Agnew: Yeah, there was an awakening to the need for conservation and taking care of the heritage of the country. Not only the natural heritage, but also the cultural heritage of the country. So this, I think, was the driving impetus. In the early seventies, there’d been a sea change, really, in Australian politics, when [Edward] Gough Whitlam became prime minister. He transformed the country in a few years, until he was ousted in a kind of political coup. He was no administrator of fiscal responsibility, none of those things; but he changed Australia irrevocably, and he changed it for the better. He really took it out of its apron-string attachment to Mother Britain. He made it a grown-up country.

He did things that the conservative side of government really screamed at. He bought a Jackson Pollock painting for $2 million, huh? They said, “What a waste of money.” So Gough Whitlam was an extraordinary person, and he really redirected Australia. He opened up the country to foreign immigration. He negated the white Australia policy. Australia was a racist country. I saw that, when I went in 1974 to Melbourne. I was astonished at the extent of racism that I encountered there. Antipathy towards black or Australian aborigines. I thought—and I still do—that there was absolutely no reason and justification for that, because not only were they not a threat, in terms of sheer numbers—. The Australian aboriginal population is miniscule, compared with the white population, miniscule. Whereas in South Africa, it’s ten to one, black to white. In fact, I looked at projected figures for population growth in a newspaper that was published in Johannesburg, one of the liberal newspapers, which was always coming under government attack, called The Rand Daily Mail, at one point in the early seventies. They just pointed out that there was a big disparity between the real numbers of blacks and whites in Africa. That’s
the first one. And second, that the growth rate, if you projected into the future, was not six to one. Or if it’s six to one now, in twenty years, it’s going to be ten to one, fifteen to one. Who could possibly imagine that in the end, white supremacy would be sustainable, apartheid would be something that could survive in Africa? I thought, this is crazy. Here, my sons are going to be dragooned into the Nationalist government army. They’re going to have to go and fight black people on the borders. They’re going to have to be either with the apartheid regime or against it. And if they’re against it, they are going to be victimized. They are going to be beaten, they’re going to be pushed, despised, and they’re going to really have a hard time. Not for me. Got to get out. Got to get out.

Holmes: Yeah. Of course

Agnew: Sorry I digressed from your question there.

Holmes: No, no. No, I think it’s very important.

Agnew: But coming back, Gough Whitlam changed all that. He opened Australia to immigration. He took the first waves of Vietnamese immigrants, from the Vietnam War. There were Chileans who were coming from the [Augusto] Pinochet thing. So he was accepting. He really had amazing influence on the country, and then he was ousted. But he, I think, set the country to a new direction. And the outcome of that, one might say, I think, was an opening up, in terms of culture, awareness of culture, opening to the greater world, taking care of the heritage, both the Australian aboriginal heritage and the white heritage.

Holmes: A recognition of both.

Agnew: So I think that’s where the conservation movement, the Burra Charter and all of those things evolved. I would like to trace it back to Gough Whitlam. Others who are more knowledgeable historically than I am and know more about it might disagree; but it was coincidental in time.

Holmes: Oh, sure.

Agnew: So it’s a nice way of really saying that this was a transformation in thinking, in politics and in society, in Australia.

Holmes: Well, and it also seemed to be that not just the development and awareness that conservation of heritage needed to be taken in a much more active and professional way, but it was also a larger kind of encompassing—right?—of everyone’s heritage.
Right, right, yeah. Which is why the Burra Charter was written. And its basis is the Venice Charter, which was written in the 1960s, ’64, I think. The Venice Charter, as the name implies, was really written in Venice. You might know, or might imagine, that its bias—and I say bias—is very much towards architectural heritage, and very much towards European architectural heritage. Actually, there was an Athens Charter before that, and so on and so on; but the Venice Charter is the charter which has become the one that’s known best, and has been the progenitor of many other charters, including the Burra Charter. But it is limited; it’s Eurocentric. And Australians said, around that time, it doesn’t fit our needs. Because not only is there no aboriginal architecture comparable to European architecture, of course, but even the archeology of the aboriginal community is more like lithic scatter in various parts, stone tools and the like. It’s not deposits. Although there are deposits, of course, in some of the caves; like Kenniff Cave, in central Queensland, is famous. I think it’s got 14,000 years of deposit in a rock shelter. So those have been excavated. But in general, it’s not got the kind of archeology that Europe is used to.

Sure. Sure. What’s also interesting to see, that this is developing in Australia. But at the same time—which would be your future institution, which we’ll get into in the next session, or maybe towards the end of this—. But here you had, also, the Getty Conservation Institute, roughly around the same time, seemed to be embodying this greater awareness of the need for conservation and the professionalization of conservation, and a more active role in that. Were you aware about the Getty?

No, I didn’t know anything about the Getty at that time. I had no idea about it. No, I was very much engaged in creating a success of my own work at the Queensland Museum. And it was all-enveloping for me. It was really so consuming and so delightful and so exciting and just wonderful, in many ways.

Well, let’s talk about those projects, because you certainly had your hands full there. One of the major projects that you undertook at the Queensland Museum was the Lark Quarry dinosaur tracks.

Ah, yes, yes.

Yes. Can you talk a little bit about that?

The Lark Quarry dinosaur track is now one of the three or four first, today, as of I think 2004, nominated by the Australian federal government as a national monument. At that time, it wasn’t. It was very quickly created as something like a state park. But it was a discovery of a dinosaur trackway—or trackways,
I should say—running dinosaurs. So they called it a stampede. The story, which has been contested by other paleontologists and trackway specialists, is that the big fella, who had footprints that were literally about three feet across and is, like a T-Rex, bipedal—. And there are eleven of them; plod, plod, plod, up one side. All the others were running like crazy. You can actually trace individual animals.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

01-00:35:59
Agnew: You can see the skid marks, as they crisscrossed. These were bipedal dinosaurs, as well. They were from the size of a chicken to about the size of an emu. An emu’s about half the size of an ostrich. So running all over. There’re 4,000 tracks in a small area. It was discovered by a farmer, a station owner, they call them. Big ranches are called stations there. So the station owner, he was well-educated, and he thought they were bird tracks. At some point, he brought them to the attention of the head of paleontology at the Queensland Museum, Mary Wade, and she went out—. And the director of the museum, the guy who hired me, Alan Bartholomai, was also a paleontologist. They went out—before my time; this was 1977 or ’78—and they looked at the site, and they recognized that these were dinosaur tracks. It’s dinosaur area there, but there are no bones at Lark Quarry; there’re just the tracks that were found. The actual exposure occurred—. Although the station owner had alerted the museum, it was a guy called Lark, who was trying to quarry for opal in the area, who had uncovered some of it. He brought these “bird tracks” to the attention of the station owner, who told the museum. They recognized it was dinosaurs, and then started to excavate. Then they found the big tracks, and the excitement built. They excavated about 200 square meters, into the side of a hill. So it’s horizontal stratigraphy. But the hill is an erosional slope, and they excavated back into the hill. So there’s more tracks still there. And then they figured that it was such an important site that it had to be kept open to the public. So they then said, well, we’ve got to protect it some way, and a roof is a good idea to protect it. But then where’s the money? It took two years to get the money to build the roof. And what kind of roof? Well, a local architect said, “I can build a roof for you, no problem.” In the meantime, Mary Wade had also put hay bales on the surface, to protect it from the sun and rain and so on. So the roof got built, a pentagonal roof, but nobody was supervising the construction. Of course, nobody was there and these welders went out and you know what happened? Can you imagine, with hay and welding?

Holmes: He had a fire.

01-00:39:01
Agnew: He had a fire, yeah, that burnt the surface. Plus they put one of the roof pillars on top of one of the important prints. Then there was a big brouhaha. At that point, I was the new conservator, so I had to go out and say, what can we do
here? So I spent some years working on Lark Quarry, and I’ve published extensively on it. Mainly from a point of view of pointing out that these things, such as a fragile site, a unique fossil site, a site that represents perhaps thirty seconds of time a hundred-million years ago—. Think about that, huh?

Holmes: No, it is, it’s amazing.

01-00:39:49
Agnew: Yeah, it’s just phenomenal to look at these claw marks. So it’s really important. You can’t just go and do things in an ad hoc way, without proper supervision, without proper planning. And over time, the site flooded, the surface had cracked, the fire had burnt, there was damage done, the roof was built, and hardly anybody came. There was no money to have a person there at all. So visitors, about five a week would come. It’s in the middle of nowhere. It’s south of Winton. Winton is the place where Qantas was founded. Queensland and Northern Territory’s air service, Qantas, the airline, was founded in Winton. It’s also the place where “Waltzing Matilda” was composed, so there’s two claims to fame. But 100 kilometers south of that is the Lark Quarry dinosaur track site. It’s really in the middle of the Outback, about central Queensland. Queensland’s about twice the size of Texas, so it’s a big, big state, all the way up to Cape York. A lot of damage was done.

Holmes: Well, what were some of the techniques that were beginning to develop to further preserve the tracks?

01-00:41:10
Agnew: Well, I did a lot of study on the water absorption, the coefficients of transmission of moisture, and we developed a technique for sealing the cracks that had opened up, with a backer rod and silicone, which is removable. I mean reversible, also using a silane as a coating, invisible, to also prevent or limit the amount of intrusion of water, if rains gets into the surface. But there were other problems. Dust filled the tracks. Which was frustrating for visitors, the odd ones who came, because you couldn’t see the tracks properly. Dust had blown in. So I developed a surround of a fabric that I later used in China to control sand at Dunhuang, to stop dust. It was about 50% effective, but dust is still a problem. So there was that. The kangaroos moved in underneath the shelter, because for weeks and months, sometimes nobody would be there. Kangaroos like shelter, too. In the drought, they died on the surface. So that when I got back after six months, kangaroo corpses lying there, desiccated, shriveled and so on. So the whole thing was a catastrophe. It was not a good situation, because the project was not thought through from the beginning. It was just one catastrophe after another. So I’ve published on this, to paleontologists and archeologists, who think that because that’s their site, they knew best. We dug it. Mary Wade was not like that. She knew they’d made a terrible mistake and all that. It was the first time for the museum paleontologists, too.
Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: But I like to tell archeologists, “You guys are often irresponsible. I.e., you excavate a site, and if it’s important, you want it to be exposed to visitors; you don’t want to rebury it, even temporarily.” They hate doing it because they’ve exposed it; it’s theirs. And then they imagine that they know how to preserve it, as well, and usually they don’t. So bad things happen, very often. Or if it’s not important enough, they walk away from it and just leave it to erode away.

Holmes: Well, I think that’s really interesting. In the Lark Quarry case, what we see is two aspects, I’d like you to discuss. More of a holistic and integrated type of conservation, which you really became a huge promoter of and embodied in much of your work, in the decades that came afterwards. But also site management, which is another that you’re very well known for, promoting not just a kind of multidisciplinary, kind of holistic and integrated type of conservation; but that we need to also look at the entire site, and plan. Can you discuss a little bit of that?

Agnew: Yeah. Site management. I wish we had another word than management. It smacks too much of kind of corporate stuff.

Holmes: Yeah, industry.

Agnew: Yeah. But really, it is management, in the end, because you have to manage a site. You have to look at all the aspects of threats to the site. Also you have to look at staffing of the site, and management and motivation of staff, and funding and so on. So really, it becomes a big deal, in the end, all things connect. Apart from the technicalities of preserving a site, you have to be aware of the social and human requirements. You really have to look at sustainability in the long term, apart from erosion and all of the vicissitudes that can afflict a site. So it’s big-picture stuff. You have to do it, because the preservation of a site is only as good as the weakest link in all the things that you have to do. If you don’t have all of the elements in play—and it’s very difficult to do that—you’re really putting the site at some jeopardy. So for a very important site, it’s critical that you think things through before intervening on the site.

Holmes: The recognition of having to carefully plan and look at all those various facets of that. This is something, again, that you became well known for. This is something that also we see, both through you and other members, later on in the Getty’s work worldwide. But if we look at the time that this is going on there at Lark Quarry, this is also that next step in the kind of development and evolution of conservationist thinking.
Agnew: Yeah. I think it was a kind of seminal point. I even didn’t realize it at the time myself, because I hadn’t come from an archeological background, or even a paleontological one. In South Africa, when I was working as a geological assistant, I would go fossilizing, too. In parts of the Drakensberg mountains and so on, there’re wonderful beds of Glossopteris, which is a plant found also in Antarctica, by the way, from a Gondwanaland fossil plant, in other words, before continental drift occurred. So it was wonderful. I’d find fossil dinosaur skulls. Actually, dicynodonts, mammal-like reptiles. You could see them. It’s so exciting to find these things just lying there in the streambed, in the rock, with a tooth and an eye socket looking out at you. It’s quite something. It’s amazing. I never collected those because I didn’t want to, but it was just the experience. So where was I?

Holmes: Talking about a watershed, a seminal moment of Lark Quarry.

Agnew: Yeah. But that was my knowledge, very much an amateurish one, part of my interest in the broader natural environment; but I wasn’t aware professionally of what was going on in paleontological, or even archeological endeavors. In the same way, in my youth, I was also looking in Africa at rock art sites, which I came back to revisit again, when I joined the Getty. So these things do have, in my life anyway, a circularity which is pleasing, and in many ways, has worked to my continued interest and to my advantage, I suppose. But I wasn’t aware at the time that there were issues of, well, broader issues, and that were endemic, many of these issues of preservation and site management, and that they were representative of a global phenomenon or requirement or need. I just wasn’t aware of it. I simply looked at the Lark Quarry situation and I understood that there were clearly things that happened—the fire, the neglect, the construction unsupervised—all of that stuff—the kangaroos, the lack of fencing—.

Holmes: Even vandalism?

Agnew: Vandalism, souveniring, all of that. Well, there, the evidence was laid out for me. So from that, I inferred that you had to really look, take all of those into account, and think proactively, before you start rushing ahead with intervening on a site. They should have simply reburied the site.

Holmes: I wanted to talk to you about that, because this will certainly come up in our later discussion of dealing with Egypt and Tanzania and the various other projects you’ve dealt with. This difference between conservation and preservation.

Agnew: Ah, yeah.
Holmes: In environmental discourse. Well, even being here in California, this is where, really, the litmus test and watershed moment between how we understand those, between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, over damming Hetch Hetchy Valley, in Yosemite. It’s one of the clearest studies of the difference between preservation, hands-off, conservation, use with care, right?

Agnew: Right.

Holmes: In your work, how do you see the difference of this? And certainly, when dealing with site management and should it be opened to the public or should it not?

Agnew: All right. I need to define terms better, and the way I think of them.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: Conservators are called restorers in Europe. Conservation actually came out of restoration, but I don’t want to go into that history. We don’t do restoration, because restoration is trying to take something back to what you think it was originally. It’s a subject of restoration; replacing lost authentic material with alien material. After a period of time, who knows what’s what anymore? What’s genuine, what isn’t? So authenticity’s compromised. Anyway, that’s clear. The French use restoration for conservation. But we say conservation. Conservation I think of as an interventive process. It can be passive, like good storage of objects is passive conservation. Or it can be active, like a coating or an intervention of an artifact. Preservation is the intended consequence of conservation. Or it is just keeping the original in its true form, without undue intervention. Or limiting or slowing, or endeavoring to slow, deteriorative processes. But it’s true, nothing is forever. So there’re vaguenesses between those terms, but I like to think of conservation as more like a verb, active; and preservation more passive.

Holmes: Okay.

Agnew: Just in a way of categorizing my thinking on this.

Holmes: Yes, yes. So in dealing with those kind of sites, if we go back to Lark Quarry, we see that on the one hand, they wanted to open it up and let people enjoy this, for tourism, right?

Agnew: Yeah, that’s right, and education too.
Holmes: Again, this comes around and around, in many of the projects you deal with. But then on the other hand, if you reburied them, we could preserve them and they’d still be there without damage.

01-00:52:17 Agnew: Right, right. Sure. Which is what happened at Laetoli. But there’s another story there, which is that again, it’s being re-excavated. But reburial, we see as a way of putting in storage, really, in the native environment. So if you want to re-expose it at a later time, you can do so. Or at Lark Quarry—people hate the idea, but I don’t have any problem with it—put a cast on top of the reburial [mound] and create a replica there for interpretive, didactic purposes, with people understanding clearly that below us is the real thing. It’s preserved for the future. It doesn’t get a lot of traction, I might tell you, that kind of notion. People want to see the original one.

Holmes: They want to see it.

01-00:53:09 Agnew: Even if they can’t recognize it if they see it. The same with museum displays. Museologists and exhibitors at museums want to have the real thing. “I don’t want a replica, thank you.”

Holmes: But you began to specialize in outdoor sites.

01-00:53:31 Agnew: Yes, true.

Holmes: And that poses a much different type of problem, as we see with site management—

01-00:53:37 Agnew: Sure.

Holmes: —and different techniques you have to use, is unlike a piece in a museum, you can’t put it into a protective glass, away from—

01-00:53:45 Agnew: True.

Holmes: —the elements, and control the environment.

01-00:53:48 Agnew: Absolutely.

Holmes: You have to actually look at the environment, as we saw with kangaroos and wind and rain.

01-00:53:52 Agnew: Yeah, right.
Holmes: Did you see that as really influencing, beginning to influence, your thinking of different techniques, as we saw with Lark Quarry?

Agnew: Yeah. Well, since I’d worked at the Queensland Museum, I had to deal both with the indoor environment and the outdoor environment. But it’s true, coming to the GCI, my work has mainly been in the outdoors, because I actually think it’s more challenging, in terms of preservation. Much more challenging. Not to deny the challenges of museum display and storage and curation and care and conservation and preservation, and all of the things that valuable museum collections have to have for their good custodianship. But in my view, you cannot really compare what happens inside the museum environment with the great outdoors, because there’s just no comparison. There, the entire environment is inimical, in many ways, to preservation.

Holmes: Do you think that, again, it really influenced your thinking of site management?

Agnew: Yes. Sure.

Holmes: So dealing with outdoors, you have to look at the totality.

Agnew: You have to think holistically. Absolutely.

Holmes: I wanted to move on to another project, which is the British warship Pandora, that you also worked on. Can you tell us a little bit about that? This is a maritime archeological site, which is a lot different than working in the middle of the Outback, right?

Agnew: Correct, yes. That was a fascinating project, too. The Queensland Museum had been assigned, by the state government, responsibility for historic shipwrecks off Queensland’s coast. So it had responsibility for hundreds of shipwreck sites. Many. I won’t mention some of them. But I worked on the Pandora, because the Pandora is probably the most famous of them. The Pandora was a British frigate, warship. Twenty-four cannon. 1791, sank in the Torres Strait, actually entrance to the Torres Strait, which is the tip of Cape York. Hit a coral reef—they call them bommies, but it’s a coral reef, part of the Great Barrier Reef—and sank, in 120 feet of water. All of the marines were saved, except six, I think. But the reason why Pandora is so famous is because it was the sequel to the mutiny on the Bounty. The Bounty was, everybody knows, the ship that went to Tahiti to get breadfruit to feed the slaves in the West Indies. There’s a brilliant piece of thinking. It was also—. Was it the Bounty? No, [Captain James] Cook did the transit of Venus. He went there, as well. But the Bounty went to get the breadfruit. It was under the command of Captain Bligh, William Bligh, who later became governor of
New South Wales, in Australia. He was a martinet, apparently, by every account, and after the ship had been in Tahiti a while—he had sailors that were used to the good life and lots of sex—there was a mutiny on the return journey and they cast him and loyal sailors adrift. But he made it back to England. A long story, but his story is very famous. Bligh got to Batavia, the Dutch colony, present-day Jakarta, and he got back. The British didn’t like mutinies in their ships. It was the ultimate sin, right? Which had to be avenged immediately.

Holmes: Yeah, especially with the Royal Navy.

Agnew: The Royal Navy. Within six months, they’d outfitted and in 1790 sent off the Pandora, to hunt down the mutineers. Well, they got to Tahiti and spent, oh, months there, circling around Tahiti. There were fourteen mutineers who were on Tahiti, and they were clapped in irons. Including a young fellow, eighteen or something. I forget his name now. Peter Heywood, I think. They never found the others, because they’d gotten to Pitcairn Island, which is very remote. They were lost to knowledge of Britain or the West for decades, until they were discovered in the nineteenth century sometime, the Pitcairn Islanders. Anyway, after three months of searching the nearby islands, Pandora set sail to take the mutineers back. They were locked in a steel cage on the forecastle, appropriately called Pandora’s Box. They struck a reef, and the ship sank. The captain wasn’t sympathetic towards the mutineers, but one of the crew members threw the keys into the grate, and most of them got out. They got to a nearby little sand cay, just a little sand island, where they were isolated at one end by the captain. They had to bury themselves in sand, because they were actually naked and they were being flayed alive by the sun. Presently, of course, they made it back, in the longboats, to Britain, following the route that Captain Bligh had taken. Then of course, they were tried. Some were executed. One was pardoned. The young kid Heywood was pardoned. He became a captain in the Royal Navy, went back to northern parts off New Guinea, and did survey work there. But others were—. No, I think three were executed. I can’t remember the details now. Although they’re always flogged around the fleet, as they said. In Portsmouth Harbor, they would put the mutineers in the boat and row them to each warship, and have all the sailors lined up to look at the punishment. And then they were flogged. So this was a very visual way of demonstrating the long arm of the Royal Navy. Anyway, the museum was assigned this. The ship had actually been discovered by a wreck hunter. I forget his name now—Ben Cropp, I think—but he’d had a clue as to where the Pandora wreck was.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: But it’s such a vast area and he couldn’t find it. Then as I recall, the Royal Australian Air Force flew low over the area in a grid pattern, with a
magnetometer, and they picked up anomalies—many anomalies—because there are a lot of shipwrecks there. The Reef is infamous famous for shipwrecks, because ships would sail too close to the outer Barrier Reef and be driven onto the reef. In fact, some parts, you can see the anchor chains over the reef, in shallow water.

Holmes: Oh, wow!

Agnew: You just knew these guys were desperate. They were being blown onto the reef and they were throwing out anchors. But it’s thousands of feet deep out there, and inside there’s nothing, and they were wrecked. So it’s a very interesting historical area. The British actually built, on Pandora Cay—it’s Pandora Cay—they built a watchtower, like a lighthouse, unmanned. It’s right at the site where we worked. It’s still there; built in the 1830s. Very beautiful structure. Oh, it’s a wonderful place to go.

Holmes: So it was about, what, 200 years that it lay beneath?

Agnew: 1791 was the wreck, yeah.

Holmes: So almost 200 then.

Agnew: Yeah, almost 200 years. The magnetic anomalies turned out to be the cannon. Because the first thing you do when you’re stuck on a reef is you throw overboard everything that’s heavy. The cannons are the heaviest things, so that got tossed overboard and are easy to find. So when it was investigated, it was confirmed for sure, it was the Pandora. So our first expedition was in about 1982 or ’83; I forget now. We had annual expeditions. I must’ve gone on three, I think, and a few continued after I’d left the museum. No, did I say ’80? Yeah,’82. There was hiatus for a while. I can’t remember the dates. I think the last I went was ’86 or ’87 even. Sorry about the dates.

Holmes: No, that’s OK.

Agnew: Anyway, by the mid-eighties, we were doing the Pandora work. I didn’t dive, but I was responsible for conservation. So we had big crews of divers, because it’s 120 feet down and they had a bottom time, as they call it, of about fifteen minutes; decompress coming up to avoid the bends. So relays of divers went down. We found amazing stuff. We found ethnographic objects that had been collected in Tahiti. Beautiful things. Wood that was still preserved, just underneath the sand, in this beautiful, clear tropical water. You could actually see through a hundred feet of water.

Holmes: Oh, wow.
Agnew: You could vaguely make out detail, the water’s so clear there. The wreck site is about 100 kilometers offshore, in the outer Barrier Reef. It’s an ecosystem that’s extraordinarily interesting. Not only the fish, but also the sea snakes you can see at night. They’re highly venomous, but they never bite anybody. They’re free-swimming snakes. Very lovely stuff. The gannets, boobies, they’re called. Then on the cays, when we were there in October, it’s the breeding season for the green turtles. Huge turtles. In fact, we tried to establish a base camp on one of the sand cays, so that we wouldn’t be on the boat all the time. But that very night, under a full moon, like a panzer division coming out of the sea, these huge, lumbering green turtles. There’re hundreds. They laid eggs all over the place. National Geographic magazine did an article (in 1985, I think) on the project. There is a photograph of the turtle invasion.

Holmes: You were outnumbered.

Agnew: They buried the rubber dinghies, they—. Guys, we’ve got to abandon ship. Not abandon ship, but abandon the land here.

Holmes: Abandon island.

Agnew: We went ashore the next night and we found some of them had fallen over on the back. The cay is littered with turtle skeletons, because there’re ledges of rock and they fall on their back and die. But these ping-pong ball-sized eggs by the thousands. They dig, they bury the eggs but then the next female comes along and digs up the others. So the beach was absolutely littered with eggs. And the gulls had glutted and the crabs had glutted. There’s just so many eggs that we found, it’s amazing. So it was a fantastic place. But the artifacts we found were incredible.

Holmes: Oh, what an environment.

Agnew: We found the surgeon’s watch. It was a chronometer, dated, and it’s in the Queensland Museum now. It’s actually in Townsville, in a branch museum, in north Queensland. It was conserved by a watch specialist, watchmaker in Perth. He said, “This is such a beautiful pocket watch.” A chronometer. I don’t know if you know the story about the book *Longitude*.

Holmes: No, no.

Agnew: *Longitude*’s written by a woman called Dava Sobel, about the huge challenge of determining longitude for mariners. You can determine latitude, no problem, where you are in latitude; but longitude, you don’t know. They used to do it by a calculation called lunars, a very complex process. But the best way to do it is to have an accurate watch that’s set according to, say,
Greenwich Mean Time, and will stay accurate for a six-month or one- or two-year voyage. And you have pairs of chronometers. Anyway, there was a huge prize offered by the British admiralty, I think, for the maker of the watch. I forget who won it. Harrison eventually won the prize. Anyway, Harrison made these beautiful chronometers in London, and you could read the maker’s name. The engraving was perfectly good. The outer silver case of the clamshell pocket watch was corroded through, but the rest was good. The watchmaker said, “Put a new steel spring in there and the thing will run.”

Holmes: That is very good craftsmanship, right?

Agnew: Yeah. Oh, it is just an exquisite thing. Then we found—this was the surgeon; his name was Hamilton, as I recall—a little bottle. I looked at it and there was an oil at the bottom and I thought, I know what that is. I think that’s going to be clove oil. So I finally worked out loose the stopper. It was filled with water, but the oil had sunk to the bottom. It was dense oil. Put in a capillary and pulled a little out, and I hold it up to my nose and you could smell clove oil right away. You know why they had it? I thought, surgeon, toothache, clove oil. That’s what they put on a toothache, pure clove oil. Then there was—oh, it was just an amazing thing—he had an ivory syringe for irrigating a certain part of the male anatomy, for venereal diseases.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: That was something.

Holmes: Well, sailors, right?

Agnew: Yeah, they were sailors, see? I think they used a mercurial or something like that. Shoot it up the urethra. Oh, there’s just extraordinary things. There was a propelling pencil, which was made out of a piece of poplar wood. Just a little stick, till you look very carefully. You could see it has a slide in it. Finally, working the slide back, inside there’re little pieces of lead, laid in a groove. So you would slide back, push it forward through the tapered point; it’s like a lead pencil.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: It was just so neat. Then the cannon came up.

Holmes: Oh, sure, the cannon. Of course.

Agnew: And then the water purifier. Because the British Navy was very inventive at that time. They had new kinds of stoves, they had new kinds of things.
water purifier was very interesting. It turned out to be a porous volcanic stone from, I think, the Caribbean. Pour the foul water in, and it’s porous and it filters the water.

Holmes: Then that’s potable water that they could drink.

Agnew: Apparently potable. I wouldn’t try it, but—. It doesn’t take the salt out of sea water; it just filters particulates out. It’s for ship’s drinking water, for sure.

Holmes: Oh, that’s interesting. I wanted to ask you, in dealing with a maritime site, is there something about the water and being also in that climate in water, that helped, I guess, preserve a lot of these items?

Agnew: I was totally surprised at the survival of the organic material. Usually, wood goes. There’s a marine boring “worm” called Teredo. It drills in. It’s a clam. It’s the bane of wooden ships’ lives. That’s why they used to sheathe them in copper, to stop Teredo. We didn’t see any of that, but we never raised the remnant of the hull of the Pandora, so we don’t know. But the wooden artifacts, they were in fine condition. We also found some human remains there. We had a forensic pathologist come to look at the bone on the boat, and he was so interesting. Really. He would look at a bones and say, “Well, this is the clavicle. It’s the last bone in the body to stop growing before it fuses to the sternum.” So that means this person is less than twenty-five, twenty-two years of age. And then he looked at the long bones, the same. He said, “Looks like rickets.” London. Right. Eighteenth century. No sunlight. All the coal from Newcastle and the burning. Vitamin D deficiency is endemic. So this kind of stuff. A lot of it’s speculative, but just so intriguing.

By the way, after I’d left the museum, additional skeletal material was found in subsequent expeditions. By 1998, there were plans to provide a proper naval burial. This was a requirement by the British Admiralty (which owned the wreck) when it gave title to Australia.

Holmes: It’s fascinating. Really fascinating work. I think the Pandora project is an example, which you’ve referenced even with the Lark Quarry, of the development of partnerships. It’s a very multidisciplinary type of project, with the various professionals and disciplines that have to work on a project together. Can you talk a little bit about, in the Pandora’s case, the kind of partnerships that resulted?

Agnew: We didn’t have a partnership, really. We commissioned and paid for ships to provide the basic services that we needed. Every time, we had a different ship. One ship we had had been a North Sea ship. Another was a Prince Philip that used to go around the world— Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh ship—and take young, promising men. We hired that one expedition, and so on.
Holmes: But you needed divers, though

01-01:12:55
Agnew: Oh, they were volunteers.

Holmes: Oh, really?

01-01:12:57
Agnew: Yep. We would fend them off. They wanted to come.

Holmes: Oh, I bet.

01-01:13:01
Agnew: Oh, they wanted to come. They’d come free. They would come from America. There was a young woman from L.A. From Western Australia, we had a bunch of them. Tragically, we lost one person, who disappeared overnight off the ship.

Holmes: Oh, no.

01-00:13:19
Agnew: There was a big inquiry. He was on watch. He was a young Scottish guy, not part of the Queensland Museum team, but one of the ship’s crew members. We think he fell off, overboard. He was going down to check the boats. At night, they’d string out the inflatable rubber dinghies, the dive boats, whatever they’re called now—they used to call them rubber duckies—behind the ship. He might’ve tried to get down, to check that they were secure. Something like that. But anyway, it was never without its own drama, the whole expedition. Inevitably, there were often, quite often, disagreements about what to do and so on. We brought back a lot of stuff to the Queensland Museum. I spent about a year conserving one of the cannon, which was the length of this table, weighed tons, and was all encrusted in marine concretion. You could knock off, carefully tap it and crack it, and then it’d peel off like a shell. Underneath, perfect preservation. GIIR (for George III Rex), the royal symbol, in the casting. The thing is, if you took a needle and you just probed the surface, it went right in. Cast iron is iron and carbon. The iron corrodes out and forms the concretion, and the graphite remains behind. In fact, it’s dangerous. You can’t let them dry out, because that graphite is pyrophoric, and so it will burn.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

01-01:14:58
Agnew: Yeah. Suddenly your artifact is alight or smoldering, and being destroyed before your very eyes. Cannonballs do this. So you have to desalinate the thing first, and then dehydrate it, and that takes time and care. Electrolysis is used. The guy who started the Canberra College conservation course, Colin Pearson. He was an electrochemist, from Birmingham, and he developed the desalination process. He did Cook’s cannon. So I had the benefit of that technique, and I used it for the Pandora cannon. It worked very well. But it
takes time. You have to have a huge bath of caustic soda, you have to have an electrolysis unit, and you pass electrical current through the object, and you have to analyze for the liberation of chloride, sodium chloride. When that process is salt free, you then go on to pure water from the sea, and then you have to dehydrate it with acetone. Then you have to impregnate the thing with microcrystalline wax, molten. Then you get perfect preservation. Perfect. All the detail is there. It’s fabulous. Really nice.

Holmes: Wow. Did you have to use a similar type of process with the other products? They weren’t always made of cast iron, but were there other material that you had to use more demanding techniques?

Agnew: The glass was very tricky, because glass demineralizes and then delaminates. So you can actually get iridescent glass due to scaling, and so on. Yeah, we have to be careful with that. And the wood. You have to be careful in the dehydration of wood, as well, because it warps as it dries. So I developed a technique for small items of wood, of desalinating first, and then freeze drying. Which means you freeze the desalinated object wet, and put it into a vacuum chamber, and the water sublimes at a high vacuum. The ice sublimes to water and freeze dries it. You get all the water vapor out. And the preservation is perfect, so there’re nice techniques like that, that can be used.

Holmes: Oh, interesting. Now, in this type of multidisciplinary venture, you mentioned disagreements on how to proceed. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Agnew: Oh, there was nothing really serious. I was in charge of conservation. I decided how we would treat items.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: There were little things about how you should be “responsible.” We had an assistant conservator come from another museum, who thought that it was not a good idea to transport the cannon back a thousand miles to the Queensland Museum, because it would undergo decomposition and damage as it dried out, not being desalinated. I overruled him. I was right, because I said, “We can package this thing. We can get it back in a week, by ship, and we’ll keep it wet. We’ll keep it wet wrapped in burlap and plastic bags.” And it worked fine. So that kind of thing. Conservators can be quite a pain in the neck, I’ll tell you. They can be. Hand-wringing stuff, you know?

Holmes: Yes. [they laugh]

Agnew: One has to balance these things with a good dose of common sense. What are the dangers of this happening? We needed material to show the public, right?
In the Queensland Museum, public funding was being spent on projects like the Pandora. You had to have displays. And we had fantastic displays, in the end, because of that. The cannon and the watch, the pencil, the artifacts—really wonderful stuff. It’s a time capsule, literally.

Holmes: Wow, that’s amazing. I wanted to talk about another project, the penal colony, there at Saint Helena Island, that you worked on. Again, we take these three together, it really shows the kind of broad range of projects and experiences you had there at the Queensland Museum.

Agnew: In its own right, it was historically very interesting, because there is a penal colony on a little island in Moreton Bay, Saint Helena Island. Yes, that’s what it’s called but why I never found out. It had also been a leper colony, at one point.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: Yeah. There was also a Dr. Agnew, who was a medical doctor in charge of the leper colony, at one point.

Holmes: No, relation, though, that you know of.

Agnew: No. Yeah, actually, there are lots of Agnews in Australia, as there are in America. Yeah, the name Agnew is unusual in South Africa, but it’s common, relatively common, in Britain and here, and in Australia, too. Anyway, yeah, the penal colony was fascinating, because of its history. I didn’t do that amount of work on it. We worked with the Queensland state parks department.

Holmes: A partnership in that department.

Agnew: Yeah. Yeah, well, we were both state entities. Queensland Museum and the parks are both government organizations. They got help from us and we really collaborated. It was conservation work and planning and interpretation that was the objective. I left before that really came to fruition. But it was certainly an interesting project, because we’re looking at historic artifacts. There was a tailor shop, sugar cane growing, there was a mill—there were all sorts of things. These penal colonies were used as industrial and agricultural output entities, in very much the same way as the most famous of them all, Port Arthur, in Tasmania—which I visited a number of times, and which has an interesting connection through Sharon Sullivan, to the Dunhuang, Mogao project and our work there. It shows how these things—we can get to that later—but the interconnectedness of things, because Sharon worked with me and my GCI colleague Martha Demas on the China Principles, and we
developed them, also in the management plan for Dunhuang. At that time, Sharon was on the board of Port Arthur Management. So she had the idea, since they’re both World Heritage Sites, of bringing some of the Chinese staff from Dunhuang to Port Arthur, and a reciprocal relationship. That’s worked out very well, and I think it’s still going on. So that’s how these things, in the best of all possible ways, ramify and actually create a network—a productive network, I would think.

Holmes: Talking about the penal colony at Saint Helena, there’s a lot of facets of conservation there. We have buildings, we have furnishings, we have other equipment from there. Is there anything that really struck you, that was either challenging or really fascinating, in regards to the conservation?

01-01:23:27 Agnew: I think the main thing at the penal colony was bringing one into closer contact with the penal history of Australia—something I wasn’t terribly aware of. Everybody knows it was a big penal colony; but the extent of the penal colonies in Australia is quite amazing, really. Not only in Sydney, but Port Arthur. The Moreton Bay one, Saint Helena Island, which is in Moreton Bay, is hardly known at all. It didn’t have as long or as brutal a history as, say, Port Arthur, in Tasmania, which is a World Heritage Site. It’s part of the nomination of the Australian Commonwealth government, of serial sites for the penal history of Australia. Saint Helena is not one of those. So it’s a relatively minor penal colony. But as a local and state penal colony, it was of great interest because of it is a reminder that the state of Queensland also had a penal history. Nobody ever escaped from it, by the way. Just like Devil’s Island.

Holmes: Well, is that?

01-01:24:47 Agnew: Yes, just like Devil’s Island. Or just like Alcatraz. Although I saw recently in Alcatraz, somebody—a girl, was it?—swam easily off the island, made it to the mainland.

Holmes: Well, there are, I think, was it two or three, who did escape from Alcatraz.

01-01:25:06 Agnew: Did they? By swimming?

Holmes: Yeah. Yeah, well, they’re really unsure of how they actually got off, and if they survived.

01-01:25:12 Agnew: Ah, they disappeared, in other words.

Holmes: That’s what they say.
Agnew: Yeah. Well, I tell you, there’re big sharks in Moreton Bay, so nobody ever made it off there.

Holmes: But there were a lot of attempts?

Agnew: Not as far as I know. There was a lot of infrastructure, there was a remnant—. It was all falling into decay, so it was intended to be preserved as an historic site, and interpreted for the public. It was under the direct control of the Queensland State Parks Service, a sister organization to the Queensland Museum, which is why they came to us for help, in terms of conservation and to develop interpretive programs, for the history of the island.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: There was a tailor shop there, a tailoring industry, I think, and cane growing, sugar cane and other kinds of industry. So that went ahead, just at about the time it was being prepared for implementation, I had left the Queensland Museum. So that really was the end of my involvement. Interesting, but not something that came to fruition during my time.

Holmes: Well, and in looking at the site management today, it’s very similar, actually—you’re mentioning Alcatraz—it’s very similar, in that aspect of—.

Agnew: Right.

Holmes: Cultural tourism coming there.

Agnew: Exactly, sure.

Holmes: And even doing—which Alcatraz does now, too—the night tours. They have the night ghost tours.

Agnew: At Alcatraz?

Holmes: Yeah, yeah.

Agnew: Ah, I didn’t know that.

Holmes: And then they have the same thing at Saint Helena now.
Agnew: I might tell you that at Port Arthur, which is the premiere, if you like, penal colony in the whole of Australia, at the southern tip of Tasmania—a very beautiful setting—they have ghost tours, as well.

Holmes: Oh, yeah?

Agnew: Yeah. Well, I’m against them. People are too superstitious anyway. But it’s the most popular thing there, so they won’t stop the ghost tours. Sharon Sullivan, whom you spoke to, is now chair of the PASHMA, Port Arthur Historic Management Authority. And it’s a World Heritage Site. Yeah, the ghost tours. Incidentally, Alcatraz is a very interesting example of site management and visitor management, and we’ve looked at it in the context of visitor management, at the Dunhuang Grottoes, Mogao.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: In fact, we took some of our colleagues from China to Alcatraz for the second iteration of the China Principles. Also to Angel Island, for them to see how some of these sites in the United States are managed. I’d like to talk about that when we get to the China Principles.

Holmes: Oh, absolutely.

Agnew: But it’s really interesting, because of their approach towards congestion. I’ll mention it just briefly now, because I’ll probably forget later. They took photographs. Robert Manning, working with the National Park Service, the US Park Service, took photographs of the most heavily visited part of Alcatraz. Has a street name or an alley name, in the prison complex. Then they populated it with images of people, increasing in number, and they showed a suite of eight photographs of the same area, with different numbers of people in it. They showed them to visitors and said, what is the number that you would feel comfortable having in this area with you? It’s a congestion issue. So they got feedback and then they plotted the responses, and they’ve come up with a number that is optimal for the visitor comfort level, in terms of congestion. Which I thought was a fairly democratic and effective way of determining what the carrying capacity should be.

Holmes: It’s a very interesting way, too, if we think of site management, such as the penal colony and the other projects you’ve worked on, of thinking of not just how do you control the number of people there for congestion, for also protecting the site. Where it sounds like the penal colony in Saint Helena was meant for public appreciation.

Agnew: Sure, sure.
Holmes: A type of public interaction with history.

Agnew: Yeah. It doesn’t have the kind of prison environment of Alcatraz, for example, or Port Arthur, where they have enclosed spaces that are toured. It was much more open, because—. I don’t know what kinds of prisoners they had there, but I think it was more, perhaps, less violent ones. I don’t know. But they were all put to productive use, either growing sugar cane or in the tailor or the leather department or whatever. So it didn’t have the same issues of congestion for visitors there. In fact, I’ve never been back, so I really don’t know. I spent a very nice holiday, two years ago, in Moreton Bay, on North Stradbroke Island. Which is a beautiful island, not far away from Saint Helena. But it was a family holiday, and I didn’t go to St. Helena.

Holmes: No ghost tours for you that time.

Agnew: Nah. I should’ve gone. I must go back.

Holmes: This is a good point to kind of transition. Because right around this time—which you mentioned that you left before the penal colony project was completed—that you began working on some projects with the Getty Conservation Institute. Before we kind of get into that, though, how did the Getty Conservation Institute contact you? How did you become in contact with them, and your first kind of experience?

Agnew: Well, again, it was one of these fortuitous things. When I got my job at the Queensland Museum, it was just by looking at the local newspaper, which I disparaged, unfairly, I think. It was called The Courier-Mail, and I always sort of called it the Curious-Mail. But there was an ad that I saw, conservator, Queensland Museum. That started me off on that direction of my life. Well, a similar kind of coincidence, really, that got me to the Getty, because when I was working at the Queensland Museum, I organized a conference on conservation, after I’d been there about a couple of years, I guess. I called it “Conservation: The Art, the Craft, and the Science.” We always invited international figures to inject a sort of international standard to the local standard of conservation. So for the art, we got I forget who. But the craft was a guy from I believe the Winterthur in Delaware. Oh. I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten. It’ll come to me. He was a furniture conservator and he did a lot of work on the Hawaiian royal furniture. Oh! Tip of my tongue. I’m so sorry. But the scientist was a man called Robert Feller, Bob Feller, who worked with Carnegie-Mellon. He’s a revered figure in conservation science. Bob has done—or did; he’s passed away now—all of the great studies on the suitability of conservation materials like polyvinyl acetate or those kinds of materials. How do they age? Are they suitable? What are their limits? And so on. So he did very meticulous studies and published extensively. He and his
wife Ruth, who was also a conservation scientist. Her field was lighting. Jim Druzik would know both Bob and Ruth. So I invited them, and they came. We got on very well, Bob and I. When he left after the conference, which was held in Brisbane, he said, “You know, there’s this new organization called the Getty Conservation Institute. You should contact them and go and see. They may be interested to have you visit or whatever.” So I said, “Yes, yes, that’s good. Thanks, Bob,” and I didn’t do a thing about it. About six months later, he wrote to me and said, “Have you done anything about that?” So I said, “Oh, I better do something.” I just wrote a letter and it got into the hands of Frank Preusser. I said, “I’m interested in doing some research with better facilities than we have here.” The problem I was dealing with at that time was the decay of pyritic fossils, pyritized fossils. Many fossils become pyritic, pyritized, iron sulfide. There’s a particular morphology of some of these pyritic fossils called framboidal pyrite. Framboidal, from framboise, the berry. It looks, under the microscope, very much like a raspberry. But it’s microcrystalline, and the large surface area allows it to oxidize very easily. So in high humidity, such as a tropical environment, in the presence of oxygen, it decays and destroys the fossil: liberates sulfur dioxide and sulfuric acid. So it’s totally destructive. Of course, the gaseous emanations from the decay of the pyritic fossils attacks other things nearby. So it’s bad news in a collection. I wanted to look at that problem and see how one could address pyritic fossil decay.

Frank Preusser, who was head of science at that time, said, “No, we’re not doing that kind of work here. But if you’re interested in earthen architecture—adobe, as we call it in the Western United States—we’d like to start some preliminary research. Would you be interested?” I thought about this for about five minutes and I said, “Well, I’ve got a degree in geology, as well as chemistry. I know something about minerals and clay minerals. Not a great deal. This doesn’t sound too much of a problem for me.” So I said yes. So I came, for three months, at the end of ’86, and worked in the labs in Marina Del Rey. Jim did some work with me.

Holmes: Jim Druzik, right.

Agnew: Jim Druzik, yes. He had organized, before that, a meeting—I think in Ventura County, or in Oxnard maybe, as I recall; he would know, of course, as I was not there—on the need for preservation of earthen architecture, specifically in California, where the Spanish colonial history and the use of adobe as a building material was important. The loss of these buildings, both through earthquake and through just general—.
Deterioration and unawareness of the issues that affect adobe. So anyway, we started lab work. My own interest, as it turned out, was in archeological adobe, not historic adobes, because historic adobe buildings are typically lived in, and they can be refurbished and stabilized and they can be adapted. But if you have archeological sites, that’s a different order of challenge altogether. And it remains so today. It’s a very difficult problem to solve.

Were there some historical, archeological adobe sites there in Australia? Or was this something that you were looking to take back?

No.

Or was this something for your own curiosity and—?

No, it was purely because I could do it here at the Getty and they wanted it done, and it was an interesting opportunity to do some research, spend some time in the United States, expand my knowledge. So I’d been already seven years or so at the Queensland Museum and done these other things, and so this was an opportunity. So ’86, I came, in November; December, January, February, I spent here; and then went back to Australia and continued at the Queensland Museum, because I got leave of absence for the three months. I took back a contract from the Getty, to continue the research there on adobe, which I did for a year. I had no intention of coming to the Getty because I was well-settled there, with a nice life, thank you, and very interesting work. But the GCI’s science department here said, we need to pursue this. If you’re interested, we’ll write a contract. So I got the contract and I gave it to the Queensland Museum. They administered the money and I did the research; hired somebody, and we did a year’s worth of research. But they wanted me to come back periodically, Frank did, and Jim, to come back and consult. I said, “That’s great. I’d love to do that.” A year, every year, every two years, it doesn’t matter. Come back for a month or two or so on. This would be just perfect.

You guys were working in the Fort Selden site at this time?

No, not at that point.

No? Was that later?

Correction. We were. I’m sorry, we were. We had looked at it. Oh, gosh. Speak, memory. We had looked at it, yeah. I think we were about to start there. But the upshot of all of this was when I spoke to my director at the Queensland Museum, he prevaricated, he weaseled. He said, “No. You can’t
go.” I said, “Well,” I said—. Then Jim Druzik called me and said—in September—.

Holmes: 1988, right? Was it ’88?

01:01:41:17
Agnew: ’87.

Holmes: Oh, ’87, okay.

01:01:41:19
Agnew: He said, “Are you happy at the Queensland Museum?” There’s a long pause on my side. I said, “Where are you going with this, Jim?” So yeah. And I came. That was it. I said to the director, “I’ve got to go. Opportunity knocks.”

Holmes: It was a good opportunity, but that was another moment of uplifting the family and making another move.

01:01:41:43
Agnew: It was really hard. It’s really difficult. This is wrenching stuff. It’s wrenching stuff. Kids, teenagers.

Holmes: Sure.

01:01:41:53
Agnew: Uproot them.

Holmes: To Los Angeles.

01:01:41:56
Agnew: Yeah, they had a difficult time. One daughter went back; she lives in Melbourne now. The others have all stayed, except my eldest. She went to New York and took a PhD there, and now she’s an academic in Germany. But I have two sons here. Then I remarried, and I have a twenty-five-year-old daughter here. She went to Berkeley this year, for graduate school.

Holmes: Oh, very nice. Very nice.

01:01:42:26
Agnew: That made the family happy—my wife Nancy is a graduate and her grandfather’s a big professor at Berkeley, in biochemistry, Dan Arnon. He did all the early pioneering work in chlorophyll and trace elements.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

01:01:42:38
Agnew: During World War II I believe he did the work on hydroponics, for the Pacific troops fighting the Pacific war.

Holmes: Well, speaking of interconnections, right?
Agnew: Yeah, it’s amazing.
Holmes: Yeah, yeah.

Agnew: I’m surprised you didn’t interview him. He was twice nominated for a Nobel Prize, but didn’t make it.
Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: Spent his entire career at Berkeley. Plant biochemistry. But yeah, I’ve admired his work greatly, because we’re all dependent on chlorophyll, ultimately.
Holmes: Indeed, we are.

Agnew: We don’t have an altar to the worship of chlorophyll and the sun; we should. [they laugh] We really should. A great, green altar.
Holmes: So was the decision to again uplift and come to the Getty—? I know it had a lot of attraction professionally, of the resources and the type of work.

Agnew: Yeah, yeah.
Holmes: Was that the biggest draw?

Agnew: That was the biggest draw, and new challenges, exciting new life. I’ve always felt you really can’t turn away from new challenges, new opportunities, the ability to reach beyond where you’re at. A door was opening. Was I going to walk away from it? I thought, no, I have to do it. It was hard. So I came. In January 1988, I left. I spent six months here by myself, before my family came over. But that didn’t work well for many of them. However, I think they’d all say now that this was the right thing. My kids understand. They can move now in an international sphere. They’re Americans and they’re Australians, and they know their way around the world. This is a great thing that I did for them.

Holmes: Well, I think that’s a good place to take a break.
Interview 2: July 27, 2016

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes, from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, sitting down for session two with Neville Agnew, for the Getty Oral History Project. Today is the afternoon of July 27, 2016, and we are still here at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles. Neville, we’re back from lunch; we’re feeling energized. We left off discussing you taking your new position with the Getty Conservation Institute, making another dramatic move across the world, now to reside in Los Angeles. The project that initially bought you here was dealing with studying adobe, which began with the project in New Mexico, or would lead to one there, at Fort Selden. Before we talk more about the Getty, let’s revisit that project and discuss what drew you to the adobe project, and the importance of that at Fort Selden.

02-00:01:12

Agnew: I think problems of historic adobe as a building material, as the fabric of many, many historic buildings, notably in the American Southwest and in California, where during the colonial period, and even later, adobe was widely used as a building material. Cheap, basically only earth and water. Adobe refers, actually, to the sunbaked bricks that are made as well as the building itself. Other ways of building in earth are rammed earth. Pisé de terre, it’s called in France, and it’s been used extensively there. Many buildings in rural France, for example, are pisé. And in China, as well. There are amazing condominium structures in southern China, round structures, made out of rammed earth, that have endured for hundreds of years. So adobe, earth, as building material, is fantastic. Of course, all over the world, earthen structures exist. It’s the building material not of choice, perhaps; it’s the building material that you’re compelled to use when you don’t have anything better. Right? It’s also been encouraged in the past, by national leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Julius Nyerere, in India and Africa respectively, who espoused the use of low-cost material like adobe, in order to provide housing for people. In fact, when I was in Australia, I became aware of a project in the state of Victoria called “sweat equity,” in which the state would lend young couples who had no money to buy a house a certain amount of money, and provide the guidance and technology for making mud bricks and building their own houses out of adobe. Of course, adobe in California doesn’t come up to code for earthquake, because it’s the weakest material, unreinforced masonry material. I’ll come to that story in a moment, about how our work in adobe at Fort Selden quite soon, led to a project called GSAP, the Getty Seismic Adobe Project, which was a direct outcome of our work. It followed from the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Holmes: Oh, yeah?

02-00:03:51

Agnew: Yeah. So that followed the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. In 1990, I organized a conference at Las Cruces, New Mexico, called Adobe 90. It actually became
a revitalizing event that continues to this day, every two to three years, around the world. The conference now called Terra, for earth, rather than adobe, because adobe’s a very American word. Comes from Arabic and through Spain, into the Americas. So terra is more widely used now. Adobe 90 identified the need for studying how you can stabilize adobe structures and protect them against earthquake.

Holmes: This is really important, if we think of the number of missions and historical sites all along, built by the Spanish during that period in California.

Agnew: Yeah. But initially, we weren’t thinking about the seismic aspects of adobe. We were thinking about how to prevent deterioration through erosion and moisture and issues of drainage, for example. Many of these buildings, or historic buildings, are just put on the earth or in the earth, so there is no isolation from the earth. And if water gets into the footings, it tends to weaken the whole structure enormously—to the point of collapse, because dried earth turns to mud when there’s too much water. So it loses all of its compressive and tensile strength, and it can lead to collapse. So that’s one very important criterion in the preservation of adobe—keep the “feet” dry and make sure the “hat” (roof) does not leak.

Holmes: That was really at the center of the Fort Selden project in New Mexico.

Agnew: No, the Fort Selden had a wider mandate than that, too. The initial impetus to adobe research at the Getty Conservation Institute was to look at the historic adobes, or the need for preservation of historic adobes, notably in the Southwest. But very quickly, we looked at other categories of adobe structure, archeological adobe structures. And one, you might say, is Fort Selden itself, because it’s a late nineteenth-century military fort near El Paso, Texas, actually at Las Cruces, New Mexico. So it was one of those frontier forts, at that time. Incidentally, it’s famous, also because General Douglas MacArthur’s father was the commanding officer during the construction. There’s a photograph of him at Fort Selden as a little boy, Douglas MacArthur. He must’ve been about two or three. Amazingly, he’s dressed as a little girl.

Holmes: Oh, interesting.

Agnew: Which wouldn’t have pleased the great he-man. But I think it was just a very Victorian thing to dress kids as girls. I don’t know why. But anyway, that’s a side issue. But Fort Selden, in a way, is an archeological or non-used historic building, or structures. And the distinction is this. If it’s not used, it’s an historic monument and you really want to preserve the fabric intact, with minimal alteration. If it’s a building that is in daily use—habitation, for
example, or mission church—you have to repair it, modify it. That’s acceptable within the kind of—.

Holmes: The principles of conservation.

Agnew: Principles of conservation, yeah. You’ve got to be realistic. So there were those two categories. Of the two, by far the more difficult is, how do you preserve an archeological adobe site? And some of them around the world are colossal. Chan Chan, in Peru, is hectares, acres and acres in size. Enormous structures. Many of the structures in adobe in Egypt are colossal. So it’s clear that the use of chemicals to stabilize adobe is generally not a feasible option, unless you are building in adobe; then you can do a variety of things, mixing additives into the wet mud. You can mix in lime or you can mix in a water repellent or whatever, and make the blocks really durable. But when the preexisting structure’s there and it’s weathered and it’s archeological, you’ve got a problem. But nonetheless, we did lab research here for three months, and then during that period, identified Fort Selden as an outdoor test site, an outdoor facility, which had protection, which had an interest in the preservation of adobe, which would cost nothing, and would also have staff present all the time. So that was an interesting option with New Mexico State Monuments that we developed.

Agnew: A wonderful partnership. It succeeded because of the collaborators at State Monument, principally Michael Taylor. It lasted a long time; basically, until I stopped being in charge of the adobe project, because I had other duties, as head of special projects and then field projects and so on. But our lab work testing was really very interesting, initially. The question for me was, what causes adobe deterioration? What kind of materials or processes could be used to limit the deterioration? The enemy of adobe is water. And salt in water accelerates it, but the principal enemy is water. So the old adage says if an adobe structure has got dry feet and a cap on its head, you’re fine. In other words, keep the water off the top and keep the water from the bottom. But that’s not always feasible, unless you’re sheltering. So sheltering is one option. Of course, drainage is another. So we investigated all of those in turn, over the years of testing special constructed test walls at Fort Selden. There was a preexisting program done by State Monuments at Fort Selden, on test walls. Because in the Southwest—in particular in New Mexico and Santa Fe—there was an adobe revival in the 1930s. So that buildings like the fine arts museum in Santa Fe are built in adobe. But actually, it’s concrete. Nonetheless, it’s in adobe style. And there are many historic adobes there that are lived in. So New Mexico State Monuments also, in relation to preserving Fort Selden and other sites. Fort Union is another one, a bigger fort—wanted to do research on how to best protect these, not only through, say, treatment
with chemicals or stabilizing, but also other methods, like better drainage or
sheltering or capping the tops of walls. So we tested all of those things. We
had a preexisting research facility going on there. We joined that, built new
test walls, and took some of the processes that were developed in the lab here
by me—and then in Australia before I came back to the Getty, in that period at
the end of 1987—then really set up the test walls in May 1988, in like a six-
week program of working, at Fort Selden. We monitored these
photographically, temperature, moisture, and so on.

So we tested chemical consolidants of various kinds, coatings on the walls,
penetrating consolidants, we tested drainage interventions at the base of walls;
we tested physical stabilization through drilling into the existing wall and then
putting in a stiffening rod, so that if it cracks, it doesn’t fall over; we tested
shelters over the walls; and we did accelerated aging over the walls, by having
a spray onto the wall. Move things along, you know? We haven’t got forever.
Life is short. At one point, we built a full-scale shelter, which I designed. It
was built on the basis of a hexagon, so appropriately called a hexashelter.

Holmes: Hexashelter, yes.

Agnew: It was a lot of fun. But that was a nice project, too, as a subset of adobe
research, with a wider application to sheltering archeological sites, because
with a colleague here, Shin Maekawa, we put in two environmental test
stations under the shelter and outside the shelter. And outside of the shelter
was another test wall, identical, to look at the efficacy of the shelter in
protecting the adobe walls. We had good results and we published those
results. It was a quantitative measure of the efficiency or the performance
characteristics of sheltering, by that particular shelter. We used that shelter,
incidentally, in Cyprus, over a mosaic, as well. It was a prototype design
shelter. It’s another story. That sheltering was a big thing, part of our sort of
quiver or armament of potential interventions for protecting archeological
sites. So a lot of work was done at Fort Selden, and we had a wonderful
relationship with the Museum of New Mexico. My friend and colleague there,
Michael Taylor, who left State Monuments for a while—he was the State
Historic Preservation Officer in New Mexico, and then he went to join the
National Park Service. Mike must be about getting ready to retire now, I
should think, if hasn’t. I haven’t seen him for a year or so. But he’s a great
colleague. We worked with him at Chaco Canyon, as well.

Holmes: Yeah. Well, tell us a little bit about the Chaco Canyon site. Because that was
also there in New Mexico, in a partnership, right?

Agnew: Yes, northern New Mexico. Las Cruces is right near the southern border, and
Albuquerque, Santa Fe are in the middle. Chaco is a wonderful site. It’s right
behind me on the wall here.
Holmes: Yeah. This wasn’t adobe, though. Those are more ancient stone ruins.

Agnew: Yeah, these are Anasazi or Pueblo Indian sites, abandoned about the twelfth century, probably for environmental reasons. Not exactly known why, but almost certainly, it was due to changing weather patterns, less water, and so on. A vast site, a World Heritage Site, unique. Really amazing site. Chaco is an enigma, in many ways. How did Chaco function? What was its purpose? Because there are many other sites in the area that were also abandoned. The Pueblo Indians further south in New Mexico, around Santa Fe and down to Acoma and all the way over to Arizona and so on, claim ancestral affiliation to places like Chaco in northern New Mexico, and Mesa Verde, and another site called Aztec, and various other sites too. All of that area was full of these extraordinary sites, constructed out of stone. Many where with ritual kivas in them. We did work there, but it was, again, on ruin stabilization and ruin protection. At Chaco, one of the problems has been the drainage, again, in the kivas, for example. Also the protection of the tops of the exposed masonry walls, because this is so—.

Holmes: Similar to adobe, right?

Agnew: Yeah, yeah, similar to adobe. The problem there is worse, in many ways, than adobe, because it gets a lot of snow in the winter. The snowpack on the top of the walls later in the winter, as the temperature rises, will start to melt, and the water will seep into the walls. Then it freezes at night. So what develops within the body of the wall is an ice block that grows.

Holmes: And expands.

Agnew: And expands and bursts the wall. It’s very dangerous. They have eight miles or so of wall tops at Chaco, just in the one site. They typically used to blow them off with leaf blowers—the snow was powdery—in order to mitigate that. So there were drainage issues, rising salt, protection of wall tops, different types of mortar stabilization, a whole slew of those kinds of things that we worked with at Chaco, with the National Park Service and the chief archeologist there, now just retired, Dabney Ford. Marvelous person. Lovely, lovely collaborator. Just a great resource for the National Park Service, like so many of their professionals, really. The US National Parks are just one of the great treasures of this country.

Holmes: Yes.

Agnew: And unfortunately, don’t get enough support, in my view.

Holmes: No.
So that, too, was an amazing collaboration. Dabney, Mike Taylor, and my GCI colleague Martha Demas were the principal investigators. Not everything we did was a big, fat success, I might tell you. We had our failures. We had this idea, also of what we called “winterizing” the walls. That winterizing means you go out with a tarpaulin, before the first snowfall, and you drape it over the top and you secure it down the sides with ropes and weights. Then six months later, we came back and oh, they’re gone. I said to Dabney, “What happened to our winterizing experiment?” She said, “Oh, well, the Navajo crew here, they saw a packrat in there. We’ve had outbreaks of hanta virus,” which is a lethal virus carried by packrats. So they’re nesting underneath the winterizing blankets, tarpaulins. She said, “I’m so sorry. They just bundled them up and took them to the dump.” So that was the end of that experiment.

But that’s also an example of when you’re dealing with cultural sites, you’re dealing with the totality of the environment.

Yeah, sure, and the unintended consequences.

Similar to how kangaroos wanted to use your shelter.

Right, right. I’m full of stories like that. There’s one where we were looking at dust mitigation within the caves at Dunhuang, Mogao. Fine dust penetration. So how do you measure that? Well, you can spot-measure it with a special piece of equipment, the airborne particulates. Or you can measure their position. So we said, we’ll measure their deposition. It’s simple, it’s really low cost and so on. So we bought aluminum plates and put them in the caves. Well, we came back next time—we go twice a year, normally—the plates had money in them, because people were going in and thinking they were donation plates. So I said, “This isn’t going to work.” Then we got Frisbees, because I found a paper on the aerodynamics of the Frisbee. They published a serious physics paper on this. They showed that the Frisbee, upside down with air flowing over it, will not scoop dust or anything out of it. It’s static environment within the upside-down Frisbee. So Frisbees are the answer. So we put Frisbees in there. Well, the Frisbees got stolen and people were playing with the Frisbees outside the caves. There are these other experiments. You’ve got a 50 percent chance, very often. But it does make you think of, what’s the weakest link in this whole process? For sure, that’s going to be the one that’ll break, and then the chain is useless.

Sure. So we see in these early projects, especially with adobe, of how this research wasn’t just applied, say, or beneficial to looking at New Mexico, or even adobe in California, if we go back to the Adobe 90 or looking at the seismic kind of research. But it was something that again, through your publications and conferences, that kind of outreach, the Getty Conservation Institute was really able to then spread that knowledge globally.
Agnew: Yeah, yeah. Mainly through our publications and conferences and so on. So we’ve always organized conferences. So that’s a good way of disseminating the findings of work. Also the publication of a conference, if it’s good, has got “legs,” has survival value. But the conference itself is very often less rewarding, other than as a professional-social get-together, in which people are meeting, discussing, and exchanging ideas. Information dissemination and training have always been central to the mission of GCI.

Holmes: Yeah, exchange of ideas.

Agnew: That’s the normal function of a conference.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: And I’ve organized a number of them.

Holmes: Yeah, yeah. Well, we’ll touch on those later.

Agnew: Yeah, I must talk a little bit about the aeological Congress, WAC-5, at some point—

Holmes: Oh, yes.

Agnew: —because that was a very interesting one, as well.

Holmes: Absolutely, very interesting.

Agnew: And important, I think, yeah.

Holmes: Very important one. But I wanted to step back a bit, before we move on to a few of the other projects here and discuss you coming to the Getty in 1988. Well, what position were you hired as? Because I know that position changed over the years, and multiple times, showing, also, the evolution and growth and development of the Getty Conservation Institute itself.

Agnew: When I came in the beginning of 1988, the GCI, as a formal entity, had only been in operation a few years. The head of the science department—and I was hired into the science department—was Frank Preusser, a German. A very fine scientist, who now works part-time at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. But he’d been at the Doerner Institut, in Munich. Excellent, very high-quality scientist. The manager of contract work was Jim Druzik, who really managed his contracts. So Jim and Frank were running the science program in
that way. It was Jim who suggested to Frank, after I’d been at the GCI three months and gone back to Australia, that I might be a good, suitable, appropriate person to hire. In fact, Frank was under some pressure from the then director, Luis Monreal, to find somebody to alleviate some of the work pressure that he was under, because he was starting the Nefertari project in Egypt and he was doing research, he was setting up the institute, and servicing also the needs of the Getty Museum collections in research and authentication and so on. So he had a lot of things. I was hired as the deputy director of the science program. That was my job. But I ran the adobe research project and presently, I got involved in China. So one thing after another, I started doing field special projects.

Holmes: In that new position, you began to specialize in outdoor heritage sites. I wanted to ask if you could discuss a little bit of your impression of both—You came from a museum that was really spearheading conservation in Australia, right, and broadening what really came under conservation.

Agnew: It was spearheading conservation at the Queensland Museum, not in Australia. In Australia, the Australian Museum in Sydney and other institutions were well established in conservation. The Canberra University, or Canberra College training and educational course—

Holmes: Sure. You mentioned that.

Agnew: —was actually being run at that time. So yeah, they were doing good conservation and so on, but very little in the outdoor field, I must say, at that time.

Holmes: When you came to the Getty, not to say that one could actually compare institutions, but what was your impression? The Getty seemed to be spearheading that, not just here in the United States, but also looking to establish international partnerships, too.

Agnew: Yeah. When I first came here, it was a difficult transition for some months for me—I would say probably six months, while I tried to come up to speed—because there was just a tremendous amount going on in the Getty Conservation Institute itself. Not only in the science program, but there was a training program being run, as well, training courses. There was a documentation program, a publications program. It was all sort exploding as it was created. The first director, Luis Monreal, was a powerhouse. He was very dynamic. He got the institute up and running. He, it was, who realized that to get visibility, he had to have high profile projects like the Nefertari project. So he created that, because he had the contacts to do that. And likewise, when it came to China, he also had the initial contact in China. So that’s how we got involved there in late 1988, when I went for the first time. So things were
brisk, to say the least. The science department, under Frank, with Jim running the contracts, had all sorts of things going on. Contract research with universities. I don’t know if they’re working with CalTech, at that point. Maybe. Glen Cass and others. For example, one of the questions that was being posed at that time—and Jim will have talked about this, I’m sure—was to what extent do pollutants that are so notorious in the L.A. basin—ozone, nitrogen oxides, sulfur oxides and so on—to what extent do they infiltrate into museums like the Getty Villa, which is an open museum? It’s not a sealed envelope. To what extent do those pollutants attack and degrade artworks. So there were deep studies done, and they showed that probably, the fabric of the museum, the wood, carpeting and anything such as curtains and so on, provided buffer absorption for pollutants. So the impact was negligible. There was also a project going on with the use of Vikane for the killing of termites, the fumigant, Vikane, sultry fluoride, made by Dow Chemical. There were analytical projects of various kinds going on, a lot of contract stuff. Jim and Frank were managing this. So all of this was kind of new to me, and I had to try and catch up a bit.

Holmes: Yeah, well, you had to hit the ground running, it seems like.

02:00:29:49
Agnew: Sort of, yeah. I stumbled a bit here and there, but I could catch up. The environment’s very different, too. There was money then and there was just a lot of nimbleness, in terms of getting things done, up and done. For example, when I came for the three-month adobe study before I joined the staff, Frank and Jim had organized things so well for me that I just moved into the lab. They hired a wonderful retired professor from Occidental College, Frank Lambert, who’s just the loveliest man. I sent ahead the likely chemicals that I would need for research on adobe, and they were all there. Frank had organized it all. I moved into the lab and I had three months of intense lab work. It was just wonderful again, to do that. I’d work late at night, I’d work on the weekends and all, and very happy doing that. So it was a very dynamic and exciting situation. It was kind of reminiscent of the earliest days I’d gone to the Queensland Museum, when there was a new world opening there, in terms of work and challenges. Here, there was a new world opening in terms of opportunities and a bigger world, so it was even more exciting, in many ways.

Holmes: Your time at Queensland, you saw heritage conservation broadening itself, right? That the study of conservation, the practice of conservation, the conservation community and conservation science was broadening and developing. What was your impression of when you moved here to the Getty, of that type of mission? The Getty, later on, is usually identified as very much, like yourself, the kind of holistic type of conservation, very much at the forefront of spreading conservation internationally, of taking on these big projects. But also doing it in a much different way than what was done before. What was your impression of that kind of mission, when you arrived?
Agnew: I thought that the standard of conservation was really very high. It was a world leader already, at least in the museum field. Particularly where it came to paintings or antiquities or decorative arts conservation, the standard was extremely high. The basic premises of conservation were well established then, and the practice followed those premises. It was very good enough. I’d kind of absorbed that stuff through my time in Australia. When I was at Queensland, I spent a few months—a few months, perhaps two, yeah—learning about conservation, in Rome. There’s an international center in Rome, which is part of an affiliate of UNESCO, through—. It’s called ICCROM, International Center for Conservation. It’s one of those acronyms; it’s just known as ICCROM. I went there and did a course on scientific conservation and so on, which they were teaching. There was no new science for me, but it was an opportunity for me to become better oriented in European conservation practice, in European heritage. It was a very good thing that the Queensland Museum did, pay for me to go to that course. Alan Bartholomai, the director, was prepared to invest in me, to send me there. Later on, when we were doing the shipwreck work, before Pandora, I went to another trip to Europe, to look at the great Swedish warship, the Wasa. The Wasa sunk in Stockholm Harbor on its maiden voyage. It didn’t have a maiden voyage; it just got off the wharf and it sank, in the seventeenth century. It’s a fantastic thing. It would be equivalent of an aircraft carrier being launched now today, and just going to the bottom.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: Well, it was raised by the Swedes and it’s now a museum, the Wasa. But they’ve got problems now, it came out black because of all the ooze and black iron oxide in the bottom of the harbor. Then later on, when the British raised the Mary Rose in Southampton, another warship, wooden warship from Henry VIII’s time, they learnt how to extract the black iron sediment from the wood and it’s a more natural color. But anyway, I also used that in relation to the Pandora.

Holmes: Oh, okay.

Agnew: So anyway, by the time I got to the Getty, I knew what the standards of international conservation were about. I found that they were very good, by and large. The GCI had taken on, and still does, a wonderful service to the conservation field, through an abstracting service called Art and Archeology Technical Abstracts. We publish it online; at that time, we were publishing hard copy. It’s a volunteer effort, global, in which people read a number of journals of relevance to heritage and conservation, and they submit abstracts, which are then edited and published and made available free.
Holmes: Which is another example of the Getty’s outreach and service, outside of their publications.

Agnew: Yeah, absolutely. Wonderful tool for research, and it’s still widely used.

Holmes: One of the aspects which you mentioned, too, is that the Getty does take on big projects. It began to really spearhead the development of these kind of international partnerships. Of course, as you’ve mentioned, the Nefertari tomb of Queen Nefertari, as well as the Valley of the Queens project in Egypt, this was one of the projects already underway when you came and joined the Getty staff.

Agnew: Only the Nefertari project, not the Valley of the Queens.

Holmes: Yeah, the Valley of Queens came later, that’s correct.

Agnew: Right, that came later. That came with our reentry into Egypt.

Holmes: Yes, yes. Well, let’s discuss Nefertari’s tomb and that project.

Agnew: This project was created, basically, by Luis Monreal, as a flagship project to give visibility to the GCI. He had connections. He himself, Spanish, actually Catalan, had been the secretary general of ICOM, the International Council on Museums, in Paris; again, a UNESCO affiliate. He was hired to start the Getty Conservation Institute. A man of vision and great energy. He’s still active, but I think he works for the Aga Kahn Foundation for Culture or something, in Geneva. I haven’t seen him for years, but I have great admiration for Luis. A forceful and brilliant character. So he just created the GCI out of nothing, with a vision. His vision was that the GCI is not just going to be kind of like a service organization to the Getty Museum, and it’s not just going to conserve artifacts and objects; it’s going to do international projects. It’s going to do the great outdoor cultural heritage, as well. It’s going to do archeological sites and monuments. So it’s going to be a dynamic, exciting place for conservation. That was his vision. And he was supported by the president of the trust, Harold Williams and his wife Nancy Englander. So Luis said, “We need something that’s going to really show that the Getty Conservation Institute is a presence in the world of heritage.” So he selected Nefertari’s tomb, which is one of the most beautiful tombs in Egypt—discovered in 1904 by [Ernesto] Schiaparelli, the Italian archeologist who worked in the Valley of the Queens—but had severe problems of salt and deterioration. And photographs from 1904 to the 1940s, 1950s and later, showed progressive loss and deterioration, damage.

Holmes: Of the wall paintings themselves?
Of the wall paintings, yeah. So he negotiated the project to study and conserve Nefertari’s tomb.

These are massive partnerships, having to—

There was a big partnership, and it was not without its own problems, in terms of the relationship with the Egyptian authorities and Egyptian professionals.

I want to get into that here in a bit. But this is a multidisciplinary, massive-partnership kind of project and undertaking. Describe for us a little bit of the wall paintings themselves and that process of conservation, and the collaboration that had to go into that.

Yeah. The standard approach—which is, again, a logical one, and it’s one that is sometimes overlooked—is first to document the existing condition of the wall paintings. If you have the historic record of photographs, to compare the photographs to see what the trajectory of deterioration is, from which you might be able to infer the rate of deterioration—so much time, this much deterioration. A rate of deterioration is always an important thing to know. So you could then extrapolate that prognosis for the future. If we do nothing, what’s it going to look like in ten years, fifty, a hundred years. It’s something that I did at Fort Selden, as well, by using historic photographs from Mike Taylor, who got them locally. We’d try to measure the rate of loss from 1890s to present.

A type of risk assessment, right? In some ways?

It’s partly a risk assessment, but it’s more than that, because it shows you rates of deterioration. That’s really the point of it. Because if the rate of deterioration is close to zero, why do anything? Or there’s no urgency to do anything, right? But if it’s aggressive, you really have to do something. So one needs to know what the condition is, and if you can, to determine the rate of deterioration—both of which could be done, to some extent, with Nefertari’s tomb, because there are a lot of photographs from Schiaparelli, 1904 to 1980s, and you could see progressive deterioration. The next thing is to know the material that you’re working with. What’s it composed of? What are the pigments? What are the binding media? Study those. Which creates a problem, because in Egypt, taking samples is a big no, no, no. It doesn’t matter if the sample’s tiny. We faced this problem in Tutankhamen, as well, of a sample statue; it’s antiquity; antiquity cannot be taken out of Egypt. Cannot be sampled.

How did you solve this problem then?
Well, we never, ever take samples illicitly. That’s a stupid thing to do. Because A, it destroys confidence and relationship; B, you really can’t publish the results, if you do it. So that’s not a good idea. We didn’t do that. No, you negotiate and you explain and da-da-da. We did the same with the Tutankhamen project. Eventually, we finally got authorization for some small, tiny samples to come for analysis. We’re so good now that we can really extract a vast amount of information from a very small sample. So you do analyses. What are the pigments? What are the binding media? What’s the substrate? What are the salts that are present? Because in some places, you could see a buildup of an inch of salt behind the plaster, popping it off. A solid inch of rock salt. Rock salt. So halite, sodium chloride. It’s not just salt at that point, it’s the mineral halite, because it’s as hard as rock. But it’s salt nonetheless.

And that pushes, as it builds up, is pushing the plaster away from the walls itself?

Yeah, it just disrupts it. And then some places, it’s gone through to the painted surface and postulated the painted surface, which we see in Mogao, as well, and in many other places in the world. So those sorts of problems. So all of this was studied, and electron microscopy was done. Environmental studies in the tomb and outside the tomb. A big question was, how was the salt mobilized? How did it get there? It’s a big challenge to understand. Especially because in the Valley of the Kings, just on the other side of the mountain, there’s basically no salt in the tombs. So it’s a big, interesting problem. The answer seems to be—although it’s never been intensively studied—that in the Queens Valley side, the stratigraphy of the mountain, which is limestone—. Actually, it’s marine marl, not limestone. Marl is a limestone with a high clay content, not pure limestone. The stratigraphy slipped and rotated. So if the layers of rock, marl, slip, they tilt this way, right? And fracture. That seemed to have allowed the intrusion and accumulation, along fracture lines, of salt in the Queens Valley. And also gypsum. Why it slipped may be because the Nile River had migrated close to the Theban Mountains—this is some miles from where the Nile is today—and perhaps undercut it, and the whole block slipped and rotated on that side of the Theban Mountains, the Queens Valley side. The Kings Valley, further inland some miles away, but not very far, really, is basically salt free. Anyway, this is what we have to deal with there. So the problem was never definitively solved, about how the salt got close to the surface. I think it’s because the valley had flooded many times, since its creation. Ever many millennia.

Yeah. That’s a long time.
That’s a long time. There is wonderful stratigraphic evidence of flooding, in the Queens Valley, and even better in the Kings Valley. Some of the tombs are filled right to the top with flood debris.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

That’s what you can see. After that, of course, there is no record, because the tomb can’t fill up anymore. But what you can see there is layer by layer. First layer is heavy, big particles—sand and rock and pebbles. Then as the flood abates and settles slowly, you find silt. Then the next layer is the same. It’s like a layer cake, going up, up, up, right up to the ceiling. KV5 in the Kings Valley is entirely full with flood debris. So I think in the Queens Valley, many of the tombs had flooded historically. Then of course, lateral migration of moisture through the rock, carries the salt.

Holmes: Is this particular to the stone? Most of the tombs are made of large deposits of limestone, is that correct?

It’s limestone, yeah. Marl.

So is there something about the salt within that stone, that that allows, when in contact with moisture over those thousands of years, that would help produce the salt?

It can only migrate when it’s in solution.

Okay.

Yeah. It can’t migrate as a solid. But it would’ve migrated in solution, had there been enough capillary moisture in the rock, in that marl, to carry it to the surface. The surface can be on the surface of the ground, or it can be on the surface of the walls, below ground, where the water evaporates slowly, but the salt remains. So slowly, it builds up. Slowly, it builds up.

And that’s in some places where you got an inch of crystalized salt.

Yeah. Yeah, that salt is not so damaging, because the surface of that salt is minimal—surface area exposed to humidity—because it’s massive. But when you have finely divided salt, the surface area is very large. So it rapidly can absorb moisture from the atmosphere and dissolve, if the humidity’s high enough. Then as it dries out, it crystalizes again, and that disruptive action of the crystallization causes the damage. Same thing at Dunhuang. So the actual
morphology of the salt particles is very important in the whole rate of
deterioration. It’s something we know, but it’s something we can’t control.

Holmes: Yes.

Agnew: So we understood all of that, through study, and several analytical reports
were written, and then the work began. Work comprised stabilizing the tomb
and removing as much salt as possible, the massive salt, and reattaching the
painted plaster. It was conducted by a large team, in six-week-long
campaigns, twice a year, and led by two famous Italian conservators, Laura
and Paolo Mora, a husband and wife team, revered figures in the world of wall
paintings. These paintings, of course, they’re not fresco paintings. Fresco
means fresh, which is done in Italy and Europe, on limestone, with lime-based
paintings. So the lime carbonates from calcium hydroxide into calcium
carbonate, and becomes part of the wall. These are painted on Nile silt, with
powdered filler in them and sand and so on, attached to the marl. The ancient
Egyptians didn’t use lime as the Romans used lime. There’s no evidence of
that. So it’s a different creature altogether. It’s more akin to the Mogao, China
wall paintings. They’re on dried mud; these are on similar Nile silt and sand
and sometimes gypsum. My colleague Gueteri Wang has made a study of
these plasters.

Holmes: That they mixed together to make the various layers.

Agnew: Yeah, the plaster and they plastered the wall. So anyway, that’s how the
approach was undertaken. It took several years. But our recommendation to
the antiquities organization, after the completion, was that the tomb would be
too fragile, in terms of further reactivation of the salt by moisture, to have
tourists go in, and so it should be kept closed. Only opened on rare occasions,
to important visitors. Inevitably VIPs would be allowed access. That was our
recommendation. It was based really largely on, I think, opinion, rather than
fact. And it was cautious opinion, an appropriate one. But as we know, the
tomb was opened, during the era of Zahi Hawass. In fact, we haven’t seen any
evidence of the impact of visitors’ breath and humidity on the tomb, in terms
of reactivation of the salt-related deterioration. What we do see is physical
attrition of the tomb, where people bump against the wall or scratch them. Or
film crews. It’s a little gold mine for filming. Innumerable videos have been
shot in there. Just like King Tut’s tomb. Of course, time is money, so film
crews move fast. They have stands, they have cameras, they have tripods—

Holmes: And lights, yeah.

Agnew: —they have people. They’re insensitive. Never been in the tomb before.
Where do we put this? They put it here or there. Next thing, they bump a wall
and there’s a three-and-a-half-thousand-year piece of painting knocked off or
scratched or damaged in some way. So that’s where damage occurs. Or other people, you may even find—as we found in Tutankhamen’s tomb—little modern graffiti, Pepi. P-E-P-I, Pepi. Now, who the hell’s Pepi? Pepi was an Old Kingdom pharaoh. What’s he doing in here—? [they laugh] Or they leave little amulets or tokens tucked in crevices.

Holmes: In King Tut’s tomb, of all things. Right?

Agnew: Yeah. Actually, it’s very funny.

Holmes: Very much. That certainly deals with the site management, which you’ve had a lot of experience in. But before we touch on that, I wanted to discuss really quickly, one of the principles of conservation. You’ve touched on this a little bit earlier. But the decision of not completely refurbishing the paintings, but you conserved and refurbished what was there. Meaning that parts that were irreplaceable and damaged in Nefertari’s tomb were left that way. Can you discuss that decision? And was that even debated, or was that just—? I know that in some schools, that’s a principle of conservation.

Agnew: Yeah, sure. We never, ever repainted anything. Where there’d been loss, the loss was infilled with a bland mortar, uncolored, so you can see where the loss occurred. That was also a way of buttressing and stabilizing the adjacent wall paintings. There had been a big debate. The Italians have a technique called tratteggio. Tratteggio is the use of thin lines of paint over the bland colored mortar, so that visually, it integrates. It’s not an attempt to repaint anything that’s there; it’s just compatible colors that are used, in watercolors, so that from a distance, visual harmony is achieved. So a test was done. A little area was done by the Moras on tratteggio. Then there was like a committee that debated this, and it was decided no, not to do that—which is fine, and I think the appropriate decision, so it was never implemented. But otherwise, it was all conservation. There was application of stabilizing consolidants on the walls to help secure the lifting wall paintings. It’s not possible to remove all the salt. It cannot be done. Where you have massive salt pushing out a lump of or an area of wall paintings, you can excise it and remove it and replace the wall painting. But where it’s pustular and small, the disease is too far gone. It’s not amenable to surgery. You’ve got a sodium chloride cancer going on there. It’s beyond operability.

Holmes: Then it doesn’t help, going back to site management, when some visitor like Pepi was leaving his name behind. In your article I think you were writing in 1993, you and your co-authors were discussing how the tomb was closed to the public, just to monitor and see, in a sense, the concern of not just tourism, but also the moisture, the humidity of human breath, and that would reactivate the problem of salt and deterioration of the tomb. But then by 1996, the tomb was reopened by the Egyptian authorities. To quote you, which I thought was
very well-said and lucid statement, that “we seem to be able to destroy in a few decades, what has survived for millennia,” warning that we’ve now conserved this, but that that degradation of what took millennia for the salt to do, human beings could do in probably a matter of decades.

Yes, this is true. It’s distressing that so much damage can be done through mass tourism, whether it’s through humidity or physical attrition and so on. But it’s because the mass tourism is a meaningless activity, other than one that generates income for the authorities. If you put that in the balance scales, against the original intent of the tomb and its visual harmony and its sense of serenity, it seems almost outrageous that the tomb could be exploited for mass tourism. I’ve absolutely no problem with careful scholars going in or informed visitors, knowledgeable people. It sounds like elitism; and it is, in a way. But just observing mass tourism around the world at various sites, it is painful because the visitor gets nothing out of it. Pays money and may check a little box of being there, but they’re totally, totally unprepared for this. So the question, in my way of thinking now is, how does one begin to create a more informed, educated, and aware and empathetic visitor for these important sites like Nefertari’s tomb? For thousands of years, it lay there, quietly being the resting place of the favorite queen of Rameses II, the great pharaoh.

Which was its intent, correct?

Which was the intent. If you look at the wall paintings, they’re serene. They’re beautiful. Not only just beautiful, but more serene. There’s no taint of morbidity of death. There’s no expression of gloom, of darkness—unlike the Greeks, with Hades and all of that. This is lightness and serenity and being greeted by the gods. It’s charming. It’s lovely.

Well, and that seems to come across in a lot of the material that I’ve read, not just on your work, but the work of others as well—is that as a practitioner of conservation, when you go to these sites, that it is a cultural site. It’s a spiritual site. That in a sense, your duty and principles is not just to try to conserve the site for the generations to come, but also conserve its culture and spirituality, and balance that. Did you feel that way with Nefertari’s tomb?

Yeah, I do feel that way. I think the new challenge, really, is to find a way to inculcate into the visitor, the need for understanding, preparation. I don’t know how you do that, really. It’s very, very difficult. But in my utopia, I could imagine the visitor being informed and having a lifetime experience going into these places, and being spiritually enriched by them and having the chance to engage in a way that allows them to enlarge their own sense of being and sense of mortality and so on. So I know it’s incompatible with numbers of visitors. I know that. But at the moment, in so many places, not only in Egypt, but elsewhere, it’s just a stampede through, and it’s at the
extreme point of misuse of cultural sites for money, for income. That, I find very objectionable and very, very sad, in many ways. But I don’t have a particular answer for it, other than a relentless program of education by authorities and in schools, in terms of cultural heritage. Almost like having a lottery to go in to visit a site, a lottery based first on passing a qualifying entrance exam. [they laugh] When I first went to Australia in my sabbatical year at Monash University in Melbourne, I wanted to go to a national park during the Easter break. It’s called Wilsons Promontory. It’s about a hundred miles to the east of Melbourne. It’s an extremely popular place. Then to my surprise, I found that you could not just go at Easter. Forget about it. You had to have won a lottery ticket. This was in the seventies. They had a set number, and they created a lottery. Or you could book years in advance. So not everybody could automatically, ipso facto, qualify and get into Wilsons Promontory. It’s the same with anyplace where there is a limited capacity.

Of course, another option for mass tourism is a replica. The French at Lascaux and Spanish at Altamira have done this, closed the caves to tourists. It’s been accepted by visitors.

Holmes: Sure, sure.

02-01:02:21
Agnew: In the heyday of a great opera singer like [Luciano] Pavarotti, you’d be lucky if you get a ticket for a performance—and it would cost a lot of money. Or, for that matter, the Chicago Cubs playing the Cleveland Indians in the finals of the World Series.

Holmes: That’s true. That’s true.

02-01:02:33
Agnew: I think we should really look at the whole business of mass tourism. Not only is it inimical and harmful to cultural heritage, but it doesn’t raise the standard of awareness within the community, of the importance of heritage. If we were more restrictive and found ways in which even poor people might go, if they were qualified, and charge more for it, it would be better all around; and if we started to teach about cultural heritage and its values in society today, at school level—which they do, as far as I can see, in China. But nowhere else, or very few other places.

Holmes: No, that’s important. In continuing on here in the Valley of the Queens, when you returned—. What is it, in 2000 or around there?

02-01:03:34
Agnew: Yeah, it was a long time later, quite a bit later. After 2000. In 2006, I think.

Holmes: Under your direction, that you reestablished those partnerships to actually conserve all the tombs in the Valley of the Queens.
Agnew: Correct, the site as a whole.
Holmes: Yes.

We went back to Egypt at the request of Zahi Hawass, who was then the head of antiquities in Egypt. Zahi asked us to come back. Personally, I must say, I was reluctant because although Hawass himself is a great proponent of preservation in Egyptology and so on, and a powerful figure—. Was, and still is, to some extent. But he fell from grace, if you like, lost his position as Minister of Antiquities, when [Hosni] Mubarak was ousted. Nonetheless, Hawass invited us to come back and urged us to come back and said we did the best work, et cetera and so on. We’d also studied the Sphinx, remember.

Holmes: Yeah, and I want to talk about that here in a few minutes.

Agnew: The Sphinx?
Holmes: Yeah.

Agnew: That was just a study.
Holmes: But an important one, as well, though.

Agnew: Yeah. Nothing ever happened as a consequence of that.
Holmes: No.

In fact, it had a political kind of ramification, which is a little embarrassing, but never mind. Hawass said, “Come back, come back.” So I said fine. This was my internal advice here: we need to do an evaluation of the Nefertari project, spend six months doing that, write a report. There’re two versions of the report. There’s an exculpated version and there’s a non-exculpated version. I don’t know if we want that in the record. But the overall sense was that Egypt has got phenomenal antiquities and cultural heritage. Almost preeminent in the world. When you go to Egypt and you just see what they did, what they built, and so much of it, over such a long period of time, so much of it so beautiful. A lot of it is highly political, a lot of it is fascist architecture, like the pyramids. What else could be a pyramid but a fascist piece of architecture? Or Rameses II’s great battles, all depicted in bas relief on the sides of the monuments—slaying the Hittites, conquering the Nubians, whatever. He was just a propagandist of the first order. All the pharaohs were. So that gets a bit tiresome. But nonetheless, it’s just amazing stuff. So it’s a temptation to work there. And the archeologists, of course, breed themselves.
More archeologists are Egyptologists, because it’s an academic enterprise, see? So their students become diggers in Egypt. They have established an unfortunate precedent in Egypt, by really having to go and seek permits to dig. And they go with bended knee nowadays, to get coveted permits. And they pay for everything, and we pay for everything. So basically, you get no quid pro quo from the Egyptian government, in terms of contribution. We pay for the staff. All of those things are paid for. So these are negatives, in my opinion, because I have a profound belief that if you want a partnership, you have to be a contributor to the partnership.

Holmes: It gives them a vested stake.

02:01:07:31

Agnew: Vested stake, sure.

Holmes: Yes, yes.

02:01:07:33

Agnew: Even when we worked in Laetoli, even when we worked in one of the poorest countries in Africa, in Tanzania, even so, we could negotiate with the government to provide us with something. Something was free guards at the camp and guides from the government. They did that. The rest we paid for. Fine. That was fine. But in Egypt, there’s nothing. So I tried to negotiate for the Queens Valley, the same deal, when we did go back in there. It was promised, but it was enormously difficult. Really, really very difficult. There was no comprehension on any level in government, about the fact that there should be a contribution from the Egyptian government. I say that without rancor, but it’s the honest truth. And there should’ve been, despite the fact that we negotiated those rates. I said, “We are not going to pay for your staff to work with us on your projects, and which we are funding.” “Yes,” they said. But when push came to shove, it was a different story. The staff were unhappy working with us. They never got paid by the government. Because normally, a mission there—and we were categorized as a mission. I had a big argument about that. “We’re not a mission; we’re here to work at your invitation, to work with you. We’re conservation. Missions are archeologists.” “No, you’re covered by the same rules and regulations. You’re a mission.” So therefore, you have to have two inspectors, or one inspector. Inspectors are archeologists with degrees, Egyptians in antiquities organizations, who have got a degree in archeology. Nominally, they’re there to be part of your team and to learn, and also to act, in a way, and appropriately so, as observers of appropriate behavior by foreign missions. They’re not spies at all, but they’re there to keep an eye on things, so that people are not filching antiquities out of Egypt—which is all perfectly okay. But the missions have to pay for them. I wanted them assigned and paid for by the Egyptian antiquities organization. Likewise, the conservators.
So it was a very difficult process, and never worked. Finally, I just kind of gave up on it and paid to ensure harmony. We organized training courses. We hired an Egyptian, who was a PhD from Glasgow University, a very fine man, to give them mentoring in between campaigns. This is Queens Valley now, not Nefertari. Give them mentoring between campaigns, on site management issues and so on. We brought some of them, the site inspectors and conservators—we were training seven in each category—here for a stay of a month at the Getty, to see how we worked. We sent others to conferences and so on, so that they could get international experience and start to not feel so downtrodden within their own organization and country. So we did all of those things. Again, thinking holistically. It was very difficult.

Holmes: Because there was, what, another hundred tombs in the Valley of the Queens?

Agnew: Yes, but before that I should mention that we were a big team of 69 staff and specialist consultants. Martha Demas, an archeologist (Aegean archeology, not Egyptology!) and I led the initiative. We had wall painting conservators, architects, geotechnical engineers, survey experts, geologists. Our study of the Queens Valley, I believe, was exemplary—even bat experts! So, yes, more than a hundred tombs in the Valley of the Queens. Many are eighteenth dynasty tombs. They’re undecorated. There was a big transition, for reasons I don’t understand, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth dynasties. Eighteenth, undecorated. They’re simple shafts, vertical, right down. Then a chamber, beautifully cut, twenty feet, thirty feet down. Chamber, burial chamber. There’s nothing in them anymore. And there’s nothing on top, either. Whereas Nefertari’s tomb, there’s a ramp going down, chamber after chamber, all beautifully decorated. Nineteenth dynasty. So there’s a big transition. Many of those vertical eighteenth dynasty undecorated tombs had flooded in the past which caused so much damage. Many had bats in them. Others had mummies in them, lying there. So when we started, we had massive cleanups. The archeologists come back and remove the mummies. We had them taken away. And we had a study of the bats. What are the species? How can we move them? Which tombs should we leave? Deep tombs that have no paintings in them, that are trashed by floods and so on, we could leave the bats there, because bats are important for the ecology of the region. They’re a protected species, even in Egypt. So we were all in favor of that. The deal with the authorities was this: that for the Queens Valley, we would do all of the study and the preparation for the conservation of the entire valley, holistically conceived, the hundred-plus tombs; and we would do the detailed engineering and architectural planning for a new entranceway, parking lot, lighting, visitor center, interpretation; and take the four existing tombs that are open to the visitors—Nefertari, QV55, 44, 52, and we would refurbish the presentation in them—the lighting, ventilation system, walkways, interpretive panels and all of that.
So we would do that, and the detailed flood study. Because I’d mentioned that the whole of the valley is a one-square-kilometer catchment area, all of the runoff focuses at the entrance to the site. It’s like a huge basin. It’s like a bathtub, going down, down the tube. Right over here at the bottom where you enter. It’s a roadway and there’re toilets, and the site security and the buses and the vendors are all there. All of that could go—\textit{whisst}—just away like that, just washed away. In 1994, in the Kings Valley, there was a flood. It went right out of the Kings Valley, miles away, and killed some people. There was a meter deep of mud and debris.

Agnew: Kent Weeks saw it. He was there. It’s the same flood that occurred in the Queens Valley, but these to a lesser extent. The preparation for flood was so poor that they had to borrow pumps from the villagers, to remove the water from some of the tombs. It was heartbreaking. It’s just heartbreaking.

Holmes: Were preparations after—perhaps on your recommendations—taken to be better prepared for that type of site management?

Agnew: Yeah, all the plans are there. I’ve got them behind you there. We have engineering plans in great detail, construction-ready, and were about to begin. Hawass said, “Yes, we’ll get the Army Corps of Engineers in Egypt to do the construction.” They came down. Now, this is going to be a few million dollars. He said, “We have the money.” They came down in November; in January, the revolution started. Since then, we’ve been just on hold. It’s a great pity, because if you’ve got a few million lying around, you could invest in the future of Egypt. No, it’s quite serious. Think about it. Why could one not do a deal with Egypt, a developer? We will take on the Queens Valley. We will do all the development for you, for 50 percent of the gate, and we’ll do the promotion for you, for twenty-five years, say. And do it. They’d get it, and it would cost the government nothing, except a reduction in the income for twenty-five years, or whatever the deal was that could be worked out. I’d love to negotiate a deal like that. Signed, sealed, and delivered, with cost guarantees. But there just doesn’t seem to be an interest in that, in doing it, anywhere. It’s not the Getty’s role to take on projects like that but we could provide the conservation guidance for a public (Egyptian government)-private developer partnership.

Holmes: No, that is a pity.

Agnew: But don’t you think that’s a feasible way of doing a project?

Holmes: It might. So ten years from now—.
Agnew: Yes. At least a prototype project. Test it out. This is capitalism working for conservation.

Holmes: Well, I guess we could put this on record, that—

Agnew: You can.

Holmes: —five to ten years from now, if I’m no longer at the Oral History Center, that means I may have taken you up on your plan. [they laugh]

Agnew: It’s a win-win situation, let me put it that way.

Holmes: We can call it Agnew and Holmes, right?

Agnew: That’s right. I get 50 percent!

Holmes: Indeed. You mentioned the Great Sphinx. The Great Sphinx project and study that you did, this was between Nefertari’s tomb and the Valley of the Queens larger project.

Agnew: Yeah, it was on the Nefertari side of things—well before the Valley of the Queens.

Holmes: It’s like a three-year project?

Agnew: Yes, it was while we were still working on Nefertari and wrapping up there. After Nefertari finished in 1992, the wall paintings conservation, we did continued environmental monitoring in the tomb, to understand better the conditions when the tomb was sealed. At that time, we also brought in groups of Egyptians, to see what the impact of fifty people for one hour would be on the tomb environment. Those kinds of studies. So that went on for about four years, and then the tomb was opened. Then we basically stopped. We had a recommendation about opening the tomb, how many people. Maximum, 150 people a day and so on, spread out over the day. It didn’t work that way. They all came in the morning. But importantly, we were at the same time, asked to look at the issues of deterioration of the Great Sphinx. In the Nefertari project days, a chunk of rock fell off the shoulder of the Great Sphinx at Giza, and the minister got fired, or some bigshot got fired because it fell off. Then there was concern about the neck of the Sphinx. Was it going to fall off? Because it seemed to be eroding aggressively. An Egyptologist called Mark Lehner, who may still be working in the Giza Plateau, talked to us at length about the erosion rate of the Sphinx. So we decided to have a look at that, see what was causing the accelerated erosion of the Sphinx. Because he said, and it’s true,
that very often you can walk around the sphinx in the morning, and you will find flakes of limestone popped off the Sphinx, lying below. Thin flakes, like potato crisps, about the same size, too, and I’ve seen them. So what’s causing that? So we figured out we needed to look at that, and we did. We installed one of Shin Maekawa’s environmental monitoring stations on the back of the Sphinx. Sitting right up there on the back of the Sphinx. I have photographs of myself on the back of the Sphinx, with Shin there.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: Oh, yeah, I have some nice photographs of myself on monuments. On El Mirador, in the Petén of Guatemala, right on the biggest, one of the biggest pyramids in the world. Right on the top. It’s very nice. We landed the helicopter there. No, it was a great project. But I’m not going there. Anyway, the upshot of that was to determine—and we did—that at night, in a desert environment, the temperature drops—clear skies at night—and the dew point is exceeded. It’s exactly like leaving your car out on a clear night. The next morning, it’s all covered in dew, because if it’s a clear night, the temperature drops and the dew point is exceeded, which means there’s condensation. Right? Condensation’s a regular phenomenon on the Sphinx. So imagine the Sphinx being a marine rock, limestone with salt in it. Exactly the same phenomenon. The salt will dissolve in the dew, and then as the sun comes up in the morning, the moisture rapidly evaporates, the salt crystalizes, and—bup—off go the little flakes. So it’s kind of been scaled off slowly by that phenomenon.

Holmes: It’s slightly similar to the salt problem that you encountered in Nefertari’s tomb, in some ways.

Agnew: Sure.

Holmes: Was it there you also figured out that it had to do with the core temperature? Which is a testament to the new technology that was available, of course, in those days, too. The core temperature of the rock itself in the Sphinx.

Agnew: No, I don’t think so. We did thermography on the Sphinx. I can’t remember the results of that. But the principal cause of this was the—.

Holmes: Was the dew.

Agnew: The dew, the condensation. Other people have had other theories, as well, but we’re confident in our results. It’s marvelous to walk on the back of the Sphinx, because I was standing there—. We had a very famous geologist from Berkeley, Garniss Curtis. Right? Garniss is a lovely man. He must be very
elderly now, if he hasn’t gone to geological heaven, where he would belong. And he may have. He’s got to be in his nineties, I would think, or more. Garniss had the geochronology lab at UC Berkeley. He did the study of the dating of Laetoli footprints, 3.6 million years. Nobody’s ever disputed those. You don’t mess with Garniss. He’s just a great guy. It’s so wonderful to meet a scientist who is really at the top, really at the top. It’s just fantastic. Such wonderful people. Wish I were there.

Holmes: Yeah?

02-01:22:56
Agnew: Yeah, really. I’ve met some from CalTech and other places, and from Cal, as well, and they’re great. Garniss was one of those. He pointed down, while we were on the back of the Sphinx. He said, “You see this?” I’d walked right over it, but the geologist’s eye—. There in the middle of the sphinx is a sea urchin, on the back, about this big.

Holmes: Oh, interesting!

02-01:23:16
Agnew: Yeah, you can see, it’s a perfect sea urchin. Look at that. Fossil, marine fossil. This is fossil limestone. Yeah, it’s just a lovely thing to see.

Holmes: Yeah, well, and especially considering how many people also have the opportunity to realize that you have that type of fossil on the back of the Sphinx, which is iconic, right?

02-01:23:35
Agnew: Yeah, I know, I know.

Holmes: That’s amazing.

02-01:23:38
Agnew: Yeah, I’ve got a photograph of it somewhere. It’s just lovely things like that, that bring back memories. Inconsequential but extraordinary, and nonetheless very poignant memories.

Holmes: For sure. On the Sphinx, if I recall correctly, that your recommendation was, again, some type of cover.

02-01:24:01
Agnew: You’ve been reading too much stuff in the background! There was the problematic issue. Well, we said, what can you do about the Sphinx? So at that time, I was doing research with a guy from Australia, a lightweight structures architect called Vinzenz Sedlak. Vinzenz is an Austrian, but he’s a professor at the University of New South Wales. Or was; I’ve been out of touch with him for twenty years now. He did these lightweight structures. He did an assessment of the stability of the hexashelter that I built at Fort Selden and Cyprus. He pointed out to me that I really should not have snow land on
it, because the weight would be too great. Do you know what happened at Fort Selden?

Holmes: No.

Agnew: It snowed. [they laugh] I had this call one day, “Your shelter’s collapsed.” We had that big snowstorm in December. “It never shows here,” they said. Anyway, that’s another story. But we had the data by that time, so we knew the performance characteristics of it. I spoke to Sedlak like, “What could we possibly do to shelter the Sphinx against this constant deterioration that’s going on?” It was just like a concept. Sedlak went away and he kind of did a concept design of a rail on either side of the Sphinx, outside the pit of the Sphinx, and a retractable shelter, which would be pulled over at night and pulled back during the day. We kind of looked at this and, yeah, yeah. There wasn’t too much enthusiasm. It was all too much. But one of our staff members, who shall remain nameless, unauthorized, put it out in the greater wide world. I think it got into *National Geographic*. The next thing you know, there was a lot of trouble. The Egyptians seemed to think that we were seriously proposing this, at this point, to build this structure over the Sphinx. It’s almost as though we had the construction team there ready and we’re building it unauthorized. No, no. We were just thinking aloud, if you like. Calm down, calm down. But anyway, it was just one of those little blips in a relationship.

Holmes: But it is a good example, though, of when we are thinking about solutions, right? As a conservationist does, of thinking of solutions. Eventually, the deterioration, due to, again, the totality of the environment—because we’re dealing with an outdoor site—of an iconic structure, an ancient structure such as the Sphinx, that you will have a deterioration that you can’t turn back or stop.

Agnew: This is true. What we never did, and might’ve done, would be actually to determine the rate of loss, again. Quantitatively, if possible. You could do it probably today, with laser scanning. We couldn’t do it then. Because laser scanning could be done to submillimeter precision and accuracy. So we could do that now. You could do a laser scan now, in a year’s time, in another year’s time or whatever, and you could determine the rate of loss, actual loss of the shell. Or not the shell, but the skin, the outer surface of the Sphinx. You could extrapolate from the data. As a rough estimate of the rate of deterioration, you could do it, and it would have meaningful results. Perhaps not that accurate, but order of magnitude, it would be okay.

Holmes: Well, and that would also put the issue really directly on the table, to say to the Egyptian authorities and—.
Agnew: Yeah.

Holmes: Because it will come to a point, I would imagine, where—it’s interesting to think about this from a conservator’s point of view—you will have a loss that you can’t fix, eventually.

Agnew: You can’t fix it. Once it’s gone, it’s gone. Well, their solution, which they did without assessment, was to start cladding the Sphinx with new blocks of limestone. So all the paws in the front paws are actually surrounded by new blocks of limestone. They cut new blocks of limestone, they put it around, with lime mortar. But the lime mortar was so lousy, I’m sorry to say, it started to fall off. Then they removed them. Then they used ancient blocks to re-clad the surface. I said—and this is early nineties—“What are you going to do when you get to the neck and head? “Oh, they said, “Nobody would dare to touch the head of the Sphinx.” Okay. What are you going to do in the back? So you have a Sphinx that’s got a kind of cladding around the legs, the paws in the front and sides, with old blocks of stone! But the real Sphinx is underneath that. It’s kind of meaningless. It’s window dressing. It’s not even very they betray, or display, a lack of real understanding of conservation and of issues of deterioration and irreparable loss.

Holmes: Sure. It also seems to, in a sense, violate some of the principles of conservation.

Agnew: Absolutely. It sure does, yeah. It’s not even a good restoration. Not at all.

Holmes: Yeah. I wanted to touch on another iconic project that you were able to work on there in Egypt, as well as that the Getty initiated and sponsored, which would be the tomb of the famed Tutankhamen. Can you tell us a little bit about that project?

Agnew: Well, we’re currently working on that project.

Holmes: Okay, so it’s still ongoing.

Agnew: Oh, it’s a very active project, and I’ve got a vast amount of literature. Boxes that say Tut, T-U-T.

Holmes: Yes, yes, yes.

Agnew: All full of the documents of Tut. Again, we were requested to do this by the Egyptian authorities, by Zahi Hawass. We took it on because it’s one of the most famous tombs in Egypt, if not the most famous tomb.
Holmes: Oh, sure. I would think so.

Agnew: So this makes a nice counterpoint, in a way, to Nefertari, which is also one of the most famous tombs in Egypt. One in the Queens Valley and one in the Kings Valley. So “why not?,” we thought. Tut is one of the most famous tombs in Egypt. Everybody, basically, who goes to the Valley of the Kings, visits Tutankhamen—for an extra hundred pounds Egyptian entry fee. It’s nothing much, as a tomb. It’s tiny. It is not even particularly beautifully painted, by comparison with the other royal kings’ tombs. Seti I is huge. KV5 is colossal. Most of the tombs are spectacular, and Tut’s tomb is just a small, inconsequential tomb. Now, it’s famous because why? Because of the treasure and the story of the discovery of the treasure. Carter’s discovery in 1922 is amazing. Amazing. Stuff that was crammed into the tomb, that took ten years to take out and conserve. Carter did an extraordinary job, with [Alfred] Lucas, the conservator, and—oh, I forget his name—yes, Burton—the photographer, just documenting a ten-year work. Just wonderful work that’s stood the test of time. So that’s why it’s famous, the gold. It’s the gold. It’s the treasure.

Holmes: Sure. Well, and also the story of Tut himself that they’ve pieced together right?

Agnew: Yeah, insofar as we know anything about Tut at all. There are all sorts of hypotheses about his demise. He was murdered by his successor, Ay, whose tomb is in the Western Valley. But clearly painted by the same artists who painted Tut’s tomb. Bigger tomb, but not grand, really, not like the others. Anyway, we decided to take it on. Again, study the causes of deterioration, documentation. But we also have been doing the refurbishment of the presentation of the tomb. Better ventilation, walkways, a ramp going down, lighting, display—all of which has been very problematic, in planning and getting it done and so on, because the Egyptian authorities didn’t want the tomb closed. But there’s no way, we said, you can have new walkways, with people coming in.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: So last October, we did it in one month.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: It was all done. But one big problem was the moving the mummy into a safe place. The mummy’s in the tomb. The mummy was taken out of the coffin by Zahi Hawass about, oh, ten years ago, maybe. Put into a glass case in the antechamber. The glass case is a nitrogen-filled case, built by a German company, Glasbau Hahn, in Frankfurt, which make extraordinarily high-
quality cases. Their nitrogen case is an active case. That means it pumps nitrogen, dry nitrogen, in. Why nitrogen? To stop deterioration, keep it from oxidizing, biodeterioration, and so on. You may know that we’ve also developed mummy cases here, which are passive cases.

Holmes: Really?

Agnew: Yes, yes. Shin Maekawa did this, and it was one of the earliest things we did in Egypt, at the request of the Antiquities organization, at the time of Nefertari’s tomb, for the royal mummies in the Cairo Museum, as part of our special projects. Our engineer, Shin Maekawa, developed the mummy case, and we installed them in the Egyptian Museum. They’re nitrogen-filled, but they have no electrical requirement. It’s all been published. They’re elegant, in the sense that you don’t need any engineering in the maintenance of a nitrogen-oxygen-free environment. It’s entirely sealed. Nothing is sealed completely, but the diffusion rate has to be very, very low, five to ten years life, and you have to repurge. So we developed that. Hawass had originally asked us to develop a nitrogen case for Tutankhamen. But in the meantime, somehow, somewhere, before we got too deep into the project, we arrived and there was Tutankhamen in a Glasbau Hahn case. I don’t know how. Never explained. This is an active case. No problem with the case. A German case like that operates. It’s just inappropriate, in the sense that one questions its sustainability in Egypt, because they have to send technicians from Germany or Cairo, and the cost of maintaining the whole system. There’s an entire engineering steel case, which is eight feet tall and six feet wide and deep—outside, which handles the condensers, the purifiers, the computers, the pumps, the whole thing that supplies the nitrogen to Tutankhamen. We had to disconnect all that, so we had to get the Glasbau Hahn people to come and do that. Then we had to move the mummy to a safe place, while we put in new flooring. So we had to get a mummy specialist from Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts, Mimi Leveque, to design a special temporary mummy case. She came, and then we had to get the Glasbau Hahn people to come at the same time, to lift the case, the glass case, move it out. The thing weighs about 800 pounds.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: We don’t know how we’re going to do this. But the Egyptian workmen are absolutely amazing. They work in a team, and they chant and they just lift. They chant and move this thing out. It’s so heavy! They said, “No problem, no problem,” and it was no problem.

Holmes: Oh, wow.
Agnew: Yeah. We were all standing there like, one slip and this is thousands of dollars and people crushed. But anyway, it worked out well. So we moved the mummy out into a safe place, into this temporary case, which had to have its own environmental controls now—silica gel and charcoal as an absorbent for any pollutants, and so on—and then have it moved back in again at the end of the month. All of this between the first of October and the thirty-first of October, 2015. On the first of November, I had the pleasure of seeing the first visitors go into the tomb. They were so overjoyed.

Holmes: Well, and this seems to be—.

Agnew: Now we have the wall paintings conservation to complete.

Holmes: That’s still not finished, yeah.

Agnew: No, it’s not finished yet.

Holmes: But I wanted to touch on that retrofitting, what seems to be, redoing the flooring and the ramps for Tut’s tomb. This is, again, another step, another advancement within site management, of acknowledging there’s going to be mass tourism at this tomb.

Agnew: Yes.

Holmes: So therefore, what do we do? That seems like yourself, as well as the Getty, is really advancing, again, site management to a new level.

Agnew: Yeah, it’s site protection, as well as management, because it’s not just the flooring and the ramps; it’s LED lighting, and above all, it’s a better ventilation system. So we put in a new ventilation system, which is active filtered supply and extraction at the same time. You have to balance supply, filtered air supply, and dusty environment, because the walls of the tomb are not flat like these walls; they’re actually rippled. So there are projections and there’re recesses. That super-fine desert dust, fine marl clay particles at the submicron level, settles. There’s a gray film on the walls that has to be removed. Some of it’s quite embedded. So one way, again, is to mitigate that through an air supply system that’s filtered. You’ll never solve the problem completely. Another way, which we put in, was an isolating door at the top of the staircase going down. People said, “Well, why are you doing that? We have security.” I said, “It’s not security. You have to realize that the door is going to isolate the tomb at night. At the moment, you have the tomb opened eight hours a day to visitors. But in fact, from the point of view of the wall paintings, it’s open twenty-four hours a day. Eight hours of the day, and then at night. You think it’s closed. It’s secure. Nobody can get in there. Except for
the environment. You have a windstorm in the night and the dust is circulating twenty-four hours a day. You really have to limit the intrusion of dust.” So we did that. So that’s all done, and now we are in the process of continuing with the wall paintings conservation.

Holmes: With the wall paintings. Now, what are the issues that you’re confronting with the wall paintings? Are they similar to Nefertari’s, with salt?

02:01:41:04 Agnew: No, there’s no salt there. It’s in better condition.

Holmes: Just degradation over time.

02:01:41:08 Agnew: Some of the pigments, like the charcoal pigment in the beetles—. The scarab beetles are black. Coarse-ground charcoal. The paint’s lifting. So it’s meticulous work. The wall paintings conservators under Lois Wong will be doing that. They’re doing that now. We’ll be there in November, next February-March, two campaigns, and finish the whole project, hopefully, by the end of next year. And then publish it. We’re planning a book, several books; a monograph on the work, and a popular book on the work, to match the Nefertari popular book. So that’ll be the outcomes of the project.

Holmes: Well, that would also seem to be capping close to three decades of work in Egypt by the Getty.

02:01:42:00 Agnew: Yeah, yeah. Our work there is intermittent, of course. Many of the archeological missions go there year in, year out, and they go for a six-month season. University of Chicago has been there for perhaps a hundred years.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

02:01:42:17 Agnew: Chicago House.

Holmes: Sure.

02:01:42:19 Agnew: Metropolitan Museum was working in the thirties, but I don’t know the history of the various missions. One of the big problems in Tut’s tomb is the mystery of the brown spots. The painted part of the tomb is heavily spotted with brown spots. Some of them about the size of, oh, I guess a nickel. There’s been a lot discussion about what caused them. Some people have said—and Carter believed this and we believe it—it’s microbiological. Fine. They’re round and they look like microbiological spots. Others have said, vehemently, that it’s bat excrement and the tomb must’ve been open at some point, to bats, prior to being used. We don’t believe that. So we’ve studied
them. A lot of effort has gone into the brown spots. But here’s the thing. There’re no other tombs that we can find in Egypt with brown spots like that.

Holmes: With brown spots.

02:01:43:32

Agnew: So the current thinking is this: the tomb was certainly sealed with all the grave goods, including unguents and oils and organic material, wood, even flowers, and so on, which were found when it was opened, and so on—wood—and sealed. And humidity from those materials engendered the growth of fungal spots on the walls, which then came to a halt, when the humidity evaporated and dryness set in. However, from time to time, there’ve been panics. The brown spots are growing. So about twenty years ago, the latest brown spot panic struck. Egyptian microbiologists and conservators were sent down posthaste, to look at the brown spots, and started a program of treatment, injecting the brown spots with biocides of various kinds. The record’s not very good, about what was done. In fact, it’s very hard to get a coherent record of what was done. But you can see the injection holes. We know, we can see that samples were taken extensively. But the question was never answered, as to whether the spots were growing. We acquired photographs from Carter’s time and the photographs from the Metropolitan Museum, who had photographed the tomb in the 1930s, and we printed them to the size of the wall paintings. We held them up next to the same area and we looked, spot by spot. Guess what? There was no change.

Holmes: No change at all?

02:01:45:35

Agnew: No new spots, no growth, nothing. It’s kind of sad, isn’t it? All this drama, all this drama about the spots growing.

Holmes: Well, it seems to be that—.

02:01:45:47

Agnew: But is the lesson learned, is the point. That is the point, is the lesson learned?

Holmes: Yeah. I wanted to talk about lessons from Egypt before we end our session. This was one of the first international partnerships GCI undertook.

02:01:46:04

Agnew: Yes, with Nefertari.

Holmes: A relationship and partnership, which is a theme that we’ll explore in our conversations, because you’ve been very much at the center of a lot of those, as GCI has, as well been at the forefront of fostering those around the conservation of heritage sites. What lessons did you take away moving forward, that you think both the Getty, as well as others in the conservation
community, in doing this type of conservation of heritage work internationally, could learn from those partnerships with Egypt?

Agnew: With Egypt, I think that the lessons are universal ones; they’re not peculiar to Egypt alone. I think the lessons are better exemplified in the China instances, but as a counterbalance to Egypt. Egypt, although it’s a delightful place to work and the Egyptians are just personally, extremely pleasant, intelligent and so on, I think their system is pretty broken, unfortunately, in terms of management of the heritage. So there’s that to it, and that creates the difficulty. I would wish for future relations to be able to negotiate better collaborative commitments, both sides upfront, clearly understood. Part of the problem is not only in Egypt, but it’s everywhere except China, that I’ve seen, is that ministers change, heads of antiquity change, senior people change. And I don’t mean just retire and get old and retire; I mean they change as a result of political changes. So you are suddenly confronted with an entirely new person to have to deal with. This is not conducive to a sustained relationship at the personal level, at the professional level. It just doesn’t work well.

Holmes: And you’ve mentioned before the very importance of that, of building trust and of fostering a long-term relationship at a worksite.

Agnew: Sure. The Getty Conservation Institute’s relationship in Egypt and reputation in Egypt is good, very good. We’re renowned in Egypt for doing the Nefertari project. There’ve been criticisms sometimes and so on, but by and large, with the Antiquities organization, we’re gold standard. And rightly so, too, I think. So we could negotiate from that position of strength, I would hope. But if the leadership’s changing, the viability of a negotiated agreement, if it’s not negated, at least it is weakened. And if it’s often weakened, it’s as good as negated. So it’s not a satisfactory thing, in my view. I don’t have an answer to that. I wish I had. Other than to secure a contractual relationship. But it’s better to have a written understanding that is not a cast iron kind of contract, because our contracts in the past have tended to say things like, in the event of disagreement between the partners, the disagreement will be resolved according to the rules of the State of California, or according to arbitration in Switzerland or something. All of which is inimical to a sense of good trust. They’re like, wait a minute, we own this stuff. We’re Egypt. We’re a sovereign state. We don’t want you to be ruling in California in these things. So that kind of language in a contract is more for a business contract, and less for a cultural heritage collaborative contract. We need a sensitive tool. A sensitive instrument that is a serious tool, in terms of contractual undertakings, commitments, ability for them to provide staff for us, support, and meaningfully and not just a token.

Holmes: Sure, sure. A partnership and a relationship, right? A vested stake by both sides.
Yeah. But the old saying is—. Whatever it is. I’m not sure it’s entirely appropriate, but let’s just try it. Good fences make good neighbors, in the sense that a good relationship can flourish when you have boundaries and you know what those boundaries are, and we’ve agreed on them; and they’re not hostile boundaries, they’re boundaries to serve the relationship, but they’re not in a sense of punitive contractual undertakings.

I also think, too, in reflecting on this—and I wanted to get your insight before we take a break for today—of a lot of the success that also came out of Egypt. In looking at a success of not just, say, the conservation of Nefertari’s tomb, but how that was expanded to address the entire Valley of the Queens. How that also addressed site management, of trying to train and get to the acknowledgment of site management, of maybe trying to limit tourism. Or as you also mentioned in one of our conversations, the requirement of a conservationist to accompany archeologists. As you mentioned, archeologists, for over a century, have been exploring—some good, some bad—in Egypt. There’s been pros and cons of that now, that require that a conservationist accompany them in those projects.

Yeah, sure.

Could you talk a little bit on the success of that partnership and that work in Egypt by the Getty, as well?

Well, I’m not sure you can ascribe to the Getty Conservation Institute, a change in the requirements for conservators to be part of archeological undertakings. I think that is true, to some extent; but it is not a direct consequence of our work entirely. We’ve been contributory to that, and we’ve always pressed for it, everywhere we’ve worked and we’ve published, that this is an essential requirement. So that has very much been part of our approach, and we’ve been successful in that.

But also of being able to navigate, maybe on your personal and professional level, but also the Getty’s role, as well, as your colleagues, of fostering and taking on these big international projects. As we’ve mentioned, there’s a lot of entities to navigate. You have a language barrier, a cultural barrier. You’re dealing with shifting political regimes, at times. You have international organizations like UNESCO and others that are involved. What strategies did you take away from this?

Yeah, some are greater. Let’s look again at the Queens Valley project. So we looked at it holistically, not only the hundred tombs, not only the issues of flooding that have to be addressed. That’s a sine qua non. You’ve got to do that, or else everything else is at risk. It’s like building a palace without
seismic reinforcement, in California. So that had to be done. All right. All of the engineering, all of the planning, all of the intervention, all of the presentation and so on, the site management—all of those kinds of things were conceived of bit by bit. The bats, the interpretation, the lighting, the training of the conservators. Seven conservators, we trained, seven site managers, integrating them in our teams, bringing them here, sending them to conferences. This was the whole enchilada? It was the whole thing.

Holmes:  
Sure.

Agnew:

But this didn’t address the bigger agenda of coordination within the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the other missions. So we had the bright idea, we will organize an annual coordination meeting of West Bank or Luxor area missions. Top missions. Not everybody, but, with the presence of the SCA. So every year, we did. We did the coordination meetings, for a couple of days, in which Christian Leblanc came from the French mission, Hourig Souruzian, people from Chicago House came. I forget who all else. And the head of antiquities from Cairo came, and the local head of antiquities. So we would have twenty or twenty-five people, hosted either in one of the hotels on the East Bank, or Chicago House, on the East Bank, hosted us a number of times. We’d talk through the issues. We’d talk about the common issues. We’d talk about the planning on the West Bank, where the roads might go and so on. We did this every year, organized it. Everybody said, it’s a great success, it’s wonderful, terrific. After five years, I think it was, I said, “Fine. Now it is time for the Supreme Council of Antiquities to start organizing these meetings because after all, they should be the coordinating body. We’ve initiated it. we’ll help, we’ll do that, but you guys have to organize it.” They said, “Uh,” they said, “uh,” they said, “yes,” and the next year, nothing happened. Although right up until the last moment, I was calling Sabri Abdel Aziz. “Sabri, what’s happening?” He’s number two in Egypt, in the Supreme Council. A long story, but nothing happened. Nothing happened. At which point, I just said, “This doesn’t work.”

Now, maybe one just keeps going and going and going and going. But now we’re not going anywhere with the Queens Valley project, and we’re wrapping up in Tutankhamen and so on. I don’t know what the future holds there. But that was the political-professional agenda at the highest level, having dealt with all of the technical concepts and planning and training and work with the Egyptian staff at the ground level, on the ground, as you like. But then trying to reach out to our professional colleagues internationally, and the Egyptians, and talk about bigger issues. And I must say, all of the missions were very keen to talk, and so was the Supreme Council of Antiquities personnel. But in the end, they just didn’t get it together. I’m not quite sure why. I don’t know why. Was it a lack of momentum? Was it an ineptitude? Was it a sense that they really didn’t want to do this because they might be exposing themselves to some sort of critique about taking initiative that would
not be justifiable in the eyes of the minister or somebody? I would say this. It’s not the most trusting of environments in Egypt, at the political-professional level within government. Just isn’t. I’ve seen this elsewhere, too. I think that’s an endemic problem that is difficult to overcome. If you talk to the other mission leaders, as well, and the archeologists, they’ll say that quite candidly.

Holmes: Well, next session I’d like to continue talking about the lessons of these partnerships, as we move to China. So I think this is a good place to stop for today. Thank you, Neville.
Holmes: This is Todd Holmes, with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, and I have the pleasure again to sit down this morning with Neville Agnew, for the Getty Oral History Project. Today is Friday, July 29, 2016. We’re here at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles. Neville, thanks again, and welcome. This is our third session, and we’re going to have our last two sessions today. It’s been a wonderful week here at the Getty. I want to pick up where we left off. In our last session, we were talking about Egypt and many of the projects that you undertook and led along with your colleagues here at GCI. And these projects in Egypt kicked off almost immediately when you started here at GCI, around 1988. At that same time that we have these massive projects happening throughout the 1990s and after there in Egypt, there’s also this parallel track of another partnership and massive projects also underway simultaneously, with China. Can you talk about the beginning of that partnership and that work?

Agnew: Sure, Todd. When I came at the beginning of 1988, I’d already been here in 1986-87 for three months. Then I came back, as I think I mentioned earlier, as a permanent staff member in the science department. But very quickly, because of my experience in Australia, in field work and field sites and a variety of work out in the urban environment, so to speak, I got involved in projects in Egypt and then in China. The Nefertari project, the conservation of the tomb of Queen Nefertari, the favorite wife of Rameses II, the great pharaoh, on the West Bank at Luxor, was already underway when I joined. It had been started in 1986, by our very dynamic director at that time, Luis Monreal. He catapulted the institute into the international arena, through really operating on multiple fronts—a science department; field projects, which was called special projects then; a documentation program, with publications and a newsletter; and a training program. So all of this was happening simultaneously. It was a hotbed of activity and excitement and dynamism. It was a very, very exciting time. So the Nefertari project was underway. I was not really involved in it at the beginning at all. Later on I became involved, when I took over field projects, or special projects, as they were called then.

Holmes: What year was that?

Agnew: That would have been in 1990, maybe.

Holmes: Okay, yeah. Because I know you’ve had multiple titles.

Agnew: I’ve had many jobs. Yeah. But 1988, I was hired as deputy director of the scientific program, under Frank Preusser. The first six months or so were quite challenging for me, coming from Australia, because this was an entirely new ballgame, an entirely new arena, with money, international connections, and a
great deal going on. So I had to come up to speed. I sometimes felt I didn’t really get up to speed, but maybe I did. I didn’t do anything in Egypt, I think, until 1989. Even then, I was still not in charge of the project. I was just readying myself, through exposure to what was happening in the tomb of Nefertari. But I’ll get to Egypt in a moment. But late 1988, the next big project was being initiated by Luis Monreal, who had connections with UNESCO and was approached by the UNESCO representative in Beijing, Leo Teller, to provide some assistance to China, which had, only a year or two prior to that, joined the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. So it signed up for the World Heritage Convention, and in the first tranche of sites nominated by China for World Heritage status, the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang was one. The others were, of course, the Great Wall, predictably; the Palace Museum, that is the Forbidden City, in Beijing; the Xi’an Terracotta Warriors; and the Holy Mountain, Tian Shan, in Shandong Province. So these, put Mogao up at the upper level of important sites, among the six most important sites in China. So Luis made a preliminary trip to China. He also took with him a consultant at that time, who subsequently became the director, Miguel Angel Corzo, who was a consultant, but really was handling, and did handle subsequently, the field projects. Corzo and Luis Monreal came back, and they talked to me and they talked to the director of the science program, Frank Preusser. They packed us off to China, to take a look and see what we might think about doing in China. So around September of 1987 Frank and I went to China, and we visited two sites, essentially. We visited the Yungang Grottoes near Datong, which is now also a World Heritage Site. It’s also a Buddhist site. It’s very important because it’s fifth-century, and monumental carved Buddhas in grottoes and so on. Then we went much further to the west, to the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang. Coming back, we somewhat irrationally, I think, agreed to work on both sites. So for five years, we did. It fell to me, really, to lead that initiative and to work on both sites.

Holmes: Now, in developing that partnership and taking a lead on that, had you ever worked in China before?

03-00:07:46
Agnew: Never. No, never.

Holmes: No? So there was a very significant cultural and language adjustment.

03-00:07:51
Agnew: It was amazing, yes, I must say. Nor did I imagine at that time, by the greatest stretch of imagination—I’d never even thought about it—that twenty-eight years or so years later, I would still be working at least at one of the same sites.

Holmes: For almost three decades, which is a centerpiece of display here, right now.
Agnew: Yeah, yeah. It’s extraordinary. But no, I had no exposure to China, really. I didn’t know a thing about China, and tried to learn very quickly, some of the history and the culture and so on. We always worked with translators there and always had a facilitator. We had good connections through UNESCO, right to the highest levels of China, so it was not as though we were negotiating and setting up projects with a local authority. Others have tried that, and in many instances in China, it hasn’t worked very well. There’s a saying in China that goes something like, “the mountain is high and the emperor’s far away.” Local opportunities rule and you can get away with a lot of things. So there’s been some malfeasance in some instances. But we had the blessing, the imprimatur, if you like, of central authority, with which we negotiated the best deal ever. Which was that when we work in China, the Chinese government will pay for our accommodation, our meals, and our transportation in China. We will pay for our getting there, we will pay for our consultants, and so on. And that has prevailed throughout all these years.

Holmes: As we were discussing last session, which I know we want to discuss here later today in further depth, is the fact that the foundation of a good partnership and relationship is both sides having a buy-in.

03-00:10:00
Agnew: Yeah. They both have a buy-in, and we got that buy-in. It did not work very well at Yungang, because I think there, the local authority was still in the mindset of the old regime, pre-Deng Xiaoping’s opening to the West, suspicious and closed-minded. In fairness, the director of the site was a smart and cultured man, in many ways; but we didn’t strike an empathetic relationship there. Yungang, near Datong, was probably the pollution capital of the world. Coal mining, heavy industry, locomotive manufacturing. It was difficult to work there. But we persisted for five years, and then said, “Enough.” Traveling by train from Beijing, night train, coal trains to Datong, and then going back, and then flying, sometimes taking two days to get from Beijing to Dunhuang, was exhausting.

Holmes: Oh, yeah.

03-00:11:11
Agnew: It was a hard thing. So we cut down to one site, the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang, and we’ve worked there ever since.

Holmes: I’d like to take both those sites in a little more detail. Let’s start with Mogao Grotto site. Can you tell us a little bit about the site and the overall project? There’s almost 500 caves and temples in there.

03-00:11:37
Agnew: Well, they’re called cave temples or grottoes, and they are just that. They’re Buddhist cave temples. They’re all hand-excavated into a natural cliff face. So that they’re not natural caves, they’re excavated caves. They’re shaped
internally like a temple would be. Or a tent, if you want to think of it that way. There’s basically a main chamber, which is square, and there’s a truncated pyramidal roof or ceiling, and there’s an ante chamber, an entrance to the outside. There are nearly 500 decorated ones. The decoration is wall paintings on dried mud, stuck to the excavated rock, which is a soft conglomerate rock; and sculpture, which is modeled in clay, on a kind of armature of sticks and reeds, to bulk the sculpture. They date from about the fourth century to the fourteenth. So, a thousand years of this amazing art. I said nearly 500 decorated caves. There’s still several hundred others that are undecorated at the same site, the northern end of the site, which are thought to have been habitation, very small habitation and/or meditation grottoes. So it’s just a huge site.

Holmes: And this site, it’s along the old Silk Road, right?

03-00:13:10 Agnew: Yes, yes.

Holmes: It’s considered kind of a confluences of the cultures there.

03-00:13:13 Agnew: Sure. Yeah. In the Han Dynasty, it was founded, Dunhuang, in 111 BCE. It was founded as a military garrison, to protect the northwest frontier and to protect trade going along the Silk Road. The Chinese, being very bureaucratic, had customs stations outside of Dunhuang, called the Jade Gate and the Yang Gate, where entering and exiting caravans, shall we say—or traders or monks or whatever—were examined. Details of their mission, their purpose, the number of people, the goods they were carrying were all recorded. So the military garrison was established to protect the frontier; but it also provided the security for trade to flourish. Ultimately, of course, around the third, fourth century, when Buddhism permeated along the Silk Road, out of India into China, it came through Dunhuang. So Dunhuang was important militarily; it was important as an oasis town on the frontier. Naturally, when Buddhism arrived there, it could flourish under those circumstances. So over a thousand years, it just grew to be this tremendously big and important cave temple complex. But after the thousand years, it was essentially abandoned, when the Ming closed the Silk Road. So it fell into disrepair, abandonment, until about the mid-eighteenth century.

Holmes: Oh, wow. So there was numerous phases in this project of conservation. As you would say, you started just for a five-year period, and then would go back. Can you talk a little bit about the stages and the challenges and various techniques? Because it had to do with restoring the temples or the caves themselves, the wall paintings.

03-00:15:31 Agnew: We don’t say “restore.”
Holmes: Oh, that’s right, we conserve. Conserving, preserving, right?

Agnew: Yeah, we conserve to preserve.

Holmes: That’s right. Well, and which is a good point to again stress. There’s a difference with restoration, that some say, if we look in Europe.

Agnew: Right, yes, yes. Well, many buildings are restored everywhere, we know that, if they’re inhabited. We’re not averse to that. But an archeological site of great antiquity like the Mogao Grottoes, you don’t restore it. Although restoration has been done in the past there, a hundred years ago. Not by Europeans, but by local people.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: When we first arrived at Dunhuang, the initial discussions with site authorities were tentative, about what we could do there. They were cautious, I would say. They’d had no experience with Americans previously, or Europeans much, other than the bad experience with Europeans. They say looting, but we say it wasn’t really looting. Certainly, the loss of the documents from the famous library cave at Dunhuang, Cave 17, which were taken to London, Paris and St. Petersburg, and also elsewhere. So the experience with Europeans had not been good. These priceless documents, including the first printed book, the Diamond Sutra, dated exactly to 868 Current Era. So these treasures were lost. Even today, it is a sore point in China that this loss occurred. We were regarded with some caution. But nonetheless, we were made welcome, and we started to discuss what was important. The initial phase involved looking at threats and issues that afflicted the whole site. One of the first was control of windblown sand. To the west of the site, there’re huge dunes, sand dunes, oh, hundreds of feet high. They supply sand that is blown across the plain, on the plateau above the cave temples. Then it flows over the edge of the cliff and down, and is dumped at the base of the cliff, and has historically clogged the entrances to the caves. It preserved some; but it also damaged a great many, because whenever the river in front flooded or it rained, that wet pile of sand clogged the entranceway, conducted moisture in, and caused utter loss of the mud-based wall paintings. But on the other hand, it isolated the caves, too, by clogging the entrances to some. So it was a mixed blessing. The flow of sand over the top certainly abraded the cliff top—it’s very soft conglomerate rock—to the extent that some of the ceilings of the upper-tier caves—and there can be two, three levels of caves, one above the other—that abraded and collapsed, so sand would come in, and water. So there were just problems of controlling sand, of stabilizing the cliff.

We did crack measurements in the cliff, to see if cracks were opening. We did environmental monitoring, to measure the wind direction, speed, intensity,
solar radiation. Our first environmental monitoring station ever was erected on top of a cliff to provide that kind of information. That happened in 1989, in the first year we were there. With that, we gained a lot of credit with the Chinese. Of course, it’s known that in June 4, 1989, a certain event occurred in Tiananmen Square. That led to a huge backlash in the United States and internationally, and appropriately so. To the extent that there was pressure on us to perhaps retract from our work in China. There was a lot of discussion. In the end, we decided that perhaps the best thing to do would be just to discretely let our Chinese colleagues know that things were on hold, and we would be back.

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In truth, what happened was that we went back to China in September, and we put up the environmental weather station. We just were doing a little bit of under-the-radar work in China, without any promotion. I was there on June 2nd, and I saw Tiananmen Square and I left. By June 4, it had all erupted. Things were coming to a boil on Tiananmen Square. I had no idea what was going on. Whenever I asked them, they said, “Oh, there’s a memorial.” Our Chinese colleagues didn’t say it was a protest, they said it was a sort of memorial for one of the Chinese leaders who’d died recently. So we only got the truth later on; we were back here and looking at CNN. Leo Teller, who started us in China, was in his diplomatic quarters above Chang’an Avenue, and he was on the telephone to us. We’re all gathered in the Marina where our office was at the time, and Leo was saying, “Well, now I can see tanks coming down the road.” Then suddenly CNN went off the air. So there was a lot of excitement about events unfolding there. That’s a side story. What I’m really saying is, because we didn’t jump ship, we didn’t abandon our Chinese commitment, when we went back this gave us credit. Of course, the argument I promoted, and others here, was that we’re not into the politics of this. We’re really trying to help in saving what is a World Heritage Site, and let’s keep our focus on that. It gave us great credit with our Chinese colleagues, that we hadn’t negated our commitment.

Holmes: Well, that’s a good basis for relationships. Then also, it highlights the complex terrain that GCI, in your international work, has to navigate at times.

Agnew: Sure, sure. Yeah. Anyway, I digressed into that story about Tiananmen Square a little bit. But our first five years or so at the Mogao Grottoes and at Yungang were really concerned with site-wide issues.

Holmes: Which is a very big component of your holistic type of conservation.

Agnew: Well, yeah. One has to look at the whole scene first, and come down from massive interventions like windblown sand, like flooding or geological instability and so on. So we actually had geotechnical engineers come, including Bob Englekirk, who was the structural engineer here for the Getty
Center. We paid for his travel and he charged no fees. He did it as a gratis consultancy, to advise on the geological stability of the cliff face. Because it delaminates. The cliff peels away in slabs, so there’s huge cracks that transect the cave temples that have cut through the cracks. So it’s a seismic zone, too.

Holmes: That’s right.

Agnew: Collapse of cliff face and caves has occurred historically. Not in recent times, but historically.

Holmes: Maybe describe again, to addressing the sand. Were there discussions of, maybe we need to put up doors on the caves?

Agnew: Oh, that had actually happened in the sixties, security doors.

Holmes: Oh, okay.

Agnew: That was done by the Chinese themselves, by the Dunhuang Academy. They’d also built a concrete façade against the cliff face, as a sort of buttress—not connected to the cliff face, but as a buttress holding it back—which allowed them to put in security doors. Because the concerns about loss of the cultural heritage, whether it’s cutting out paintings, wall paintings, or stealing little statues, was very, very much in the forefront of thinking, in Dunhuang, because so much had been lost already. As late as 1935, they’d intercepted a Western journalist, whose name was Parsons. He was no parson, I might say it seems, because he was trying to steal a little bodhisattva statue. He was taken away under close escort, according to the archive in Gansu Province. So that was the last recorded effort. But even when we were working there, some local Chinese got into one of the caves and stole a section of wall painting, to try and sell. I think they had a bad ending.

Holmes: Oh, yeah?

Agnew: So the security doors were in place, the cliff façade had been built. All of that had been undertaken by the first two directors of the site. Chang Shuhong, who came in 1944, an artist himself, who established the practice of copying the wall paintings as an act of study, as an act of documentation of the condition, and also to create moveable replicas that could be shown elsewhere.

Holmes: Is that what’s being shown here at the Getty right now?

Agnew: Yeah. Yeah. That tradition has been continued since 1944.
Holmes: Oh, wow.

03-00:26:17

Agnew: Some of the replicas have traveled widely—Japan and Hong Kong and Taiwan, even, and Singapore, Beijing, of course, and so forth. So a lot had been done already when we arrived, but there were intractable problems. One was the geological stability. Was the cliff face opening? Were those cracks opening in the rock or not? The sand. Determining what the environment was—wind direction, speed, humidity and so on. So collecting basic environmental data, scientific investigation of color change in the wall paintings. Because there are two glories of the Mogao Grottoes. One is the art within the caves—the wall paintings and the sculpture, but principally the wall paintings. The sculptures are focused of Buddhist devotion and it’s very important. But the real value of the wall paintings, apart from the artistic merit—and it’s phenomenal, as you’ve seen in some of these replica caves that we have here now in the current exhibition—is the information it contains. Because it is a window into Medieval China—the costume, the ways of life, agriculture, technology—multiple areas—and music. Very important, the depictions of musical instruments, some of which no longer exist. The wall paintings, I’m told—I’ve never counted them—depict forty different kinds of musical instruments. So it’s a wealth of information. And the other value of the Mogao Grottoes is those documents that were taken from the Library Cave in the early part of the twentieth century, and now are mainly in Europe. That’s what really comprises the singular significance of the Mogao Grottoes.

Holmes: Oh, that’s interesting.

03-00:28:26

Agnew: So five years, basically. Then we had an international Silk Road conference at the Mogao Grottoes, in which we presented our work and others presented theirs. The Japanese have been working at Mogao. They actually preceded us at Mogao by maybe a year or so. This was Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Property. They never really did anything on the scale that we worked at Mogao. They were more modest in their initiatives. They did raise a lot of money for the construction of an exhibition hall on the site. It’s really rather a nice exhibition hall. It’s been a great asset to the Dunhuang Academy. We tried to work collaboratively with our Japanese colleagues, and we did manage to have one meeting, in which the Dunhuang Academy was there, our Japanese colleagues, and ourselves, to talk about better coordination. But whilst not wishing to be negative, it didn’t seem to work somehow. I’m not sure why, even to this day. There was just not a fusion of the three parties, for the common interest of the Dunhuang Academy and the grottoes.

Holmes: Were there other collaborators in the various phases of the conservation effort?
Agnew: Well, I don’t think so, other than till we brought in others like the Australian Heritage Commission, the Courtauld Institute of Art, and so on.

Holmes: Okay. The wall paintings themselves, which you were mentioning, are some of the most valuable aspects of this ancient site, this cultural site, can you talk a little bit about the efforts of conservation? The damage and really the task and effort that laid before you.

Agnew: Yeah. The wall paintings are really, all said from an informational and artistic point of view, the great asset and glory of the site, so conserving them is most important. The damage that they’ve undergone has been enormous, from all sorts of causes—principally moisture, water either seeping in or leaking in, and mobilizing salt out of the rock, which is terribly destructive to the wall paintings. But also there’s been physical damage and so on. So you’ve got to remember that for several hundred years, the site was abandoned.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: The monks and custodians of the site, the people who made the art, moved away. It was just an abandoned site. So great damage occurred. Nonetheless, enormous amounts of extraordinary wall paintings still exist. And it’s astonishing to think how thin and fragile those wall paintings are, just on dried mud stuck to a rock wall. It’s attacked both from the outside—the atmosphere and light and humidity; and attacked from behind by salt; and then very often damaged by physical attrition—scratching, sometimes deliberate. Oh, in 1922, when the Russians were fleeing the Bolsheviks, White Russians, they inhabited the caves over a winter, and many of the caves were blackened by the fires they lit to keep warm. Huge amounts of damage. So there’re plenty of challenges at the site. Enormous numbers of challenges to the site, there’s no doubt of that.

Holmes: In the Nefertari case, you had collaborators. Expert conservators for the paintings came from Rome. Now, the GCI and your team, did you bring in other paint experts to work on these and to not restore, but to preserve and conserve the paintings?

Agnew: Yeah. Yes, we did. We did not have in-house, in 1986, at the beginning of the Nefertari project, or for quite a long time, actually, the in house expertise in wall paintings conservation. We didn’t have that. That came when we really started to do the wall paintings conservation at the Mogao Grottoes, specifically in Cave 85, when we were hiring wall paintings conservators. One is at least still with us. Not since that time, but there’ve always been wall paintings conservators on our staff, since we started working in Mogao. But in Nefertari’s tomb, the wall painting conservation was done by two famous
Italian conservators, a husband and wife team, Laura and Paolo Mora. They were a delightful couple.

Holmes: That’s right, that’s right.

Agnew: Revered in the annals of wall paintings conservation.

Holmes: Yeah, you mentioned that.

Agnew: They led the project that we had there.

Holmes: So by the time you took on the project, or the project developed to that stage in China, then the GCI had its own team of paint experts and conservators.

Agnew: Right. You’ve got to remember that we started in China in 1989, at the beginning of 1989, officially, with the signing of an agreement. Then the first five years or so, it was all about the site writ large. Sand control and fences to control moving sand, vegetation fence as a supplement, with drip irrigation, to control the fencing, rock stability scientific studies—all of that stuff—and training in scientific method, of some of the staff. Then after the first Silk Road conference, we had an official evaluation of the project, by an evaluator who came from Washington, D.C. His name was Thomas Cook. Oh, I’m sure it was Thomas Cook, despite the fact that Thomas Cook is also a famous travel man. But Tom Cook. Tom Cook, I said to him, “Tom, you don’t know anything about China.” He said, “I don’t have to know anything about China. I’m an evaluator; I evaluate.” That’s about the only conversation I had with Tom Cook, because he shunned me like a leper. He thought I was going to jeopardize the evaluation and talk it up. I wasn’t interested. But we nominated five people from China and five outside experts, actually from Europe and other places. The team interviewed people here, and then—it was very expensive, I might add—went to China and went to the site and interviewed people, and then wrote a report. The whole thing took three months and took an awful lot of money. The result was no surprise to me. It was, yes, you could’ve done this a little better and that, and da-da-da. Small things. But overall, very positive. So on that basis, we decided to continue working in China. The collaboration was good, the work was good, it was prestigious, we had a successful international conference. All the signals were positive. So we went forward again. However, at that point, we then started working on wall paintings conservation, because this was clearly the next big need there.

Holmes: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Agnew: Clearly the next big need, because they didn’t really have a good handle on conserving the wall paintings, I must say.
Holmes: Well, and there was a lot of intricacies and a lot of obstacles in that endeavor of conserving the wall paintings, right? There was a lot of damage.

Agnew: Oh, sure.

Holmes: Light exposure. Can you talk a little bit about that kind of damage that you faced?

Agnew: We didn’t have a really good handle on the causes of damage. Some are manifest. You’ve got soot from Russians; that’s it. You have flooding at the base; that’s it. So those kinds of things are evident. But the relationship between, for example, salt and how it gets to the surface was not understood. How it exactly causes deterioration is not understood. The pigments were identified. There’s no problem about that. In fact, the Dunhuang Academy had done a lot of pigment work. They knew that. The fading of the pigments was not that well understood. Why had some changed? Some of the lead-based pigments go black over time. So that wasn’t very well understood. So all of those things were investigated, at one level or another. Color monitoring for stability of the pigments. Well, the question was, had the pigments changed to completion? Or is there still some potential for the color change of the pigments in the wall paintings and the sculpture to continue? Well, the answer is, as far as we can see, that they have gone about as far as they can go, in terms of blackening of lead-based pigments, fading, and other forms of color damage, and so on. Later on, we discovered, for example, that some organic colorants from plants and insects had been used over the pigments, as a kind of wash, to provide a greater subtlety and depth to the appearance of the wall paintings. That in turn was an enormously difficult technical problem, and it’s still not entirely solved. But we did mount a project to investigate organic colorants, because the pigments are otherwise inorganic, natural minerals. We also had to find out what the binding media was. So a lot of research, a lot of investigation.

Then the biggest threat to the site is an invisible one. It is the detachment between the rock wall and the clay-based painting. You know it’s detached because very often if you look up, especially at the ceiling, you can see areas where the painting has fallen away, under gravitational load. If you go and tap the wall paintings, you can hear it’s hollow. So whether it’s mediated by salt migration from behind, which it is to some extent, we think—. But probably it’s ancient and may well have been a separation between the fresh mud plaster put onto the rock at the time the cave was being made. As it dried, it contracted and drew away from the rock. Well, this is a seismic zone. If you look at the satellite image of the area, you can see that the Sanwei Mountains are actually defined by—they can be seen from space—enormous faults. That’s an up thrust metamorphic rock of great antiquity. So it’s very active, tectonically, seismically. There’s not a good record of earthquakes in the
region, but they are known. And for sure, every earthquake is going to bring
down some of the painted walls. So it’s a disaster waiting to happen. For Cave
85, which we chose as the model cave to develop a methodology in order to
address some of these problems, as many as we could, salt was a big problem.
Detachment of the wall painting from the rock was a big problem. We
addressed those, particularly.

Holmes: In talking with some of your colleagues, they mentioned that using the fence
to hold back the sand was one of the many examples of the lateral thinking
that you display in many of the projects that you work on, but that really also
embody—perhaps through you, but others—of the Getty’s kind of work. Just
a more holistic kind of thinking, we need to take care of the whole site, not
just say one cave or one aspect of the site. The Valley of the Queens was a
good example of that, of the projects you guys drew up. But this also came to
include tourism, in the larger plan of, how do we sustainably maintain this
site? Can you talk a little bit about that in regard to the caves in China?

Agnew: Well, today, Chinese tourism is the biggest industry in the world, tourist
industry, and one of the biggest industries. Deng Xiaoping, when he opened
up the country, identified tourism as a pillar industry. A pillar industry. It’s
very interesting. It’s amazing, when you think about it. They’re perceptive
people. Deng Xiaoping, sure, he was thinking about development and all of
these sorts of things, but tourism? Who would’ve thought that? Well, they’d
just come out of the Cultural Revolution, so they knew that the heritage had
been affected, sometimes destroyed. But Dunhuang wasn’t really affected, as
far as I know. But still. Initially tourism, in the late eighties, early nineties,
was small, small. But as the economy in China grew, so did tourism. To the
extent now that the Forbidden City, a few years ago, in the October
holidays—which are the national week holidays called the Golden Week—
had 182,000 people in that space in one day. This is an impossible number of
people to handle. It’s just shoulder-to-shoulder. Some photographs I’ve seen
of other sites in China are equally alarming and startling. The Longmen
Grottoes, for example, another Buddhist site, I have seen a photograph there
in which you really wouldn’t have been able to insert another person into the
solid phalanx, mass of people.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew: So I said, “How did this happen at Longmen?” They said, “Well, yeah, it was
October Golden Week, and for some reason, it was declared that this would be
a day in which there would be no charge for the entrance ticket.” In other
words, it’s free. Well, the visitors came in masses. Now Dunhuang and the
Mogao Grottoes, being remote, have never had quite that number or that
pressure. But it’s grown and grown, and now there’s over a million visitors a
year and it shows no sign of abatement. They’re almost all Chinese, because
the Western and the international visitors’ numbers have remained static. The
growth has all been in domestic tourism. They come in SUVs; there’s now a
good rail link to Dunhuang; the airport’s been expanded, they can fly in; still,
the coach tours come. So a million people. But they’re squeezed into the six
months of the summer, because the winter’s too severe and hardly anybody
goes.

So it’s really a challenge. Tourism has been something that we’ve identified
as the steamroller coming down the road of cultural heritage—for certain
sites, at any rate. It’s true of Venice, it’s true of Notre Dame Cathedral in
Paris, it’s true of many, many sites around the world. Machu Picchu, and so
on. Especially if they’re on the World Heritage list, they then become icons.
They become magnets for tourists, and they become magnets for developers
and vendors and advertisers and people who want to use the sites for all sorts
of purposes. The Great Wall is so iconic that it features in many ads. Also it
features in elegant dinner parties on the Great Wall, by candlelight, with silver
and the full moon. It’s all very wonderful. But that’s a very elitist kind of
activity. Mass tourism is the threat in places like Mogao, which are different
than the Forbidden City, which is an open air space, they don’t go into the
buildings. They look into the buildings, increasingly. They look into the
pavilions in the Forbidden City. But in Mogao, they enter into the caves. We
call these “blind holes,” because the entrance is the exit. There’s one entrance-
exit. So the air is mixed only by natural ventilation, and the displacement of
air by the next group of tourists coming in. So it gets very, very stale and foul
and not healthful. Carbon dioxide builds up and humidity. That’s one impact
on the environment, and on the comfort and health and safety of the visitors
themselves.

There is an impact, also, of course, on the art, which is inadvertent, very often.
It’s physical damage. And humidity, especially when it’s raining, if the doors
are open. So we say it’s the act of visitation that’s the biggest damage during
rain periods, because the doors have to be open. So this wet air, humid air,
floods in and activates the salt and causes damage. So tourism is a
complicated thing. There’re issues of congestion, there’re issues of access and
booking. So it’s multifaceted. We used a modeling company that did a
software simulation package, to look at visitor flow. Actually, had been used
by the Getty here, to look at the access of visitors and motorcars to the Getty
Center and to the Villa. A San Diego-based company. They did modeling of
visitor access flow and so on, at Dunhuang.

Holmes: It’s from this that you began to come up with a system of what you call
sustainable tourism, right? Sustainable for those involved, but also sustainable
for the site itself.

Agnew: Right. Indeed. Yes. But sustainable tourism is itself quite an enterprise
internationally, where increasingly, site managers and authorities have had to
look at the very issues of congestion and impact of too many visitors, on the resource. But that’s not true anymore, for example, in Egypt.

Holmes: Well, that’s why I wanted to draw that example, because you confronted some of the same dilemmas in some of your projects in the tombs there in Egypt, as well.

Agnew: Yes, yeah.

Holmes: If we think of the tourism to the Great Wall, the Great Wall is stretched over miles and miles, so it’s not all concentrated on one single site.

Agnew: Yeah, right.

Holmes: But the grottoes, as well as the tombs in Egypt—.

Agnew: Tombs and grottoes, those kind of blind-hole cultural resources, are very susceptible to environmental impact, congestion issues and damage.

Holmes: What are some of the suggestions that you came up with to address some of those problems? And if they were followed or not, because they could only be suggestions, right?

Agnew: Yeah. Well, our studies are very intensive, to look at the impact of visitors on the climate. What do visitors do to the climate? That’s one thing. And quantifying those and looking, at the Mogao Grottoes, at the natural ventilation rate, the air exchange rate. Number of air changes per hour is one factor. Looking at the carbon dioxide buildup, the humidity buildup, and then scaling things to find a sustainable visitor load that’s spread over the entire day. For any good visitor study at a site like Mogao or elsewhere, you want to have the maximum number of visitors, who have a good cultural experience and a good visit, so that it’s enjoyable, educational. But the sine qua non, the absolute criterion that must be applied is, there shall be no damage to the resource. That’s not acceptable. Because all damage—the example we like to use—because natural heritage people also have the problem of sustainable use and visitor impact. But there, the site can regenerate. Right? By closing off for a while and resting, and the grass grows again and trees and whatever. The animals come back. All damage is cumulative in a cultural heritage site. So it’s a cumulative and irreversible thing. Since we don’t do restoration, you just see a degradation of the resource over time. This is why it’s important to distinguish between conservation and restoration. Because if a tour agency or operator says, “Well, you can restore it,” and they don’t see the problem, what they don’t realize is that restoration is a subjective activity. It endeavors to recreate, with new material added to the resource, what the restorer thinks it
was before. That’s where the subjectivity comes in. Well, obviously, it’s like this parlor game, you draw a cat and you pass it to the next person who copies it and it comes out as a mouse or something. What’s the end result going to be of multiple phases of restoration? It’s not going to be the same.

Holmes: It’s not preserving the original.

Agnew: Yeah, not at all. The other example that’s used sometimes is, this is an axe that’s been in the family for generations. It’s only had six new handles and five new heads, but it’s the same axe. Right?

Holmes: Yeah. I wanted to then switch to the other grotto site that you and GCI worked on there, that didn’t have the same kind of outcome, there at Yungang, if I’m pronouncing that correct.

Agnew: [corrects pronunciation] Yungang, yes.

Holmes: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Agnew: Well, we did talk a little bit about that already. It’s a very important site.

Holmes: Sure. The carvings are amazing.

Agnew: Yeah. It’s Northern Wei and it’s fifth century. It was an imperial site. There’re about fifty caves. It had challenges, too. Really interesting ones. Again, through moisture, but this was seepage moisture through the rock, liquid water filtering down. It’s a wetter environment than Dunhuang, so you actually had if not running water, at least seepage moisture. Sources of moisture were a big problem. Determining the pollution was a very important study. We used a wonderful person from CalTech, Glen Cass, an environmental scientist there. Glen had worked with us a lot. In fact, Jim Druzik had first had contact with Glen. He unfortunately died very young. But I had a very, very high regard for him. Not only as a scientist but as a human being. He was just a very fine person. He took his team of two PhD grad students to Yungang for a solid month, and they did round-the-clock environmental monitoring in and outside the caves, to look at the sources of pollution and particulates, from coal burning and other fossil fuels and transportation and so on. So he came up with this amazing study about the pollutant load at the Yungang Grottoes. In fact, since then, Yungang has been very cleaned up. There’s no coal mining in immediate proximity to the site; there’s no coal transportation in front of the site. Because they used to have coal trucks endlessly going by, and the local villagers would glean the fallen coal at the side of the road. Then three times a day, the whole site would be enveloped by smoke, because they were cooking at morning, midday, and night. These clouds of coal smoke and particulates
would envelop the site. So that a lot of the sculpture on the outside had about a quarter of an inch or half an inch of coal muck.

Holmes: And soot — yeah, yeah.

Agnew: And soot and particulates on it. It was just terrible. So yeah, we no longer work at that site. We did that. We did a training course there, which was seminal in the initiation of the China Principles. The training course was on site management, and was run by Marta de la Torre, from our training program. She and Nicholas Stanley Price, who was on our staff at that time. One of the instructors was Sharon Sullivan, from Australia. What became very clear at that two-week, I think, or maybe three-week-long training course, in 1992, was that there was a huge need for site management. Which in turn, after further discussion, led to the idea of the development of a set of principles for the conservation and management of outdoor sites in China, which became in turn, then ultimately, the China Principles.

Holmes: I would like to discuss that, actually. That’s where I was thinking of going next. But first I wanted to make a comment and get your thoughts on it. That leading up to the China Principles there was outreach of the training course that helped pave the way. I think it’s something that’s very notable about the GCI and its operation, in the aspect that one would think of an operation of conservation goes in, conserves a site, and okay, we’re done and we move on. But that was not the path that you wanted to take; that was not the path that the Getty wanted to take.

Agnew: Sure. Yeah, that’s true.

Holmes: It seems like having these types of training courses and outreach programs, which we’ll discuss a bit later on today in more depth, certainly are a vital part of the Getty’s mission. China wasn’t the only place that the Getty led this outreach and training.

Agnew: Not at all. Yeah, sure, sure.

Holmes: I think that is very important. Can you talk a little bit about the training course? And then let’s lead into the China Principles.

Agnew: Well, it was a training course that was devoted to site management, mainly, in China, the need for site management. Site managers from a number of sites, including the Mogao Grottoes, came to Yungang—because it was held at Yungang—for that training course, including the person who subsequently became the director, Fan Jinshi, who’s now just retired as director. She was de facto the director, even then, almost from the time we started at the Mogao
Grottoes. She was a senior staff member, and she then became the deputy director, and then in turn, eventually the director. She has been, perhaps, I think, the most effective director the site has ever had. She spent her entire life there, from a young graduate in 1963 to her retirement as director last year.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Agnew:

Yeah. She’s still active. She tells me with some asperity, “I’m not retired, I’m just not the director anymore.” So she’s got a lot of spice in her. She was declared one of the hundred most important women in China, in the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary, some years ago, of the PRC. She was on the Gansu delegation and so on. She’s a very fine person. She, as much as anything, is the reason for our success in China, because when she had faith in us, she supported us. And she’s always fought hard for the site. Anyway, she went to the Yungang training course and saw the light and got the message. Other people did, as well. But it brought to sharper focus, the need for an understanding in China, of the relationship between conservation, management, and science. Here’s the thing. At the Mogao Grottoes, the science department, when we started there, was like the flagship. They had quite a lot of expertise. The head of the conservation department at Dunhuang was a scientist himself. And a good one. An analytical chemist. But they didn’t see the relationship between science and heritage preservation, conservation as a tool; they just saw it as a technical intervention which was scientific. In fact, I must say, even amongst our own scientists here, who’d been hired—some of our scientific consultants—getting into their minds the fact that science is a tool for conservation, it is not the wherewithal of conservation. A hard scientific approach is like a hard economic approach; it can be very damaging to the heritage, if you’re not respectful of the authenticity, the integrity, and the need to preserve the materiality in its true form of heritage. So science is a double-edged thing. The big thing that I think we were successful in doing initially is modifying that approach within the Dunhuang Academy, to science as being the ultimate arbiter of what one does in preserving a site like Mogao, to a more nuanced approach, in which science is seen as a tool. All of the scientific approaches really are just that; they’re tools. I’ve often said that we have very sophisticated scientific tools at Mogao or elsewhere, but they’re tools. The chain of events that occurs is as follows: you have a scientific instrument, it analyses, it gives you a result. You then understand the cause of the problem better. But that result has to be then assimilated by decision makers and a decision has to be made, which then has to be implemented, in order for the benefit of the knowledge to be realized. So one thinks of it as tools, pure and simple, like a hammer is a tool to put a nail into a plank. It’s nothing more than that, no matter the degree of sophistication.
Holmes: Well, and that’s really promoting a multidisciplinary approach—

03-01:04:02 Agnew: Oh, it is.

Holmes: —to conservation, which of course, yourself and the Getty has become known for. And it should also be recognized that this is coming from someone who was a chemist.

03-01:04:12 Agnew: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Holmes: So I think that background probably lends a lot to the credibility.

03-01:04:18 Agnew: I certainly hope so.

Holmes: It’d be much different if a historian was just stating that, right?

03-01:04:23 Agnew: Yeah, yeah. I’m an avowed scientist. Not only was I raised in that tradition, but I’ve practiced science and chemistry for now, less than half my career, I must say. But yeah. I was an academic chemist, so I know what it’s about. Science is indispensable in today’s heritage conservation, but it’s not the whole thing. So getting back to the Dunhuang Academy and their scientific enterprises, they needed to be held back, because they were rather keen on interventions that may not have been evaluated sufficiently, or might have been irreversible and so on. In fact, everywhere we’ve been in developing countries—China, Egypt, elsewhere—the first question that’s often asked is, what’s the material you use for conservation, for wall paintings conservation? What’s the formula? We say, “Well, wait a minute. That’s not the way it goes. You really have to understand the problem first. You have to understand the material. You have to do the testing. You have to do the evaluation of the testing over time. Only then can you have the formula or whatever the right material is.” Not that we are the custodians of the formula and we’ll give you the formula when you’ve proven that you’re good little people and you know what to do with it. No, it’s not like that. It’s more just the notion that having a formula or having a material, in and of itself, is not good enough. You really have to have the understanding of the material and its behavior over time. So at Dunhuang and elsewhere, they did, unfortunately, some interventions that were too aggressive and have had bad consequences. For example, polyvinyl acetate is a commonly used synthetic polymer. And polyvinyl alcohol. They are film forming, and it’s been applied liberally, in some places, on wall paintings in Mogao. Once it’s on, you’ll never get it off. It tends to skin on the surface, which is bad when salts are behind and there’s migratory pressure from the salts coming out. The end result, depending on the amount of moisture and salt, can be damaging. It’s fine if it’s absolutely dry. If you have any humidity—and I’m not talking about liquid; I’m talking about water
vapor—humidity migrating through the wall and carrying salt, you can have problems. So it can be a dangerous material to use.

Holmes: So this then, of course, paved the way, it seemed, to developing a larger set of practices, standards that became known as the China Principles of cultural heritage sites in China.

03:01:07:28 Agnew: Right, right. It’s interesting. China’s got well developed laws for heritage. There are three values that are identified in Chinese heritage law. These are the scientific value of the heritage place, its artistic value, and it’s historic value. These are three very good values. But as many people have pointed out, it doesn’t have social value enumerated or identified as a value. But nonetheless, social value is a kind of implicit value. Nor does it have economic value. The Chinese site managers and so on are really leery of saying economic value is a value that should be within the law, because they say it would be used as an excuse for economic developers to exploit the heritage. We don’t want that. Nonetheless, it’s a derived value, if you like. So those values are enshrined in the Chinese law. But it doesn’t tell you how those values shall be preserved in a particular site.

So the China Principles provides a toolkit, a methodology, guidelines, under the law in China, for the preservation of heritage sites. Notice we say heritage sites, because we don’t deal, in this instance, because another department deals with it, museum collections, for example. Although exactly the same methodology and criteria apply to museum collections as to heritage sites. Nonetheless, we developed the China Principles for heritage sites. The idea is that the values will be enumerated, understood, written down from multiple perspectives, with multiple inputs of stakeholders. Not just the experts, but the local community, others. Then a statement of significance will be written. What is the significance of this place, in all of its significance—historic, scientific, artistic, social? All of those will be state explicitly, exactly, as best you can, with input from different constituencies. The China Principles then says, thou shalt not impact the values of the site, as described in the statement of significance, through any interventions. In other words, the objective is to preserve the significance of the site. Whatever you do should not—whether it’s tourism, whether it’s fixing a wall painting, whether it is taking a sample, whatever you do—. The objective is not to impact or alter the significance. It’s that simple. So like many other simple things, the actual application is a big challenge. How do you do it practically, is the big challenge.

Holmes: Well, and drafting those principles, that took a bit of time. Is that correct?

03:01:11:09 Agnew: Yeah.
Holmes: Can you talk a little bit about the process? Again, this was an international partnership that took on this task, as well.

03-01:11:19 Agnew: Yeah. The Australians themselves had pioneered the adaptation of a preexisting charter called the Venice Charter—which dates to about 1964, if I remember correctly—for the preservation and conservation of historic buildings. But it’s very Eurocentric; its’ very architecturally biased. It was issued by the International Committee on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS, which is affiliate of UNESCO. The Venice Charter, as it’s called, was and still is the sort of keystone of architectural heritage conservation. It has wider application than architectural heritage. The Australians, in looking at their own cultural heritage, both European and even more importantly, aboriginal heritage, found that the Venice Charter was not a suitable tool for their purposes. So they adapted it and they called it the Burra Charter, B-U-R-R-A, from a site where it was promulgated, in South Australia. Burra Burra is the name of the place. A very aboriginal word, you see.

Holmes: That was in 1979, correct?

03-01:12:48 Agnew: Yeah, Burra Burra. There used to be copper mines there and so on. There may still be copper mines there; I think there are. I’ve been there. So the Burra Charter became the yardstick. What it does is it respects and reflects the aboriginal heritage. Because they pointed out that there’s no built heritage of any consequence in aboriginal culture. Archeology is often lithic scatter on the surface, although there are archeological deposits. It’s much more subtle than Greco-Roman and Mediterranean archeology, or even Maya or North American. There’s not a lot of excavating. Let alone Egyptian archeology. So it’s a different thing altogether. Their charter has become very influential. So I mentioned that Sharon Sullivan had been an instructor on the Yungang training course. We turned to her. She was at that time, the executive director of the Australian Heritage Commission, which is a federal organization. No longer extant, and Sharon has been retired for many years now. But we turned to seek the input of the Australian Heritage Commission, specifically herself and one of her staff members, Kirsty Altenburg, to help us in the development of the Principles. We called it the China Charter initially, until our Chinese colleagues said, “No, you can’t use the word charter. If you use the word charter, it translates in Chinese as law. So the China law is going to be in conflict with the existing law. You can’t use that.” I must say that they themselves — this was from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage — were wary of transgressing into areas that could be seen as an impingement on the existing law. So it was always very clear, the China Principles are under the law, so we changed from China Charter to China Principles. And so it has been. In setting up the collaboration, we put together the international team ourselves. This comprised Martha Demas, myself, from the Getty Conservation Institute; Sharon Sullivan, Kirsty Altenburg from the Australian
Heritage Commission; and then a team from the state administration, including people like Director Fan Jinshi, from the Mogao Grottoes. The modus operandi was to look at sites in China and identify what their needs were, in terms of management and conservation. So study tours were undertaken to a number of sites in China, many sites in China—in fact historic towns, grotto sites, architectural places like Chengde, where we subsequently worked, and so on, tombs. Then we went to Australia and looked at how the Burra Charter had been implemented at sites in Australia, mainly around Sydney—rock art sites, convict sites, architecture; adaptive reuse sites in the center of Sydney, where buildings had been adaptively reused. So looking at a wide swath of different types of cultural heritage. And then came to the United States for a study tour, which occurred here, and then in the East Coast, Annapolis and Washington, D.C. and Colonial Williamsburg, which was very interesting for our Chinese colleagues, to see how history was made living in the United States. It makes no pretense about it being authentic; it is just an interpretive means. Many people, Americans, have said, “Going to Colonial Williamsburg as a child has been very important to me. It actually directed me to an interest in history, in conservation, in cultural heritage and so on.” So we took them. And we took them to Chaco Canyon, to look at archeological sites and the work we’re doing there. So it was a rich experience on three continents, in three different cultures, to look at conservation and management.

All the while we were doing this, which happened over seven years, we were drafting the first China Principles. Which went through many iterations, wordsmithing, as well as content development. Then of course, we’re translating it at the same time. I might say the translation was an enormous challenge. In the end, it went through many, many native speakers, Chinese-born speakers, in the cultural heritage, to get a consensus in the translation. It really was an eye-opener for me that “lost in translation” was a very real hurdle to get over.

One of the things we did in the China Principles, which I think was very effective and it should be done in all international documents that go across language barriers, is to develop a common glossary. In other words, this is the meaning of the word. This is the word in English; this is the word in China; this is what it means, literally in Chinese. So our China Principles has that kind of glossary. It has the Chinese-to-English glossary; it has the English-to-Chinese glossary. So the literal meaning, the common use of the word. It seeks to provide an unambiguous language for the China Principles. So the China Principles was a success. Everybody in China says, “We use the China Principles.” It’s become a mantra. But do they? Sometimes they don’t. Sometimes it’s just a smokescreen, to tell you the truth. On the other hand, universal adoption takes time.
Holmes: So it was a very, very important, if not historic, undertaking of this international collaboration, of drafting out a document that lays out, really, the principles, and shared precepts, of the conservation.

Agnew: It was the best thing we’ve done in China, because it seeks to influence the nation. Furthermore, being in English as well as in Chinese, it allows China to promote its own—and I don’t use this in a disparaging way—but it allows China to show its flexibility to other countries like India, in which English was the common language, which would allow, in a way, an expansion, if you like—. I’m not finding the right words to use here, but an awareness in other countries in Asia—let’s take India or elsewhere, or even Japan—of the flexibility of Chinese thinking, in terms of not being too proud to take outside help from Westerners. I must say, there was sometimes negativity even in China. There were little acerbic comments about the American charter and so on, we heard.

Holmes: Oh?

Agnew: Yeah. Which is why when we revised the China Principles recently, after fifteen years, we really had a hands-off approach. And the Australians weren’t involved, because sometimes they, the naysayers, even said if not the American, it’s the Burra Charter in China or something like that. There were snide comments sometimes made. To be honest, that happened, though not often. Too bad. I think it was just a perfect model. You always get naysayers, do you not?

Holmes: Sure. Well, not only will you always have some sort of naysayers or backlash in those kind of endeavors, but to also understand that the tremendous language and cultural barriers, again, that were still there, even after working there for so long. Could you talk a little bit about that experience, whether that would also be helpful for others who will be following perhaps similar ventures down the road?

Agnew: Yeah. We’ve had to work with translators. In fact, we have two who work with us. One is our official translator, Peter Barker, who is Anglo, if you like, Australian. He’s a Melbourne boy. For some reason, as a school kid, he took Chinese. Then since Australia recognized China very early on, when it still wasn’t recognized by the United States—the PRC, that is—China reciprocated and had a number of students come to China to learn Chinese. Peter was one of those, and he went in the early days. I can’t remember when, but a long time ago, he went to China. He spent some years there. I think he was just a kid at that time, was just out of high school. Very hard for him, he said. It was difficult. Cut a long story short, Peter became a professional Chinese translator, and a very good one. He translates for the prime minister of Australia and he translates at very high-level meetings and so on, and a huge
variety of different subject matters. But Peter, we’ve worked with ever since we began the China Principles.

Holmes: Oh, that’s great.

Agnew: So he’s one of our key people. But he’s based in Australia. Then Po-Ming Lin, who is Taiwanese American, but Taiwanese born and raised and lives in L.A., he’s our long-term consultant. So those are our two ways in which we communicate. Po-Ming has been absolutely essential to our success in China. Unfortunately, I and most of my colleagues do not speak Chinese. We only have smatterings, which we’ve acquired by an osmotic process somehow, which is to our shame. Never mind. Had I known that all these years would go by, I would have made perhaps a more concerted effort to learn more Chinese. But anyway, one becomes a little lazy. Our Chinese colleagues are learning English much better and faster than I’m learning Chinese. But they make the effort to do that. All power to them. I’s really wonderful to see.

Agnew: Yeah, yeah. But it’s a good example of the multiple members that have to be assembled on a team to move these projects forward.

Agnew: Well, one of the criteria I think that we need for success in cross-cultural, cross-language barrier—but cultural, perhaps, more than anything, even than language—is somebody who is attuned to the partnership culture. That somebody inevitably has to be of that culture himself or herself. So in the case of China, we’re very fortunate in having Po-Ming Lin, as I said, who is a wonderful natural diplomat himself, and has excellent people skills and has been able to guide me and others through some of the more sensitive issues, particularly if one is in an intense discussion, or some even disagreement. I won’t pretend that all of our work in China or elsewhere has always been a paradise of harmony.

Holmes: Naturally, yes.

Holmes: That’s a good balance.

Agnew: He is the facilitator. No, I won’t say lubricant, but he has a way in which the friction can be minimized. He knows both cultures. He works for us, but he’s attuned to China. Similarly in Egypt, we have Romany Helmy, who’s been
our long-time—since Nefertari days—facilitator, and a marvelous asset for our ability to work there. It’s critical.

Holmes: Well, I’d like you to reflect a little bit more on that, on partnerships. I know that’s one of the themes that we wanted to discuss, and I think it’s a good venture here, as we are discussing the China Principles and the partnerships that are much needed there. In talking to one of your colleagues, they say that forthrightness in developing that kind of strong relationship, where you can speak plainly about the issues and really throw the issues on the table was so important. Particularly, we see this in your work in China. Sharon was the one who was telling me that; that it was because of your own people skills and that kind of forthrightness that you had in developing and fostering those relationships, you and your team would start a meeting with, “hey, we’re all friends here.” And use that as a broaching point of reminding everyone that we’ve worked a long time on this, but we need to speak plainly about the problems we’re confronting.

Agnew: Right, right. It is important. Certainly, the culturally-attuned team member who speaks the language—Chinese or Arabic or whatever—is critically important. But the partnership thing, if you want it to float and not sink, the ship that doesn’t sink— I always use the ship analogy for partnership because it’s easy to launch a ship; but to get it to make the voyage, that’s really what you want, without it going down halfway. The partnership does have criteria without which you will not be successful. These are common objectives, for sure. Absolutely common objectives. The need for total honesty and being culturally attuned, of course. But without those, you’re not going to make any progress. There’re four or five things that just are necessary. Stability in the partner organization is also another key. You can’t have the head of the antiquities department, the site director where you’re working, change every six months or every year, or even every year or two. That just doesn’t work. You’ve got an entirely new person to deal with, who doesn’t necessarily agree with his predecessor. In fact, he may have ousted his predecessor. So you could be up against something you don’t even know you’re up against. It doesn’t work that way. We’ve seen this in a number of our endeavors internationally. So stability of partner leadership is very good; stability from the Getty side is good; having to have an agreed upon agenda; forthrightness; and having a facilitator, if you like, on your team, who can speak the language and can be a diplomat between the two sides. All of those things, I think, are really good.

The last one, of course, the one I always like—I’m a good bargainer, they say—you have to negotiate ab initio, the contribution from the partner organization. What are you putting on the table? Here’s what we put on the table. Not under the table, ever, but on the table. There’ve been not-so-subtle approaches for under-the-table benefits for the partners, but those never go anywhere. When that happens, if that happens, no matter how subtly it’s
introduced, my antennae raise and I say, “Well, the Getty Conservation Institute never—” and it’s absolutely true—“never transfers money.” Then I say, “You know why? Because as soon as money is on the table, all the eyes are on the money. They’re not on the relationship. They’re not on the object of the project. They’re on the money. And that is poison. That’s poisoning the well. Forget it. We bring skills, we bring expertise, we bring partnership, we bring a desire to work with you. Those are what we bring. That’s what we offer. We will pay for our side, but we’ll want you to contribute, too. We want you to contribute skills, we want your staff members, and cover some of the costs, if you can.” Usually, when that’s established at the beginning, it’s successful. But you can’t go in later on and then say, “Well, now I need something from you.” It really has to be early on in the process, when you establish those.

Holmes: And that helps, having both sides having that vested stake.

Agnew: Yeah, a vested stake.

Holmes: Having those shared objectives and being that forthright is really the ingredients of developing those very tight and productive partnerships, like China, that we see.

Agnew: Yeah. The Chinese have been hugely supportive, in that sense.

Holmes: As a reflection of that, too, it’s not just the success. We look at the various projects in China, particularly the grotto sites. We look at the international collaboration of also drafting the China Principles. But then they’ve also recognized you with the two highest awards bestowed to non-citizens, with the Friendship Award and the Science and Technology Award. Is that correct?

Agnew: Yes, that’s right, yes.

Holmes: Yes. Which I think is an acknowledgment to your work, the Getty’s work, and that very type of partnership and relationship that you were able to build.

Agnew: Yeah, it’s been a wonderful, really, acknowledgement, and I’m very grateful for those awards. They’ve been generous and they’ve been much valued and appreciated by me, and I think they’ve been really great. But they reflect just as much on the Getty’s vision as they do me. The Science and Technology Award was the first one ever given for conservation at all, to anybody. It’s a very high award. I know it is, because I’ve been told that it’s top. There are two divisions to it. The one is the internal one, for Chinese, and the other is the external one, for others who’ve had a contribution towards the
development of science and technology—and in my case, conservation—to China. So yeah, you get medals and stuff. [they laugh]

Holmes: But, outside of the—. Well, dare we say, outside of the bling, right?

03:01:34:42
Agnew: The bling. Yeah, the bling. Well, it’s something with a bling like that big. I’m unable to wear that. It resides in a drawer. You get to have dinner in the Great Hall of the People, and with the diplomatic corps and the leadership. So Zhu Rongji, the premier, was there, and the predecessor of the current, Xi Jinping—. I forgot his name already.

Holmes: Hu Jintao?

03:01:35:16
Agnew: No, no, no, before. Before Hu Jintao.

Holmes: Yeah, I’m not sure.

03:01:35:27
Agnew: When they get off the seat, they just fade away. It’s like anybody. Ah, Jiang Zemin.

Holmes: But it’s a great recognition of really the partnership that you were able to establish.

03:01:35:37
Agnew: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Holmes: I want to come back; we’ll reflect a little bit more on partnerships here in our next session. But I think if we look at the contributions and advocacy within the conservation community internationally, that you’ve also tried to make an impact; that partnerships were very much at the root of that. Here, I’m referencing the fifth World Archaeological Congress that the Getty helped organize in North America in 2003. Can you tell us a little bit about that? From my understanding, this was the first of those conferences ever held in North America.

03:01:36:28
Agnew: I think so. I think that’s true of the World Archaeological Congress, the fifth one. Let me back up a little bit. I think within the Conservation Institute, our feeling has long been that there’s not enough integration between archeologists and conservation professionals.

Holmes: The artificial divide, in a sense.

03:01:36:58
Agnew: Yeah. There should be a merging. It’s happening slowly, but it hasn’t happened in the past. This is because conservators very often, in archeological
sites, have been regarded as, at best, those people who sit down with the potshards that are all shattered, and they painstakingly put them together. That’s their role. They stick pieces of broken pots together, huh? They have no other say in that. Which is a very mechanical kind of thing. I’m being a bit disparaging there, but just to illustrate the point it was regarded as a menial undertaking. Skilled, but still of no consequence to the great enterprise of archeological discovery. I will say this, that conservation—heritage conservation, cultural heritage conservation, archeological conservation—still suffers from one great drawback, in terms of its status. And that is, it does not have that appealing element of discovery. Archeologists, no matter how menial their work, can enjoy, like fishermen, the possibility of an unanticipated, unexpected catch.

Holmes: Yeah, the big catch.

Agnew: Discovery.

Holmes: Sure.

Agnew: Conservators don’t do that. They just have to look at the material that’s been found and figure out the best way to save it, preserve it and the site. So the element of discovery, I think, is a detraction to the overall esteem in which the field is held. It places us in handmaiden position, if you like, not at the very front rank. It shouldn’t be like that, because certainly in museums, in museum collections, the people in charge of the survival of the collection are the conservation professionals. Right? Without that, you don’t have a reason for having a museum. In the field, in archeological sites and monuments, the people who should be in charge of the survival of the site should be the conservation professionals. Nonetheless, they generally are not. That’s just the way the world is.

So the idea of the World Archaeological Congress and our involvement there, was well, let’s try and make an impact on this weak link. It’s not a divide, because there’s a chasm that has existed since the beginning. Let’s try and bridge that. How best to do it? Various Archaeological Congresses, like the American Archaeological Institute and so on, or even the American Research—. Well, what’s it called? Yeah, American Research Center in Egypt, ARCE, as it’s commonly known, organizes congresses and conferences, and certainly, conservation people who’ve worked in Egypt or in archeological sites are free to submit papers about conservation of this or that, or finds or sites. The trouble is that they’re just another paper, it’s another conference, and the presentations tend not to be attended by the archeologists. So the idea was, well, if we want to have an impact, we should actually take on a segment of the overall congress organization. So we did. Five days of an
entire theme within WAC-5, the fifth World Archaeological Congress was devoted to the single purpose of integrating conservation and archeology.

Holmes: Bridging those divides—

03:01:41:12 Agnew: Bridging them.

Holmes: —between the academic community and conservation.

03:01:41:13 Agnew: Exactly. So we had a number of sub-themes within that. One was rock art. One was the Iraq War, which had just happened. So we brought people from Iraq for that. Just a whole range, China and other areas, to talk about specifics. We couldn’t cover the whole spectrum of archeological enterprise; but nonetheless, we covered a great deal of it. Insofar as it goes, it was a success, and I edited the publication and it came out and so on. The other thing that I tried there was to change the statutes of the World Archaeological Congress to include a statement to the effect that conservation is integral to archeology, and all archeological field work should have conservation professionals involved as team members, and that kind of thing. It ran into some opposition, to my great surprise, by certain people who seemed to think this was impudent. I was very surprised about that. But nonetheless, there was one particular person, who is a rock art specialist, actually, who used to be in South Africa and went to Australia, I think. Oh, he was a grandstander. So you can get people who love the politics of congresses, so long as they can find something to seize upon. It wasn’t the easiest of experiences. Nonetheless, it got passed. Like any law, it doesn’t ensure that things happen, but at least it is enshrined now in the history and in the charters of that organization. So it may have long-term consequences. We’ve never done it again—I rather wish we could—because it was very expensive to do. But it would be nice. It would be good, because I think a one-off thing never has the legs that a repeat would do. But the opportunity just hasn’t arisen.

Holmes: Well, and in that publication and in that event, from my reading of those documents, you, as well as GCI, were promoting that multidisciplinary type of philosophy—

03:01:44:23 Agnew: Absolutely, sure.

Holmes: —of bridging what I think you rightfully call these artificial divides between archeologists and conservationists, and promoting that kind of integrated, holistic conservation, which you and the Getty became very much known for in your various projects. That’s really important, if one would think about the future of how heritage in archeological sites are going to be able to survive, be preserved. So have you seen any type of acknowledgment that it’s there in the principles? Any kind of benefit or work coming out of this?
Agnew: Yeah. There’s no doubt that the movement is alive still, to bring conservation into archaeology. Certainly, we’ve had some very strong proponents of that. For example, Giorgio Buccellati, professor emeritus from UCLA. He is a strong proponent of integrated conservation and archaeology. He’s a great scholar. Unfortunately, his site in northern Syria is closed down now. But he’s had such good community relations there that as I understand, as far as he knows, it’s still being protected by his erstwhile workers. I think he still does pay them, somehow get money to them. So here’s a wonderful example of a first-rate archaeologist and academician of the highest order, who’s really taken onboard the message, and promotes it.

Holmes: What’s seems to me, too, is at the center of this is, again, coming back to partnerships. That it’s not just partnerships between the host country of a site, as well as the Getty and these kind of international collaborations. But it’s also collaborations of a multidisciplinary type of nature, when trying to take on such endeavors and look at those sites. Do you think this is also perhaps generational, as well? Do you think that maybe the new generation of archaeologists may be thinking differently than their predecessors?

Agnew: Probably. I certainly hope so. But I think they probably are. Definitely, there has been progress. Definitely, the message has permeated into the archeological field. The problem still remains that archeologists tend to mount field campaigns on a shoestring, right. Their budgets are tight. Therefore, when something has to be cut, guess what it is? Because there’s no element of discovery in conservation. So this has been a challenge, really, that still persists. Best thing is to have it enshrined in the legislation of the host country, that they are required to have conservators. Even then, very often they do the conservation work and it’s still pot mending. It’s not so much site preservation, site stabilization, reburial, prevention of erosion, proper sheltering of the site, all of those things, that tend to be done very badly, if at all. Maybe I exaggerate, but I want to make the point.

Holmes: But that kind of legislation, requiring, say, archeologists to have conservationists on their team, on site, was passed in Egypt if I remember correctly. Egypt passed this type of legislation did they not?

Agnew: I don’t know about Egypt. But I see more and more now in Egypt, that the archeologists in themselves are doing conservation with conservation professionals there. Which is wonderful, I think. It’s really great. They all have conservators now working. But the conservators tend to be their own teams and not so many conservators from the Egyptian side. Although yeah, I think that’s fair to say.

Holmes: That reminds me, speaking of the archeologist from UCLA whose site is in Syria, which right now, of course, that site is under threat by war, by conflict.
At the same time that the WAC 5 was happening in 2003, of course, there were also protests in regard to the Iraq War. Could you speak a little bit about, well, the Getty’s actions in regard to highlighting those sites?

Agnew: Yeah. From time to time, we face questions of what we should do when disasters of one kind, whether natural or human, impact important sites or areas of importance culturally. Earthquakes and floods and so on are typical. But we’re not poised to be able to respond to those. We don’t have the resources, the time and so on. For example, massive earthquakes as in China. We can advise and so on, but we don’t have a team ready to leap into the air and fly elsewhere and help. So it’s a bit frustrating, but it’s the reality. However, in the case of a country like Iraq at war, when it was invaded and the aftermath of that was extensive looting, huge amount of looting of the archeological resources of Iraq, then there was something that we felt that we could do that would be meaningful as a tool in the long term, for preservation of Iraq’s heritage. So in fact, it was Martha Demas’ idea that we should develop a method of mapping, recording remotely, the sites, so that they can be registered, in a way. In turn, that derived from another staff member who is no longer with us, who went to the World Monuments Fund, Gaetano Palumbo. A fine archeologist. He was on our staff for a while. But Martha was the one who initiated what then became ultimately known as MEGA [Middle Eastern Geodatabase for Antiquities], and then later, MEGA-Iraq. This is a database that we started to develop, which Gaetano himself had developed for Jordan, with a guy, Steve [Stephen] Savage, from Arizona State University in Tempe, I think. He called it JADIS, Jordanian Antiquities Database Information System, JADIS. So the idea existed, and could we make something like that for Iraq? And we did.

It was a very difficult process, because we wanted something user-friendly. JADIS was itself tailor made by Steve Savage. Steve didn’t really cooperate well with us, for one reason and another, so we started again. We hired another company—still working with us, actually—called Farallon [Farallon Geographics, Inc.], to develop a system that is open source, so there’s no software problems there. Like a GIS, a geographic information system, if you like, but more powerful, that could locate the position, supplemented by all sorts of data for sites. So that it would be a tool that you would give to the Iraqis for their use, for their own database of archeological sites. People sometimes said, well, it’s giving the information away to the looters. Well, forget about it. The looters know where the sites are anyway. It’s very often the authorities don’t know as well as the looters know where the sites are. So it’s at least bringing it up to parity. Aerial photographs of archeological sites in Iraq show a lunar landscape there. You can see the looters with their Toyota trucks, and armed, digging. The tragedy of it, of course, is looting is driven, like the drug trade, by demand. Where’s the demand come from? Unscrupulous collectors, who want to have unique objects in their cabinets, wherever they may be, whether United States, Europe, elsewhere. That’s
where it comes from. So we spent, and are still working on, the subsequent iterations, if you like, of MEGA. Unfortunately, the Iraqis could never deploy it. It was for the historic heritage and for the archeological site heritage, in English and in Arabic. This is not an easy thing to develop.

Holmes: No, no, no. That sounds substantial.

03-01:55:02
Agnew: Especially as many of those places in Baghdad or elsewhere don’t have physical addresses for buildings. We operated out of Amman, in Jordan, to do this, and here. Eventually, in some despair, when the State Board of Antiquities [and Heritage] of Iraq kind of collapsed. We thought, well, we’ve got to keep this initiative alive. There’s a need beyond Iraq. We’ll migrate it to Jordan and we’ll develop it for Jordan, so it’ll be poised and ready to be implanted in Iraq when Iraq’s ready for it. So we did that. We worked with the Jordanian heritage authority. Remember that Jordan already had had JADIS. Steve Savage and Gaetano had worked on it. But it was really superseded. It was a great idea, but as a functional tool, it wasn’t effective. So we developed MEGA-Jordan. MEGA-Iraq made MEGA-Jordan. It’s being used in Jordan today. Then we brought it back here, and now it’s called Arches, because it’s now being used, actually, for—. Well, in Los Angeles, for the city’s historic buildings and architectural resources, which had never been mapped and never been recorded.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

03-01:56:42
Agnew: So for the city of L.A. We’re working with the City of L.A., and Arches is the tool that’s now being used for that.

Holmes: Well, and it just shows some of the amazing work, of course, that GCI has been able to do, to create a function and a platform, that then can be used in Iraq, used in Jordan, used in Los Angeles.

03-01:57:06
Agnew: Right, and we’re looking for other venues to use it. My colleagues David Myers and Alison Dalgity explored its potential use in the National Parks system. We’re thinking about applying it in rock art sites. What would be great would be to have this as a really—and it’s getting there, I think—low-cost, open source, anybody-can-use kind of tool. Sure, you’d have to have sign-in security for this, but really, that provides an inventory. Not just a location, but a great deal of ancillary information—photographs, maps, other records—of a particular site or sites, for a country, for a region. Whether it be rock art, whether it be architecture, heritage sites. So that you actually have the repository tool, in which you can find a new site and place it in there. It’s in there. It becomes then part of the history of the country and its heritage resources. I think rock art is an especially useful—not useful, I mean but
especially appropriate—heritage category for that kind of tool, like any other archeological site.

Holmes: Oh, absolutely.

Agnew: Above-ground buildings and so on are not that difficult to locate. But archeological sites, rock art sites, are. And always, there are new ones being discovered. So you really do need to have a tool that is ready to receive that information, and it becomes part of the archival heritage.

Holmes: Sure. To receive it.

Agnew: And as a useful tool.

Holmes: To receive it, to record it.

Agnew: To receive it, record it, to retrieve it, as well. Because that’s the problem, very often, the retrieving of data. Who has access to that data is really important.

Holmes: Well, our next session, we are going to explore your current projects with rock art. I think this is probably a good break for lunch.

Agnew: Oh, right. Okay.
Holmes: This is Todd Holmes, with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, and I am sitting down one last time this afternoon for the fourth and final session with Neville Agnew, for the Getty Oral History Project. Today is Friday—still Friday—July 29, 2016, and we are also still here at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles. Neville, it’s been great and very enlightening. This is our final session together to talk about, of course, your career, as well as to reflect a bit on the GCI moving forward, which, I think, would be of tremendous value, the wisdom you could provide to up-and-coming scholars and other colleagues, after your many decades of amazing work. The projects, in Africa and Australia, we could discuss here before we get into those other topics— it’s almost coming full circle, in some ways, in your career. So I’d like to start with the Laetoli footprints in Tanzania, an amazing project. Would you discuss that a little bit?

Agnew: It is an amazing project, it was an amazing project, and in a negative way, it continues to be an amazing project. [they laugh] The Laetoli—I better begin just by saying what they are and why they’re significant and why we did undertake the conservation of the site. The Laetoli footprints are 3.6 million—plus or minus 200,000—years old. They were dated by potassium-argon dating, to that date, from a mineral called biotite, which is a mica, which occurs in the volcanic tuff, which is ash fall from a volcano. So it’s a sedimentary rock, soft. The ash fell, and these hominids—still believed, I think, to be precursors in the human line of ancestors, three and a half million years ago—walked in the ash and left their tracks there in Tanzania, within site of the Ngorongoro Crater—which is a World Heritage Site for its natural attributes, and a crater that is a caldera, as well—that blew about two million years ago or so. But it’s not the volcano that erupted and provided the ash and put the stratum down on which the hominids walked 3.6 million years ago. The dating has never been questioned by anybody. Mainly because, I think, it was done by that eminent geologist from UC Berkeley in the geochronology lab, Garniss Curtis.

Holmes: Yeah, you referenced that.

Agnew: Yeah, sure. It’s a radioactive dating technique, in which potassium-40 decays with an emission of an electron, to argon-40. Argon, the gas, a noble gas, is trapped within the crystal. When you heat it in a mass spectrometer, it liberates the argon, which can be measured quantitatively against the remaining potassium. So you actually have a time clock that’s going on there, because radioactive decay—. I don’t want to give a lesson on nuclear physics, but it’s relevant to know that it’s a very secure dating method. So 3.6 million years ago. So why significant? Well, mainly because this was the first evidence of bipedalism that was found and not associated with stone tools. So
in a way, in a simplistic way—and I guess paleoanthropologists might quibble with me about this; I’m not a paleoanthropologist—but I think of it in these terms: that the footprints, without bones at all, no bones there, are—. Incidentally, the species is believed to be the same species, Australopithecus afarensis, that became famous with the skeletal remains called Lucy, discovered by [Donald] Johanson, in Ethiopia. So it’s the same creature. Very small hominids. Oh, four and a half to five feet tall, more or less. Small footprints. But the footprints are exactly like ours: left, right, left, right; small arch; big toe in line with the foot. Because the argument was, if the toe’s opposed, then it’s used for gripping and climbing; if it’s in line, it’s used for walking. Right? So these types of arguments were evidence of true bipedalism, rather than something that could clamber up into the trees, and walk as well. And no stone tools.

So it answered the question, which came first, bipedalism or the evolution of the human brain? This was an argument that went all the way back to Darwin, unresolved, because you actually can’t tell from bones, fossil bones. But the lack of tools and the bipedalism gave a clear indicator that it was bipedalism that came first, for whatever reason. But in so doing, it liberated the hands, and the hand and the eye and the brain worked to develop the human capacity. The hand became the new tool of the hominids. That’s the way I think of it, and I think it’s not un-plausible. It’s kind of elegant in many a way, you see, because we do use our hands like tools and we use our hands to make tools. So it’s wonderful. This footprint trail—it’s about a hundred yards long, say—was discovered by Mary Leakey, the paleoanthropologist, wife of Louis Leakey, who had excavated with Mary for a long time at Olduvai Gorge, just to the north, only maybe thirty miles away, as the crow flies, from Laetoli. Olduvai Gorge is on the western flanks of the Ngorongoro Crater, this vast caldera. It’s on the tourist route from Arusha, in Tanzania, up to the Serengeti, where thousands of tourists go to see the game and the wildebeest migration and so on. So they go past Olduvai. But Olduvai is an incised gorge, so it’s an erosional gorge, and it exposes a lot of stratigraphy, and hence, fossils. So the Leakeys made their famous discoveries—the Zinjanthropus, the “Nutcracker man,” and others—evidence of tool use, very commonly. Olduvai is 2.2 million years, so there’s a 1.2 million-year gap between Olduvai and Laetoli. I don’t know if there’s been much exploration between those two sites, to look for what kind of transition occurred there, whether paleoanthropological or fossil or geological. I don’t know.

Holmes: Laetoli was discovered around what, 1976?

04-00:08:39

Agnew: ’77 or ’78, I think.

Holmes: Oh. I remember it was found, I think by the staff, while they were having a—. Well, I guess you could call it a food fight, with elephant dung.
Yeah, they were grown men, playing the fool at the end of a long day in the field looking for fossils. Mary had gone from Olduvai to Laetoli, to look for fossils. There are fossils there. In fact, there’re fossil bones of Australopithecus. I’m speaking from memory, I think the type fossil there for Lucy is from Laetoli. It might be, a fragment. But yes, they were flinging elephant dung at each other. So the story goes, as recounted by Mary, and I have no reason to doubt it. I forget who it was—I had their names, but I’ve forgotten them now—dodging the missile, bent down and looked, and saw what looked like a track, a human track.

Holmes: It was quite serendipitous.

Yeah. Then they all gathered around, I imagine, reconstructing it in my mind again, and said, wow, look at that. Let’s look over there, underneath what’s buried here. Wow, there’s another one! And of course, the hunt was on. Then they excavated a hundred yards of it. They started at the northern end, where natural erosion had exposed this, and then it got a little more deeply buried, as you go further to the south. But it consists of a trail of three hominids. One walking side-by-side with the other two. The one behind was walking, as the interpretation goes, in the footprints of the one ahead. So two in tandem, the third walking in the footprints of the other. Not an exact match, so it’s a match partly overlapping and partly creating a new print. So it makes it difficult to interpret those prints. But the ones to the side of that are well preserved. In some parts off the trail, they’re very well preserved with a skin of a secondary deposit of calcite lining the print. Other parts, the tuff, the ash fall tuff, has weathered very rapidly and the tracks are badly weathered. You can still see them, but they’re the equivalent of very dried, hard mud. Mary did the excavation, did photogrammetry, did the right thing by the site, and buried it again for protection, because it’s a remote area. The Maasai have got their cattle there; they would’ve trampled it to death. A lot of buffalo, elephant, giraffe, big game move through the site.

She [Mary Leakey] was worried about damage to the footprints. A big monograph was published by Mary, with a co-author, on the Laetoli site. What’s interesting about the site is that in that one area—being maybe 500 acres or thereabouts; quite an extensive area—there are many natural exposures of footprints. But not human. They are extinct animals and still living ones. A three-toed horse, for example, now long gone. Smaller creature, precursor to the horse. And some things that still live today, like guinea fowl, but other bigger animals, as well as many hares, little hares hopping about. So it was an area of great biological interest. But so far, only those hominid footprints have been discovered.

Holmes: When did the Getty get involved?
Well, Mary buried the site. She covered it with a big pile of lava boulders that she brought down from the escarpment nearby, to protect it against erosion and to stop creatures trampling on it. Unfortunately, what she didn’t figure was that she was putting in acacia seeds with the burial fill that she brought, the soil. The acacia seeds found a very congenial place to grow. In fact, it was like a little nursery for acacias. This is a big tree. It’s one of the species of African thorn trees that’s so common, that kind of umbrella thorn that grows rapidly. This species, Acacia seyal, a very fast-growing one. It grew in the soft fill. But also, the seedlings were protected by the boulders, and could grow between them. They have physical protection, they have soft fill, and they grew like crazy. So within a small period of time—ten, twelve years—there were trees ten feet tall. The director of antiquities, Simon Waane, was attending one of our training courses on archeological site preservation techniques. This was held in Cyprus. Both Martha Demas and I were teaching on that. Waane spoke to me about it and said, “We have this problem.” I said, “Oh, that’s very interesting.” He said, “We’d like your help.” I said, “Let me think about it.”

So I came back and we had discussions in-house, and we did a kind of feasibility study, and we decided to go ahead with it. There was criticism from some quarters. For example, some people in the Getty said, what are we doing with a fossil site? We’re a cultural heritage site. Until we had commissioned a paleoanthropologist—. And Martha did this. She located a very eminent paleoanthropologist, Owen Lovejoy. He wrote a significance statement for the Laetoli footprints. It went, in part, something like this. There’s only one set of Laetoli footprints. It answers this incredibly important evolutionary history. It’s highly unlikely that anything like this will ever be found again. It is of the first importance. So on that basis, we said, we’re going ahead with it. It didn’t quell all of the comments, but nonetheless, we did it. It was a six-year project, and was a wonderful project, in many ways. It had political problems in the beginning, because Waane wasn’t popular with some of his staff, who wanted to get rid of him. So then it wasn’t long before a sort of backlash against him occurred, and we became a sort of football in the game, with spurious accusations about our—. I can’t remember now, but probably things like bribery and so on. You have to realize that in the annals of cultural heritage and science and so on, there are few things that really are at the top of the pile, when it comes to public awareness and interest. They are dinosaurs, human origins, and Egypt. We’ve worked on all of those.

Well, and certainly, you have.

I’ve worked on all of those. Yeah, sure. So those are the things that excite. Later on, we got into a lot of trouble with people who thought they should’ve been involved in the project and were not. [Russell H.] Tuttle, from the University of Chicago, was quite scurrilous in his attacks on us. He thought he
should be the person invited back to study the footprints when they were re-
exposed. Because our technique, our strategy, was to re-excavate carefully,
which we did, the entire trackway; surgically remove the growing stumps, kill
them; stabilize the trackway, insofar as we could; and rebury it for protection
again, with appropriate protections against roots coming back in again, by
clearing trees around the area and putting in place a maintenance plan for the
Tanzanians.

Holmes: A site maintenance plan.

Agnew: Site maintenance plan for the Tanzanians. People like Tim White, at UC
Berkeley, said—. We consulted with him. We consulted widely. Immediately,
Mary Leakey was on our committee, and so was Desmond Clark, from UC
Berkeley, her old friend. Now long dead, I’m afraid, but a very fine
gentleman. And others. We had a UNESCO representative and we had people
from Africa, and of course, the Antiquities people themselves—Donatius
Kamamba, the director of antiquities and so on. So we put together an
advisory committee. Consultative committee, we called it.

Holmes: Like partnerships, right? Collaboration, the GCI is not just going out by itself
and ahead of itself—

Agnew: Right, yes. Sure.

Holmes: —but is consulting various communities.

Agnew: Sure. It was a wise thing to do, because we became aware very soon that there
were not only countervailing opinions about how the site should be
preserved—. Of course, Tim White had been, with Mary Leakey, an excavator
of the site. But he fell out with Mary. He felt her techniques of excavation
were not good. There was a lot of politicking there, none of which we really
were interested in or could do anything about, nor had ever been involved in.
This was discovered in ’77, ’78, I think, so long before our time. Incidentally,
it was just about the same time as the Lark Quarry dinosaur trackway was
discovered, by Mary Wade and the others, in Australia.

Holmes: Now, what were the type of techniques that you used? I know you were
getting rid of the invasive trees at the site. Was there any other kind of
preservation of the site that you did, outside of the removal? Surgical
removal?

Agnew: That’s a nice way of describing it. Yes, surgical, careful removal. We
involved some of the conservators from the Getty Museum Antiquities
Department, Jerry Podany and Eduardo Sánchez, to do some of that work. We
hired a photogrammetrist from the University of Cape Town, a professor of geomatics there, Heinz Rüther, to do new photogrammetry of the trackways. We hired Ron Street, from the Metropolitan Museum in New York, to come and replicate the existing cast that Mary had made—a very fine cast, stored at Olduvai—make a new master mold and make secondary casts from that, which he did, and train the Tanzanians in the procedures of molding and casting. We didn’t want to make a new mold off the trackway. It’s too fragile. Because a sticky rubber latex or silicone, when peeled off, will pull off some of the trackway. So we didn’t touch the trackway, in that sense. So yeah, we did a lot of detailed conservation on the tracks, stabilized some fragments that were loose, did the photogrammetry, and—.

Holmes: You worked on site management, as well, right?

Agnew: Yeah, the site management. Well, we had interesting challenges to the site, apart from the political side. I’ll come back to that in a moment. One was that between campaigns—because we could work only in the winter months, when it was dry—we would bury parts of the site as testing—. Not the site, but test materials on site. The Maasai tribesmen, with their long spears, right? They’re very statuesque, in the savanna landscape, with their red garments and beadwork. Tall people, and still wearing traditional clothing. They were very curious about what was going on there, and they’d probe with spears. So we’d come back and uncover to find spear holes stuck into areas of trackway. Fortunately, they never hit any of the footprints. And fortunately, the trees there hadn’t destroyed any of the footprints. But they would’ve in time. They have these big roots. So we cut, killed, and then removed them, insofar as we could, and consolidated the surface. So that was the essence of the treatment. And reburial with special techniques of geotextiles and root-inhibiting geotextiles and so on. All of which was good, and required a lot of testing and a lot of evaluation, and a lot of time and a lot of money. So all that was good. The Tanzanians provided staff to work with us and security. We stayed in a camp nearby, at Endulen, about ten miles away. Lovely camp, organized by a camp organizer for us, in tents and so on. It was great. Of course, you would see game when you were traveling, giraffes wandering by and so on. You never knew what was going to happen. This is Africa. It just reminded me of my boyhood.

Holmes: Yeah, I was about ready to ask about that.

Agnew: Yeah, yeah. Because it’s just like being back in my childhood. It was wonderful, in many ways, so I loved it. We all loved it, around the campfire at night. We had really good food. It was marvelous. And a big team there. We had a lot of people there. Conservators. We mapped the site. Heinz and his team, with their photogrammetry.
Holmes: Like a 3-D mapping, right? Or contour mapping?

Agnew: Yeah. We did all that kind of thing. But he did the photogrammetry of the trackways, as well. We had it developed. He used very fine-grain aerial emulsion. It was the beginning of the digital camera age, and not yet good enough. So he used aerial photography emulsions, so it was super fine resolution, which we had to develop in the camp, but without a darkroom. So a tent was converted, with black plastic, into a darkroom at night. The water had to be pre-purified, and filtered because it was stream water. It was quite a lot of drama. We had another photographer, a scientific photographer, Tom Moon. A lot of stuff was going on. We communicated via satellite camp phone, with the office. But it became onerous, because the office was always bugging us about something trivial. So we developed a strategy for not answering the phone, and eventually, when we did talk, say, eh, no reception. [they laugh]

Holmes: The truth now comes out.

Agnew: Then we had a lot of visitors, of course, as well, including paleoanthropologists, people from the ministry, and so on and so on. But one of the things we did was—. Because there had been criticism of Mary Leakey, not only by Tim White, but others, as well, about the lack of access. Some paleoanthropologists said, it's no good to study the cast; we have to see the real thing. So we said, all right, good. We invited three paleoanthropologists—one geological stratigrapher, Craig Feibel, from Rutgers University; Bruce Latimer, from Cleveland Museum [of Natural History], an anatomist, also in paleoanthropology; and I forget the other guy's name; he was Swiss, Schmid I think; doesn't matter—to come when we had exposed the tracks, and study them. We brought Mary Leakey there, too. So we had her there. To solve the problem with the Maasai interfering with the site, I drew upon an experience that I'd had when I lived in Africa, which was another story which I don't go into now. But it served us well there, because I said we should consult with the local tribal leader, who’s also the religious head. He’s called the oloiboni, in Maasai, and he’s a traditional leader, healer, et cetera. So we went to see him. A very influential man. We made a special trip to go and see him in his boma. He is very wealthy, as well. He lived in various separate establishments across Northern Tanzania, with, reputedly, forty wives and many cattle. You measure your wealth, like the Zulus do in Southern Africa, in cattle and wives. So the wives are the product of the cattle. Lobola is the word. You pay for your wives with the cattle. Anyway, that’s the way they live.

So we explained this problem of the interference by the Maasai between campaigns, and we asked him if he could solve that problem. He said no problem, he would call a tribal conclave. We gave him the spiel. It’s our
ancestry, your ancestry, too. Our ancestors, your ancestors, all people’s ancestors, right there. He got it. So we had two final campaigns, and each year, he had a blessing ceremony for the trackway. All the Maasai came from the area and the media came, and then it’s a day-long ceremony, with sacrifice of a goat and a sheep and—.

Holmes: That really symbolizes a transcultural artifact, that we’re all related.

Agnew: It does, sure. Well, that’s the way we communicated with the oloiboni and the Maasai. It’s our common ancestry. To relate it better to our present day culture, we said, look, when you look at those footprints, it’s a deeply moving experience. You realize you’re looking back in time three and a half million years, to our most profound ancestors. If you look at Neil Armstrong’s footprint on the moon, you are bracketing the rise of humankind from 3.6 million years to today. That iconic imprint of his foot in the moon really resonated a lot. So this was a way of communicating the significance of the site to others. I think it worked.

Holmes: Again, did you have an interpreter there that allowed you to bridge the language and cultural barrier?

Agnew: Yeah, because our Tanzanian colleagues spoke English—it’s a former British colony—all of them, and they spoke Swahili, as well. But basically, it was English. They provided guards, as I said. They provided and paid for the guards, the night guards, because we always had armed guards there. When we walked in the bush, we had a guy with a rifle with us, because there’re lions and it’s dangerous, and some of the Maasai can be a little obstreperous from time to time, we were told. I never encountered anything like that. But they would look at your clothing with interest. The oloiboni liked my hat, so I gave him my hat to sweeten the deal. So it was all a great adventure, in many ways. The aftermath of that was—.

Oh, by the way, when I was saying about the restudy of the footprints, we got into a lot of trouble with people like Tuttle from the University of Chicago, who said he was aggrieved that he had not been invited, and went on a vicious attack in the media, about the Getty. Totally unfounded. He thought he should have been invited to study the footprints. Despite the fact that I and the GCI had not selected the three paleoanthropologists to come and restudy the exposed footprints. We had, with Mary Leakey’s advice and Desmond Clark’s advice, had a separate committee identify them. The separate committee also had—I forget who—a number of—. Including Richard Leakey, Mary’s son, also a famous paleoanthropologist. So they identified the three guys. It was out of our realm altogether. They came on two campaigns, and Mary was there, too, and there were endless discussions on the site. They never published; I’ve got to say that. This didn’t please me one little bit. Schmid was
his name, from Switzerland. He published some. I forget his first name, Peter I think. So I wasn’t impressed, I’ve got to tell you. These guys, big brouhaha about having to have access to the real thing—no casts for me—and having to have Tuttle and others assailing us. Plus then there was sometimes sniping from the Tanzanian press about things that we were doing there. They said we were poisoning the environment, because we used Roundup to kill the trees. Not sprayed, but the herbicide simply by applying it into holes in the stump that was cut. So it was entirely contained within the stump and roots, and killed the trees very effectively, but that didn’t stop them. Some people said we were killing the fish in the river. What river? There’s a river nominally, called the Garusi River, which is a dry channel that occasionally runs. There’re no fish in there, but it’s just bone dry most of the year. So it’s a load of inventive slander, really. So that kind of thing. All of it was geared at getting Simon Waane out of the way I think. So we became a political football. Happened in Egypt, too. It happens in places where we can be seen as a means of getting, through us, at someone else.

Holmes: How did you handle those kind of situations, both in Tanzania and Egypt? Does the GCI just ignore it?

04-00:32:14 Agnew: Tend to ignore it, really, because I think it’s—. I like to use the phrase—from Uncle Remus, is it? I forget—a tar baby. Once you touch it, you’re stuck. If you [fight] back, then it becomes a vituperative exchange. You can’t win that kind of thing, because the assault comes from a position of prejudice or lies, or both. I don’t know. But there’s no profit in it at all. If you can reason with somebody and it’s just misinterpretation, of course, you correct them or you enter into a dialogue. But when it’s just mean-spirited, vicious and vindictive, or it’s got another agenda, well, you can’t do a thing about it.

Holmes: The political problem also ended up—or not really problem, but another controversy—arose years down the road, after the work was done and you reburied the site, there was discussions of once again, perhaps, unburying the site.

04-00:33:27 Agnew: Yeah, this has happened, or is happening. We’re not too certain of where the status is now, but it’s been going on for some years. We heard from the former director of antiquities, Donatius Kamamba, who’d worked with us. He was an excellent person, because he actually worked in the field with us, while we were on campaign there. Helped excavate, document, do the work, do the down-and-dirty work on your knees and moving dirt and so on. So Donatius and his team were good. But he called in one day and said, “Bad news. The president of Tanzania has visited the site.” “With me,” as it turned out, “me” being Donatius. The president looked at this little pile of boulders there, that stretches for a hundred yards, and said, “There’re footprints underneath there? That’s what I’m told.” Kamamba said, “Yes.” He said,
“What is this heritage of humankind doing buried there? We must show it to the world.” Argument did not prevail. In part, because it was aided and abetted by another Tanzanian, who’s Charles Musiba. Musiba is an associate professor of paleoanthropology at the University of Colorado now. He’s a plausible guy, a smart guy, ambitious, young, academic. Made good in the United States, got an academic career. He had the ear of the president. He wants to re-excavate the site; he has a plan to build a shelter in the shape of a footprint, an interpretive center, over the site. Despite all of the studies that we did that shows there’s no infrastructure, no road, no staff, no money for staff. It’s highly vulnerable. The studies have not been done about the rise of groundwater. What is going to be the impact on that site?

Holmes: The principles and tenets of site management and that kind of holistic conversation that you’ve done on so many other projects.

04-00:35:43 Agnew: This is fairly typical, when a political intervention overrides a professional one. It’s sad, because it’s a piece of ignorant arrogance. Ignorant about the consequences, and arrogant because I’m the big man around here. I’m the big man, and you shall do as I say? And everybody does. They kowtow. We’re not too sure exactly where it is now. Recently, a colleague, Peter Keller, who directs the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, was there just a few weeks ago. He sent me photographs that they—. They have a new team. Musiba is digging other parts, looking for more footprints. He’s said to have seen them; we don’t see photographs of them. The idea for this grand interpretive center is still there. We don’t quite know where the money’s coming from, when it will be implemented, but it doesn’t seem to have gone away. We have reported this to IUCN, which is the International Union of Conservation of Nature. It’s the counterpart of ICOMOS, International Council on Monuments and Sites. Because Laetoli is within the World Heritage area of the Ngorongoro Crater, Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority. In the meantime, what has happened is that the Antiquities Department of Tanzania has lost its authority over the site. It’s been given to the NCAA. They’re all nature people there. They can’t even keep their rhinos from being poached. Let me tell you that the rhinos, despite the fact that they had twenty-four-hour accompanying rangers in Toyota Land Cruisers, they’re still poached. Because there was bribery and malfeasance. One rhino horn is worth a lot of money. God, it’s terrible, isn’t it?

Holmes: It is terrible.

04-00:37:54 Agnew: It’s just terrible. So I don’t have great hope for the survival of the site. But Tim White is the one who said, “You’ve got to lift the site. You’ve got to lift the footprints.” We said, no, this is symbolic now. It’s been studied as a site of science, for the evolution of humankind and rise of bipedalism. That’s its
scientific significance. It’s also its human significance. Actually now, its scientific significance has diminished. But its symbolic significance has risen.

Holmes: Sure, their connectivity, I can see that.

04:00:38:32
Agnew: You’re looking at the site in situ, within sight of Sadiman volcano, in the savanna of Africa, which is claimed to be a cradle of humankind. That is what its symbolic significance is now. Chop out those tracks and take them to a museum, they lose their relationships, they lose the significance of the site in its setting. What’s more, we don’t think they’ll survive in a museum, because Tanzania’s not a rich country. The museum storage is ridiculously inadequate. So all of those reasons. But Tim White said, “You have to take them away.” We said, no, we won’t. He said, “You’ll be sorry.” Maybe he’s going to be right in the end, but I’m pretty sure they’d have been lost in museum storage anyway, because when we looked at the storage area at Olduvai that Mary Leakey had left behind, it was in some chaos. It was in disrepair. Even one of the casts and the mold she’d left of the Laetoli footprint were somewhat damaged.

The final thing we did for Laetoli was recreate the Olduvai Museum that Mary had made, refurbish the entire thing. We had a designer from Pasadena do the designs. We refurbished the museum. Why? Because it’s a small museum, just a few rooms. But it’s a wonderful little museum. It integrates Olduvai and Laetoli. So we took the best-preserved part of the trackway, about the length of this table, nine feet long, and we put a replica of that on display. Then we had interpretive panels around it, about the conservation and significance. We did it in English and Swahili. We printed brochures; we gave them the master. We did graphics for school, interpretation in school, education. We made casts and we took them to the local schools, for the teachers to teach the kids about the Laetoli footprints and their significance. Some years later, when we went there, we found one of the windows in the museum had been somehow damaged—either broken into or accidentally damaged. But the glass had been broken and the steel frame had been buckled. The rain had come in and damaged one of the interpretive panels. No effort had been made at repair. So it was just very sad. Now, I hear from Peter Keller that it’s all been ripped apart. Who knows what’s going to happen now. I just don’t know. But that didn’t prove very sustainable, I must say. But on the other hand, in our own defense, I think, like the Queens Valley project, we looked holistically and we looked at it from every angle. I don’t know what more we could’ve done.

Holmes: Well, that was a point I was going to ask. It seems, outside of the naysayers or the political motivations of some involved, it seems like the project in its totality was a grand success and a great hallmark in the types of work that the GCI has done. The partnerships, the collaboration, the conservation and preservation of the site. But looking at the site in its totality, not just the track itself.
Agnew: Yeah, sure, these fossil footprints. They’ve got enormous value. But there’s another value, too, which is what, coming back to the China story, we’re trying to inculcate into the science department at the Mogao Grottoes. It’s not just science. You have to look beyond the science. You have to look at significance. Following the China Principles, you want to conserve all the values there, all the values that add up to the significance of the site. That’s what you should be striving to do. It’s very difficult. We do suffer, of course, as an institute, from not owning a site. Neither do we have the management of a site in our hands.

Holmes: True. True.

Agnew: I’ll say this, that although you can get good professionals in government departments, by and large my impression of governments is that they are not the best custodians of sites. Motivation is bad, funding is poor, education is sometimes bad. I don’t know how you overcome that problem. Perhaps conservation management of sites should be taken out of the hands of governments; but then it could fall into the wrong hands, in which exploitation is the name of the game. So there’s no easy way between the two.

Holmes: No. No. I wanted to ask you about another project that’s very similar, or has similarities—again, coming full circle in your career—of rock art. It’s currently on your agenda of trying to form an international conference on the subject. Rock art, when looking at it and looking in light of your career, it’s really very much that aspect of collaborations and partnerships, a consortium of looking at sites. It’s like the Burra Charter very much, in its broadest scale of conservation.

Agnew: Yeah, sure.

Holmes: Can you tell us a little bit about that project?

Agnew: Yes. It’s a project that’s grown. I think it’ll reach its fullest development next year, and a little bit beyond, if we do continue, with support from the institute. My interest in rock art actually goes back to childhood, again in Africa, when I did see rock art sites and I discovered some myself; or as a young guy, when I was doing geological fieldwork in southeast Africa, in the mountains and in places like the Drakensberg and so on. I would come across these sites and beautiful San bushmen paintings, sometimes only a few inches in height. A little painting of an antelope, exquisitely rendered, just in a little rock shelter. Wonderful, wonderful things. Of course, they, the San, don’t make them anymore because there’re no San people living there; they were driven out in the nineteenth century. The San people now are living in Botswana and in Namibia. But they don’t do rock art paintings, mainly because there’s not
much rock there. Well, at least in parts of Botswana, in the Kalahari Desert. So they’ve lost their tradition; but they’re the same people. They also extend the click language people that go up to the Hadza in Tanzania, as well. So the African rock art is extremely varied and extensive, in Africa and in Australia, and of course, in Europe and North America and in South America—in fact, everywhere, except, of course, Antarctica.

Holmes: That’s true, that’s true, we don’t know yet.

04-00:46:23

Agnew: Yeah, we don’t know yet.

Holmes: But your point is very valid, I think. It’s widespread. Its global connections.

04-00:46:31

Agnew: It’s ubiquitous and it’s of the greatest antiquity. It’s the most profound expression of the human condition.

Holmes: But it’s also perhaps one of the most unappreciated, when we think of sites to conserve.

04-00:46:44

Agnew: Absolutely. Sure. It’s also archeology. It’s archeology on rock walls. It’s been very neglected by archeologists, mainly because a lot of archeologists can’t agree on what it means. So they squabble about that and they shun it, because it’s better to dig and find something that you can know what its date is, what it might mean, even though there may be mysteries still associated with archeological finds. But it’s more concrete. But the debates about what the rock art means, in the absence of oral evidence. There’s only one oral historian of rock art that I know of, and that was a German philologist, Wilhelm Bleek, in the nineteenth century, and his sister-in-law, I think Lucy Lloyd, in Cape Town. They wanted to know about the San people and the rock art they made and their culture, and so they had prisoners, San prisoners, come live with them. These San prisoners, they had been arrested for poaching sheep and cattle. Not without cause, because their lands, their hunting grounds, had been taken away from them, so they had to earn a living. But then they were imprisoned. Sometimes they were even executed. Many times, they were driven to extermination. So talk about genocide. There’s lots of that that went on, but not talked about a great deal. But Bleek, being a great humanist, had some of the prisoners come live with him, to recount their stories and to learn the language, click languages. If you ever hear it spoken, it’s most amazing. It’s a series of astonishing clicks. Many different kinds of clicks, so it’s phenomenal. Their art is so beautiful, too. Really beautiful. So that was the kind of art that I grew up knowing about, in Southern Africa.

Holmes: This can take a variety of forms, right, rock art? Carvings into the rock or just paintings or sketches.
Agnew: Paintings and carvings. They’re variously called rock paintings, petroglyphs or pictograms and fancy words like that. But they’re painted on natural rocks, in overhangs or on boulders, or engraved in boulders everywhere.

Holmes: These are spiritual and cultural sites, many of them, correct?

Agnew: They are, but not today in Africa, because the people have been driven away, so they don’t have a connection anymore. But in Australia, they do. The people that made the art are still, in some instances, making the art and they know what it means. So it’s very valuable there. The rock art project, I have always thought, has been very appropriate to the mission of the Getty, and very appropriate to the mission of the Getty Conservation Institute. What could be better for the Getty than art? It’s visual art, right? It’s of the deepest antiquity and ubiquity, and it’s archeology and it’s understudied, and it’s in dire need of protection and preservation techniques. So there could be no better pedigree for undertaking work on rock art.

Holmes: But there’s a lot of obstacles in trying to advance those kind of projects right?

Agnew: Well, not within the institute. But we haven’t done anything much, other than what I’ve done and a predecessor of mine, Nicholas Stanley Price. In 1986-87, in the training program of the GCI, [he] started a one-year training course at Canberra College, I think it was then, in Canberra, now the University of Canberra, for a master’s degree.

Holmes: In Australia.

Agnew: In Australia, yeah, in rock art studies. Had about eight or ten people from a variety of countries, including one from Tanzania, who did the master’s degree. One’s in South America, one’s in Colombia, I think, or Bolivia. He’s been doing great work. Jannie Loubsen, South African who’s moved to the United States—oh, I think he’s in Texas somewhere. I don’t know. But anyway, it was quite seminal. But it was only held once and never again. Then we did have a field project, which I didn’t run, but I was in charge of when I visited the site. This was in Baja California. It’s the central part of the peninsula, in the Sierra de San Francisco, high in the mountains. Very beautiful, austere, overlooking the Sea of Cortez. Amazing rock art paintings there, just extraordinary. They’re undated as yet, although crazy dates have been put forward. But they were known when the first missionaries arrived. The local Indians said, “They were long before our time; we don’t know.” They typically figure seven feet tall, eight feet tall, on the volcanic exposures, and they’re bichrome. Vertically, one half is red and the other half is black. So they’re typically amazing. And then there’re other figures; there’re deer and animals. They’re in many sites in the canyons there.
The site we worked on was called Cueva del Ratón, the Cave of the Mouse. Everybody says the rat, but ratón is apparently a mouse. Except that the mouse that’s depicted there is actually a mountain lion, so there’s a big difference. So we conserved and presented that site and put in place a management plan. Which was interesting, and it’s recently been re-evaluated by a Mexican anthropologist, to find out how well it was working. It’s working, but it’s not working as well as we would’ve hoped, because the stress on that site was that people from the United States would bring tour groups down there. There’s a man called Crosby, I think, and another one, Erle Stanley Gardner. Do you recognize that name? Erle Stanley Gardner, he’d written popular books, I think about California. Maybe in the thirties, forties, fifties, I don’t know. He’d take groups down there. They created and were the beneficiaries of the tourist industry there, not the local villagers. So that was the stress. Villagers provide the mules now to go down the canyons. So the new modus operandi for visiting the sites was to have the villagers provide the mules and take them down, act as guides, and get the benefit. Nowadays, apparently, there’s been some fraying around the edges of that, because developers have moved in and made the villagers promises that apparently are not being realized. There’s an intrusion of modernity. Those villagers have lived there since the eighteenth century. So a remote place, but very beautiful. So that was our rock art initiative, until I revitalized it with the Southern African Rock Art Project. That, I’ve discussed already.

Holmes: So we were discussing the rock art projects, of course, that the Getty did down in Baja. You’ve touched on sort of your initiatives there in Southern Africa. I’d like to talk about your future initiatives and what you plan to do with rock art. But I also would like to, before we do that, touch a little bit and have you comment a bit on what you see the obstacles are for rock art conservation.

Agnew: Yeah. It depends on the region. If you’re in Southern Europe, there’s no obstacles because of the paleolithic rock art in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira, for example. In fact, the oldest dated rock art is there, 40,000 years in some of those caves. It’s so widely known now and such spectacular art. Replicas are made of Altamira and so on, and Lascaux. So it’s in the public eye, national treasures. It’s the epitome of rock art. But as far as we know, those are the only sites in the world of that antiquity, so deep within limestone caverns, and so well preserved, from the Ice Age. There’s nothing comparable. Most of the African, Australian, and American rock art sites are in rock overhangs, not deep caves. Or on exposed boulders. So there’s just not the public awareness to the same extent. This is not to say there’s no public awareness; there’s a lot. But it’s not very strong. For example, one of the national sites in the United States is Petroglyph National Monument, on the outskirts of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It’s a big extensive site. Petroglyphs. These engravings on the basalt boulders that litter the hill. Really wonderful engravings. There was a plan to drive a road through—it was I-25, I think—
from Albuquerque to Santa Fe. And they did. It should’ve been diverted, it should’ve gone around. So it’s now a kind of split-in-half park, national monument, with—.

Holmes: With a highway going through it.

04-00:58:01
Agnew: With a highway going through it, yeah. It’s well-interpreted by the US National Park Service. It’s very nice. In another sense, being so close to an urban center, it gets people who can be educated by it and learn about it. In another sense, it’s inappropriate for that to have happened. So that’s what I mean; there’s just not enough momentum and public support to stop that kind of thing happening.

Holmes: Would you see there’s a connection between that recognition and public awareness and funding opportunities to conserve rock art sites?

04-00:58:38
Agnew: Yeah. There’s light at the end of the tunnel, because if you just keep going past Santa Fe, to a small town just outside Santa Fe called Española, on the banks of the Rio Grande River there, there is a rock art conservancy called Mesa Prieta, Black Mesa. It’s run by a woman who must be about eighty years of age, with volunteer groups. She owns the property. It’s got wonderful petroglyphs, very similar to Petroglyph National Monument. She has been very effective in reaching the public and stopping a rather infamous exploiter of the area for gravel mining and rock and so on, who’s now a big proponent of preserving this heritage. So it’s astonishing to me what individuals can do, in turning things around. She has quite some vision. I’m very admiring of that. So these things that grow up here and there, you want them to coalesce better. I think the Getty could play a role in that. For example, here at UCLA, in the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, there is a rock art archive. It’s run by Jo Anne Van Tilburg, who is an archeologist. Most of her work is on Easter Island, as a matter of fact, on the moai there. But in the meantime, when she’s here, she runs projects with volunteers, in the Owens Valley, I think it is. I haven’t been to the site; I hope to go there. She’s very effective. She gets people from JPL [Jet Propulsion Laboratory] and other places, and PhDs and rocket scientists and all, and they spend their weekends recording sites for the love of it.

Holmes: Across the spectrum of the sciences and other professions too.

04-01:00:43
Agnew: Yeah. My vision is this, let’s make rock art like bird watching or amateur astronomy; give it the same momentum with support groups. Both documentation and public awareness, and good healthful enjoyment, education, all of those things. We should be able to build that consensus and build up rock art, an awareness of it, as a fundamental human heritage that is everywhere.
Holmes: Is that your aim with your current project that I know you’re going to be holding a conference on, I believe next year?

04-01:01:27 Agnew: Yeah. What I’ll do next year, the plan is this: to organize not a conference, not a seminar, but a colloquium. So what is the difference? Well, in my view, a colloquium is something you have where you have assigned speakers talk about particular topics, of your choice or agreed-upon choice, and stay on the agenda, not to come to present their latest findings from their site. Right? So you have a tightly structured framework for the colloquium. Particular themes that you want to hit upon. Ones that I want to hit upon would be things like volunteer groups, how you manage them, where you draw them from, what their benefits are, what role rock art can play in the current artistic inspiration of creative artists. How many artists use rock art? There are a number of instances there. What role can communities play in benefitting from guiding to rock art sites? So these kinds of things that are not, per se, conservation of rock art, but are outward-looking. Outward-looking, to achieve a greater momentum, through engagement of multiple, different kinds of input from contemporary art to site management through visitation, to community benefits and management. So all of those things. It’s not just how do you conserve rock art? It’s not like, how do you study rock art or what’s the meaning of this or so on. All of that’s important, but that is more archeological and inward-looking.

Let’s enlarge the scope of rock art to encompass community, broadly writ. That’s the vision there. To do that probably is difficult, but I think it might make a good beginning. I’m hoping to bring people from Europe, as well as Africa and Australia, also indigenous people. It’s got to be small, because this is an expensive enterprise. Maybe twenty-five people. We’ve done these colloquia before. We developed this technique for reburial and for sheltering. Figure out what you want to talk about exactly, what the subthemes would be, identify the best person to speak about that, have that person agree to do it, prepare a paper in advance, circulate it, present it, and have the whole thing, in each session, critiqued and discussed, and then publish the results. Publication is always important, but it does suffer from one very difficult flaw; and that is that you have to hope people are going to read the publication and then act upon it. That’s a big if, very often. And the right people. Somebody once said to me, and I think it’s very apt, “Publishing something is like—. Well, you’ve published it and you’ve got the book in your hand. There’s a tall wall, and you’re walking along it and you throw the book over the wall and you hope that somebody’s going to pick up that book on the other side, open the book, read it, understand it, act upon it, and change the world that way.” That’s a whole lot of ifs and buts and ands and hopes there. It’s a very inefficient tenuous process, right? It’s not something that you can guarantee is going to be successful. So that’s the problem, in a way.
Holmes: But it is a great example of the many forms of outreach that you and GCI have taken over the years. One of your international colleagues had commented on that aspect, that it was—. It’s just like the holistic type of conservation that you and the Getty have taken, to approach a site in its totality. That in and of itself is important; but if you’re not spreading the knowledge and trying to initiate a discussion—. Which you and the Getty have done through conferences, through outreach, through educational workshops that you would hold around the world.

04-01:05:51
Agnew: Now our China exhibition, yeah.

Holmes: Sure. Sure.

04-01:05:55
Agnew: Probably, that’s going to have greater outreach than all the conferences we’ve organized on China and Dunhuang, the number of people seeing this, the caves here.

Holmes: Absolutely. Absolutely.

04-01:06:07
Agnew: There’s no kidding there. Over 200,000 people have seen this already.

Holmes: That’s amazing.

04-01:06:15
Agnew: Yeah. By the end of August and the beginning of September, who knows? Maybe a quarter million, I don’t know.

Holmes: That’s a testament to not just the multidisciplinary, but multifaceted—

04-01:06:28
Agnew: Yeah, it is.

Holmes: —outreach that both GCI and yourself have taken over the decades.

04-01:06:33
Agnew: Oh yes!

Holmes: Which is a very important component, I think, and perhaps even overlooked component, to the conservation profession.

04-01:06:42
Agnew: Somewhat overlooked, I would say. Perhaps very overlooked, yeah, because we do tend to have our eyes more on the ground than at the stars sometimes, when we’re talking about conservation. I think it is important to try and encourage a vision. But then the field of conservation is enormous. You only think now, the GCI is interested in modern art, in contemporary architecture, in these subjects, as well. We still do not do, nor do I think we necessarily
should do, for example, shipwreck conservation, which I did in Queensland. We don’t do that. The world is full of incredibly important historic shipwrecks, apart from the treasure. The danger with them is, of course, many have been looted at a brisk rate, for treasure. Shipwreck treasure seekers go out and they just scoop up what they can get and get away.

Holmes: They even make television shows about this very thing.

04-01:07:51

Agnew: I remember in Australia, when I was working on Pandora, or shortly thereafter, the Titanic was discovered. The hoopla-doopla about that was phenomenal. There was this guy who had a bald-shaven head, and he was called Kojak. Kojak? Right. He was like a tough guy.

Holmes: Yeah, it was a police show, I think.

04-01:08:15

Agnew: Was it really?

Holmes: Yeah, yeah.

04-01:08:16

Agnew: Yeah. His name was Telly.

Holmes: Telly Savalas.

04-01:08:19

Agnew: They hired him to do the opening on television, of the captain’s safe raised from the Titanic. Everybody thought, well, all the jewels are going to be in there. Of course, they must’ve opened the safe before. They knew there was nothing in there. But still, he thrust his hand in this thing, as I recall, wads of soggy notes that came out. No real value anymore. Interest and so on. There were no glittering diamonds. But the thing about it was, of course, it was very inappropriate way of presenting, after all, what was a gravesite, and a very, very important gravesite.

Holmes: Very sensationalist.

04-01:09:06

Agnew: Yeah, and sensationally just doing it, creating a media event for it. Got the attention, but—.

Holmes: I wanted to have you reflect, now that we’re in our last session, a little bit on GCI. But also reflect on the conservation community as itself and how that relates to GCI. You’ve been working in this area for well over thirty years now, and there’s been a lot of change. But I’d also like you, I think, maybe to begin to again reflect on the importance of partnerships, not just in conservation projects, partnerships that you were laying out in our last discussion, of the core kind of principles, right? The four to five areas that
really make a successful partnership. But also some of the benefits that have had, in thinking of partnerships on a broader canvas. That you’ve worked with US Parks Service, you’ve done service in regards to scholarly journals dealing with conservation. What do you think have been the most effective aspects with your partnerships and where they should go and how the GCI could keep fostering those relationships?

One should always look for partnerships because collectively, you can always achieve more than you can individually, whether it’s a person or an institute. I’ve always espoused the establishment of partnerships in our foreign projects, in joining forces in finding better ways to do things, in pooling resources and so on. So we’ve had, for example, in relation to MEGA-Iraq, World Monuments Fund formed a partnership to support that, because World Monuments Fund was working on the conservation of Babylon. So yeah, there was an example with a partnership that mutually benefitted both of us. That kind of partnership is very valuable. But more challenging, of course, are partnerships across cultural and language boundaries and, shall I say, resource boundaries, as well, because so many of the places we work in developing countries are not wealthy. So we must seem like rich, spoiled people appearing on the scene. I’ve no doubt that’s how we were first seen when we went to China in 1988, rich Americans. In fact, Director Fan has said, “When I first saw you and just thought a bunch of rich Americans. So what are you doing here?” She said, “And so I thought, I can take your money; that’s okay.” She said, “Then afterwards, I realized you had things to teach us and things to learn from, so we got serious about you.”

It was a very candid statement from her, but not surprising at all. But that’s always the challenge, of course. Those are the difficult ones. For those to succeed, you do have to have those criteria, I think. Did we enumerate them before? To have somebody who’s a culturally-attuned person, who speaks the language—Arabic or Chinese or whatever—commonly agreed goals, buy-in by the partner organization, commitment of resources and so on, and absolute honesty. Those are the things that make for a good, sustainable, enduring partnership.

If we looked at those in the various projects and partnerships that you and GCI have fostered over the decades, would you say that, if we compared Egypt and China, there was a different stakes of buy-in by both sides? Do you think that was, say, a problem? But again, how does one fix that, either?

Yeah. China, by comparison, was an easy project. Egypt, they’re wonderful people and highly intelligent, and some are extremely skilled and so on; but the system is dysfunctional. The way allocation of resources occurs within government. The disconnect between the Muslim population and the pharaonic antiquities is ironic, because it’s the Arab Republic of Egypt. So
that’s the first thing. I’ll look at the money and think, but they’re not Arabs. The Arab Republic of Egypt? What? I’m sorry, maybe I shouldn’t be saying this, but that’s what strikes me. It’s just amazing. Then the fact that there’s not this connection between the people and their ancient history that I mentioned. Although on the currency, you can see pharaonic monuments depicted. But I’ve met Egyptians in senior positions in Cairo who have never been to Luxor—they’ve never been to Luxor—in the antiquities departments. Of which there’re several departments. There’s Islamic, and there’s Coptic, and there’s pharaonic, and sometimes, never the three shall meet. So it is really astonishing, don’t you think?

Holmes: Yeah.

Agnew: So it’s that kind of thing that shows the disconnect. And yet, many of the archeologists who come out of Cairo University, young ones, they specialize in pharaonic antiquities. But then they’re not rewarded. Do you know that Cairo University, I’m told, graduates 200 young pharaonic archeologists with a bachelor’s degree every year? Those guys, when [Gamal Abdel] Nasser came to power, were promised jobs in government, if they got a tertiary degree. So when trouble started in Egypt in recent years, there was a time when young unemployed archeologists were camping outside Zahi Hawass’ office. Literally camping there at night, protesting the lack of jobs. Which is really sad, because it shows that there was a lack of reality in making promises like that, which has never been revised, for one thing; and a lack of ability to be able to respond to that; also just a lack of initiative in the young archeologists. Many of them, truth be told, go into tour guiding and so on, which is a much better opportunity for them.

But I’m astonished at how poor the country is. Here’s the indicator. Think about Egypt. It’s got the Nile; all the water it wants, right? It’s got the high dam; it’s got hydroelectricity. It’s got the Suez Canal, and the money that generates. It has the pharaonic antiquities, arguably the greatest in the world, and the closest to Europe, where there’s a tradition of visiting Egypt at least once. The riches of that country. It used to be known in Roman times as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. It’s mismanaged from the top down, and that permeates the whole thing. I’m sorry, that’s my reading of the situation. So it’s very hard to get a good collaborative contribution from the partner there. Plus the fact that in Egypt, all the archeological missions—We qualify, as a conservation institute—. We’re assigned a role as a mission. A mission is an archeological mission, despite the fact that we do no archeology, but we do conservation. We’re a mission. All the missions have to pay for every last thing they do.

Holmes: What takes those kind of missions in that relationship, as well, is a history of not the most noble behavior on the part of, say, Western visitors, right?
Agnew: Oh, and Western exploiters.

Holmes: Yes, yes.


Holmes: Which is a great example of the many kind of complexities and facets that one has to think about when establishing relationships, because there is a history—

Agnew: —if it was well before our time, or not.

Agnew: You could argue that the Egyptian authorities now, in extracting whatever they can from foreign missions, are fully justified, given the bad things that have happened to their heritage. I have a lot of sympathy for that. Still, this is the modern world, and there should be better care of the antiquities, there should be better support for the staff who care for the antiquities, better motivation, guidance, training, all of those things. They’re lacking in all of that. They’re lacking in all of that. We can’t fix that. We go there twice a year, maybe, for six weeks maybe each time. Actually, some of the other missions are working there six months a year. Chicago House and the French and the American University in Cairo and so on all work there much more sustained periods of time than we do. So I must say, we ride on the coattails of our Nefertari project, our reputation. It’s true now that this is why I wanted to bolster that reputation by doing the Queens Valley project, a holistic project, which was within hair’s breadth of being implemented when the revolution broke out, and is now in abeyance. Because the deal was that they would pay for the implementation of the engineering and architectural elements. We would do flood control, we would do all the studies, we would do all the preparation, pay for the designs, do some refurbishment of tombs, et cetera, and interpretation and so on, geotechnical stabilization of collapsing tombs—all of which is prepared. Project ready, planned, so there. That’s the pity of it. Then we did take on Tutankhamen, which should finish a year from now.

Holmes: But that reputation that we see with Nefertari, with the Queens Valley, with Tutankhamen, isn’t that what also separates and gives the renowned reputation that the GCI has throughout the world, is that of doing good work?

Agnew: Yeah.
Holmes: And the noble operation, as well, right?

04-01:20:56
Agnew: Yes. Yeah. We certainly have a good reputation, and that’s something I’m proud of. I don’t think it’s pervasive as it could be, or as widely known as it could be. It’s known in heritage circles, in archeological preservation circles and the like. But honestly, my view is that it could be even better. The pity of it is that it isn’t. This is not pointing fingers at the Institute, which I love dearly. I do. It’s the organization that has given me my bread and butter and it’s a unique organization. It’s one of a kind in the world. It’s an absolute privilege to work here. And overall it is well led by Tim Whalen, who has been director for fifteen plus years now. It’s something that very few people are given the opportunity to do, and I got it through sheer good fortune and I cherish it. But I want the best for the institute. I really do. It’s done fantastically well. But I don’t think one should ever rest on laurels and I always look to what’s next, what could be better. Not from a sense of ambition, because I’m not ambitious in that sense; but from a sense of, we can do better, we should do better, there’s opportunity to do better. By better, I think just more important things, more valuable things, culturally and socially valuable things. We should be really having an expansion of our vision, to look at areas in which we could be reaching the public directly in better ways.

That’s why I think our Dunhuang exhibition is an opportunity to do this. It’s groundbreaking. It has been very difficult to do and partner, but it’s done. But here’s the thing – we’ve reached so many people. I think it’s really a powerful way of influencing people and society for the better. I’m not saying we need to make more exhibitions, believe me! This one has been a very big challenge. Tim Whalen did fundraising for the exhibition and he did a fantastic job in garnering support particularly from China and the Chinese-American community. But that’s one way in which we can reach to large audiences, to create in society, an awareness of what is valuable to society. See, I view cultural heritage, physical cultural heritage, as the carrier, the vehicle. The materiality carries the value of heritage. What we value, it’s carried by that physical object, whether it’s a site or an object. It carries the information and carries the cultural value. We conserve that, in order to conserve the value and preserve that. So the two of them are inextricably intertwined, the value and the physicality. We conserve the physicality. We don’t promote the value sufficiently well.

Holmes: That value is multifaceted.

04-01:24:04
Agnew: The value is multifaceted. It can be, again, all of the things we’ve discussed before. It could be artistic and historic and heritage, could be touristic, it could be economic. It could be all sorts of values for society. But we need to have that foursquare in our vision, about why we’re doing these things and what the value is and why it’s important to have those values embedded in our ethos
and how we promote it, so that we can communicate that to society at large. That’s why we need to do better. If we’re a technocratic, technical kind of organization that does excellent conservation work of the physical fabric, that’s fine; but it’s not sufficient. This is why we also need, in my view—and this is just a very personal opinion, of course—it’s why we need to embed the cultural values within the bigger ambit of what it is that we and society value as a whole, whether it be our literary heritage, whether it be our nontangible heritage, whether it be our natural heritage. I have difficulty in distinguishing the spiritual value of a natural landscape, with its ecological aspects, from the spiritual enrichment that I might get from looking at a painting or going into one of the grottoes of the Mogao. The site, in its setting, the artifact in its setting, the landscape, the environment—it’s all one. It’s a fabric. We look at the tapestry as a whole. We don’t look at part of the tapestry, nor excise it and draw boundaries around it.

We really need to have a focus, but that focus bleeds out into a wide awareness of where the focal point sits in the broader picture of our cultural heritage, which can include the natural heritage. Which is why we went to Laetoli, because it is both cultural and natural. Forget about that somebody says it’s a fossil site. Yes. In a way, it’s irrelevant, when you look at the symbolic value there. It’s about humanity, and it’s about humanity in the landscape, and the rise of humanity. That’s why we really need to be looking more broadly than a narrow focus. The tools of the trade, whether it is paper conservation, paintings conservation, architectural conservation, wall paintings conservation, all of that, even site management and those things, all of them start to fit into a bigger and much broader panorama, a huge, encompassing canvas that is part of our cultural and spiritual value system. So that really where it the institute wants to go, should go, should strive to go, and should seek to go. And it could go there by making greater efforts into the exploration of value systems, into the exploration of cultural heritage, broadly writ, the relationship between nature and culture. After all, UNESCO, for its nomination system for World Heritage Sites, has cultural sites, natural sites, and—guess what?—it’s got mixed sites. Natural and cultural sites, in which both of those values are enumerated, identified and incorporated into the status of World Heritage Site.

Holmes: If we took those categories, they easily fit in a lot of the GCI’s projects and work.

Agnew: They do.

Holmes: Which is what differentiates, I think, the GCI from other organizations, perhaps, in conservation. At least it was always at the forefront in advancing that kind of holistic view of conservation. You mentioned this kind of valuing, and the different steps that GCI could take. I wonder if you could go a little further into those kind of suggestions. We’re looking at, say, another thirty
years down the road, where do you think the Getty Conservation Institute could expand and grow?

04-01:29:01

Agnew: Yeah, that’s a good question, thinking about thirty years down the track, or even longer. Where would we be? Where should we be? Where would I want us to be? The glass is dark. For me, at any rate. I have no crystal vision. But I have glimmerings of what I think it should be. Some are what I’ve said already.

Holmes: Well, in thinking of partnerships and education, the conservation profession has developed at an amazing rate, especially if we think of the beginning of your career in conservation, in 1980, to now.

04-01:29:43

Agnew: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Holmes: It’s completely different. It’s a completely different world. But the profession now operates in a completely different standing.

04-01:29:53

Agnew: It does, certainly.

Holmes: Just to think of, well, even technology, of trying to get some of your background interviews of Sharon Sullivan, who’s in Australia. To coordinate just the time to call, was one thing. And of course, we’re corresponding and coordinating this by email. You didn’t have those in that day.

04-01:30:16

Agnew: No, we didn’t.

Holmes: So maybe just to reflect on how much conservation has changed, but maybe some of the building blocks in further developing it, such as in education and funding, if you have thoughts on that.

04-01:30:32

Agnew: Right. I’d love to see the GCI increase its funding and its staffing, in order to be able to achieve better and bigger things. The institute is thirty years old, right? In that period of time, there’s hardly been a growth in the number of staff. In fact, there may have been a decrease. There’s not been, in real terms, dollars, there’s not been an increase in funding. A diminution, in fact, because of rising costs. Airfares and so on absorb a very large part of our budget. So we’re not better off. Our ambition is great. I mean large. It’s also great ambition, in the best sense of that word. That’s what my vision is and ambition is for the institute. How can we make it better and greater? But in fact, we’re stretched very thin. I used to run more projects, but now I actually have direct responsibility for three major projects—in China, in rock art, and in Egypt. Of course, I have excellent professionals, such as Martha, who work with me as equals, rather than as partners. I have those kinds of supports. I
have Lori [Lorinda] Wong, who’s a wall paintings conservator and very bright, who’s working both in Egypt and in China with me. So we’ve had people like Michael Schilling and Shin Maekawa.

I must just pause here to mention that our much beloved colleague Shin Maekawa passed away just a week ago, after a long illness. He it was, who’s worked with me since basically, the very beginning here. An engineer, Japanese American, American; but very Japanese in many ways, because even in his final illness, over many, many months, you would never get him to confide. Never a word. Then he would disappear for weeks—for treatment, we assume—and then come back. Last week, that was it. We all, I think, without saying much about it, feared the worst and hoped for the best. But it turned out that the fear was realized. Shin put up the first of those environmental stations on the cliff top in 1989, in the first operational trip that we organized at the Mogao Grottoes. Shin was with me on the back of the Sphinx, when we were doing the study of the Sphinx. Shin put up the third environmental station at Nefertari’s tomb, the fourth at Tiwanaku, in Bolivia, the fifth at Chaco or wherever else. Shin was doing environmental monitoring, processing of data, feeding it to us, debating with us what it meant, how it could be used for the control of sand, for example. Wind direction at Mogao, from the station, to help to dictate the design of the sand fence.

Holmes: Very cutting-edge.

04-01:34:04

Agnew: Yeah. Oh, sure. The solar-powered environmental stations he pioneered. They’re basically meteorological stations, with a great deal of sophistication and telemetry to download the data and so on. He was just a great field man. He was a guy of substance, and will be greatly missed here. His final contribution to the field was in the form of a book that appeared, I think earlier this year, on environment within museums. So that was an encapsulation of much of his experience. Even as recently as six weeks ago, Shin was in the office. But when I asked him about the environment in the tent where the Dunhuang replica caves are, Shin came over with me and gave me the benefit of his advice about the excessive humidity in there, you see. I think that was the last time I saw him. His memorial is on Monday, next Monday, and I think there’ll be many people going. He’s a great loss to the Institute. So we’ve seen people come and we’ve seen them go. Shin is a huge loss. We traveled a lot together.

Holmes: Yeah, it sounds like it.

04-01:35:38

Agnew: Fantastic sense of humor. Really hard. So I think that there’s a need for more Shins in the world. There’s a need for us to be bringing on more staff, to really increase our capability to do excellent work across these other areas that I think we need to reach. But I digress. To be more specific about your
question, I would hope the GCI in thirty years (actually much sooner) would be both an effective conservation organization, which is what we are now, but also a better exponent of the intellectual attributes of heritage. A think tank, if you like, an academic powerhouse with strong connections to universities and other institutes like the Santa Fe institute. Better public education about cultural heritage to put heritage into the mainstream; a bit difficult, utopian I suppose.

Holmes: I had the pleasure this week of doing the videography for my colleague Paul Burnett’s interview with Jim Druzik, another great scholar, first-class scientist and member here at the Getty. Even predates you—.

04-01:36:33
Agnew: He does?

Holmes: Yeah. You and Jim worked together in the adobe project—

04-01:36:37
Agnew: Correct.

Holmes: —which brought you finally here. Having the benefit of listening to his oral history and his recollections, the GCI was such a special place and when it was created, it just had this amazing knack of bringing in very special people that were not just excellent in their field, but also just very multidisciplinary. Which again, is the foundation of the work that you have done for decades, that the Getty has done, and really spearheaded internationally for decades. Outside of funding, it’s one of the questions that have been burning and developing in my mind this week. How can the Getty, how can the GCI, really help develop and advance that next generation of multidisciplinary scholars to come and work in special institutes and places like this?

04-01:37:46
Agnew: We do, we do. And we do that effectively, but not to a sufficient degree. We do that in an amazingly good way with interns, graduate interns. But for me, it’s a rather sore point, because we have so few graduate interns. They are so limited in number. These are the brightest of the bright from around the world. They’re amazing kids who come, recent graduates, usually with a master’s degree. Even sometimes, I think, we’ve had a few with PhDs. But they’ve all graduated very recently. They come to us, they apply. It’s highly competitive. This is across the Getty that they apply. But we get a small allocation of perhaps four or five, and they’re hotly contested within the Institute. But those kids, when they come here and they work in a team with us, they end up doing great work. Just great work. They go out as our ambassadors. We have imprinted them for life. For good purpose. And they know it, because they’re at such a wonderfully creative time in their careers, because they’ve proven themselves by being graduates—usually a second degree, a master’s degree, sometimes even higher. So they know their worth, in an academic sense. Many of them are multilingual and have just got extraordinary talents. So
they’re young, maturing professionals. It’s just the right time to get them. They’re proven, in a sense. They’ve worked with us in China, in many instances. Some work in science. I’ve had a lot working in China; sometimes Chinese, sometimes not. I’ve had one or two on rock art. We’ve had a couple in Egypt. We’re having a young Chinese girl, starting next month. She’s going to be assigned to the Tut project. She’s very enthusiastic about that.

Holmes: Wow, that’s exciting.

Agnew: Yeah. Many of them have been at University College London and so on, for their master’s degree, and they come here. They’re not paid any princely stipend, may I tell you, $35,000 a year or whatever it’s about, which in the scheme of things, is not very much for L.A. Given the benefits that accrue to them and to the field and to our reputation, it’s a small amount. But as contributing staff members, by the time they’ve been here their twelve months they’re wonderfully attuned to what we’re doing and embedded in the projects. Sometimes we’ve hired them on afterwards, after a one-week hiatus, because they’re not allowed to transition immediately to employment, as consultants or something of that nature. But I’d like to see more of that. Interns are incredibly valuable. I’d like to see a broader range of staff members hired. I’d like to see increased budgets. But above all, I would like to see our mandate expanded. That’s my vision for the next thirty years of the Getty.

Our mandate expanded along those lines that I talked about, as really a broadening of the vision of the Getty Conservation Institute, about what is needed for society to value cultural heritage broadly writ, including the natural environment, the natural heritage. So that we can have a better society and a better awareness of the values of cultural heritage, and the sheer joy of being able to appreciate both a great painting and a great archeological site and ruin. To be able to have the experience of musing about the Laetoli footprints and what they mean, or looking back at a dinosaur track made a hundred-million years ago, where one dinosaur skidded this way to avoid another one, just in one second of time, huh? It’s really a phenomenal thing. These things are not self-evident to everybody. They’re the sort of thing that you want to get a young person to sit down with you—preferably a child, sometimes, but a young adult, too—to imbue them with a sense of discovery, sense of awe, sense of excitement. All of those things. It’s a great opportunity, I think, for us as an institute, to influence society for the better across international boundaries, because I do think that our work internationally is very important. This is why we should continue working in China, we should expand into other areas in other cultures, with other languages and ethnicities.

Holmes: That also touches on something I wanted to ask you about. Again looking, say, thirty, fifty years ahead, to achieve those goals, that that next generation
of scholars also seems to be trying to break better into the academic realm, perhaps.

Agnew: Yes.

Holmes: We spoke a bit in our discussions, of the divides between the conservation community and at times, the archeological or other academic communities and sectors. On this front, what steps would you like to see GCI perhaps undertake to help to advance this? Because you yourself have lectured at UCLA; you’ve led workshops, of course, down in Australia, as well as even at Columbia.

Agnew: Yeah, sure, sure. For a long time, Martha Demas and I gave lectures annually at Columbia, in site preservation work and so on. They were valuable, and it was very nice to give occasional lectures. In some instances, we’re able to draw from the student body there, for young professionals who have joined our staff. Jonathan Bell was one. He’s gone now. He’s got a PhD and he’s doing something else, but in the heritage field. So we’ve influenced people through that, through the teaching. Teaching’s very important, for sure. There’s no doubt of it.

Holmes: Well, thinking of partnerships and relationships, do you envision perhaps that the GCI could establish maybe a better partnership or relationship with some of the universities?

Agnew: We have one; that’s it. We have one with—. No, I’d lost track there for a moment, but we have one, of course, with UCLA, in the master’s degree in ethnographic and archeological materials. Not sites, materials. Although they do do a little bit of site lecturing, which is what I lecture on there from time to time, on site conservation. It was a stretch to get that inserted into UCLA, because UCLA—I’ll be very candid—looked at this enterprise as not necessarily of the first order academically. It’s a research university, right? And international. What they look for is top-flight research publications, state of the art research, fundamental research. Conservation still does suffer from a problem of being an applied activity, applied knowledge, applied research, applied technology.

We don’t do fundamental research in the scientific labs here. We might do cutting-edge research, but we don’t do fundamental research. We take the tools and the techniques that others have developed, and the knowledge, and we apply them to our problems and we generate new information. It’s very valuable; but we are not generating new discoveries and research, in that sense of the word, which is the reality. So it’s sometimes difficult. It might be better for us to focus, in our academic rise of conservation, heritage conservation, in the academic field, through a more academically-accessible university,
perhaps. Not a community college, but perhaps the state universities. They might be more amenable to provide a greater level of support, and we might find our student base more engaged, in many ways, for our own advancement.

Holmes: But as we also spoke about, actually, here just recently, it could also be a generational thing, as well, that sense not just of the aspects of what the Getty can undertake, but also the academic community perhaps also realizing over time, that turf wars in these kind of areas are silly.

Agnew: Yeah, absolutely. They are silly.

Holmes: But that might be wishful thinking on my end, as well.

Agnew: Well, it’s hard to pigeonhole conservation, because it is so multidisciplinary. We want to know everything about everything, insofar as it pertains to conservation. Certainly, in a site. A site’s history, its archeology, the technical challenges, the analytical challenges, the management challenges, all of those things. So there’s just a heck of a lot going on in conservation. It’s hard to find where its natural home is academically, other than in conservation. But I think that’s why, also, it would be good to form greater affiliations with nature conservation. They seem to have gotten their act better together than through ecologists, particularly, and the like, and also enriching the public. They’re way ahead of cultural heritage conservation people. Way ahead. Think of the way they can garner funds and support. Well, let’s put it this way. A baby panda has got much more appeal than an adobe ruin. No matter how important the adobe ruin is, the panda’s got the goods on the adobe ruin. So you can reach the heartstrings and the purse strings through the panda very easily, but not through the ruin. Or naming a baby gorilla. The minister of tourism is Rwanda, she said, “That’s how we make money.” You can buy the name you want to give your baby gorilla.

Holmes: It’s hard to compete with baby pandas, right?

Agnew: Yes, it’s very hard to compete with baby pandas.

Holmes: Before we go, you had mentioned that over the decades, you’ve learned that a partnership and relationship is almost like a marriage. This is very much embodied with the various projects and success stories that we see coming out of China. That yes, there were bumps along the road, but we didn’t leave. We stuck it out, we worked together.

Agnew: Sure, yeah.
Holmes: And that you wanted to reflect maybe a little bit on some projects that perhaps were abandoned a bit too early, and that there might’ve been lessons in those cases moving forward, both for the GCI, but for the larger conservation community.

04:01:51:11 Agnew: I think in some respects, the GCI in the past has been too flighty, shall we say. Too quick to mount big initiatives that in the end didn’t go anywhere. That’s unfortunate.

Holmes: Fort Selden?

04:01:51:44 Agnew: Fort Selden was a case in point. It was a lovely site that could’ve been used, but was lost because there was no continuity from my successor in the science department. It was a research base that was very valuable. He was not interested, really, in pursuing somebody else’s work, wanted to do his own things. This has been an endemic problem with people coming into the GCI. They want their own projects. It’s a very human thing; I understand that. But killing off something that’s really valuable, I think is wrong. I think it’s just stupid and shouldn’t be allowed. But that’s not the instance I’m really thinking about. I think in projects that we began and really didn’t see through to fruition. I think the Brancusi project in Romania, for example—.

Holmes: The Endless Column?

04:01:52:45 Agnew: The Endless Column, yes. Yeah. I’m not sure how that kind of just died away. But some years later, lo and behold, the World Monuments Fund had it and was getting great PR out of it. We undertook it because our director at that time—not Luis Monreal, but Miguel Angel Corzo—met somebody who was very plausible, and Brancusi’s column is a very important icon, both for Brancusi, the artist, and for Romania, the country, because it’s a sculptural ensemble embedded in an urban environment. The column is there and it’s over a hundred feet tall, and a mile away is the next part of this, which is the Gate of the Kiss. That’s made out of travertine. Then there’s Table of Silence, another part of it. So they were strung out along this axis. Had been very much neglected. The Endless Column was the focus, not the travertine, because it was originally created as a bronzed finish on cast iron, which was these trapezoidal elements that are built up, one on top of the other, going up a hundred feet—the very Brancusi motif that he used in other sculptural pieces, as well. You can see them in the Metropolitan, I think, or in the Guggenheim in New York. Some in wood, but this isn’t. They’re not always identified as being of the same design or same origin as Brancusi’s column in Romania.

People see the objects in museums like the Metropolitan, I think it is—or the Guggenheim; I forget—and there’s no relation. But clearly, he had this motif that he used repeatedly. So it’s big and it’s the ultimate expression of that
particular artistic sculptural motif. The coating that he had on it was brass, I think. Well, this is not good for the outdoors. Follow? It was meant to kind of shine in the morning sun. Looked glorious. But by the time we saw it, it was black. Brass does tarnish quickly. There’s a lesson to be learned. So many artists are ignorant of the behaviors of materials, whether it’s the ancient Dunhuang artists who did the cave paintings and use the lead pigments that blackened over time, when they were white and flesh-colored to start. But centuries later, they’re black now. Black faces, black. The lead oxidizes. Whether it’s Brancusi, with his brass coating that tarnished in the environment, or whether it is some of the contemporary artists’ materials that are being studied here in our science labs now. Modern art materials that are fugitive color-wise, fragile in terms of durability, and so on.

Artists grab whatever they like and they use it. Of course, the deterioration of valuable artworks with fugitive materials is not a good combination—at least for the possessor of the art, who may have paid a lot of money for it. To see it crumbling or changing color before your very eyes is not a good thing. Anyway, the point being that generally speaking, artists are not aware of the behavior of materials and the durability of those materials. So the current authorities and Radu Varia, who is the Romanian who was promoting this thing to our director, wanted the same thing. You couldn’t gild it; it wouldn’t be right. You couldn’t do this, you couldn’t do that. It had to be just like it was. Now, a lot of research was done on it, and then I don’t know where it went. We even involved a Swedish corrosion organization. The pity of it was, it wasn’t wrapped up in a way that measured and defined or completed, even if it’s not completed the project. So that was one example, I think, that was not appropriately dealt with. There’re others, too. I really can’t—.

Holmes: But on that front of understanding the lessons moving forward, of sometimes it’s better to not exit the relationship or the project prematurely, but maybe to give it its full due.

04-01:57:53 Agnew: Yeah. Well, if you rush into a relationship, you’re probably going to not end it well.

Holmes: That’s true.

04-01:58:02 Agnew: Yeah. That’s true for human relationships, and it’s true for cultural heritage conservation, as well. We really should be strategic in the way we look at our projects, before we go into them. We now have—or we had, even since the Laetoli days, we had—this idea, let’s do a feasibility study before we jump in. It’s there on paper; sometimes it’s used and sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes it’s rigorous and sometimes it isn’t. The other thing that we’re supposed to do and we try to do is an assessment of the project. So this very fact of my mentioning the Brancusi column, the Endless Column, is a kind of
assessment. It’s just an opinion assessment, but it still is for that reason. Quito, we ended prematurely, I think. We did finish a phase, which was very nice.

Holmes: This was in Ecuador.

Agnew: Yeah. Quito is a wonderful city. I was responsible for the project. I went there many times, and led it. There are other projects too that died prematurely and for reasons that seem illogical to me, but I am not the decision maker so I will leave it at that.

Holmes: Well, before we go, and in taking those lessons into account, I wanted to also give you a chance to reflect on a question that has been burning in my mind over the week of getting to know you, of young scholars reading this, of thinking about conservation, of looking at the life of someone who very well could’ve been, I guess if everything went to plan, would’ve never actually have had these adventures, but would’ve been working in a chemistry lab, perhaps.

Agnew: Another old professor somewhere. Retired and—I could’ve stayed in South Africa and be fishing on the coast, near wonderful, wonderful Kleinmond and those places. Just beautiful, beautiful fishing resorts and beachside cottages and very nice. Kenton. Really lovely. Used to go there for the summer holidays.

Holmes: But I know the question that I’ve been also thinking of, and I know my colleague has been thinking of this, and surely, I think, the Getty itself is also thinking of the same thing, is what really were the ingredients that made a Neville Agnew?

Agnew: Oh. Oh, I really don’t know. I don’t know. Well, I do. I have a prejudicial opinion of my attributes. I think they are limited. That being said, I think that my singular attributes are curiosity and tenacity. I’m curious. And I like to solve problems and I like to have a sense of achievement in doing things. I don’t like intractable problems, but I like to see the way through a problem and I find it exciting to plan, whether just a technical problem—. I used to enjoy synthetic chemistry a great deal, because on paper, you’re looking at the structure of a molecule that you want to synthesize. Right? It’s a paper construct. It’s the architecture of a molecule writ on paper. I want to make that molecule. No matter why you want to make it. It sounds very arbitrary, I want to make a molecule. It’s not that at all.

But let’s say you’re designing a molecule for a specific purpose; that’s exciting in its own right. Then how do you approach that synthetic problem? From the repertoire of synthetic approaches that one knows of and has, how would you go about making that molecule? Then you try things, and
sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. But the sense of having created that new substance—. It probably has existed somewhere in the universe over the eons, the eternity of time, but it never existed on Earth, as far as we know. To create that, it’s of no consequence whatsoever, in one sense. And that is, hundreds of thousands of new molecules are made by chemists in industry and in university labs and in pharmaceutical laboratories every year. Nonetheless, you’re making something that’s new. It’s a creative act. There’s a great sense of satisfaction in being able to do that synthesis and to be able to isolate the compound, and if it’s a crystalline material, to know you have a pure crystalline molecule there. Which you may do an x-ray crystallographic analysis of, to confirm in three dimensions that indeed, it is the molecule that you planned. There’re other ways of discovering that it’s the molecule you planned, such as nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy. Or you could do infrared or you do carbon-hydrogen-nitrogen analysis. All of those things add up to a convincing truth that this is, indeed, what you set out to do. That’s a very satisfying thing. You made something. Curiosity and the creative side, for me, are very important. And staying power—I’m a trooper. That’s what makes me, I suppose.

Holmes: Yeah? Well, and when you apply that, a way not just for chemistry, but actually, apply that to a conservation site, we could see why you’ve probably been so successful over the decades.

04-02:03:27 Agnew: I would say to any young person, just keep your enthusiasm up and keep your curiosity. Those two things. Enthusiasm is a very great part of success in life. In the limited success that I’ve had—and it is limited, let’s face it—it’s the enthusiasm that I’ve valued, and the curiosity, I suppose. Those are the things that I think are important. And don’t watch too much television, okay?

Holmes: Neville, thank you so much.

04-02:04:03 Agnew: Thank you very much, Todd.

[End of Interview]