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Installation view of *Foundry to Finish: In the Studio of Adriaen de Vries*, June 29, 1999-April 9, 2000, courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum. See page 77 for discussion in text.
Fran and Ray Stark Sculpture Terrace design sketch, Merritt Price, 2006.
See page 107 for discussion in text.
Getty Villa Family Forum, 2005. Photo © 2005 Richard Ross with the courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved. See page 97 for discussion in text.
Getty Villa Gallery 209, 2005. Photo © 2005 Richard Ross with the courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved. See page 90 for discussion in text.
Installation view of *J. Paul Getty: Life & Legacy*,
September 27, 2016-ongoing, courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.
See page 86 for discussion in text.
Installation view of *Michelangelo: Mind of the Master*,
See page 101 for discussion in text.
Merritt Price leading "Visitor Experience" workshop with frontline staff around 2015.
Abstract

Merritt Price is the former head of the Design Department (now Museum Design Department) at the J. Paul Getty Trust, which he ran from 1995-2020. Price grew up in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, and moved to Toronto in 1980 to attend the Ontario College of Art (now Ontario College of Art and Design). Price worked for several design firms in Toronto, including starting his own practice called Tangram, before accepting a position with the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1990. He began his work with the J. Paul Getty Trust in 1995, founding what was then the Exhibition Design Department. In this interview, Price discusses growing up in rural Ontario; attending University of Waterloo before transferring to Ontario College of Art to study industrial design; working at Toronto design firms, including Keith Muller Ltd. and his private practice called Tangram; teaching university-level design throughout his career, including through Ontario College of Art and Otis College; working with the Art Gallery of Ontario (1990-1995), including learning to run an in-house design studio for a museum; founding the Exhibition Design Department at the Getty in 1995, including determining scope of work and hiring multidisciplinary employees; the Getty Center project, which opened in 1997, including working with Richard Meier & Partners Architects, designing wayfinding systems for the campus, as well as designing opening exhibitions and other visitor experiences; working on redesigns at the Getty Villa; memorable exhibitions, including Foundry to Finish: The Making of a Bronze Sculpture and J. Paul Getty Life and Legacy; collaborating with other departments and programs at the Getty Trust; the process of design, including mockups and visitor testing; challenges under Barry Munitz's leadership; the impact of financial downturns on the Getty; his decision to retire; the impact of COVID19 pandemic on Design Department work, as well as plans for reopening to the public; and his reflections on changes at the Getty, as well as the organization's contributions to the field of exhibition design.
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Interview 1: September 9, 2020

01-00:00:06
Tewes: This is the first interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project. Interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 9, 2020. In this remote interview Merritt is joining me from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you so much for joining me today—the first of many interviews together. Let's start at the beginning: when and where were you born?

01-00:00:33
Price: Well, I was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada in 1960, August 2, 1960. So I'm a Leo, and in the Chinese calendar I'm a rat, so it's double the same attributes.

01-00:00:49
Tewes: I had not thought of that; that's pretty funny. [laughs] Tell me a little bit about growing up in Belleview.

01-00:00:55
Price: Belleville.

01-00:00:56
Tewes: I'm sorry, Belleville.

01-00:00:58
Price: That was the closest town or city with a hospital, which was about a half hour or more drive away. I actually grew up in the hinterlands, the Canadian hinterlands, you might say, outside of a little hamlet called Actinolite, which had a population of under a hundred people, so it was a very small place, but halfway between Toronto and Ottawa on the Trans-Canada Highway. It was very rural, and it was a place that my family had lived for two generations in the vicinity on both sides.

01-00:01:43
Tewes: So you're very rural. What is that experience like for a young kid in the sixties and seventies?

01-00:01:50
Price: It was great until you became a teenager, because there were lots of fun things to do outdoors. My aunts and uncle lived down the road, so there were cousins that were the same age as my family that we had playmates. There were a couple of other kids that were involved in my family's business and lived at that property. We had a gas station and restaurant and trading post. That was somebody who was in my same grade and in my younger sister's same grade, so these were playmates, as well. We did a lot of outdoor activity, so building things, creating things outdoors. It was Canada, so we all played hockey in the wintertime and skated and skied and tobogganed and—yeah. So you made your own fun.
My family were both products of the Depression and the way they were raised with their family. So we all were fairly frugal in our habits and unlike today with lots of bells and whistles of computers and things, it was a little bit more homespun.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the family business?

Yeah. Well, my namesake Merritt, well, my grandfather on my dad's side, he was a minister, and he was a major in the First World War and a minister. When he returned home, he was known as the Motorcycle Minister, that he was stationed at a few different rural churches in Ontario and ended up in Actinolite. He was a labor organizer, so he organized people in the congregation and the community—this was during the thirties, during the Depression—and organized contracts with the government for building roads and byways for the trains that were being built at that time in the country. That didn't sit too well, I understand, with the women folk in the church, that he was mixing religion and politics, and so he left the ministry.

And because he was involved in this road-building project, [he] realized that there was an opportunity and built a log cabin—literally, like hewed the trees from the woods—and built a log cabin to live in and built a restaurant and a gas station that became a stopping point between the Toronto and Ottawa. So that was our family business that my older siblings remember hanging out there and being around our grandpa and grandmas. They both passed before I was born, and then my father and my uncle and my mom and my aunt inherited the business and carried on with it. That's how we ended up there in that part of the country.

My dad was also a member of parliament in the provincial government before taking full responsibility for the business of the gas station and restaurant. My granddad on my mom's side was a train station master of the train in a local town called Tweed. They had a cottage that was across the road from our family home that he bought the land from my grandfather on the other side and established a little cabin there, which was actually a converted twelve-seater outhouse that was decommissioned from the restaurant, and there were overnight cabins at the property. So they got real plumbing, real running water, and moved the twelve-seater outhouse down the road to become a cabin for my grandfather, and what then became a family cottage, and it's still in the family.

So we spent summers with my grandparents across the road, boating and building rafts and fishing every night with my grandad in the summertime. In the wintertime, we tapped the maple trees and had maple sugar, very modest
maple sugar and maple syrup operation that was enough to put up jars for the immediate family.

Some might think that was a very idyllic—and in many respects it was—childhood, but then going back to an earlier question, what was it like growing up there. Teenage years, it was fairly isolating, so we were a long way to get to a movie or anything like that. Fortunately, our restaurant was a popular workplace for waitresses because it was a very busy place in the summers especially. So most of the waitress staff were people that I knew from school and so that was an instant, ready-made, like get-together on weekends when you were a teenager too. I was always the designated driver because I was—lived furthest away and so would pick up other people and drive into town for a movie.

Tewes: That makes sense. You mentioned you had older siblings. Where do you fall in the birth order?

Price: I'm fifth of sixth. It's interesting, my older siblings grew up without water at the school they went to. It was a one-room schoolhouse, believe it or not, with grade one to eight all in the same room and one teacher. So my oldest sisters tell stories about going to school in the winter, and the older boys would arrive a bit early to put wood in the potbelly fireplace to heat up the room and put everybody's inkwells—because they were still writing with old-fashioned dip your pen in the inkwell—they put the inkwells on top of the stove to thaw out from the winter cold. So it was really rural.

By the time I went to school, they had a brand spanking new three-room schoolhouse, so it was three—grade one, two, and three and one teacher; and then you progressed on to the next room, which was four, five, and six. As you graduated—there was usually one row per grade—you got closer to the window. So that was your reward for graduating, moving over towards the widow.

Tewes: You get a little more vitamin D [laughs], right? Well, I'm interested, given that scenario, what your exposure was to arts education growing up.

Price: Yeah. People always in my family said that I must have inherited some artistic ability from my Grandmother Dorothy on my dad's side, because she painted and drew and did needlepoint and crafts, and there are mementos from her artistic expression that are adorning the walls of various family members' homes. I was always interested in drawing and liked that as a subject at school. I didn't really think that it would materialize in a career path as I got older. But I did do some continuing education classes when I was in high
school that were really targeted for older adults, but I was bored and there was something to do. There were two different teachers that were close enough to me that they befriended me and would pick me up on their way to their class, and I would take their class, so you know, paid for it for credit and all of that. And then both of them, made friendships with and would do other plein air painting excursions in the warmer months and hang out at—it was Poul Thrane was the name of one of the artists—hang out at his house and help him with his framing a little bit and just get some tips. I was always painting and drawing in my teenage years, yeah. And I was on the school yearbook committee and decorations for school dances and things like that, so that was always something that I did with extracurricular time.

01-00:11:18
Tewes: Did you identify that, though, as being artistic, or was that just an interest you felt was separate?

01-00:11:25
Price: No, I identified that as being artistic, but I didn't really think that it had a commercial, like a livelihood potential attached to it. Yeah. Our family and cousins were very industrious, too. We were always building things. We had extensive forts, like two-story forts with lofts and ladders and tin roofs that you could go and overnight in. And we ranged fairly far. It was those days when you were sent out in the morning with a lunch and told to be home by dinner, so our territory that we were familiar with was fairly extensive in the country.

01-00:12:12
We collected bottles for the deposit money along the side of the highway, and we during the season would pick pinecones from different kinds of pine trees and turn those into Ontario Department of Lands and Forests [Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry] for—they paid you by the bushel so that they could get the seeds out of the pinecones.

01-00:12:37
And I, being one of the smaller kids, one of my jobs in the pine tree forest—it's actually a pine tree forest that my parents and aunt and uncle planted. They grew in like a grid, and outside of the grid, the pine trees would have branches all the way up. On the inside of the forest, there would only be branches at the very top. For the outside branches, those were the most plentiful with pinecones. I would be sent to the top and would grab on to the topmost branch that would support my weight and then go down because pine trees have—their branches are completely concentric where it's always one above the other. And you would, with gloves on, grab on to the branches, and they would fold up, and all the pinecones would pop up as you just went down the edge of the tree, slid down the edge of the tree grabbing one branch to the next to the next, and then you'd pick up all the pinecones on the ground and put them in your bushel basket. Maybe that wasn't so safe, but I survived without any broken bones.
Price: Yeah. So we made our own fun, and we also made our own money. We all worked in the family business from a fairly young age, and we saved. There was always an understanding pretty much with our family that we would go on to secondary education, unlike a lot of the people in the community that were destined to stay on the farm or do more blue-collar work. But we always had it as our goal, all of our family really—and my cousins—to go on to postsecondary education. So part of the working was also saving to finance going to school.

Price: Being very thrifty and making things go a long way. My mom and dad were very community oriented, so they were involved. Dad was involved in the [Royal Canadian] Legion and did all the accounting for the Legion. He was in the D-Day landings in the Second World War, and survived that, like landing on the beach and making it across through the machine gunfire. So he was always involved in the Legion and supportive of his other pals from the Second World War. My mom and dad were also elders in the local church, which was a very small, rural church. It's where actually my grandfather was a minister, and my dad lived in the manse there. Its claim to fame: it's the only white marble church in Canada. They were elders in the church and did the bookkeeping and helped with the church suppers, and we would go early to open the place up, turn the heat on. My job was to ring the bell when I got to be old enough to call the service to order. We were all in the choir. If the Prices didn't show up to church, the choir didn't happen, because it was predominantly my family and my cousins that were the choir. It was a very a small community.

Price: The United Church of Canada, which was—it's a fairly liberal church that's mainly in central east Canada. I think it was a combination of Methodist and—I'm forgetting—Lutherans, [it was a union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian, established in 1925], I believe, combined together, and the United Church of Canada was formed. They were one of the first churches to ordain women to the clergy and I think in maybe the early seventies rewrote the scripture book using common language instead of old English kind of prose. Yeah.
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01-00:17:21 Tewes: I'm interested in, thinking again about your arts exposure, whether or not you had a mentor who helped you think about art as not only a profession but maybe just as a way to garner expertise.

01-00:17:40 Price: Yeah, the only thinking of this—because I've been asked this question before, like what were your role models or mentors, as you put it. And the only ones that I can really think of were from television. One was Darrin Stephens from the Bewitched show, that I thought that was a really cool job. He was like some kind of ad exec that was always making pitches for television commercials, and it looked like fun. He was drawing and coming up with slogans, and so Darrin Stephens was a role model. I thought that would be a cool job; how do you get that? The other role model that I can think of was Mike Brady, who was the architect on The Brady Bunch, right? Well, and they also had a big family, so that was a parallel to my family, and they got up to hijinks like families do. So those are the only two really concrete examples I could think of that were jobs that you would do with something creative or artistic. But there weren't really people in the community or student counselors or teachers that knew about that or could advise you in any way. I ended up thinking, Well, architecture is a profession that sounds professional and has like something applied at the end of it that you would do, so I did. Eventually, I applied to architecture school coming out of high school.

01-00:19:21 In that moment in education in Ontario, you had to decide by grade ten whether you were going to do the five-year or the four-year high school program. And the four-year will set you up for vocational schools and college, community college, but the five-year was the more academic track to qualify you for university. So I was in the five-year program, which meant that my graduating class was quite small, like under twenty people in high school.

01-00:19:56 Tewes: So tell me about the decision to attend the University of Waterloo starting in 1979, I believe.

01-00:20:05 Price: Yeah. You know, I want to go back because it's something our family—before I answer that question, something our family is known for is the fact that we had bears. And so my dad—well, my granddad, I think, but then my dad—had rescue bears that they took under their wing and looked after. As the gas station and restaurant became more popular, instead of the bears just being on a chain with a bear house that was a bigger version of a doghouse, they built an enclosure with like a little swimming pool and a place for them to hibernate. It became a roadside attraction that was not that uncommon a thing in rural, countryside in Canada and in the United States in the twenties and thirties and forties. But there, people would come to see the bears and feed them a Coke or an ice cream and get their picture taken with them. That was
one of my jobs at the restaurant, was to make sure the pop machine, the soda machine was kept full with bottled Coke, because people would buy the Coke and feed the bears. In retrospect, I think this was a good lesson in branding and marketing that it was something that my dad having kind of a soft spot in his heart for anything that needed to be looked after, people and animals, turned it into an advantage of an attraction.

So people knew of our place, the Price Restaurant with the bears, fairly far and wide, because it was a heavily trafficked highway, and anybody from that part of the world would stop there between going to their cottage or going from Toronto to Ottawa. And so people knew me from that or they knew where I grew up. I would say, "The place with the bears," and everybody would know the place with the bears. It was also emblazoned on my dad's shirts for the local five-pin bowling team, because they were Price Bears.

See, that is advertisement. [laughs]

Yeah. [laughs]

Sponsored the team. Yes, thank you for sharing that. That is definitely a unique youth experience.

Yes, definitely.

But in terms of choosing to go to university outside of this small area, did size of the city matter to you at all?

Well, because I was fifth of sixth, a couple of my older siblings had left home and gone to school, so I had visited them at schools in their cities. One of the benefits of having a gas station restaurant is it was also an inter-city bus stop and so our family had unlimited pass to travel on the bus system for free. I used that very liberally when I was a teenager to get out of Dodge, as it were, and spread my wings a little bit, because I would hop on the bus on a Friday and go and visit a sister at university for the weekend and then come back on Sunday before school started or—yeah, if it was summertime then. It was really more of a schooltime endeavor rather than a summer endeavor, because we were working in the summer.

But I had sisters that went to school in Peterborough, which was like a ninety-minute trip, and one sister that went to Waterloo, which was more of a four-hour trip. And that sister, Beth, she had very good stories to share about her time at University of Waterloo. It did have an architecture program. She
studied statistics. She met her husband there and had a really good experience in the residence that she lived in, which was a cooperative residence where when you paid your dues for the year, you were a co-owner and so you had responsibilities for maintaining the building and doing chores and being part of a community. And unlike other residences, it was organized so that it gave preference to returning students. It was a blended community, not just all frosh or younger students, but it was people all the way through to graduate studies, from entry level up to graduate studies, so it was a little bit more sane environment than some residences can be with partying and what have you.

I ended up following in my sister's footsteps and went to Waterloo. I applied to several schools for architecture and was accepted in one that I wasn't really keen on going to. I made it to the hundredth cut at University of Waterloo, but they only took seventy-five into the first year of study. It was a fairly exclusive program. It was cooperative program, which was one of the appeals, that you would go to school for a quarter and then go and work for a quarter and then go back to school for a quarter. You got experience, as well as making a little bit of money and understanding—applying what you were learning at school, which was really appealing.

But I didn't get accepted that first year. I went to the university thinking, Well, I'll knock out some of the core courses in math and sciences and then I'll get accepted the next year. I can build on my portfolio and meet some of the students and see what it was like, which I did. So I enrolled in the honors math program and took electives in fine art. Math was very difficult, way more difficult than it ever was in high school. I never heard of a bell curve before, but I was saved by the bell curve in more than one test. It was very challenging.

But during that year, I saw people in the architecture program and how hard they were working and what they were doing, and it was a tough, tough program. I was up for it, but I was introduced to a friend of a friend during college who got to know me a little bit and said, "Oh, you might be interested in what this buddy of mine from high school is doing. He is going to a college in Toronto and studying industrial design." So I went to an open house at this college and saw what you could do at this college and thought, Oh, that's actually a really good fit for me because it was a little bit more expansive than just architecture. You could design other things, graphics, like Darrin Stephens did, advertising and products. Yeah, a year away from home and a year at school made Toronto seem less of a big city and more of a viable option. And then having had met a person who walked me around and showed me the campus—it was a fairly small school that I applied and was accepted for advanced standing. So I applied to the Ontario College of Art—it was just called the Ontario College of Art then; it's now called the OCAD University—and went into the second year of study in industrial design.
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01-00:28:08
Tewes: And we should say that was in 1980.

01-00:28:13
Price: Right. I left home in '79, so I was a frosh—British expressions for college freshman. We were frosh in first year and the chores that we did at our residence were called fags. It's a British expression for tasks, I think. So that's, I guess, part of my heritage, too, is that my mom and dad were real British loyalists, having fought in The Queen's Own Rifles [of Canada] and part of the Commonwealth in the Second World War, being supportive of the monarchy. And Canada still then was required to send all of its laws to the queen for signature to put them into action. We only became a completely independent country in, I guess, I think it was the early eighties that the constitution was brought to Ottawa and the queen's role was more ceremonial than it was previously.

01-00:29:23
But where I grew up was very White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. It was English, Irish, Scottish settlers and their descendants that were the stock of the people in that part of the world.

01-00:29:42
Tewes: How did that background compare to your time in Toronto?

01-00:29:47
Price: Oh well, yeah, being introduced to all different people with different religions and different ethnic backgrounds, that was very rich and eye-opening. Coming from a small, rural area, I was fairly naïve and not very worldly compared to many of the people that I would end up crossing paths with. I just had my nose down to the books and worked really hard.

01-00:30:20
Tewes: So let's speak a little bit about those books. What was the design curriculum? What were you studying back in the early eighties?

01-00:30:29
Price: Yeah. OCA, Ontario College of Art, was one of a number of schools across the continent—well, and around the world for that matter—that were cast from the Bauhaus way of teaching design. And so the curriculum was foundational studies, where you learned about materials and processes and color theory and just read about the Bauhaus and you'll see the wheel. Then you got to specialize in craft, whether it was graphic design or industrial design; it could be fine art painting or sculpture. The school was supported with shops, so there was a woodshop and metal shop and a foundry and a plastic shop, so that it was both applied coursework as well as hands-on learning how to build things.

01-00:31:29
So industrial design was a small class of maybe—second year, there was maybe twenty in my class, so by the time you were at fourth year and
graduating, that had dwindled to a smaller number. We learned how to draw and learned how to organize ourselves and manage our time and learned how to sculpt using automotive sculpting clay. The head of the department then was a graduate of the ArtCenter [College] Automotive Program in Pasadena in California and designed automobiles. He designed the streetcars in Toronto that were popular in the—or were being built in the eighties and the nineties. All of the teachers were active practitioners, as well, so that was good. Everybody was a real-life working professional, as well as teaching, which had its pros and cons. Nobody really had credentials in teaching, so some of the teaching formally was not that great but practically, you got real-life experience from it.

But I didn't really want to design core kind of products—a better vacuum cleaner or a better lawn mower or you name [it], fill in the blank. I was more interested in things that had to do with the human condition. So I was interested in medical products and services. There was a consulting firm in Toronto that I knew of because some of the upper-year students had gone on to work there and then were advisors in the program, and so I got a window into what was happening at that firm. They were doing like designing a new crib for the Hospital for Sick Children, and I thought, Oh, that's a product that I could get interested in, because there was some pure—there was some research to it and it was doing good, not just in making a better vacuum like another widget and just filling a commercial need. So that I set my eyes and my sights on that firm, which I thought, They do good kind of work that betters society, and eventually ended up working there after I graduated for quite a long period of time.

So yeah, doing medical design was—and I structured some of my classes. The school allowed you to do independent studies, so because I wasn't really that keen on just the product design, I built some of my own special projects and got approval to do these projects with a special advisory team. And I would invite teachers from different parts of the school to provide feedback and critique on what I was working on. So I did the core courses, but I also did some custom design classes, one of which was like designing a chair, a chair system for geriatric use. I went and interviewed nurses and physiotherapists that were out of veterans hospitals to see what the needs were, and worked on that at school and eventually worked on that when I was in early career designing some patient room furniture.

But one project that was formative and really was the beginning of my path in design in the cultural realm was after—I took a year off school, partly because I needed to make some money and I just wanted a break. I thought it would be good to work and make enough money so that I would take the summer off and travel to Europe. That was a life goal that I had with a friend from University of Waterloo that we had hatched a plan that that's what we were
going to do one summer. So I did work for a year, and it was a drafting job in a suburb that was kind of a long commute, and sometimes I rode my bike. It was a company that was making industrial pipelines and blaster systems for oil refinery and aluminum smelting. It was not glamorous and not what I wanted to do for a career path, but it was a decent job, and it was doing something that was design related. I was drafting and there was a metal shop there, so I got to design these crazy contraptions that would bolt on to blast furnaces and worked with the metal workers to figure out how to assemble these things. So there was some hands-on good experience that I gained.

But I made enough money to go to Europe and did the Grand Tour, saw lots of museums and old churches and archeological excavations, and realized that, Oh, somebody's designed some of these experiences, whether it's going to the Louvre and going to the ticket system. And I didn't really realize how much was involved in creating spaces, environments, and installing works of art at that time. But going to an archeological excavation like Pompeii, where there were interpretive signs and guided tours, that there's a whole mechanism around visiting historic site that I thought, Oh, that would be a fun and a unique project to do at school.

The year after that study trip, the year after the Grand Tour and when I went back, enrolled in school, I developed a special project to design an experience around an archeological site. So I went to the local ministry of Culture [and Heritage] that had an archeology and historical preservation branch. I'm not sure of the exact name of the department—they changed over time. And the office happened to be just a few blocks from the college that I was going to, and I made an appointment, and I went to visit—Roberta O'Brien was her name, who was the chief archeologist for Ontario, southern Ontario, and asked her if she had a sample project or a site that I could use to design a theoretical visitor experience around. She pulled out some grid paper from her top drawer, and she says, "Well, as a matter of fact---" and she had a little doodle on it of like a rolling chalkboard. She said, "We've got this dig plan this summer. Just a few blocks from here we're digging up the First Parliament Buildings before---" which was a requirement. You had to do an archeological excavation if there was any evidence of historical site to a prehistory encampment. They knew that around about where they wanted to build this massive—it was the new CBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation building that's going to go there. They had to do an archeological dig first.

And so she had planned for archeologists to go there and dig up in a grid this vacant parking lot, and it was like the perfect project. I said, "What can I do?" She said, "Why don't you work on this with me?" and I did. By the end of two semesters, she was really impressed with that and said, "Oh, I should show this to my boss," who was a minister in the provincial government. She set up a meeting for me to share it with them, and I thought, Oh, this is getting kind
of serious, I'll tune up my presentation. I got a couple of friends from my program at school and from another program that was interior design—it was called environmental design—to work on it with me. And so the three of us formed a company and made a presentation about this archeological exhibition that could be built around this dig, and they really liked that, and they said, "Well, how much would it cost to do all of that?" We didn't know and said, "Well, can we get back to you on that?" We did a little number crunching over the next few days and said that we thought it would cost about $90,000, and they said, "Okay," and funded the project. And then we had to get it built, so we did it.

We ended up being somewhat the historians and the authors and the marketing people, too, because the historians that were promised never really did materialize. So we were in the library and researching the indigenous peoples that lived there and why the First Parliament buildings were at that location, and creating some of the graphics that gave the backstory. And then we designed showcases to show the artifacts they were digging up from the site and did diagrams of what the foundations looked like and made a program for how the visitors could talk to the archeologists from an elevated ramp and looked down at the excavation site. It happened to be across the street from the CN Tower, which was then the largest freestanding structure in the world, a popular tourist destination. You had to walk by this site to get to the CN Tower if you were walking. From the CN Tower, you could look down, and we did appliqué on the roof tarps that had the name of the project. InSite [Project] was what we branded it, a play on words—insight into the past, but also it was an archeological site—which we had T-shirts and things that you could buy with that graphic on it.

It was a big, big project for three young kids who had never done a design project before, and we made it happen. Well, they made it happen for the final chapter. I left on a study trip to Hong Kong and China and left them holding the reins while I was off on the other side of the world, and they put the finishing touches on the construction and actually manned some mops and buckets, because it was a super wet beginning to the summer and our tarp system didn't work, the engineering of it didn't work out quite so well. Instead of repelling water off of the roof and keeping the exhibits dry, it gathered water into reservoirs on the roof that had to be pushed up and emptied. There were some harrowing evenings where they rode down on their bikes to keep the roofs from collapsing from the weight of the rain.

Tewes: That's dedication. [laughs]

Price: Sure. [laughs] Yeah, those were other duties as assigned. But that exhibition system that we created was then used for a few years running. It could all be
packed up and put in a warehouse. And they had a big campaign in the early eighties in Toronto to do urban archeology where—because there was a lot of construction going on, so they wanted to see what there was to see beneath the earth before they did the developments. Yeah, so that was fortuitous that it was just knocking on the door. Well, having the, I guess, gumption to go and knock on the door and think that I could do it and do a special project and having the idea and then doing this combined. It was a bit of industrial design and product design with the furniture and showcases we did, as well as the interpretation and writing and graphic design and the marketing with the related product and posters and T-shirts and things.

It was an experience design. It's like what I do now in my—what I did in my career, but it didn't really have a name then. I didn't even know that there was a school that you could go to for exhibition design, which would be the closest thing. It was an amalgam of lots of different disciplines. I thought that was really cool. I mean, why do you have to just be a specialist in one thing? You're designing this integrated experience that needs all these different disciplines to work together, who says you can't do it all? And so that was foundational for my approach in my career path in exhibition design or museum design that it should be the kind of one-stop shopping. You get the idea and you deliver what's needed for the whole enchilada, right, beginning to end, and that's just to use the expression.

Were you thinking about how this was going to translate professionally for you at this point?

Not really. As I said, I didn't really know that that could generate into a career path. I didn't really even know at that point that designers were focused on doing things for museums as a potential client, for example. I still had this idea that I was going to do healthcare product design with this company that I had discovered. Keith Muller Ltd. was its name. There were a couple of individuals that worked there: Mark Campbell was in upper years studies when I was in lower years studies at OCA, and he was working at Keith Muller; and, oh, I'm blanking on her name, Anne Carlyle, was a very supportive and kindly woman, young professional and designer in Keith Muller's office, also. They both were super supportive of my interest in the field, so were advisors for me on my school project. They were always one step ahead of me in their career paths, so by the time I got to working at Keith Muller's, they had both gone on to other pursuits, other consulting offices.

And I think you graduated and started at Keith Muller officially in 1985?
Yes. Because I took a year off school, I graduated with another class from what I started with. I mainly stayed friends with the classmates that I had from when I first started and I still remain good friends with them, many of them to this day. I had a very short, maybe eight months, at a job that was doing trade show exhibits of a company I had never heard of before. But I had my eyes set on Keith Muller, there just wasn't an opening there, and when an opening came available I applied and got a job at his office. And so I got the tail end of that project that I mentioned that I had seen during school of working on this infant's crib for Sick Children's Hospital, and there was a research corporation at Sick Kids Hospital, so I designed the entry to their offices. It was kind of high-tech-feeling foyer with signage and what have you. I remember doing that, and that's one of my first projects.

But soon after arriving, because Mark and Anne had left some of these other projects undone, I picked up this task of developing furniture for a seating company. They were primarily a seating and office furniture company, but they were beginning a healthcare branch of their endeavor and were designing hospital room furniture. So I got in kind of the ground floor of doing some hospital room furniture and the whole graphic identity for this new branch of this company. Globalcare was its name. We did the photoshoots and the brochure design and booths for the trade show, which came in handy that I had done some trade show exhibition design in my prior job and designed the furniture, as well. It was like creating a whole world within a world of this manufacturing company's capabilities. That was a very rewarding project, and I liked that project. There wasn't more coming in terms of the healthcare furniture, but I did some other office furniture systems for what's—its' a fairly big company now called Teknion. It was very early days of Teknion office furniture systems that I was involved in.

And Keith Muller ended up forming a partnership with Stuart Ash from an international company called Gottschalk+Ash [International]. They were teamed up and were doing collaborative work combining industrial design and graphic design, because Stuart Ash's company was graphic design company, and doing signage projects. So I got involved in a major signage project while at Keith Muller's, which was signing the largest interconnected subterranean set of passageways in an urban environment in the world. In Toronto, there are all of these underground concourses, shopping concourses and tunnels that would connect one building to another under the street, because of the inclement weather in the winter. It became a city ordinance that if you built a new building and were excavating, you had to tunnel under the street to adjoining buildings; that's part of the permission to do the construction. It was a thing that was being promoted by the city, and I spent months walking around with a clipboard and a pen and paper, documenting the tunnel system, because every building was freestanding their own boundaries, there was nothing that mapped the whole system. So not only was I mapping the system
by hand and then coming back and trying to create an integrated diagram of the whole system, but I was documenting the preexisting signs that each building had to direct people around their building. All the major banks of the world had their towers there and major department stores and shops. Everybody had their own corporate identity and their own signage program, and we had to figure out a solution that fit in between all of this preexisting infrastructure, which we ended up doing and doing some innovative work with signage and some new relatively unknown or unused signage product for urban environment in porcelain enamel. It was called the PATH System, and it won some awards for both the graphic design and the industrial design. It's still a thing that exists to this day. They built on it.

So in addition to doing the mapping and the industrial design of the signs, I was taken by a councilmember at the city and we had to develop a pitch and we had to go to all—many of the property owners and the building facilities people in those properties for the major banks, as I had mentioned, and show them what we intended to install in their buildings. They were underwriting part of the cost of it, but the city was also supporting this signage project. All of the property owners had to agree to it, as well as the city and the city council having to approve it. So there was a lot of presenting that I had to do and salesmanship, which was a good learning experience. It's another important part of professional design work that you never learn in school. I did that dog and pony show for months and months.

It was through this project that our offices, Keith Muller and Gottschalk+Ash, got computers and the very first Adobe product. So my partner in the graphic design side was starting to take my hand-drawn drawings and draw them in Illustrator and Photoshop. And then they became massive files really quickly, and our computer kept crashing. It was not a happy experience. We really ended mainly relying on hand-drawn drawings for the specification of the system.

And of course, it was a different time then. Correspondence, we were still using the mail. So sometimes like writing back and forth, even though it was within the city, it could be days of waiting for an answer to come back from a letter. I remember our—the secretaries—they were called secretaries then—at the office got a new IBM Selectric typewriter that had a memory of like a fragment of a sentence with a teeny little window on the keyboard, above the keyboard. They were so excited that they could erase things electronically instead of having to use Wite-Out, because it would save little fragment of a sentence. If you saw a typo, you could backspace over it before the Selectric bulb would type it on to the page. You could pick two different fonts, too, you could buy different bulbs with different fonts. So that was all very new technology. I'm dating myself.
Tewes: [laughs] But it's an important moment in how design is shifting during these years, so that's interesting to hear about.

Price: It is. Yeah, like my last year of school or maybe second to the last year of school was when faxes were created. That was a big technological step forward that you could transmit something instantaneously to another office by fax. Before that, it was telex, where you could just—you know, it was old-fashioned, World War II technology where you could send a text-based message. The telex machine would start clattering away, and the little strip of a message would come out like a telegram, you know. But we had a fax machine brought to the college, and it actually spawned an initiative that one of my instructors organized with the design school in Hong Kong and some students in Hong Kong. He [Maurice Barnwell] and spent some time in the Far East and knew people in Hong Kong in the Design Program there, the Swire School of Design.

We worked on a joint project—students in Toronto and students in Hong Kong—and shared sketches with each other by the fax machine. It was opposite side of the clock, so we could be working on the project, send them our sketches, they'd be getting up to go to school and receive our sketches and contribute their thoughts to the project and so we worked on it together during the school year. And then a number of us who were involved in this project and people from Ryerson [University], who were who were in the Fashion Program—Maurice Barnwell, it was his wife who was running the Fashion Program at Ryerson—we all went together to Hong Kong and spent a week in classrooms together with these students that we've been working on the project with for months by fax.

And then we went to Mainland China—it was the first year that Mainland China was open to tourists really—and did a tour of arts and design colleges, as well as manufacturing facilities. The Chinese tour guides thought, This is a very weird trip that you people are taking. Why are we going to these places? We could be going to see places of scenic beauty or where tourists would typically go, and we are looking at the underbelly of like manufacturing plants and stuff. They thought it was very weird. But it was fun, it was exciting to be in Mainland China and Hong Kong on this project.

I extended my summer trip by a month, because my cousin was the British ambassador to Burma, and he organized an extended visa for me to spend a month in Burma, which at that point in time, you could only get a, I think, a six-day visa for a foreigner to visit Burma. I had a fairly leisurely trip. I got to stay in the ambassador's residence, which was kind of palatial, and get driven around in a limousine without the flag unfurled, but everybody in Rangoon,
[Burma], knew the limousine, they knew it was a British ambassador's car, and got to take my time visiting the country.

01:00:58:56
Tewes: What a really unique time to be traveling in Asia.

01:00:59:00
Price: Yeah, it was.

01:00:59:04
Tewes: Wow. I'm going to speak a little bit more about other design jobs you had in these years after graduation. I believe for some time you worked at Adamson Industrial Design?

01:00:59:21
Price: Yeah.

01:00:59:22
Tewes: With—

01:00:59:22
Price: Let me try to think of the timeline.

01:00:59:28
Tewes: I think around 1987. Does that—

01:00:59:31
Price: Yeah. So Adamson Industrial Design was in the same building complex as Keith Muller Ltd. Jerry [Gerald] Adamson and his wife were the people who ran that company. It is a fairly small community in the industrial design community in Toronto, everybody knew each other. Jerry's office was one of the other offices that people would aspire to work at. He had a relationship with Moshe Safdie, the architect. And like Keith, Jerry also did furniture design and kind of a mixed bag, signage design, interiors, product design. In his partnership with Moshe Safdie, he was doing all of the interiors and, as it turns out, showcases for the galleries and signage programs for the new National Gallery of Canada, which was being built a stone's throw from the Parliament buildings in Ottawa.

01:01:00:46
I mentioned earlier in this conversation that Mark Campbell came before me at Keith Muller's office. Well, when he left Keith, he went to Jerry's office. So I was aware of his career path and knew what they were up to over there, and he was aware of my abilities. They were filling out the middle and junior rungs of talent in the office for this big project to do all the interiors and furniture and showcases for the National Gallery, and I got hired there. So I left Keith's office and went to Jerry's, and Jerry had expanded the operation and moved out of the building to a new, nice, really nice office that was a couple of blocks from Stuart Ash's office in midtown.
So I was working on that project happily, and it was exciting, because we flew to Ottawa at least once a week for meetings with the client, and I was included in some of those trips. It was a whole new group of design people that I was introduced to. After a few months of working on this project, Mark Campbell and another senior designer quit and stole some clients—at least that's the way that Jerry would represent it. It was very like high drama and emotions were high and there's a lot to do on the project. Mark and the woman who was running the interior's branch of the effort—Mark was doing the showcase and signage part, I believe—left Jerry kind of holding the bag like, What are we going to do? So all of the middle-level people that were responsible got elevated to the senior positions, and I had not been working a long time. It's like, I don't know, four years out of college, and all of a sudden was in a senior role. But I stepped up to the challenge and worked really hard. They were long, long—this is paying your dues kind of time where we were working until after midnight every day, and then getting ready for client meetings weekly in Ottawa, flying up, bringing information back. I had people beneath me that were on the drawing boards drafting; this is before computers were really being used. So it was a busy, busy year or more doing that project.

Irka Sochaniwsky [Dyczok] was the interiors person, so we made a good friendship and remain in touch to these days. I learned a lot from Irka, and it was fun working at Jerry's office. He brought in food for us if we were working late, and there were some other distractions. I remember designing the interior of a speedboat, which was kind of a—we built a full-size foam core speedboat in the workshop room in the basement of the office. We did all the instrumentation, panel designs, and stitching designs for the upholstery for the seats in the boat and so that was kind of an interesting distraction from the main thing we were doing for the National Gallery.

But the National Gallery project was done. We did some new things in terms of conservation technology. Fiber-optic lighting was a very new thing that we introduced to showcase design. Because we did a little traveling around looking at showcases in different museums from earlier years, we found these showcases at the Royal Ontario Museum that were all wooden constructions. They had these wooden screw actuators at the four corners, and you could turn a big crank, and there was a gear system that made the actuators go up and lift off the heavy glass bonnet so that you could—the curators and the mount makers and art handlers could access the inside of the showcase to arrange the objects, bolt them down or place them. And then you crank this thing, and it would make the lid come back down, and you could lock it in place. After seeing that, we updated it to a modern metal version of that where you used a drill gun to activate the screw system, and it would lift the bonnet up. So there are other systems like that now in showcase design that are hydraulic powered or a little bit smoother, systems that have less vibration in them. But it worked. I think they used showcases up until just a couple of years ago when I
know the design team at the National Gallery of Canada were updating them all. So they put in a good twenty-five years of use at the National Gallery of Canada.

Well, clearly that has resonance for some of your later work, but that will be something we get to next time. But I do just want to say that I believe you went into private practice for a period of time on your own.

I did. I always had ideas about how to manage an office and client relations a little bit differently than how maybe Jerry or Keith would have done it, so I thought, Well, maybe I should give a try at doing it myself. I also felt that way about my education, that I thought the teachers weren't as good as they maybe could have been, so I always have it in my mind when I was out school that, Maybe I'll teach and see if I can do it differently or better for the students, and I've taught ever since. Soon after graduating college, I was an adjunct instructor at OCA and then later in Los Angeles—well, in Toronto at Seneca College and then Los Angeles at Otis College and more recently at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles] Extension.

But you asked about my private practice. I had a company for a year-and-a-half or more. I called it Tangram. It was that puzzle that you have the geometric shapes, and you see the silhouettes of how make that out of these puzzle pieces, so that was a concept for the company. It wasn't particularly original, as I discovered afterwards; lots of people used that name. It had kind of an Asian connection so I was still—I was given a Chinese name when I was in Hong Kong at school, and one of my classmates there gave me a chop how that name would have been spelled in Chinese character. I still have had his kind of Chinese thing percolating, and the Tangram was something that had roots in terms of Chinese puzzle. That was the name of my company, business cards, and letterhead and the whole thing. Bought a computer, one of the very first Mac computers, it was really expensive; bought my own printer, so I had some capital investment for the operation. Set up a home office and had some good clients.

I did an interesting power wheelchair design, which was based on a relationship I had with a person at the University of Waterloo, who did the European tour together with me, Diego Picchetti. He was an engineer at this power wheelchair company and knew that I was had finished my industrial design program. He hired me to do some updating of the styling of some of their power wheelchairs. I sculpted the chassis and figured out all the engineering of how to make these more styling cowlings, jazz up a power wheelchair for kids and young adults. That was a really good client. And I capitalized on my museum experience, that I did a little bit of freelance work.
of the Royal Ontario Museum in doing exhibition design, and Coca-Cola Canada was a client of mine.

Annemarie Hagan, who I met at the Royal Ontario Museum, she was an interpretative planner and a person that I really thought did her job exceptionally well. She's still in the business. We got in league together, and she did the research and interpretative planning and narrative story writing, and I did the physical space design for a few exhibits for Coca-Cola Canada. One of which was *Coca-Cola and Baseball*, because of the twin sponsorship of Coca-Cola for the baseball teams.

But the more interesting one was a show called *The Great One* about Wayne Gretzky, because Wayne Gretzky was a Coca-Cola—that was one of his sponsorships. Annemarie and I got to go to Wayne's parents' house, which was a city—I think it was Brantford—a couple of hours outside of Toronto, and go down to the rec room. They said, "Wayne's bedroom is over there, and those closets are full of memorabilia. Whatever you want, just show it to me before you take it." So there were awards and hockey sticks and t-shirts and autographed pucks and certificates and stuff that was just jam-packed into the rec room. And we sat in the rec room for a couple of days just going through stuff that we could include in an exhibit about Wayne Gretzky, and signed some papers and took them away and made duplicates of them for the display. But Wayne Gretzky's dad was a super heavy smoker, so all of the framed things that were on the wall had this veneer of nicotine stains that when we took the things apart in their frames, they were like sticky with brown goo on the surface. So we cleaned them up, and when we returned them to them, they were in pristine condition.

But that was a fun exhibit about Wayne Gretzky. It was at the international airport in Toronto in one of the concourses. There were a few really big showcases that had some facts and figures about Wayne Gretzky and his t-shirt and hockey stick that he—and puck that he won that got the thousandth goal or whatever it was. I can't remember exactly what the things were that we were saying about him.

I learned, though, that plexiglass is really heavy during that project, and to clean the inside of a plexiglass bonnet was really, really difficult and hot. Because once you got inside to clean the inside of the plexiglass, it was like a microclimate, and all of the body heat that you're putting out is just trapped in that little bubble. You'd build up a little fog inside of there, and it was just—it was a horrendous hour that I spent cleaning these plexiglass showcases, too. You never really can get them cleaned, because they're staticky and they attract dust, so as soon as you polish them, any free-floating dust in the air just sticks to the surface. You do the best that you can. I gained empathy for the
people who have to clean plexiglass in museums to this day from that experience.

01-01:13:18
Tewes:  
Well, I'm thinking about these early positions you took after school. I wonder what your biggest takeaways were about the field of design and where you thought you might go next.

01-01:13:32
Price:  
Oh yeah, well finishing off the story about private practice is that it was a kind of solitary reality of having your own firm, and there was no infrastructure there. If you had to send a package out, you had to walk it to the FedEx office; or you needed stamps, you had to go buy them. You had to do your own accounting, you had to do your own proposals, you had to do the client relations, do the design work, do the production. It was a lot to be responsible for. You didn't have people to answer the phone for you, and this was the days before email communication, I think, so there wasn't really a mobile. There were no mobile devices, so you couldn't take your work away. You were kind of tied. I felt always tied to my home office and was nervous about being away for a long time that I'd miss an important call or an opportunity. I really missed working collaboratively in a team in these larger consulting offices. So that was a good learning experience that I didn't really like the sole proprietorship thing, at that scale anyway. I liked the parts of it where I was working with other people, but that was a small percentage of the total time. But it was very anxiety-provoking being responsible for your own business and everything.

01-01:15:08
So I looked for opportunities to get to stop my private practice, and I didn't feel like it was a failure or a loss. Really, it was a good learning experience, but I wanted to be back in a larger environment with people and infrastructure where there were people that could work together with you to do something bigger. Well, also being a solo proprietorship, it limits your ability—especially [since] I was young; you know, I was still in my twenties—of what people would hire you to do. Well, does he have enough experience, is he going to be able to finish the job? That was all part of the situation. I ended up thinking, Well, I would really be better off and more content in a work environment that was an in-house design studio versus a solo proprietorship. I liked being in-house, because it was more of a laboratory-like setting, as opposed to a consultant where you would just poke in and pull back out, and you just saw people at moments in time instead of building deeper relationships with an in-house team. But that was a realization.

01-01:16:32
Because there was a lot of museum building going on in Canada and the United States at that time, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto was planning another major expansion. I figured there would be some design work there, so I had my ear to the ground and was trying to identify who it was that would be
in charge of the creative aspects of the work for the Art Gallery, and poked around until I found who was head of Exhibitions and who was head of the Building Program for the architectural expansion, who the architects were, and started placing calls and seeing if there would be an opportunity there. I had just finished the National Gallery of Canada project, and I had already done the project for the archeological InSite during school years and worked for the Royal Ontario Museum, so I had a good resume for the opportunity. My only thing against me was I was young and so I didn't have enough experience, so I could be perceived as not having enough experience. But I was also teaching. You know, I was clearly a self-starter and ambitious. I moved jobs a lot and was progressively moving up in responsibility, and so by my early thirties, ended up being head of department for the Art Gallery of Ontario.

01-01:18:14  
Tewes: I think that is a perfect place to stop today, and we can pick back up with that story next time we meet. Is there anything you want to conclude out of everything we've discussed today?

01-01:18:29  
Price: I can't think of—maybe conclusions are for later. I mean, that was the conclusion about making a realization about in-house design being a better fit than consulting practices, sole proprietorship. Or earlier in my schooling I talked—or made the decision that I didn't really like the more commercial aspects of design. I was interested in things that had a greater social good, yeah. So I was finding my way. I didn't talk about teaching, so maybe we could pick that up for a few minutes at the beginning of our next conversation.

01-01:19:08  
Tewes: We can certainly do that. Thank you, Merritt.

01-01:19:10  
Price: All right, my—
Tewes: This is a second interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 22, 2020. Mr. Price joins me in this remote interview from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you for joining me again today in our second session together.

Price: We got so formal: Mr. Price. Yesterday—

Tewes: Yes, indeed.

Price: —you called me Merritt.

Tewes: We've got to keep this formal. [laughs] But I wanted to pick up with something we started to touch on last week in regards to your experience teaching design, and where and when you started doing that. And really, I'm interested in why you felt wanted to go that route.

Price: Sure. But before I answer that, when we were talking about my name, it's funny, a few years ago one of my sisters gifted me a series of photographs of my namesakes, and they were in a common frame mounted together. I called her and asked her, "Why did you put them in that order?" She said, "Well, I looked at your birth certificate that I found in a drawer at Mom and Dad's house, and that's the official order." I said, "Really?" Because I've got a very long name and so it's in all of these different configurations on different legal documents, and I'd always told people that it was a completely different sequence. So to have discovered when I was, I think, fifty that my name is actually in this sequence was a surprise. But I was supposed to be the last boy child of my generation, so I got all of these grandparents' and uncles' names. Our family all weirdly goes by a middle name mostly, just because of the way it sounds in a particular sequence. So my name is Franklin Wallace Merritt. Yeah, it's a lengthy one.

Tewes: That's quite—

Price: But I digress. You wanted to hear about teaching.

Tewes: But that was a great insight. Yes, yes, let's talk about teaching, and particularly when you start in the early days.
Price:

Yeah. I mentioned in our first interview that I went to the Ontario College of Art—now OCAD University—in the Industrial Design Program. It was a good program. It was a really good fit for me, as I had mentioned. All of the instructors were active practitioners, as well as teaching, so teaching was not their profession by any means; it was just something that they were interested in sharing their experience and some skills with people who are entering into the profession. As a result, some of the teaching was a little bit ad hoc in ways that things were reviewed and ways that you were assessed in what you had accomplished were not the most rigorous academic standards. Not that that was the most important thing in education, but I thought that I could do a good job of teaching, because I thought a lot about it while I was in class and was thinking what was lacking for me and what was working for me. So I made a commitment to myself that I'd give it a try when I got out there and was a professional myself.

Very soon after I graduated from college, there were part-time positions open for the introductory year of study at the school, and so I applied for a position and was given it to start teaching "Basics of 3D Design." I really liked it, I liked setting up the program, I liked coming up with creative projects for people. It was continuing education, so it was a really wide spectrum of students, too, from people who are just like late teens, early twenties and trying to get a leg up before they started school in earnest, and then there were some people that were retired and were doing it just more out of interest.

So I got lots of compliments from my students. I was a hard teacher. I expect a lot of myself and I expect a lot of my students, and I challenged them with projects that had depth to them. And both hand skills, as well as conceptual skills, presentation skills and getting up and speaking about their ideas, so it was kind of public speaking. It was a real blend of professional practice, as it were. So that taste was a good taste, and I really just kept teaching.

There were lots of different opportunities that came and went over the years, and I taught the history of furniture design for a few years. I taught a class called "Design for Social Need" for a few years, which was like making designs for people who are marginalized in society, whether that's through disability or age or physical failing or ailment or challenge, I guess, would be a better way to say it. That was a really interesting. And then I taught "Fundamentals of Industrial Design." I taught at another college in Toronto, at Seneca [College], "Exhibition Design" when I was maybe five or six years after graduating from college. And after relocating to LA, I taught at Otis [College] in their Environmental Program, a class in "Environmental Signage." Things changed there, that position wasn't available any longer for an upcoming quarter, and I met some people at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] Extension. One thing led to another, and we created
a class that had never been taught before that worked with my skillset, and it was called "Designing Experiences." That was an interesting course for them that was offered to people who were in the upper year of a four-year accreditation program in the design communication arts area. It brought together skillsets for the students that had only been looked at compartmentally, like different software skills or—and it was looking at holistically what an experience design could be: from advertising an opportunity, designing the spatial experience, branding it, and everything that one would do out of a major museum like the Getty.

That also gave me the opportunity to offer volunteer work to people that were in the program, and so I always hosted—well, I shouldn't say always, but for, gosh, maybe ten, fifteen years in collaboration with UCLA Extension—hosted people in the Getty Design Studio for ten hours or thereabouts, volunteer work every week, and it was a new spot every quarter. So that was an eye-opener for a lot of students who never really imagined that you could do design work at a museum. Some people who either took my class there or who volunteered for me at the Getty ended up being hired for positions in the studio, and had long-standing relationships with them ever since. It's been a very good experience and a two-way street.

I also, especially in middle, late career, thought was it good to have an opportunity to spend time regularly with people that are just entering into the profession, because you see what they're interested in, what the latest design tools are and technology, and it's a good reminder of what people's capabilities are fresh out of school so that you can kind of gauge your expectations. That helped also running a studio, having expectations aligned with what people were actually able to deliver when they're first or second year out of school.

All around, it was a good experience, and I always really enjoyed that, getting out and teaching, seeing people being excited about it and being able to—it helps you clarify your thoughts about what priorities are and what your practice is. So I think that's my teaching story.

Tewes: Just so I'm clear, what do hand skills mean in this context?

Price: Oh, like making things. It could be making paper or foam core or cardboard mock-ups and sometimes using found objects, whether it's wire or something. How do you make a model of a tree, if you're doing an outdoor setting, and figuring out how furniture and graphics and posts that might hold banners would look in a courtyard environment? So making a scale model of those kinds of things. You have to have some accuracy for cutting straight lines and gluing things together and being able to do it to the right scale and make it
convincing. It's a tool for sharing ideas with other people. Many laypeople don't really understand plans and elevations that well, so if you build a model, you can just look at it, and people get it. They understand it right away.

I think it's all about being professional, too. The hand skills of like what a presentation page or a presentation booklet looks like and, how do you put it up on a wall? Are your pages all lined up in rows, or are they all different sizes and orientations and kind of higgledy-piggledy, and what kind of confidence or lack of confidence does that instill in the viewer? Is it well organized and thought through, or is it kind of thrown together? And did they bring it in a folder and keep their pages all flat, or did they get munched and the dog ate it on the way to class, and what does that say about how much you honor your work and your creative product and what the client should be thinking about it then? It's all about crispness and accuracy—or sometimes it might be the messiness, because it might at an earlier stage of a project. So having things that are more hand drawn and doodled and look like they are at a stage where you can make any comment, and it's not like throwing out a lot of hard labor. I think it's the appropriateness of what something looks like for what you're hoping to get as a response from your class, from your teacher, from your client.

Now, you mentioned your teaching as a sort of feeder program into the Getty, and that's something we'll discuss a little bit later on.

Okay.

But this is a good discussion into a segue about the field of exhibition design, because, as we've discussed before, that was not your background in terms of your schooling, and this was something that you've figured out along the way through various projects that you worked on. So I would like to just start with an explanation of what this segment of the field is and how it relates to the other parts of design.

Mm-hm. Well, there are many different specialties that you could study: industrial design is one of them, architecture would be an area of expertise, graphic design and its many different parts—it could be illustration or advertising, typography, photography, fashion. So there's finer and finer ways that you can slice it and specialize. There are lots of technical aspects of the work, too, whether it's drafting or understanding how to produce things, how to make drawings and specifications for molds. Or let's say you need some special, extruded piece of metal, which we would do for a museum design, a holder for a sign or a label, let's say, that there's all these different skillsets, which you bring to the table. Museum design is kind of an amalgam of many
of those skillsets that come together. There's lots of different disciplines that have to get together and share their skillsets for a common end, a common project.

Now, sometimes, individuals can put on lots of different hats and are skilled at different skillsets, they're a jack- or a jill-of-all-trades. That comes with experience and time, of course. For experience design, we're doing graphic designs and marketing for getting somebody interested in visiting a museum or seeing an exhibition. We are doing, at the other end of the experience, maybe doing souvenir product design that's a little fragment of that experience where somebody wants to take a memory of that experience home, and that could be a t-shirt or a tote bag or a wall calendar with images from the artwork of the exhibition they saw. There's the technical aspects of showcase design, especially in Southern California with earthquakes happening, to make sure that objects are safe and secure. And so there's engineering and working with structural engineers to make sure that the buildings and the furniture that you're making is going to stand up and hold something in place securely or not. There are kinds of showcases and pedestals that are meant to move with ball bearing systems and spring-loaded gear—gizmos that allow the earth to move and absorbs a lot of the shock from an earthquake while a fragile object might stay relatively in place. There's mechanisms that you would have to accommodate in a design of a pedestal. So it can be complicated.

Material knowledge is really important, too, that a piece of silver, as we all know, will tarnish because of sulfur in the air or other contaminants in the air. So if you're going to display silver, you want to put it in an environment where you're minimizing those kind of contaminants in the air. There are other things. For bronze, some bronze have active bronze disease. Or leather and animal skin, a manuscript might have been done on parchment that's made—or paper—that's made out of rendered goat hides, and so these all have very specific humidity requirements. So controlling the environment inside of a showcase is important, and what you do or don't enclose in the environment with it to make sure that it's a safe place for keeping the object in perpetuity. There's lots of material engineering information that you gain along the way, lots to do. That's furniture design and the technological aspects of furniture design for art display way. This would work in lots of different museum settings, not just the art museum like the Getty, but a living history museum or a science museum that they all have their own little spin on the specialty knowledge that you might need.

So architecture design and interior architecture would be another aspect of the work. How people flow through a space and identify like the main entrance. The lighting of the space is important, the kinds of lights that you use, and especially these days when we're trying to be energy saving. We've just recently at the Getty converted all of our lighting over to LED [light-emitting
diode] and lower energy consumption. That changes the way that the light looks and some of our strategies for presenting the objects, because the lighting setup needs to be created a little bit differently to acknowledge the new technology.

So interior design is a part of the work, too, like what the surface finishes are, whether it's a carpet in a room or the color of a wall or the fabric on a bench that might be in a space. And decorative elements that might coming into the space, whether they're moldings, architectural moldings. Sometimes if you're doing a historical display, it maybe something that you're trying to evoke a particular moment in time, so you may need to research what moldings looked like in the Baroque period if you wanted to have a little flourish or a detail that picked up on the era of the objects that are being displayed. That goes for the color and other things, as well.

So what have I missed? Graphics, architecture, interior design, engineering, you go on and on. You blend all of those skillsets together. I've always approached the—I worked in the earlier days with departments where they were segmented, so there might be a head of design that was leading the effort in art directing, and then there'd be a separate branch that's just all of the architectural specialty skills, and then another subdepartment that's doing the graphic design, maybe another subdepartment that's doing signage for the site. Often, there would be another department that's just dealing with the graphics for the marketing, as opposed to the graphics that are in an exhibition or a gallery space proper. I found that that sometimes works but also can lead to problems where you're relying on all these people to communicate well with each other and to share a concept. Sometimes, if those responsibilities are in different departments, there can be rivalry or different ways of interpreting a concept, and so you might have a marketing plan that really doesn't bear that much resemblance to what the experience is like in the exhibition. Like the color palette might be very different, or the use of typography might be different, or maybe the image that's selected to promote the opportunity, the exhibition, is not one that the exhibition designer might decide was the best thing to do. It's also just more work for the curator or the content specialist who'll be coming up with the idea, because they have to inform like more than one design team what their idea is, and so that then leaves that open for different interpretation.

So being in some past situations where one part of the team would say, "Well, it's a missed opportunity that the other part of the team didn't understand what my intent was so well," or that the architecture might be all done and then there's just little areas left were the graphic design would be inserted. You can end up with things that are fairly conventional, like little postage stamps of graphics that are sprinkled around the room. As opposed to if one person or one integrated team with all of those skills are working together and they're
delivering the totality of the project, they're responsible for the whole thing and for it to work as well as it can as an integrated solution. So you may have graphics that can be making architecture in some ways, because of their scale or the way that they're integrated into the architecture, instead of applied as a second pass or as an afterthought. The title treatment might be architectural in scale, it might be dimensional instead of letters on a panel that have been hung on a wall. I think it just opens up more opportunities for creativity and unique solutions that really are integrated, to use the same word again.

That's been my thinking about providing design services inside of a museum setting, is to sort of have one-stop shopping for the internal client where there's an idea that's being presented, and everything around that idea comes out of one creative unit. But I think is also noteworthy that working in-house at a museum, as opposed to being in a consulting office that might be doing design for museums or galleries, that you have a different perspective, because you're right in it and you're in it all the time. It's a little bit more laboratory-like where your work product is right there outside the door in the gallery. You can walk through it, you can see visitors using it. Front-line staff, whether they're volunteers or educators or security officers, know who you are and they'll let you know—well, I always made a point of introducing myself and what my responsibility was, and after a while, people realized they could approach you and they'd say, "This is a really good solution how you've done the railing around the object that keeps people back. We should do more of that," or "This area here, I'm really having trouble with visitors not understanding what the expectation is. It seems like a step for them to get up closer to the art as opposed to a barrier to keep them away from the object." So they'll let you know, and you can take that onboard and do it differently the next time, or if it's a serious problem, address it right there fairly quickly. When you're in a consulting arrangement, that's more of an arm's length of what your responsibilities are and where they begin and end. So I like that about working in-house, that you're part of a bigger community that has a shared goal and a shared set of interests. Different responsibilities within that community, but nevertheless working together on a long-term, building relationships and building on one project to the next.

I want to speak about how you put all that into practice. But before we do, I just have a follow-up question about tools actually, because you mentioned the necessity of still needing to make mock-ups, physical mock-ups for people to engage with. But when did you start using computer programs to create the design of spaces and objects, I should say, too?

Yeah, so when I was at school, the computers were maybe a desktop calculator for doing addition and multiplication. We didn't really have computers, computer-aided design, per se, until I was into my career, a few years into my career when some of that started to be available. You look back
at the early portable computers, and they were bigger than two bread boxes put together and heavy as all get out, but they were presented as being portable. It was the early days of Macintosh computers, too, which were popular for designers, because of the way the products looked and the software was done. The computer and computer-aided design didn't come into practice until I was well into my career, so hand-drawing skills were really important for being able to sketch ideas and do presentation boards for clients about what something might look like, being able to draw things in perspective, being able to make architectural plans and elevations with all the details for construction or building walls or a carpenter making a chair or making a showcase.

And then building models was another one of the tools. We're doing models to scale. Most of the model work that we do in the museum environment, at least in my practice, is an inch to a foot, so an inch in the model is a foot in real life. Sometimes it's a smaller scale than that. That makes it more of a tabletop thing that's a little bit more portable. But those are good tools for showing how the whole thing comes together, and laypeople can stand around it and understand where you're going to walk and what components of the display you'll encounter as you move through the experience and get their hands-on, too, that it's a way of getting down to brass tacks. Curators would take off their shoes and sitting cross-legged beside a model and moving things around and working collaboratively with you to try out, "Well, what if we tried it this way?" It would make them kind of deconstruct their thesis, which they would usually bring to the table as a fairly linear experience, because they're used to writing books. And start thinking about it, Well, if we arrange it this way, it's this group where people might move from this object to this object to this object, or they might move this way. And so they begin to realize that stories need to be told, deserve to be told a little bit differently than they might be in a book.

All of those tools together are just ways to look at the same problem through different lenses and different perspectives. Just being able to look at it in a model and then look at it in a drawing and go back and forth, and small-scale versus full-size mock-up of something, it really lets you explore the concepts fully and make sure. Because timing is an important part of delivery of galleries and exhibitions, that when you get down to the few weeks of installation of a show that you're pretty certain how it's all going to come together and not making—trying to minimize the number of last-minute decisions. So the models, both at scale and often full size for certain vignettes, to just say like, "This combination of a pedestal, an object label, and an information text is going to be a thing that repeats in an environment, but here is one little vignette. Are we all comfortable with the way that's coming together: the colors, the type size, the design detailing, the dimensionality of it, the way it's lit?" So that you can get signoff on that and when you get into
the final weeks of installation, there are as few—you're minimize the surprises. Did that answer your question about models, the use of models I believe?

Tewes: Yeah, and just how they work with computer modeling. And as you mentioned, this is something that is relatively new to the game.

Price: Many of those models that are presented then in a physical—like a dimensional model on the floor or on a table would be translated into a computer model. Sometimes now, we would dispense with the three-dimensional model altogether, especially if it's flat art drawings or paintings in a space. Most of the spaces we're working in are modelled in computers, and you can take representations of the artwork and put them into the model and do a fly through or look at different vantage points within the space and project it on a wall with a projector. So that's good, but you're always only looking at what—you know, it's more cinematographic. You're only experiencing what's in the lens and in the frame at that moment. You can't step back and have the view of God looking down with an overview of how all the spaces work together or at least not as effectively, not as dynamically. The person who's the expert with the software program is in control of moving to the camera point and seeing what you see in the model, as opposed to where it's a model on the table or the floor, you can walk around and just see it without any special skills, right? You can even reach into the model and say, "Well, what if we just moved it here?" and a curator or a director wouldn't be able to do that with it in a computer, right? So there's some utility, and there always will be, to having it in a more rudimentary way and not just in a computer model. But the computer model is a step towards then describing it for posterity and describing it for other people to take action on, whether it's the spacing and where to install the art or somebody who's framing out the walls, where the walls go and the dimensions and all of that. The computer model, I suppose, is also really good for just having an archive where you can go back and look at past solutions for similar problems and see if there are problems or lessons to be learned from what you've done before for a similar problem.

Similarly, early days of graphic design was camerawork and Rubylith and pasting things together with wax and tape and Wite-Out, and then sending it to a production house to get a photograph of it taken, and then converting it into a version where you can replicate it through printing processes. Lots of that has been streamlined through computers, where you can send an electronic file to your fabricator, and they've got the same software as you do on their end, and they'll output it to plotter or a direct printer right on to a panel, and it's so much quicker now than it was in the early days. I mean, even just communication is quicker. We used to send letters and wait for a week or two weeks until you got a response from your client. Now, you send the email and
it might be back to you in five minutes. So things work at a much different pace now than in the early days of my career. They all have their pros and cons. Some people would look back fondly on how much kinder and gentler and slower the pace was. It wasn't that nice, but it's just different. It's not better or worse, it's just the way that it is now, the tools that we have at our disposal now.

02-00:34:02
Tewes:
Well, thank you for that overview of exhibition/museum design there. But now we're going to speak about how that worked out in practice for you. Because though you had worked on several different projects in your early years as a designer, a very interesting portion of your career is working for the Art Gallery of Ontario starting in 1990. I'd love to hear about how that position came about and what your decision-making process was in wanting to be a part of that museum.

02-00:34:37
Price:
At the Art Gallery of Ontario? Mm-hm. So this was a time in my career where I had my own practice and was not really happy with that as being the way forward for my career path, so I was looking for opportunities to get back into a group setting. Early nineties in Canada—I think across North America really—there was a lot of work going on in museums, so many museums were in expansion mode. And the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which is one of the big three or four museums in the country, was going through a major expansion, doubling their size. It was an ambitious project. They didn't have an in-house Design Department, per se. [These are] things I learned in retrospect. They had a person who was in the shop area [Jim Bourke]—the Preparations Department it's called in a museum—who was doing drawings for the carpenters for building things. And sometimes was intercepting curators' conversations directly with the carpenters and napkin sketching on what might be needed and helping to facilitate that exchange and inserting himself into that process of refining the thinking or turning over different ideas. So there was an individual who was working on the exhibition design-like things, but he was self-taught and grew out of an art handler's position, I believe.

02-00:36:34
So the new director there, Glenn [D.] Lowry, who's now the director at the Museum of Modern Art, was hired at the Art Gallery of Ontario. He had a vision for kind of upping the game a little bit in several areas, one of which was design, and created a head of exhibition design position. It reported to him through the Exhibitions Department. I interviewed with Glenn. Kathleen Harleman was the project coordinator in the Exhibitions Department or project manager, I suppose—I can't recall exactly what her title was—and it was dedicated to all of the new galleries and renovation of old galleries that were being created, as well as the opening exhibitions. So I reported to Kathleen. She was a great boss, a real true collaborator, and a person who got people working together well in teams. She was very adept at communication
and setting up schedules and orchestrating how people work together across departments.

I was quite young, so Glenn and the people who are on the interviewing committee would have been taking a bit of a risk, I suppose, at hiring somebody as young as I was, but I had a proven track record, having worked at National Gallery of Canada and delivered that project successfully, or at least part of it I was responsible for. And I had been teaching, so clearly I had some communication skills. I'd run my own consulting office for a couple of years, so had some business acumen. So all of that together gave me a résumé that they gave me the chance for the job.

It was an intense project. I hadn't worked in-house in an art museum before, so that was new. It was a unionized workplace, so the management and union dynamic was something that was new territory for me, as well. There was just a lot to do and not that much time, so I think we had like over fifty galleries to design and opening exhibitions within a couple of years' time frame. It was just me and Jim Bourke at the beginning—he was the person that was already in-house at the museum—that formed the foundation of the Design Department. And then I had to hurry up and start hiring to get people in chairs and gets desks and computers set up and work areas set up. We were very nomadic for those two years, because it was a construction site, and our growing department moved around to different available nooks and crannies. Sometimes they were galleries that were not air-conditioned but still under construction, and we'd pick up everything and move to another space that became available. So that was sort of interesting that we were—nobody really knew where to find us. We were flying under the radar a little bit.

Yes, so that was a big project to create. It was called stage three at the Art Gallery of Ontario. That was its nickname, because I guess there was a stage one and a stage two before that. It was originally a Beaux-Arts building, and then it was Barton Myers architects who had done the design, and then it was Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, if my memory serves me, were the architects who took over that. And then subsequently, most of the work that we did then in the nineties got overlaid and erased in a way by Frank Gehry's more recent design, where the museum expanded again by another quarter or a third its size in the early [two] thousands. So it's a museum that's gone through lots of transformation over the years.

Tewes: I'm sorry, did you say when you came on in 1990, were they expanding to include new collections or to incorporate ones they already had on display?
Price:

It was to bring things out of storage that there wasn't space for before and expand the amount of gallery space, especially in the Canadian area. Canadian Historical got much expanded and the contemporary parts of the collection I think only had changing exhibition spaces before, and so they had some dedicated spaces for contemporary art that had been created. There was a whole new center for the study of drawings [The Study Centre], works on paper that had been created, too. That was an area that they were still acquiring a lot and had a strong collection, but were acquiring a lot and had study rooms and library and things like that that were set up. It was also an expansion of all the office and administrative spaces. And an incorporation of the very first museum in Toronto, which was a historic house that was in a park behind, so it was linking back together with AGO's footprint. And a very expanded retail space and food services and event spaces were added, as well. Like many museums, lots of those spaces were sold to have people's name on them for fundraising, and so that was a part of the job was to figure out the donor signage.

In Canada, everything is bilingual, so all of the graphics were English and French. And because of both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada have collections in indigenous peoples' art, some of the galleries had a third language of Inuktitut, which needed to be edited and typeset. Going back to the Art of Gallery of Ontario now, they sometimes, I think, publish in Anishinaabe, also. It depends on the First Nations people and what their language is, what they might be putting up on the wall. Yeah.

Tewes:

So you've described a very ambitious undertaking. And I'm interested in not only the work that you were actually doing back then, but how you were implementing some of these big ideas you would come up with on how a design studio should be run in-house?

Price:

Right. Well, I guess the big idea or the master plan, I would have had to share with Kathleen and Glenn to get them to agree to it. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, there was a group of graphic designers already employed by the museum. They were doing publication design primarily, but because there were similar skillsets, they ended up coming under my wing and reporting to me. That was not without some friction that they had been in these positions for years and years and had worked fairly independently and had a production manager as their department head, so the creative aspect of the work was fairly open-ended for designers. Now, I quite frankly didn't meddle much with the graphic designers in publication design. There was more than enough work to do with the galleries, and it was humming along just fine. The work they were doing was good and fine, so I let them go about their business, but I had the management responsibility for that team. I was hiring some graphic designers who were working on the graphics for the physical spaces of the
galleries and exhibition spaces that had to rub shoulders with one another and share ideas on how things were being presented in two or three languages. So there was some commonality with the way the institution was approaching these common problems.

Kathleen and I worked together on like master schedules and how the work would flow through departments. She had already done a lot of work up front before my arrival. But how the concepts were being described by the content specialist—in this case, the art history curators—and then how those were being discussed and shared with the interpretive planners in the Education Department, and what the structures were for how ideas were going to be presented to the visitors, like word counts for text panels and hierarchy of information: was it going to be the artist named first or the subject matter first? This was a hot topic in the nineties in art museums of what got precedence. And so how all that work flowed through all the departments and incorporated the design input, as well, for shaping the physical experience in the galleries and the experience of what the graphics look like, all things the things I had mentioned earlier—colors and interiors and lighting—integrating that into a common solution. So we were working with all the curatorial departments, project teams: Canadian Historical, Canadian Contemporary, Drawings, European Art, the Inuit Art Collection. Am I missing something, curatorial areas? Oh, Modern Canadian was a different curatorial department, and then there was a special area of Henry Moore [and Photographs too] at the Art Gallery of Ontario, so that had another dedicated curatorial team. So there were project teams with all of those curatorial departments that the work flowed out of.

So yeah, we were creating the systems and procedures, as well as the look and feel of the spaces. Ultimately, all of those ideas were getting approved by the director, and senior curatorial team needed to satisfy budgets. We were collaborating with the architects, because the building was being detailed and finalized concurrently. That was another responsibility, was looking at the programmatic needs of different departments and making sure that they were as clearly articulated—in concrete terms—to the architects as possible so that there weren't missed opportunities. Like the Education Department wanted a room or a set of rooms dedicated for family activity space. They had a big school group touring operations, so that whole procedure of school buses and kids and teachers arriving on site and what they needed in terms of coat check and lunch areas and places they would get marshalled before being taken to the gallery. There were a lot of programmatic needs that needed some—or benefited from our help in describing them for our architect to respond to and design spaces and doors and stairs and routes through the building that worked as best they could.
We had the skills, too, looking at the blueprints that people wouldn’t understand maybe as fully as we did, and finding opportunities where there were spaces that are being walled in or pathways that were little bit funny. Dog-legs, matching old parts of the building together with new parts of building and making suggestions of how they might be streamlined or how they might be thought of differently. Or maybe if we knocked a hole in this wall here, we could do a recessed, built-in showcase that could feature an object in this entryway to the set of galleries. So there were opportunities that were uncovered just by us looking at the drawings and asking questions about what could or couldn’t be done with the situations at hand.

We were also traveling a little bit and looking at what other museums were doing then, the architects and us on staff. I remember having gone on a research trip to Europe and went to the Picasso Museum in Paris. I was traveling with Bryan Gee; he was my senior graphic designer at the time. At the Picasso Museum in Paris, they had this really interesting detail in contemporary spaces with twentieth-century paintings and [Alberto] Giacometti sculptures. Giacometti’s brother was actually a designer of some of the furnishings, I believe, and railings and ironwork in that building. But instead of having baseboards, which would protect the walls from cleaning equipment or getting scuffed by just the day-to-day people walking around or bumping up a mop against the wall, they had troughs in the gallery, and it was nice that if you were a long way back across the room, you could look across the gallery and the wall would meet the floor without any real architectural or obvious architectural division, which a baseboard typically would put.

And so I shared that idea with one of the architects of the KPMB, Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg, and did a mock-up of it, a full-sized mock-up in foam core that we had laminated with paper replicas of the hardwood and said, "Well, what about using this idea that we saw at the Picasso Museum, and instead of having baseboards in the contemporary Canadian Art Wing, we could have these troughs? And you can see from a distance that it makes that detail that you need for logistical reasons for floor polishing equipment and brooms and stuff, so that they have an edge to work up to, but instead of putting it on the wall, let's put it on the floor." It also gave the benefit of much—many contemporary works of art go down and sit, rest on the floor or they want to hang like really, really, really close to the ground, because they're playing with the idea of interrupting the plane of floor and the wall. So they were quite taken with this idea and that made them change the approach to all of the millwork detailing in the Contemporary Galleries to adopt this trough instead of baseboard solution. It was quite beautiful, if I do say so myself.

Tewes: That is so interesting.
Price: Yeah, so being in-house and just thinking of some of these details from the art installation perspective, instead of, well, just being really close to it that would make you see it in a different way. Lots of times when you get architectural plans, because they're [the architects are] just dealing with blank walls on sheets of paper, they've got light switches or thermostat covers or like fire strobe or a fire post station. So there are these little things that they need to arrange on the wall, and they'll take space, occupy space, because it looks good to compose it on their drawing sheet and kind of push into the space where we want to hang art. Or you could suggest to them, "Well, couldn't we move some of that equipment around the corner into a door jamb, instead of having it being on the face of the wall?" or "Could we organize them all together so that they're all in a line and pushed up against the edge?" So just thinking of it that way to say what the final use of these walls were going to be might influence the detailing that the architects were putting on paper and instructing the construction people to install. That was beneficial, too, to have a seat at the table with the Building Department and the architectural team. I know I was perceived as a pain in the ass sometimes, because I was making people look again at some things that were already quite close to being accepted or are ready to go into production, so it wasn't always welcomed. But I was persistent when I needed to be for the good of the final project. I mean, it wasn't really about an ego thing. It was just like, Wouldn't that be better for the—how we're going to use this if this happened. Sometimes, I could make a convincing argument and maybe it did cost a little bit more, and you'd have to convince the people that the director and head of administration, people monitoring the budgets, that is it worth it. There was often a business case, as well, of whether it was worth it to do some of these things.

Tewes: So you were with the Art Gallery of Ontario for five years, and I am just curious, overall, what your big takeaways were from this experience.

Price: Well, I think that my thinking about how to organize a department worked in large part to provide a design department that has one-stop shopping for the internal clients. And to be in on the ground floor of a museum building project earlier than later is beneficial, too, so to be an advocate or helping people develop their programs for the architects to then respond to benefits the project long term. I think it's with age and wisdom—I don't know that I really had it when I left that job at the Art Gallery of Ontario—is to be as calm as you can be, because you have other people following your lead and that not everything is going—there are so many people in museum settings that are perfectionists, and so everything is out for the best outcome for a project, but sometimes you do have to compromise, and that's not a failure. I think that was a lesson was that compromise in a work setting—well, in life—can viewed as good thing. It's just you need to know when to stick to your convictions and when to let go.
So I think that, you know, managing people and having to deal with it in a unionized workplace was something that just the division of labor took a little bit of some stumbles along the way. I wasn't used to having to ask permission to go up like to use a ladder. You weren't allowed to get up on a ladder; that was somebody else's job. You couldn't go there and just adjust a lamp; that was somebody else's job. If we were working long hours in the design studio, it reflected badly on other people who—maybe people weren't filling out their timecards the way they should to get their overtime. I was oblivious to all of that, because I was just working in private practice, and you worked until the job was done, and you took a salary home at the end of the week. You didn't really have people on your side looking out, your union reps looking out for your well-being. That was a whole thing that I had—some of my staff were unionized staff and some of my staff were professional staff, so navigating those waters of how different people get treated differently was a big learning experience.

No major stumbles, but there was a downturn in the middle of that project. There were staff that had to be laid off. And in unionized workplaces, there's points that you have for how many years of service, and you can bump other people in other positions. It was something to witness. I had no window into that workplace before, so to see all of that unfold and people being let go and then them bumping somebody out of a job in another department that they had common skills. The chain reaction through the institution was just amazing, and sad to have to say goodbye to the people that you had hired just a year and six months or a year before, because that's what was asked of you. That was a big learning experience, too, was just all of the management responsibilities. Before that job, I was really sheltered from all of that, because I was responsible for myself and the delivery of a project, but not really responsible for the well-being and the futures of people who were in my care, in a way, in my department. But that was just having empathy for that whole dynamic of all of the people working and all of the interpersonal dynamics, relationships.

I've got to say, Kathleen Harleman was really good that way, that she thought a lot about people. We together as a division was the Design Department, the Preps and Production Department, and the Publications people, and the Editorial group was aligned with us and the Exhibitions Coordinators. Our division, we all did the Myers-Briggs assessment together. That was really interesting to identify what your personality type was and learn how other people tick and what motivates other people. So just understanding how different people perceive things and how they process things and come to make decisions, that was a big learning experience. I think both then and in the early days of the Getty of different team-building workshops and assistance that was being provided by the HR departments was important, because I really valued that and valued the well-being of people who work around me and kind of community minded of wanting to be responsible for
the health of the whole organism not just my little part of it. So I've got to give a lot of credit to Kathleen for introducing me to some of those management ideas that I really valued.

And in the art museum, many of the people that find themselves in management positions have no management training. They're a specialist in an arcane bit of art history or have come to their position without any management training, so those little bits of insight that you got through some of these management workshops were invaluable, but it was very uneven how they were practiced and who had been exposed to them. Management, I suppose, in many organizations is very different. You have very flat socialist kind of areas of the institution, and you can have other departments that are quite hierarchical and dictators, so there the buck stops at the top and that person has the final say. So understanding how different departments work and how you might need to change your communication style or your expectations or you might inadvertently step in it, because you didn't understand or follow the chain of command over in that part of the institution and you talked to the wrong person. Those were all really good learning experiences at the Art Gallery of Ontario through stumbles and some introspection and quiet talks with Kathleen in her office about like, "Why did that go that way, and how could we not have that happen again?" kind of thing.

It sounds like it was all very valuable.

Yeah. So the other big takeaway from the Art Gallery of Ontario, too, is where I met my wife, because—Carla Roth. She was a manager in the Education Department and was responsible, in large part, for managing the budgets of a very big gallery school that people would come to take art classes, as well as she had responsibilities for managing the budgets for all different subdepartments within the education umbrella, and was responsible for new media and new technology. One of the only projects of any scale that Carla and I ended up working together on was a new visitor interactive kiosk for the entry lobby, which had a computer embedded in it and a touchscreen. These were all new technologies where it could help you plan your visit to the museum. That was new for the museum and somewhat new for the province. The Art Gallery of Ontario had some of its funding from the Province of Ontario, and so the museum had obligations to share expertise with smaller regional museums in the province. So some of these things we were doing at the AGO were being showcased around to other smaller museums and helping them get a leg up. I remember Carla going on trips to other museums to share what we were doing at the AGO and comparing notes with other places.
We got married just six months before I started at the Getty, and so that was a big year of transition, from meeting—we were both very busy at work because of the building project. We weren't really looking for a relationship, per se, but love can bloom, even in busy, frantic times; maybe even that lends itself to making strong relationships with people. So it's only a year after—we got married in October and I and started to recruit, set my mind on this Getty opportunity, because the gears were turning, as it were. And then by the summer, I was in Los Angeles and Carla—well, it was one of our life goals, was to move to a different country. The United States and Los Angeles were not on the checklist of top destinations. Some other countries were, and some other cities, as well. If we did move to the States, Boston and San Francisco have a lot more in terms of similarities to Toronto than Los Angeles did. University towns were built at similar times and had robust infrastructure, in terms of public transits and melting pots of different kinds of people, good food and restaurants. Seattle would have been on the checklist, too, I suppose. But the opportunity was in L.A., so we ended up setting our—my sights on that, and Carla was a willing participant to pull up stakes and move to a different country and to leave her job behind. She had been at the AGO for a lot longer than I had been there. She started as a server in the restaurant and worked her way up into management. And also, she comes from an art and design background, too, so we have that as a—

Tewes: That's great.

Price: —common thing.

Tewes: Well, you've already started us on this path in thinking about what comes next for you, in terms of the Getty. How did you hear about this position, and can you walk me through your decision to apply?

Price: Yeah. I'll just wrap up a couple of things about the AGO experience. We got stage three completed, and the new permanent collection gallery's debuted. Then right after that, there was another big push to get the first set of special exhibitions completed and installed. So for a few months, it was just people were coming to visit because of the new galleries. But then there was a big, big important international exhibition from the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia that they were renovating their galleries and had to go through some gymnastics to get changes to some stipulations that the collection would never travel. But they needed to raise funds, so they had special permission from their board to, "Okay, this one time, we'll travel these important Impressionists paintings, Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings to fundraise."
And so the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto was one of the recipients of this traveling exhibition, and it was a big, big blockbuster. It broke records for attendance, and it had a lot of press attention on it, and we wanted to do it right. That exhibition was a big challenge. Glenn Lowry's reputation was riding on it, to a certain degree. We'd already successfully delivered all of these permanent collection galleries in these different collection areas, but how would this museum do with special exhibitions? It went really well. We had very creative installation planned for it, and it was super well attended.

There were a series of other exhibitions that followed on that, a William Morris show with a very theatrical and creative head of Drawings. [Katharine] Kathy Lochnan, and some special contemporary shows where we're working with living artists. So there was this moving to an operational way of working, as opposed to a start-up, and so there was a year or more—I don't remember exactly the timing—of moving the Department into more of an ongoing, how we would fit into the fabric of this institution after having finished the expansion.

So there was some settling and figuring out where our department would be located. There was some shifting around of staff and downsizing and reorganizing that went on. People had made this accomplishment, and a lot of people that were on staff had it set in their sights, Okay, I'm going to make it until the stage three project is completed and open, then I'm going to take a breath or go back to school or look for another job or I'm going to stick it out until then. This isn't really my—whatever, lots of different factors that would motivate people to have that as their turning point. My turning point wasn't in the stage three, but well, Let's see how this operates for a while and do some of these first opening exhibitions and live with the building, too. So we made some adjustments and tweaks and refinements over the first year or more of operation. That seemed like it was complete, and I had really delivered the projects and delivered the Department. It was in good standing, and I felt like that I could leave it in somebody else's hand if a new opportunity came up.

I knew that the Getty was a project that was underway. I had visited Los Angeles as a reward to myself after the National Gallery project finished and toured some of the museums. I remember going to LA County Museum [of Art] and the original Getty [Villa] out in Malibu, which was a bit of a quirky place, I thought, the first time I visited it. I was aware of it, and I knew that it was an institution that had deep pockets, and I knew that they didn't have an in-house design department. I knew that it was a big project, multiyear, and I could—I knew that they had an opening date in their sights. So all of those together, I knew that they probably were going to be hiring talent to help make all of this happen. There were some articles in the Art Newspaper, and there was chatter at different museum conferences. I had attended a few
conferences showcasing work that had been done at the Art Gallery of Ontario, so we're meeting other people from other institutions across the country and across the world, and reveling a little bit in the spotlight of our accomplishment at the AGO. Some of the work that we did was groundbreaking in the way that the interpretive planning for an art museum was done and the integration of computers into galleries. And the fact that we had presented everything bilingually was not common thing, especially for American museum. So there were a lot of things that were of interest to others, how we did it and sharing some of our successes.

Where was I? Well, about the Getty. I knew that Getty project was happening, and I was poking around to find out who might be—or just who would be the decision maker, who might be hiring, or who might be thinking about an in-house designed department. So I sent out some exploratory emails and phone calls to people who were seeming like they'd be the right person. Irene Martín was the person that I eventually arrived at being one of the key players of decision making. She was the head of Exhibitions and had it on her checklist of things to do was to hire a head of Exhibition Design. That's what the position was. when I first contacted her, they weren't quite ready to do that, it was a few months away, but not that far down the path. And so she was interested in hearing from me and said when the time was right, she would let me know more about the posting and so one thing led to another.

I just want to check in with you. Do you want to finish this story of the hiring process today, or would you like to stop where we're at?

Let's do that. Let's finish, because it's a kind of train of thought. Is that okay?

That's fine with me, go ahead.

Yeah. So this would have been I guess summer of '94, 1994 that I would've probably been making a connection with Irene and seeing what the timeline might be for a Getty opportunity. Carla and I were also planning our wedding, because we decided to get married in the summer and set a date for October. The first round of interviews for the Getty opportunity was going to be in the fall, and I mentioned that, well, I was reserving a month, because not only—we had both just finished this huge project at the AGO and really hadn't taken as much vacation time as we might have liked to. And Canada, like much of Europe, has—in these kind of work situations—has a minimum of six-week-a-year annual vacation, so we had stockpiled some vacation and wanted to take a decent break in our honeymoon. So we were getting married and then taking a month off to travel, and I had to let the Getty know that I wasn't
going to be available for interviewing during that window of mid-October until mid-November. That was fine, and we set up an interview for January.

So I had applied for the job, written your cover letter and CV and some slides of the slide film and some slide sheets with annotations as evidence of my work experience. And I was shortlisted, so I came for a first round of interviews in the winter. Everybody was very apologetic of the weather in Los Angeles, and I thought it was dreamy, because I was leaving like subzero [temperatures and] feet of snow on the ground in Toronto. It was a little bit drizzly and chilly maybe for Angelenos, but it was really nice with flowers blooming and the ocean right there. I mean, it was like going to Shangri-La.

They put me up in a nice hotel, and I went for the first-round interview and it was a big interview. My gosh, it was two days with the entire management team, a presentation in the boardroom to the entire management team the first day; then meetings with all of the senior administrative officers, the chief curator, the director, the head of administration, and HR; and then every hour on hour was meeting another curator and another department head; and then there's a quick dinner, and it was off to an opening at the Hammer Museum, because the Photography Department had an opening up at the Hammer that was showcasing a new major acquisition. I think it was that winter that the Photography Department really exploded in its size, because of this major acquisition that being showcased at the Hammer. I was introduced to some of the curators in the Photography Department at the opening at the Hammer that night. So it was a twelve-hour interview; it was exhausting. But I made it through that day, including a dinner with Irene, and then I was back for a second day of interviews with follow-up with [Deborah] Debbie Gribbon, who was the chief curator, and who else? I probably just met with Kris Kelly, who was the head of Administration, and John Walsh, the director, because they would have gotten some feedback from the meetings the day before and were like, "How did it go," what was I thinking, kind of conversation and a few questions, a little walk around, and then I was back in a plane to Toronto.

That was January, I think, and on the second round of interviews—so the short list got shorter, and I think it was down to just two or three people then. One of my references, who was the head of Design at the National Gallery of Canada, learned of the job through me asking him for a reference, and he applied, as well, so I wasn't very happy about that. But ultimately, I got the job and he didn't, so I felt the right man got the job, although he would have done a fine job of it, too, I suppose. So the second-round interview in the spring, which was another trip down. I was still working at the AGO, so I had to fit these trips in. That was a red eye going down and just taking a day off for vacation with not so much notice down for the interviews and meetings, and then straight back to Toronto and work.
It was that second interview where Debbie and John and Irene all thought that there was maybe more to the position than just head of Exhibition Design. The work that we had done at the Art Gallery of Ontario, they were interested in the collaborative work with the architect's office, and saw that there was probably some work to do on that front still at the Getty. And the fact that I had experience doing signage design, they had held back all of the signage for the museum part of the project for the new head of Exhibition Design to have some responsibility for setting up the program and doing the work. So they were holding back certain facets of the work until the arrival of this person in the job. Together with them, we redefined the position a little bit from head of Exhibition Design that was subservient to the head of Exhibitions to be parallel and the same level of responsibility as the head of Exhibition. So we are more partners, rather than in a direct-line reporting structure. Instead of me reporting to Irene, I was—through the interviewing process—was going to be reporting to Debbie Gribbon.

Do you have a sense of [whether] the changes that John Walsh and Debbie Gribbon were thinking about for this position came about because you were the candidate?

Well, I think to some degree, yes, and that I had the skillsets to do more than just what would be a kind of classic head of Exhibition Design. I had ambition, too, and so my portfolio and experience showed that I could deliver all of that, so they were interested in having integrated solutions. They didn't really have a history or experience doing exhibitions. The Getty Villa then was a small operation and very new. The Drawings Collection was very straightforward how they rotated the collections. The Manuscripts Gallery is the same way. The Photography Gallery was just a small, little space with like pin-up boards, tack-up boards almost that were covered in fabric, so you could put nails and then take them out and not have any damage. They also did their object labels where secretaries—or administrative assistants, they might be called now—were typing them, and they were gluing them on to placards and trimming them out with the help of somebody in a shop and pinning them up on a wall, so it was pretty rudimentary, one might say. Their special exhibition space at the Villa was a room that was maybe seventy-five square feet. It was tiny, like a closet, room for painting and text panel. And so the experience was not deep. There was one person on staff who was a graduate intern in the Publications Department that had an interest in exhibition design that was getting people warmed up to the idea of typesetting and custom colors and having a designer working alongside of or in between the curator and the shops to help refine ideas. So there was the beginnings, the kernels of what a design department might be, but that was really unformed. Yeah.
Yeah, so the offer was made, and there was a little negotiating in the late spring, and I accepted the position and had a start date of early July. Carla and I actually flew down July Fourth holiday weekend. We went and saw fireworks after we landed with kind of a white-knuckle drive on the freeway from a friend of a friend who took us with them. We weren't used to LA freeways at that speed in an open-top car with a driver that was a little bit aggressive. But it was a fun first day going to see fireworks on the Fourth of July, and I started work on July 11, 1995.

With the relocation to Los Angeles, it required all of the immigration work, as well, of getting a green card and going through all of that legal work for both me and for Carla. Times were different pre-9/11 in terms of approvals, and I came on an O-level visa, which is a—I forget the exact language then—but a person with extraordinary skills or talent. With the O-level visa, it, at that time, allowed your spouse to get a visa, and we were fast-tracked for green cards. And the Getty legal team, who was looking after immigrations, because they were recruiting hand over fist people all over the world for all sorts position at the Getty.

The onboarding at the Getty for the first couple of years was: every month, there was another welcome-to-the-Getty party for all of the new staff that had been hired. It was exploding at the seams, literally, like where people were working and all the new faces and new departments and new procedures. And it was a big thing that was exploding, and there was a lot going—there were a lot—there was a lot going and people were converging on the Getty from all over the world. So it was very exciting, and it created this chemistry of a lot of people who had pulled up stakes from their prior jobs and were up for an adventure and had a little bit of experimental DNA in them. Like the curators were open to new ways of thinking, new ideas, and everybody who was arriving in job was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and up for some fun and adventure. So it couldn't have been a better time to start at the Getty, because it was a wealthy institution, the money was flowing, they were buying art, they were hiring the best talent from around the world, and we were creating this new—this museum that was going to debut on the world stage. An important architectural design by Richard Meier and the eyes of the art world were on this relatively unknown museum breaking onto the world stage. That's what I was charged to do, with two-and-a-half years to go before the opening day, so there was a lot to accomplish ahead of me.

Yeah, we will certainly dig into that particular project as we move forward. But as closing thoughts for today, I wonder if you can give me a sense of your initial impressions of Los Angeles and Southern California, being that you had come from Toronto.
Price:

Yeah, well glorious weather, although I was surprised. Summertime weather was much more temperate than it is in Toronto. Los Angeles does not have the heat and humidity of New York or Toronto or East Coast cities, so that was a bit of a surprise. I felt being down close to the ocean—and that's where I was for the first six months—it didn't really ever feel like summer. You always needed to put a jacket or a sweater on in the evening, because there'd be a damp chill come blowing from the ocean, the marine layer, as it's referred to, June gloom on LA coast. Just understanding the weather was something that moving inland—looking at Mid City was—ended up being better weather, as far as I was concerned, than being by the coast, because it was a little bit sunnier earlier in the day and the marine layer had burnt off earlier, so it felt a little bit warmer but it still cooled off in the evening. That was something to learn, was just what the weather was like in this new place.

It's a big megalopolis, so figuring out how to get around and streets, and it's an amalgam of a whole bunch of small towns, smaller cities that merged together over the years. So even understanding that the same street name was in two or three different parts of the city, but they weren't connected in any way. There wasn't GPS on your phone. I mean, we didn't even have mobile phones then, so you were using a Thomas Guide on the passenger seat try to figure out your way around this city. I was a good map reader so that wasn't a problem. I enjoyed exploring the new city.

But it was also a city that was in some turmoil, because the Northridge earthquake had just happened the year before, and so some of the freeways I was driving on, I didn't realize, had collapsed and had been rebuilt, and they had been reestablished. And there had been riots earlier that year, and so from Mid City there was some burnout buildings, and there had been quite a lot of what was referred to as white flight, of people leaving some of these urban areas and going to safer refuge in wherever—suburban areas, I suppose. So that, like understanding where the dividing lines were between safe areas and not-so-safe areas where there might be gang activity or—you can just begin to perceive this just for what rents were on apartments in certain areas of town versus other area of town, and talking to people about where they were living to figure where you might live. I spent a lot of my weekend time driving around and figuring out like, Where would we like to live.

And Carla was still in Toronto. She stayed behind to keep working. We owned a home there, so there was business to wrap up with deciding what to do with our house and finding a place to live before it was stable enough for Carla to come and join me. The first six months were crazy busy with work, so it wouldn't have been that fun a time for us to explore the city together, per se. So that was driving around the city and figuring out the neighborhoods, thinking about where you might live; that was a big learning experience, too.
And just getting together with coworkers who were all—many of them were experiencing the same thing of just having relocated to LA, and so sharing stories about who they were, where they had come from, and where they were living, comparing notes.

Architecturally, it was—I didn't find LA particularly appealing. It looked like it was one strip mall after another. It was only when you started to peel off some of the layers of the onion that you found the charm of some of the neighborhoods, and I suppose like many cities revealed themselves. But Los Angeles on the surface was so not beautiful. I mean, the oceanside and some older parts of town perhaps. It also suffered from Hollywood and watching cop shows and car chases and so much of what you imagined LA to be. Well, some of that actually does exist, but that's somewhat superficial. I mean, it's an aspect of the urban environment, but it's by no means the totality of it.

Yeah. It was a city that was still in its adolescence, too. I think it's changed a lot from the last twenty, twenty-five years, had grown up. It was looked down upon by New York, in terms of art museums and working artists as a bit of a backwater or a provincial place. And so I think that changed over the years, and probably the fact that the Getty was created was a part of that transformation, too. It turned the spotlight on to the West Coast in a way that hadn't—there hadn't been something to garner the spotlight previously and to that same degree. So I think the Getty was part, a big part of LA's emerging into a world-class city. There are many other things, too, but that's certainly one part of the formula.

That's a perfect way to wrap up here. You brought us full circle. Is there anything you'd like to add before we sign off today?

No. I feel like we've gone down a lot of different pathways and a lot of different connecting dots. Let's pick it up the next time and start fresh.

Excellent. Thank you so much, Merritt.

Yeah, thank you.
Interview 3: October 8, 2020

03-00:00:05

Tewes: This is a third interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project in association with the Oral History Center at UC [University of California], Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on October 8, 2020. And Mr. Price joins me in this remote interview from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you for joining for a third session, Merritt.

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Price: You know, when we left off last time, we discussed your decision to take the position with the Getty and your move to Los Angeles and to California, but I am really interested in hearing about your initial impressions of the Getty in mid-1990s.

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Price: Sure. So arriving in the job in 1995, it was the summertime, and it was actually Independence Day that we landed in Los Angeles, so there literally were fireworks going off to greet us. It was the height of summer, and at the [Getty] Villa, where I started working, we—I think I talked about this in last session—we were in the upper cottage on Batch Lane, and it used to be Minnie Batch's cottage. She was the security officer in the early days of the Villa. It was a little bungalow cottage with a porch and a view of the Villa below and the ocean beyond, so it was a little piece of Shangri-La coming from the Great White North. It was a small cottage that had three rooms, I think. The front room had drafting tables. Tim McNeil and Elizabeth Postmus were occupying workstations there, and where it had—a space had been made for me, as well, in the front part of the cottage. The back part of the cottage had the Exhibitions Department, so Irene Martín and Kevin Murphy was her staff assistant, senior staff assistant. I shared Kevin's support for the fledgling Design Department.

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Price: So Tim had just moved from the Publications Department, which is another center of design at the Getty, where he was a graduate intern the year prior under Deenie Yudell’s wing. She was my counterpart in Publications, head of Publication Design. Tim had established really strong relationships with the chief curator, [Deborah] Debbie Gribbon, and also Barbara Anderson, who had been responsible for exhibitions and then moved into a position at the Research Institute after being at the [Getty] Museum. I think she had been in the job for a few years already. Barbara Anderson was then head of Exhibitions at the GRI [Getty Research Institute], and we forged a really good working relationship down the road.

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Price: But our focus was on work at the Museum. From that little cottage, we had to get down to business, because it was 1995, and then the Getty Center was
scheduled to open in late '97, so there was only like a year-and-a-half, two years to accomplish everything that was before us. Everything wasn't even clear what was before us, so I think that was the first big job, was to just start making a laundry list of everything that needed to have design input. There wasn't a ready-made list from the director or the chief curator, or Tim hadn't really taken up the gauntlet of what was going to be our responsibility, because it is still such early days.

I should say that Tim had started some work on rationalizing what labels might look like in the galleries, and working with different curatorial departments, so diving into what the typography might look like and this idea of maybe standardizing labels, which were different in different departments back in those early days. There were rotations of the permanent collection in the Drawings Department and the Manuscripts Department, so that provided some opportunity to explore new ideas for how to engage with the public. Tim had already done some work on labels and case placement and working with the Preparations Department and the conservators and talking about like the narrative and labels. I think we were probably then using outside editors and lots of outside services to get things done.

The Photography Collection was brand new, and it was—but my time at the [Getty], when I was interviewing, it was the debut of, I think, the Sam Wagstaff Collection, if I'm not mistaken, that was being presented at the Hammer. The photography galleries at the Villa were quite small, so it was limited what we could do there. Then there was one room that I think used to be a closet; I'm not even sure what its prior purpose was. That couldn't have been any more than 150 or 200 square feet at most. That was the special exhibition gallery.

I remember Tim was really excited about a painting that he had some research done about it. I think he was working on it maybe with another graduate intern; it might have been Anne Woollett from the Paintings Department. They did a small exhibition that was something that the Getty eventually would become known for: doing these more in-depth explorations with the conservation story that was attached of a painting or an artist's work for a period in time.

There were little things that were being worked on that would be experimental in some ways, because there, we were in the process of moving away from the Villa. The Villa was going to close up. The Drawings, Manuscripts, and Photography Collections, and Paintings Collections were all going to find a new home at the Getty Center, so people were in a mood to start exploring what those presentations at the Getty Center might look like. I think I might have mentioned, too, that there was an air of people wanting to be exploratory
or not necessarily do it the way that it had been done in more blue blood, East Coast, or more established museums. Why not look at things fresh? So everybody had come to the Museum fairly recently and so there were a lot of new people, new ideas. It was a fairly youthful group of staff, and every week, really, there were new people that were being announced as hiring really kicked into gear.

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We had maybe two or three rotations of the Drawings and Manuscripts Collections that allowed us to pilot the new of idea of what a souvenir brochure might look like. We hired some outside services to design those with us, what, as I mentioned, labels would look like; establishing some lines of communication with the workshops—the Woodshop and the Metal Shop and the Painting Shop—for getting involved now in the process of designing things, where previously, it was curators speaking directly to the head of Preparations, who—if you think of a renovation project, you often have a designer and a builder, where those jobs are separated, where the designer does the creative thinking up front in collaboration with the builder. Like, What's achievable on this budget or with the time schedule, with the technology that we have at our disposal? The design component previously was missing, so curators were talking directly to the builder to figure out what they could do to present the art. But the builder, in this case the Preparations Department, was also the art handler, so there was a natural marriage that curator and art handler/construction manager would work on things. But they didn’t benefit from reconstructing what the program needs were or what the goals were, and maybe bringing some fresh thinking to it or bringing some knowledge of what is happening in terms of industry standards in other museums.

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That was kind of a gentle entrance that we had these low-expectation, low-risk projects in the old Villa galleries to tinker around with and build some relationships. I got to know the different curatorial departments. For example, the Manuscripts Department had partnered up with the Antiquities Department to present an idea that bridged between those two collection areas. We were presenting a couple of antiquities objects with manuscripts. So we got to know, in those first few months, touchstones with most of the curatorial areas and the Conservation Department, as well as the departments that were responsible for delivering things. That all led to discussions and then, subsequently, documentation of procedures and processes.

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On another side of the equation, I was putting my head together with Irene Martín to look at what a typical schedule for a project might be: what the milestones for delivery would be; decision points; who needed to be involved when; how much time it would take to get a small project, a medium project, and a big project delivered; and starting to rough in budgets for these initiatives, as well.
And then I guess another leg of the stool would be to have been working with the Building Program and the architects, Richard Meier's office, to look at what plans had already been put into place for the Getty Center and evaluate those with an in-house design eye and some new knowledge about what the curatorial departments, the Education Department, and some of the facilities departments might need. And also benefitting from having done this recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario, so I brought a lot of my own experience to the equation to be digging through the plan, hearing what people's expectations were of how visitors were going to move through the site, where the different collection areas were going to be presented, what the access pathways were from behind the scenes to the front of the house, and just look at: have there been any missed opportunities, were there any obstacles that had been designed into the plans that we might want to address while there was still time? It was all just planned because the Getty Center was truly a construction site of just girders going up and concrete being poured. It was hard to imagine some of the spaces, because they were—the word didn't even exist yet. You can only see them on plans and see them kind of roughed out, because of the foundation work if you went over to the construction site.

Tewes: Was that different from what you had experienced in the past, in terms of planning spaces?

Price: It was very similar to the experience to the National Gallery of Canada project, because it was a new building. And similar in some respects to the Art Gallery of Ontario, because it was a new addition to an existing building. But the AGO, you know, it was a combination of new spaces and renovated spaces, so there was some more tangible, concrete things to do, that people really already understood what the underlying problems were. I need to take a moment because I forgot to bring a glass of water.

Tewes: Sure, let's pause. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break, and, Merritt, you were talking about the challenges of coming into a design still in construction.

Price: Yeah. Parts of the project were further along than others. I remember my first meeting with Gillian Wilson, who was then curator of Decorative Arts. We met during the interviewing process, and she said, "Merritt, we're going to get along really well, because I've got everything all figured out. You won't need to do a thing for me. We do have some labels to sort out, but I even have a good production line right here on my desk with my secretary to make all of our labels, so we won't bother you. We'll just have tea and lunch now and then. It will be great." So Gillian was quite far along with the Decorative Arts Galleries, compared to other collections spaces. She had been working
independently with the Thierry Despont's office in New York doing these—well, largely they were period rooms for the French Decorative Arts Collection. They were a thing on to themselves that was quite separate from the aesthetic of all of the other permanent collection galleries, I think much to the chagrin of Richard Meier.

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Yeah, so we did lots of reconnaissance over at the Getty Center with tape measure and a 35-mm camera, in those days, shot a lot of film, got pictures developed. I started to pin things up around the Studio so we had things to visualize, what the place was going to look like. We started doing drawings of galleries there were already quite a few scale models of the Paintings Collection Galleries that had been constructed. And with the Preparation staff help, the Paintings curators had scale paintings that they were moving around and trying to figure out how they fit into the gallery. So there was a head of steam, as it were, that the Paintings Department in particular had built up. The Sculpture Department was a little bit less formed in their ideas. They were really holding back and looking for input from me and from my department to better understand the spaces and what might be accomplished, how things might fit, and understanding scale, how things would go. It's always more challenging, quite honestly, to deal with three-dimensional objects in space, because it's a larger space planning exercise then flat art on the wall.

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And most of the showcases, because they are very long lead items for the Manuscripts Collection, Drawings Collection, and Photography Collection, had been put to bed with some prototyping work that Richard Meier [ & ] Partners' [ Architects ] office had been involved in. Richard Meier is known for loving white, and so all of that showcase work was white on the exterior and white on the interior. There were some prototypes in a warehouse space in Santa Monica where they had mocked up a little kind of corner of a gallery to evaluate the showcases. I think John Walsh, probably in collaboration with the Curatorial Department, had decided that they didn't want all of these white showcases, that the interiors of the galleries were going to have—not to the degree of the Decorative Arts Galleries' historicizing interiors, but they would have historical elements or influences. So colors that were evocative of a period in time, fabric on many of the paintings got older, parts of the collection's Paintings Gallery walls that were more old timey, like more nineteenth-century approach to what a paintings gallery would look like. The Dulwich Picture outside of London was a prototype that John Walsh quite liked, and so if you visit the Dulwich Picture Galleries and then the Getty Center, you'll see the similarities of the scale of the galleries, the squared-up conical shape of the ceiling where the skylights are, and fabric-covered walls.

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Lots of work had been established. I'm saying that the showcases had—they weren't going to pursue the finalizing of the design with Richard's office. They engaged Glasbau Hahn, which is a world-renowned showcase manufacturer in
Frankfurt, Germany, to pick up the design and push it into the working/drawing stage. They looked at different material color and material quality. So you'll still see them at the Getty today, all of these cases that are quite venerable in a lot of ways: bronze, heavy bronze panels for the exterior, and largely fabric-wrapped interior, fiberoptic lighting on manuscripts and drawings.

And Glasbau Hahn knew how to do that. I've had some prior experience working with them. We never had the pleasure of really using them to a great extent, because they were a very expensive place to get your showcases manufactured. They had proprietary technology for how the cases opened and closed and sealed up for a hermetic seal, like for top-notch fabrication work. They were a glass house. The big thing for high-end museum showcases is having optically clear glass, which is a white glass. If you hold up a piece of glass, a white glass and just regular float glass like you have on a window in your house, it's quite green in comparison. It changes your perception of what you're seeing through the glass. This optically clear white glass was premium cost. And Glasbau Hahn—part of their name, glass—they're largely architectural glassmakers, but they had this little side business that did museum showcases, because it could benefit from their knowledge of working with glass. Till Hahn was the name of the fellow with the family business who we were working with.

And Helmut Guenschel was the person in the United States. I think he used to work for Glasbau Hahn and then he broke off and started his own company. So there was a partnership where I think Guenschel was going to do the late-stage fabrication and installation of the pieces at the Getty Center, but Hahn was doing the building. I could be wrong. You'd have to verify this with Bruce Metro, who was then then head of Preparations. Bruce had an instrumental role in making sure that all the program needs had been well articulated, dimensions and quantities were sorted out as best possible for manuscripts. There was a large inventory of manuscript cases, like how many books of this dimension could fit into a case and how many different sizes of cases would be needed.

There were two people in the Manuscripts area that helped that along. I imagine it was [Elizabeth] Liz Teviotdale and Nancy Turner. Liz Teviotdale was a curator, and Nancy Turner was a conservator who, when I started working with them, they were very diligent in making scaled plans about how everything would fit. They had been the ones who had been determining how things would fit in the galleries. They had scale rulers and grid paper, and would really proud of their work product of how things would fit in the gallery, and had some kind of comical routines, too, that they had. A test that they did—and it was kind of antic that they did regularly—it was the Nancy and Liz Butt Test, that if they could stand back-to-back, looking in the
opposite directions in two showcases and lean over and their butts didn't touch, then that spacing must be good enough for people to move around the galleries comfortably. [laughs] But there's some real sensible practicality to that. That was a good way of establishing what a good circulation space would be. We maybe put a finer point on it over the years with Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines and dealing with some larger volumes of visitors than there had been at the Villa.

Now, pedestals and showcases for the Sculpture Galleries, which were under Peter Fusco's direction, hadn't been touched at all. There wasn't really a program. There may be some lists of objects that needed to be displayed, and the sizes and weights of those objects, but it was fairly unformed [with the exception of a number of custom designed and faux painted pedestals that were done in baroque and neoclassical motifs]. They had been designed in collaboration with Joe Godla in the Sculpture Conservation department. So that was a project that we really had to dig into quickly of assessing the Sculpture Collection, getting scale models of these things done, getting them into the galleries, and start to talk about how they might be displayed, how they'd be combined, and what the pedestals and showcases for that collection area might look like. So the precedence have already been established—the Manuscripts and Drawings and Photography showcases—that influenced how we moved forward with that showcase program design. Out of convenience—and it was going well with Thierry Despont's office—that there was a contract created for Thierry Despont to design, under our direction, what those
pedestals might look like for the Sculpture Collection. There were more than pedestals, there were wall showcases—we would call them shadow boxes—and some special casework for glass and ceramics, as well.

So as you can see, there was a lot going on. There are many irons in the fire and lots of things that were moving forward simultaneously. It was kind of a joke that I had with Debbie Gribbon that I created this to-do list, and eventually it was nicknamed the Big To-Do List, because it was quite lengthy, everything that we had to do. And then that started to get chunked into things that were higher priority with long lead times and what needed to be done first.

Outside of the galleries, we are talking about furnishings like gallery benches and seating and programs spaces like the Family Room needed to have a more developed program, discussions with the Education staff and the Curatorial staff about what those spaces would do. Each pavilion at the Getty Center had a space called the Art Information Room, or at least that's what they ended up being called, which were interpretive spaces that were adjacent to the gallery spaces. That was somewhat novel in those days.

And also signage for the Museum. The signage that was visitor facing, not the behind-the-scene signs in office and work areas, which were already looked after by other under contract, but the visitor-facing signage. John and Debbie have held back the area signage people who are already in the job working for the Getty, because they felt that those signs needed to be integrated with the look and feel of all of the other interior elements for the gallery. That was wise on their part to hold that back, and I think took some effort, too, to carve that out of these other projects that had already been let and were well underway.

Well, along those lines, I'm interested in the idea that you as the then-Exhibition [Design] Department head are having to create some sort of unity in this very large campus, in terms of design and visitor experiences. And I'm wondering what your thoughts were behind that approach and, logistically, how you convinced people that that was a good direction to take.

Yes. So the director or the chief curator and the head of Education, Diane Brigham, they were all of a mind that it was a singular museum. It wasn't pastiche of different curatorial departments that were under one roof. If you go to other museums even to this day, that is the reality. If you go to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], for example, each of the curatorial departments has quite a lot of autonomy and their own formats for object
labels, their own aesthetic for showcases in their galleries, and so it is like walking into different city-states that's under a bigger umbrella.

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The vision for the Getty was to not have that; let's have more of a unified presentation. But all of the curatorial departments weren't on board. It hadn't been discussed a lot, I don't think, and they needed some convincing. Well, what did that mean and what was that going to look like? A big lightning rod thing was labels and how labels would be constructed, formatted. There is a particular way of labeling objects in scholarly publications that has the order of the information: the artist's name comes first; when they were born and when they died; where they born, where they died; the media that's used for the object from official little numbers and things that are used for inventory tracking of the object; and then there's quite a lot of arcane, idiosyncratic language to describe different art movements or production techniques or material specifics. So we had to get our arms around all of that language and terminology, as well as hierarchy, and looked at what other museums were doing and what we were doing in our Publications Department, and come up with some proposals for what object labels could look like, with the goal to bring everybody into some harmony with all of the object labels for the Museum being the same. As visitors move from one collection area to the other, they tend to not even be aware of the curatorial specialties and divisions, but they didn't have to learn a different dialect for how to read or understand the information.

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That was months of work to digest all of the different component elements, come up with some presentations on what labels might look like, what word counts would be, literally what materials they would be made out of, what fonts would be used to get everybody in agreement. So there were a lot of presentations, and ultimately Debbie and Diane held true to their convictions that this was the right thing to do. Together with them, we made a presentation that convinced everybody that they could make their peace with and moved it forward.

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The French Decorative Arts Gallery was again a little bit separate from everything else we had decided, because they had already defined some things that were constraints that couldn't be changed at that point. So the object labels were a bit smaller there than they were in some other areas and a little bit of a different dimension, I think, a little bit of a different proportion, but they still abided by the same typographic standards and the same hierarchical order of information. I lost track of what the main question was.

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Tewes: Oh, I was just—
Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Price:
I went down a rabbit hole about labels. [laughs]

Tewes:
I'm just curious about creating a cohesive look and feel for this entire campus, because there's so much work involved and so many different spaces to adhere to.

Price:
Right. So the cohesion, in large part, was established through some of the architectural detailing of the floor surfaces, the scale of the spaces, the lighting solutions, which were pretty much squared away before my arrival in the job. It was down to color, which color and lighting, I would say, are the two biggest influencers of how you perceive a space. Scale, of course, would be the third one. And so we were still determining what the color palette for all the galleries would be, and that was an exhausting process with so many different people involved—Richard Meier's office; Thierry Despont's office; all the Curatorial team; the director; the chief curator; and Design, we had a voice in that, as well. But it was a choir of people that needed to be brought to a place where they were singing in harmony. It was John Walsh principally who was the decider, where the buck stopped in that process, and he had the vision for what those galleries would look like.

There was another important contract that was part of that, and that was the Kaufmans [from Donald Kaufman Color]. It's a husband and wife team, and they were a color specialists and had their own brand of paint. Now, I think they came along to us in tow with Thierry Despont. So the Kaufmans were already looking at color palettes that were historically inspired for the Paintings Galleries, so that was quite well established, too. And again, I had a voice in the viewings of those samples and the deployment of where those would go in the galleries. But there was a lot of talent already in place that was working on those things, so I had enough to do without getting—like rocking the boat or asking too many upsetting questions there. I thought things were well in hand for all of the material finishes of the gallery interiors and the lighting and so on. The showcase program was more or less in place with the exception of the Sculpture Galleries.

And there was a lot of work to do with just how all of the art would fit into the spaces, so that was a primary focus. How things would be organized in relative position and scale, juxtapositions, how the labels and text panels would complement that, support that, and then what some systems would be for—again the visitor-facing thing—what we would call the nomenclature for the collection areas. The number system for the galleries were a bit obtuse and complicated, like on the building plans, so we wanted a simpler number system that was just for the gallery spaces and not for the electrical cupboards.
and the restrooms and other things. We just wanted a simple number system for the galleries.

There was a head of Visitor Services, Andrea Leonard, that was also in-job and looking at things from a visitor's perspective. There was a woman, her name was Diane Manuel in the Education Department, that was doing visitor evaluations. So they both had user information, if you think of the visitors as users in a product or environmental development equation. They were trying to influence outcomes, as well to be visitor friendly, you know, that we didn't want to overwhelm with too much. We wanted to make sure that the narratives were clear, that the way that you moved through the galleries was as clear as it could be. In a very complex architectural environment that Richard Meier had created, it was challenging. That things like where you got a map and guide and what the maps of the site looked like, where you would pick up an audio guide, what the signage supporting those functions were, and that benches could do more work than just providing a place to take a load off your feet; maybe it was a place that also had additional information like a laminated card or a catalog that was about the galleries or the artwork that was available in those galleries. So there were a lot of things that were outside of the art presentation and the basic architectural shell, like all the furnishings that would fill it up and systems that would guide the visitor's experience that we were developing.

So that was part of what Debbie and John had seen in my past experience, was looking at the whole system holistically and to be responsible for more than just exhibitions, because we were designing all of the galleries before we even started really digging into the exhibition program. Along with designing the galleries, we were designing the signage, which often is in a different department. When it came time to designing exhibitions, because we had—I had built a multidisciplinary team, it was only natural that we would be doing the promotional graphics for the exhibitions, as well, since we had that talent under one roof, but not typical for most museums that the promotional graphics would be under the same department.

So while all of this work was unfolding, clearly myself and Tim and Elizabeth couldn't be doing all of that work with just the three of us, so we—I was also recruiting staff and hiring people that would fit into this vision that was being agreed to now with a multidisciplinary team, not just people that can design exhibitions. And the space that had been allocated for the Design Department at the Getty Center was inadequate. There was only enough room for two or three people and no real studio space where you could make a massive mock-up. They were nice office spaces that were cut from the same cookie cutter as the Curatorial offices, and they were up in the Curatorial floor, which had some sensibility that that was going to be our primary client, but those spaces were inadequate. So by the time the Villa was closing and we are moving to
the Getty Center, the Department numbered eight—nine including me—and they had only really planned for two or three. It was clear that that wasn't going to be sufficient long term and so I think that was a bit of an eye-opener, too, for the administrators. The director and chief curator clearly hadn't envisaged a design department of that size.

But I was hiring in that first six-month period—eight-month period to get enough staff. And Elizabeth was on contract, and I ended up not hiring her fulltime. I interviewed her, but there was other talent that was a better fit. So Ann Marshall was my other senior designer, alongside of Tim McNeill. Mary Beth Heaney—now Trautwein—she came from the Philadelphia School of the Arts, which had an exhibition design program, so she was experienced or trained in-field specifically, as with Tim in London. And then I hired Nikki Hagedorn and Reid Hoffman. Reid was an interior designer; Nikki was a graphic designer. She was from the East Coast.

The last position that I filled—I started visiting schools around this city, so I remember visiting Otis [College]. I'm pretty sure I visited Otis, and I visited SCI-Arc [College, Southern California Institute of Architecture], which was a brand-new, kind of cutting-edge architectural school that's now downtown in Los Angeles, but then it was in some warehouse spaces in Marina del Rey. I went to the SCI-Arc open house, which many design colleges have this where the students prepare a presentation. It's kind of like a little trade show with all the student work on display. So I went to the open house and saw a person's work—[Robert] Rob Brown was his name. I left my business card on his display saying that I'd be interested in speaking to him, and so that led to an interview for him joining the Department. He was the last add to the Department, and he is trained as an architect—a fellow Canadian, too, I might add. So we had the Commonwealth well represented with Tim being from the UK, and myself and Rob being Canadian. That was after NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], so hiring Canadians with special talent was fairly simple, that you decide to offer them a job and they could, with a letter in hand, get a one-year visa stamped in their passport at the border coming in the country. So that was the complement of designers for our opening.

The other thing that I should add is that the Getty Center wasn't ready to move into yet, so we had to fit these people into the Villa. And so we had a few of us in a cottage; some other people in the space where the Special Exhibition Gallery was, which I described as a closet of about 150 square feet, so there were two or three people there; and then eventually, the galleries started to be decommissioned, and we all—or the majority of us—moved into the Decorative Arts Panel Gallery. It was baby blue with white trim and a fireplace that we put foam core up all over the walls to protect the walls from any damage from our work in there using it as an office space. It was a bit bizarre, because the gallery door, if you were going in and out of the
studio/gallery, you would walk right into another gallery with visitors in it, and they'd be like, "Whoa, what's going on in there?"

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And not only was our department hiring, but lots of other departments were hiring, as well, so that there were people shoehorned into the most unlikely corners and cubbies and spaces at the Villa. It was getting quite uncomfortable, quite honestly, of just how tight it was on space. But the floodgates did break at a certain point, and the Design Department was one of the first to move over to the Getty Center when it was able to house some staff. We were a bit nomadic there, as well, that we first alighted inside of a vault, so it was concrete walls that were like bedrock still, and you couldn't attach anything to them, because they were so ridiculously hard. And office furniture systems and then a gallery that was nicknamed the Future Gallery. It was just basement space that had been made to be able to be used as galleries, but was undesignated. The Design Department moved in there, alongside of a whole bunch of writers and editors for the new Art Access System, it was called, which was like all the interpretive content that was going to be on computers and audio. We were sort of mismatched bedfellows that they were all church mice and wanting things to be quiet, and we were not. So there was some clashes with just the kind of activity and noise that was generated from the designers and meetings that were happening with our internal clients in the Curatorial departments, and these people who are very studious and writing and needing to concentrate. That led to some issues, but they weren't unresolvable.

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That space, which was that shared space, eventually became the Design Studio over time. We got out of the vault and consolidated all the people and the work areas into this Future Gallery space, which is to this day the Design Studio. It was fortuitous, in a way, that I'd started in the job late and wasn't part of the whole Building Program development of needing to describe our needs and negotiate for space, because we never would have gotten that amount of space, I'm sure—certain. So the fact that we were late to the party and we just needed to be opportunistic about claiming a space got us this great studio space that had high ceilings and gallery lighting. It was also within the art envelope, so that we could do mock-ups with real art objects in the Studio, which is a real unusual thing. We didn't take advantage of it a lot over the years, but it was beneficial that you could bring paintings or drawings in and look at them together with the wall color in the right lighting right in the Design Studio Space.

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Tewes: Is the "envelope" a security designation?
Security, but also building systems for our environment—of humidity and temperature—and, yes, security that you could have the artworks in those spaces safely.

I think it was maybe a year—I don't remember the timeline exactly, but we all merged together. Maybe eight to nine months, ten months before the Getty Center opened, we were all over there at the Getty Center. And all that time of hiring those people, there were every month welcome-to-the-Getty parties. So they were heady days, people were celebrating all the time new arrivals, and it was kind of like being at summer camp, in some ways, that you were always meeting new people at the parties. They didn't spare much expense for what the drinks and snacks and foods would be. I mentioned that people were young, they tended to the younger side for being hired. So there was lots of laughter, lots of excitement, lots of introductions to new people—Where have you come from, what was your last experience—of forging some new relationships and friendships and working with procedures, too. So it was a flurry. The HR Department was crazy busy processing all of these hires and background checks and what have you, and they had some lawyers on fulltime dealing with people coming from out of the country getting green cards and citizenship issues, visas and things, dealt with.

I was a beneficiary of that largesse of the Getty, too, of them paying for the legal fees of my getting to the country. And at that time—pre-9/11—on the level of visa I came in with, they extended the benefit to my spouse, to Carla [Roth], as well, so she got a green card automatically with me—but it doesn't work that way now—and was able to work straight away. They fast-tracked that, so we had our green cards. We had a visa for a while so that was stapled into our passport for traveling back and forth between the two countries. We got our green card between like thirteen or fourteen weeks; it's nuts.

Tewes: Wow, that's impressive

Price: Yeah. That was an eye-opener, too, just going down to the immigration offices in Downtown Los Angeles. It's on First Street, like a stone's throw from city hall—like today, it was Skid Row back then, and it was not—you had to go really early in the morning to get a place in line for some of these appointments for interviews for getting into country. We felt very special, because the lawyer hired people to stand in line for us, and we could arrive like an hour or so past when they got in line. And then they would just say—you know, wave a flag like somebody meeting you at the airport for a limo ride and say, "Here's your spot in line." We were very entitled and feeling very special and like on top of the world, which is a two-edged sword, you know. It was also like, Wow, all these other people that are not benefiting
from a wealthy institution like the Getty that are in line, we were feeling bad like cutting line, even though somebody had been paid to stand in line for us. So there were interesting juxtapositions of wealth and power, as well, that play out in any big, urban environment that the Getty Center was dealing with, too. Like being the big museum on the west side on top of a hill, that it was dealing with some issues in the press of not being particularly accessible or embedded in the communities that it was going to serve. There’s always some politics that are much bigger than the job that you’re hired to do that you start to understand that.

03-00:54:53
Tewes: Exactly. How in tune were you with some of those arguments in the press or in the public about the role of the Getty in Los Angeles and the arts world?

03-00:55:02
Price: Say that again, how what?

03-00:55:05
Tewes: How in tune were you with those arguments, those—that dichotomy you just described?

03-00:55:23
Price: Only in retrospect did I understand the full meaning of it. Again, we were just nose to the grindstone, so busy with practical matters, and focused on these gallery environments and understanding them and figuring out the priority list of what needed to be accomplished in not such a great amount of time. But it didn’t leave a lot of space to be processing some of these bigger issues that—and you know, the die had been rolled or had been cast that other people with much higher pay grades than mine had made the decisions about where the Getty Center was going to be and purchased the land and decided that that was the right thing, so who was I to question that? I was just grateful for having such a great job and an opportunity and focusing on things that I was hired to do.

03-00:56:14
Tewes: Right.

03-00:56:16
Price: But I couldn’t have asked for a better team. You know, it was a team that we were all young and didn’t have a lot of—amongst our group didn’t have a lot of museum experience. They leaned heavily on my prior museum experience to establish short-term goals and priorities, and there was a lot of learning on the job. But they were all very bright and capable, so that was fun.

03-00:56:53
Tewes: I do want to point out that one of the design features, moments that you had to come up with was a wayfinding system with signposts throughout the entire complex. And I’d like to hear a little bit more about that, please.
Sure. Visitors need to know where to go for the different collection areas and where to go for food and for the restroom and elevators and just how to navigate the site. So in addition to signs that you might find in the environment, it was also maps and guides for arriving. And you have limited time: "if you have an hour" guide or the map to the Getty Center. We also, in the early days, had a separate map for the architectural garden, and we were working on an inaugural exhibition called Making Architecture that was all about the design and building of the Getty Center. So there was a separate guide that was just pointing out highlights about the architecture and the site and some of the architectural concepts that were embedded in the design. There were a number of different pieces of paper ephemera that went into the system of wayfinding above and beyond signs on the wall.

So that was a different client group, too, because it was primarily the head of Visitor Services, and the director had some interest in it, because the signs came right up into the architraves, the portals for the galleries. The architect clearly had interest in it, too, people in the Building Program Office who were the bridge between the client and the architect, and were responsible for like the execution of the work, the contracting of all of the building of the place. They were interested in what these signs looked like. Were they going to be able to be maintained, how were they attached to the building, how do they fit together with all of the other signage that's being designed for the site?

So there was a large signage design consortium that was already in place. Saul Bass, who was the designer for the logo, for the word mark for the Getty was on contract. His claim to fame was some movie credits for different [Alfred] Hitchcock films, amongst other things. I had the great pleasure of meeting with Saul in his offices in Hollywood. He was, I think, in his eighties by then. And then there was a company that was attached to Saul Bass's office called Citigate, Bass, and Yager—I think was the name of the consortium. And there were some luminaries in signage design from the eighties that were part of that consortium that had written some early books about wayfinding. So there was good work being done on the site. It was heavily influenced by Saul Bass's logo and typography, so there was a custom font that was being used in other parts of the site. And because it was heavily influenced by Meier's office, too, it was fairly discreet, both in terms of scale, but also in terms of contrast, so it was like gray letters on a white background predominantly.

There were bigger, more important signs that were literally chiseled into stone that were somewhat elevated and pretty, but not so obvious and maybe not to the benefit of visitors, because they were so discreet. In the Museum, within the Museum precinct, which was just one quadrant of the entire Getty Center site, we had free rein and so we needed to be sensitive in responding to all of those other signs that were already in the works, but we wanted to have it
more visitor facing and be a little bit bolder, a little bit easier to see. Richard Meier's office was really keen on keeping everything very low, kind of tucked away, not disrupting the architecture of the site, and so that was challenging, because it's kind of counterintuitive. We want a sign where you need a sign to tell you how to—like maybe I should go that way or that way and how far it is, so—

And the site was not a place that was a square or a donut that was easily understood. It was a rambling hillside collection of pavilions that were turned on different angles, and some of them were hidden from view as you entered the site. When you first entered the site on the tram, there was a lot of the architecture that wasn't even really publicly accessible. There was an office building and scientist buildings and administrative buildings. The Museum was in front of you, and you went up these big set of steps that had been nicknamed the Spanish Steps, because I think they had been inspired by the Spanish Steps in Rome as a place to congregate, and a large, kind of ceremonial route to an edifice up above. So it's curious that the materiality of the Getty Center had evolved during the project, too, unlike other past Richard Meier projects, which were all painted panels, square panels that are on the outside skinning of the buildings.

The community that was responsible for the look and feel of the site, which John Walsh had a strong voice in, wanted something that was more rich and had greater kind of historic importance or roots. So they arrived at and explored the use of travertine, which is what most of the big public buildings in Rome are built with, travertine, and there's some quarries outside of Rome that we actually went to get the travertine mined. They developed some interesting techniques for making the travertine with—they cut big square sausages out of the quarry and laid these on their side and had a guillotine that would hit the sausage of travertine, and it would break it along a fault line, because it was sedimentary rock that had a lot of fossils embedded in it. So we'd find a fault line that would break, and you'd have this—I mean, this rich and beautiful rough surface on one side, and the back side and the edges would all be cut to two squares. That ended up being the material that was chosen for the paneling for the Getty Center, or the Museum primarily. The other parts of the site, the administrative buildings, are more like other Meier buildings that came before, which are white or off-white.

Now, the only reason that they're not all white was because of neighborhood involvement, and the neighbors didn't want to have a gleaming white beacon on the hill, they wanted it toned down a little bit. So this Conditional Use Permit White—what has been known as, to this day, CUP White—was a white that was complementary to the color of the travertine and all of the parts of the building that faced away that you could see from the neighbors, was the Conditional Use Permit White. There was only pure white on some internally
facing surfaces. Like the rotunda in the Entrance Hall when you see it from
the Museum courtyard, it's true, true white. So that was actually, I imagine, a
challenge for somebody of how these different whites came together in the
folds of the architecture so that it made sense and looked good.

But I digress. This is all just to say that it was a very important building that
was being constructed, and Richard Meier didn't want signs messing it up is
the bottom line. So there was a lot of pressure to keep them small and discreet,
and we came up with the most minimal signs program that we could imagine,
thinking that once we got full possession of the building, we could go back
and tinker with it, maybe add some more, maybe increase the contrast or swap
them out with some different signs. We got approved from Richard these
signs that were stainless steel with black type, so it's fairly low contrast; also
because they were bigger signs than we have in the rest of the site, so the type
was larger. These coordinated with the handrailings, which were bead blasted
stainless, so it picked up on an architectural detail that was a little
ornamentation, and Richard Meier is not known for ornamentation, so it's
subtle and modernist in its intent. But we picked up on those cues so that
made them happy that it was reflective of a material choice that was already
lying through the building, and it was in a very tertiary role, like a supporting
role, so that was good.

We were able to convince them to do some larger landmark-like signs that
marked—we ended up calling the pavilions North, South, East, and West,
because the complex was designed around the compass and some of the
natural landforms of the site, instead of one, two, three, and four. And North,
South, East, and West, too, made a little bit more open access where you
would start in your visit and made these—because the East Pavilion and South
Pavilion in particular were hidden from view as you entered into the Museum
courtyard, these landmark-scale signs, which were tall—they must have been
like fifteen feet tall—had an "N," an "E," a "W," and an "S" quite large that
you could see from a distance. They picked up on some of the forms of the
building that were folding around one another and [made a connection with
the] shifting planes [in the architecture].

So Richard could see that we were looking at the building and being very
respectful of the ideas that he was playing with, and we were respectful of the
grid, and we were respectful of the compass coordinates that we’re out playing
with the paving patterns and what have you, if you look at the site in plan, and
ultimately, agreed to these landmark-scaled signs. It was one of the only
things that I can recall ever getting a compliment from Richard about, was that
I had done a really good job of designing these signs. He never would have
imagined agreeing to a sign at that size or kind of important placement, so that
was a nice compliment. Those signs are still there today, as well.
The rest of the signs, these stainless steel ones, are placed around. After the building opened we replaced those with higher contrast signs and things that were a little bit more friendly to our international audience so that we used more pictograms, like little postage stamps of works of art. Well, I want to see something that looks like that kind of art. You could just look at the picture and know which direction to go. We made these big, three-dimensional models that were tabletop scale models that had been influenced by other signs that we’ve seen at other museums. The Smithsonian in Washington has a big tabletop map like this, and it has Braille on top, so it’s servicing people with seeing impairments, as well, and visualizing the site in a really easy-to-understand way, because it’s a full-on model of the site. We developed these two big models of the site that was strategically placed and had those made—those were expensive, I’ve got to say—by a local company who was mainly making fine art. They were working making Ellsworth Kelly’s sculptures, amongst others. I think they also were the people who were making Jeff Koons sculptures in the nineties and the early [two] thousands. So they were a very high-end fabricator who made these machined, stainless steel models of the Getty Center’s sign that were beautiful.

And we had to make the scale. We actually played around with the scale of the architecture. It didn't make the architects too happy, but we foreshortened the site and shrunk all the buildings so that when you looked into the scale model, you can see into it and read it more as a representation of the site rather than a true architectural model of the site. We pushed and pulled on the relative positioning of some things to make it fit a module better and be kind of a compact size and a quick read. It didn't have all of the fine detail. It was just a massing model of the site.

So all of that together—the maps, the printed maps, which were a bird's eye view, we hired a water color artist to render the Getty Center’s site, and again do some foreshortening of the site and simplification of the site to be a quicker read. The gallery portal signs, which were sandblasted glass with black lettering. And then it was a second round of signs that we did, which were porcelain enamel, black letters on white with pictograms of artworks was an award winner by the Society for Environmental Graphic Designers as a wayfinding system. So that was a nice little recognition for a good look.

Were there any other big projects from this moment when you're helping to prepare the Getty Center to open that you really want to address?

Two projects I can think that are—two or three that are noteworthy. One was the furniture design for visitors. John [Walsh] knew that we wanted benches, comfortable benches, generous benches that would be in the galleries and
befitting kind of the quality and the scale and materiality of the gallery interiors. Well, we also knew that we needed some other furniture for the Art Information Rooms, stools, like a little bit lighter weight furniture. These Art Information Rooms had a lot of hands-on, manipulative things, like you could touch bronze or see how a dovetail joint fit together. There were lots of hands-on things that were explorations of production techniques or historical underpinnings of what was in the adjacent galleries. So we needed some different furniture there to house computers and provide seating if you were at a computer or stools, if you were at a counter looking at pigments or whatever the activity might be. There were lots of hands-on activities in the space.

But we also were designing furniture for satellite shops and some of the big desks in the Entrance Hall, the Information Desk and the Audio Guide Distribution Desk, that much of that was in the architect's court and they were working away on these big pieces for furniture for the Entrance Hall, for example. But the gallery seating had not been established as a project for the architects yet. John Walsh wasn't sure that the architects would have been the right people to do the work of the seating design, and I had some prior experience doing seating design, so we hired a firm that I was familiar with from Toronto on a contract to just do concept development. If it all went well, we might have extended the contract to the later stages of refinement, and we didn't at the end of the day, but they helped to shape the program.

So we came up with quantities. We had lots of information from other art museums around the world of what benches looked like. Largely, those were benches that were built and designed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, so stylistically they weren't quite right, but ergonomically they had some things to look at. We developed all of the quantities and sizes and basic ergonomics of the benches. The look and feel from this consulting firm wasn't quite right, but it allowed us to really fine-tune a program. We knew exactly what we were shopping for, as it were, how many sizes and where they were going to go. Then we turned the contract over to Richard Meier's office, and they detailed them to fit into the kind of California modern aesthetic, which had some Craftsman style elements of—you know. In fact, I saw a photograph recently of furnishings in the Schindler House, which is as modern house in Hollywood, and I thought, Oh, the furniture designer in Meier's office must have been looking at this photograph, because they're so—like one has been cast from the other. I think that must have been a source, early California modern, which makes perfect sense.

Richard Meier's office ended up finishing off that project and making them completely integrated with all of the other architectural details, so that it ended up being a really good solution. That same designer then had built a relationship with me, and we worked together on the satellite stores—Rick Irving was his name—but he did the lion's share of work, of course. It just had
some of my influence on working between the shop people at the Museum and the architect to make sure that the program was as complete as it needed to be. And by program, I mean serving all of their needs. If they needed bins for posters, or 20 percent of the display space in this shop is going to be devoted to books and is it front-facing books or books that were on bookshelves. Just really looking at how they wanted to—what they were merchandising, how they wanted to display it, how the shopkeepers would work in that space and how the visitors would approach the space. It was really looking at the system of each and every little shop and how it worked, and all the component elements.

We also needed furniture for the outdoor spaces, and surprisingly, there weren't really very many table-and-chair sets that were commercial grade that worked for an art museum or a museum kind of space. There were things that were kind of rough and ready or not very refined, cafeteria-like tables and chairs and other things that you can imagine in your backyard on a deck that were a little bit clunky but not very refined. That was a challenge, because we searched high and low, and together with Georgina Evans in the Building Program, we brought got lots of samples on to the site of chairs and tables that were available. But again not very many table-and-chair sets; you can find chairs that we can maybe make our peace with, but they didn't have a corresponding table.

We were traveling at that time starting to think about the Villa, and I had taken a couple of trips to Europe with the Villa architects and with senior Museum staff, including John Walsh. We are walking through Tuileries Gardens in Paris, and I picked up a postcard of the tables and chairs from the gardens there. And he said, "Merritt, that's what we want, something just like that. Those are really beautiful and elegant, and they have certain je ne sais quoi, a certain historic underpinning, and they fit in a beautiful setting like this adjacent to the Louvre galleries. We just need something like that that fits in a modernist building in California."

And so I developed a program for this, and I ended up hiring a person who was a student of mine in a furniture design class that I taught in Toronto, and she was a Kirsten White. She was working for a teak outdoor furniture manufacturer in New Brunswick, so she had the connection to a fabricator that could probably do it and had the ability to do some good design work. It was a tall order, but I said, "Kirsten, we haven't been able to find a table-and-chair set." I sent her a copy of this postcard I had of these tables and chairs from Paris and said, "We need this but modern. Can you come up with a design and a presentation in two weeks and then we'll pitch it?" And sure enough, she did some really nice renderings. We pitched it, and she got the contract to design the tables and chairs for the Getty Center. She was really young, too, I mean just starting her career, so it was a big, big project for her. And it was all new
product for the manufacturing facility in New Brunswick—I'm pretty sure they're in New Brunswick. And so they added it to their product line, and it was a part of their product line then for a few years.

Those tables and chairs lasted for a long, long time at the Getty Center. The tables are still there but the chairs had some fragility to them, and after 50 million people used them, they wear out. So they've been replaced with a different style of chair now. I don't think it's as beautiful as the original chairs were. But that was an important project, too, that when you think of—if you think of architecture like clothing and a woman getting dressed, there's a basic shift for a gown that she might put on, but then there's all sorts of extra touches that you put, whether it's a brooch or you pick the right earrings or the right belt with the right scaled buckle. So it was all of these things that were additive—the gallery furniture, the signs, the outdoor furniture—that were like well-selected jewelry for Richard's building. I probably used that analogy for him, and it's true. The siting of a sculpture in the architectural environment is a decorative element that you want to have fit together with the ensemble so that it looks well considered and like it comes together as a piece. They don't all have to be exactly like the same ingredients. It's like a well-made meal; there's different flavor notes, or a well-put-together outfit, but they need to work together like an orchestra works together.

Tewes: Nice metaphor. Well, is there anything else you wanted to make sure we touch on before we wrap up today, in terms of the Getty Center and your work with that project?

Price: Yeah. I don't know about today, but maybe when we get together next time, I should just talk a little bit about the Art Information Rooms, which are interesting stories, and they were involved.

Tewes: Is that something you want to pursue today?

Price: Well, it's not a long story, so sure. Each pavilion, which were organized around the time—so the North Pavilion was the earliest part of the collection, Medieval and Renaissance; and the next pavilion was Baroque and Rococo; and then the last pavilion was late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. So the collection was organized roughly chronologically, and there were these spaces that were Information Rooms, so it was telling the story of what was happening socially, economically around the works of art that were being created, and so that it was creating what these spaces were, so they—and there wasn't really a good program, so we worked together with the Education Department and Curatorial Departments to put a finer point on it.
But there were timelines in those spaces, so you got some of the key historical facts, like, The Black Plague happened here and then there was a rebirth afterwards, and those kinds of stories. Or a big cathedral was built and that might be touchstone for somebody that, "Oh, I remember that from history. This is the time of the world that I'm in, oh, I get it." So it's kind of providing a foundational level for you to enter into the collections or windows, lenses to see the collection through. We knew from past experience that a lot of people understand things from materiality, like they're makers or they might tinker with their car and so have a mechanical inclination or understand how things are built. So that there was a focus on those rooms of process, like bronze-casting process or, let's say, mosaic-laying process or photographic, developing processes or stylistic evolution. There was a display in one of the rooms that was all about the transition from more decorative and exuberant Rococo decoration to neoclassical, where you see all of the decorative elements in architecture and furniture and clothing and what humankind does to fill up spaces that they occupy change and evolve over time. We were giving some basic instruction of telltale signs of these different movements and periods and building some connoisseurship, I guess the basic elements of appreciating art and understanding and being able to discern for yourself like how one movement influenced then what comes after those.

These Art Information Rooms were attendant to the galleries and supporting the galleries. It was also in the nineties, the late nineties was the beginning of the Internet, so there were some research tools and CD-ROMs would have been a thing, where there's some videos about production techniques that would have been made. So we incorporated computer workstations, and people did not have desktop computers at home then; you couldn't do this kind of research on your desktop, and nobody would even imagine the iPhone or a mobile device in your hand where you can do it in the palm of your hand. So it was providing that opportunity for visitors to look at some bespoke information that we created as videos, but also to look at some curated experiences with information that was then available on the World Wide Web about how things were made and the history of the time. Yeah, so that was a whole other client group and a whole other sensibility that was a little bit more science center-esque or living history museum-esque that was less formal, I suppose. It didn't have to deal with the reverence that you would have for presenting a work of art, because it was presenting information. You could have some greater freedom and liberties with how the graphics were done and how much illustrative information you would put in the space. There were a few replica artwork objects that were used as examples of casting or marquetry inlay and wood and that sort of thing.

So those were fun spaces to design. Reid Hoffman and Mary Beth [Trautwein]—well, everybody had a piece of the action for those spaces, because there were lots of little, mini exhibitions within each one of those
spaces. We had to hire separate services to build the furniture and install all of the things in the interiors, all the interior design elements of those spaces. That was another significant endeavor that was on tight timelines to get all of that content created, written, all of the display elements made, some replicas or stopping the casting process and looking at five different stages of a casting process. So we had to hire the services in partnership with our colleagues and the conservation studios who knew some of the talent around town to get all of these display elements made. That was an opening, too, to see all of the other houses, design houses in town that were design build. We had to reach out and find places that could make all of these displays for us, and get the shop drawings done and approved, and got things fabricated and installed. So it was managing all of that work.

Another part of the design job is more than just visualizing it, but also doing all the business end of managing and contracting it and writing the contracts and looking at the estimates and doing competitive bidding. There was a lot of business work to do in partnership with people in our procurement areas. Yeah. Man, we were busy, busy people, busy.

Is the moral of this story. [laughs] It is amazing what you got done in the period that you were able to do it.

Yeah. And at the same time as doing the Getty Center, we were doing these major trips to Europe to meet with the architects and the Antiquities curators to be looking ahead at what the Villa was going to be remade, reimagined as. So just in case you're getting tired of the Getty Center project, we could turn your attention to the Getty Villa project. That was just around the corner.

Right, and that's something we're going to delve into a little bit later, but I think that's a good stopping place for us today.

Great.

Thank you, Merritt.
Interview 4: October 27, 2020

Tewes:  
This is the fourth interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project for the Oral History Center at UC [University of California], Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on October 27, 2020. Mr. Price joins me in this remote interview from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you for yet another session.

Price:  
Right, yeah. So I think that the staff at that point were in different camps. There were different levels of excitement about going to the Getty Center and dread by some about going to the Getty Center. Everybody that was newly hired, including me, that was our focus. We were hired with that in mind, so we were all just itching to get onsite and take the commute from the [Getty] Villa or wherever we were stationed to the Getty Center out of our lives and be there and just be living in the place that we are helping to create. However, people that have been at the Getty for the time before, especially people at the Villa who were really in love with being at the Villa were not looking forward to relocating. And then people had gotten into groups or ruts depending on your perspective at 401 Wilshire, which is where the [Getty] Research Institute was and the Conservation teams, which were largely down in the Marina del Rey facility, were not looking forward to going. So there was some coaxing, cajoling to get people motivated and having some excitement, enthusiasm about going.

I remember that there was a program that was initiated by the Human Resources Department that was called Coping with Change, and that gave people some tools for acknowledging that change is difficult and to try to put a finer point on what it was that they were grappling with, and some tools and strategies for overcoming it. Again, from me and my staff and people who were involved in the Getty Center planning, with maybe the exception of a few of the Curatorial staff and some of the older staff people, we were all gung-ho and ready to make the change. That was an interesting kind of dichotomy that there were these people who were really reluctant to move.

I didn't understand until later that Harold Williams who was the president, the CEO, had created the different programs with some healthy competition between them. There was quite a lot of sibling rivalry, as it turned out—
competing for money and attention and space, intellectual space, as well as literal physical space, and how these different programs that had all existed independently in their own space around the city were going to coexist at the Getty Center on the top of the hill. So there was some jockeying for resources, both financial resources but also staff resources, the attention of the architects and develop—looking after the details of what each program needed to prepare their spaces for occupancy. Yeah, so there was a lot of turmoil going on beneath the surface that I was, quite frankly, oblivious to, because I was just focused on getting the galleries and the exhibitions finished.

With that said, we were turning our attention, once we got to the Getty Center, away from some of the things that had been set, had been decided, like colors and lighting and finishes in the permanent collection galleries. The Paintings curators were fairly self-sufficient and working together with John Walsh, the director, to determine the hangs. We already established an approach to labeling, so that was a thing that was going on in the background. We were tackling the Art Information Rooms, which I mentioned before, which was one space per pavilion. So that was a lot of work, but the back had been broken on what we were doing there, and so it was working through the details in an iterative process using models and proofing the content. We hired some independent illustrators to work on images that were used on timelines and what have you, so that was in good order by that point, as well. And we were turning our attention to some of the opening exhibitions then, which a with a little over a year—thereabouts—before opening day, we needed to dig into those.

There were a couple of big ones. Making Architecture: [The Getty Center] was one substantial exhibition that was showing people or telling people a story about the creation of the Getty Center, both from an organizational point of view, as well as from an architectural point of view and the interior design, and so on. That was in a space that was undesignated. It was referred to as the Future Gallery Space, which was on the lower level of the West Pavilion. We hired MetaDesign in San Francisco to partner with us, and Gloria Gerace, who had been working Richard Meier's office on a couple of publications about the creation of the Getty Center, was the project manager that was identified for that exhibition. Donald Albrecht was a guest curator that had worked on the [American] Museum of Moving Image. I think it was then in the UK [United Kingdom], and he was out of New York. So there was a specific project team that was working on that separate from all the other exhibitions at the Museum.

That was a real fun project. We had a sixty-five-foot-long timeline that snaked through the middle of the gallery, and spaces devoted to Richard Meier's working process, Thierry Despont's working process with the French Decorative Arts Gallery. [Joseph] Joe Deal was a photographer that had been
commissioned to document the sites and the installations in the gallery as it was unfolding, so there was a gallery devoted to Joe Deal's photographs that we hung floor to ceiling, and it was an immersive space. There was an attempt to reflect the number of people that were involved in the creation of the Getty Center. So on the timeline, there were scale construction workers and professional staff that you could see the numbers build and build to a crescendo like a year before opening, and then the tables flipped where the construction workers taper off and professional staff builds up.

We even published a phone book—there were phone books back in those days—of all the people's names and their responsibilities on the site. When all of the people that have worked on the Getty project came to see the exhibition, they could find their name in the book, and it's kind of—I remember, too, people that were on staff at that time working on this project signed the concrete wall before the dry wall was all closed up in that gallery, so my signature along with other people's is buried behind a wall in that space. It was a very interesting exhibition, and it was very well attended. People liked it. There was a companion brochure that went with that took you on a walking tour of notable features, details of the Getty Center site.

Did that surprise you that that was so popular? Here, you build this multimillion-dollar center to house art, and people are really interested in the making of the museum itself.

Yeah. It, to this day, continues to be a divided—I wouldn't say divided, but a place that has different audiences. Some people come for the architecture and gardens and views of the city alone, and some people come for the collection. Many people are coming just to check it off their list, because it's one of the things to do when in Los Angeles for our international travelers, in particular, or out-of-state travelers. It was a show that was missed after it closed and there were quite a lot of comments, cards that came in to encourage us to keep it, like why did we close it. It was up for a little over a year, I believe. A brochure that was about architecture and gardens took some of the narrative and made it so that you can walk around and still get some of those stories. There were some family activity cards that had to do with the materiality of the place—the travertine and finding fossils and things of that nature. And then much later on—and I'll talk about it later in this session, I think—is the J. Paul Getty Life and Legacy [exhibit], where part of the legacy is the creation of the Getty Center. And so components of the story in Making Architecture found their way back into that exhibition, and can be experienced today.

So in addition to that exhibition, which had its own dedicated team and effort, Beyond Beauty: [Antiquities as Evidence] was the opening exhibition in the Exhibition Pavilion, which was an opportunity to showcase the Antiquities
Collection, which was going to be off view, since the Villa had just closed. It had some, at its time, interesting bells and whistles of technology of creating like 3D models of sites and showing how a fragmentary artifact from these sites would have been seen in time that when they were created. There were some outside resources from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], I believe, that had done some state-of-the-art computer modeling to show how these artifacts would have been seen in original context. So *Beyond Beauty* was a big exhibition that was opening, and then there were smaller exhibitions that were sprinkled around the site for the rotating permanent collections of Drawings and Photographs and Manuscripts. The [Getty] Research Institute's inaugural exhibition was commissioned separately from our team to an outside designer who—I'm not sure who it was. But subsequent to that, we were brought on board to do the Research Institute exhibitions moving forward.

So that gets us through opening. A big, big party, of course, to open the Getty Center and debut it to the public. Many of us were shocked at the big monitors that had been installed in front of the Museum that we weren't part of the planning for that—the events group were. And this was kind of surprising to many of us, that it was a piece of architecture that obliterated the Meier architecture, and it was there for everybody to see. As you entered into the site and walked up to the front of the Museum, the signature piano curve of the building had been negated by this kind of crystalline structure that looked like it had dropped from outer space with this big jumbotron computer screen that was part of the opening events. So that was a bit of a misfire, I'd say, but through no—none of my responsibility involved in that. Yes, so opening, oh, whew, everybody took a moment. But we were already looking towards the Villa and planning that, master planning for the Villa, so we were learning from our lessons at the Getty Center in assembling the teams and developing the programs for the spaces and the programmatic activity at the Villa. That was something that was right there upon us, but I'll speak about that later, as well.

After the *Beyond Beauty* exhibition, it was *Dosso Dossi, [Court Painter in Renaissance Ferrara]*, which was a little-known painter, at least little known to me, but an important painter from Ferrara, [Italy]. It was a project that John Walsh was really keen on getting right, because his first love is paintings. It was the kind of exhibition that lots of other institutions couldn't do, because it was a little bit esoteric, not a big-name artist like [Édouard] Manet or [Oscar-Claude] Monet or [Pablo Ruiz] Picasso. We weren't and still aren't driven by box office receipts, so we could do these more esoteric shows. And John Walsh had always imagined our exhibition program as being different from many museums that are driven by the box office to be more academically driven and having scholarly research at the foundation of the project. So
Dosso Dossi was that way, where it was revealing some new information about this court painter.

I had the good fortune of traveling to Ferrara, to see the place that he painted and some of the paintings in an exhibition there with our paint swatches to pick gallery colors. And [Timothy] Tim McNeil was the senior designer of record for that exhibition. He had a great working relationship with the Paintings curator. So that was a fun trip that we went together with our wives and toured around Florence and Venice and saw some important museums while we were there working on the Dosso Dossi exhibition.

You mentioned the not interest but—yeah, maybe interest—in wanting to do maybe more academic exhibits at the Getty. What kind of impact did that have on your design approach, if any?

Mm-hm. Many of the exhibitions were reflections, they were physical manifestations of a thesis that was being put into a book, a scholarly book. So that made it often—at least at the early stages of the project—of unpacking the concept with the curators to get them to let go of a very linear way of thinking of it. Because as you're telling a thesis in a book, it's: start at the beginning, you turn pages, you move past images and stories and chapters, and you get to the end. It's a very linear process. So having that as a starting point for planning exhibitions is always a bit of a like a ball and chain around your leg, because people are expecting the exhibition to be very similarly organized. But in a three-dimensional space, people are free to move through it one way or another, and so you could flip to chapter three and start there, that you don't necessarily have to start at the foreword and move through like in a linear fashion. So I think all exhibition design has that, in a way, that people write out their story in a narrative that's linear, and then it's transforming that into a space that's an experience that's spatial and has free will for how you move through it. You could even move through it backwards, for that matter.

Other things that came from the more scholarly—and of course most of the exhibitions were historic European based—but we did look a lot at the historic period for architectural and interior design, decoration and architectural moldings, and what have you, colors that would have been complementary to that time. Those, I think, are the two biggest things that would grown out of that more historical approach. We would be looking, too, at typographic styles and the kind of decorative flourishes that might be part of artistic creations that would also then find their way into graphic solution. So the solutions in those early days were somewhat referential and grounded—evocative of a point in time, more so than they have in more recent years, where we've taken a turn to look at the exhibitions more consistently through a modern lens and a
consistently modern lens without the decorative, historical flourishes that we might have had in those early days. It's a matter of taste and decision about what the right blend is.

I've often used the analogy of having a pantry that you can go to, to select from, like you're making a meal, but it's just what you choose in the pantry and in what quantity that ends up influencing what the final outcome is and the strength of one flavor over another. Over time, different people have different ideas about what's the appropriate thing to do. As an exhibition designer or a designer more in service to somebody else's ideas, often you'll hear people talk about art museum design work, that if you done it well, it's mostly unnoticed, because it's in a supporting role to the presentation of the artwork—that you don't want to overshadow or outshine the artwork. You'll see that for many of the exhibitions, especially ones that are museum paintings, drawing shows, in particular. There are other exhibitions that we'll talk about that were more conceptual where there was more freedom to be more theatrical in the way it was presented. But sometimes, too, it's just based on the personalities, whether they wanted to have something that was a bit more showy, let's say.

I'll mention a few exhibitions then that get at some of the different facets of the work and the collaborative work with different people. Growing out of the Art Information Rooms, there was a desire to have a series of exhibitions that were conceived fairly early on that would be one per collection area. That had to do with how things are made in a very tangible, concrete thing that many visitors have as an inroad into understanding a collection area, is the practical reality of how something would be made, whether it's casting a bronze sculpture; building a piece of furniture; doing the tapestry, which is weaving; mixing pigments and applying them to a canvas or a board. So there was a series of "making" exhibitions, one of which *Foundry to Finish: [The Making of a Bronze Sculpture]* was one, *Making of a Medieval Book* was one, *[The] Making of Furniture* was one, and *Making a Renaissance Panel Painting* was one. I must be missing some, but that's okay.

So the *Foundry to Finish* exhibition was a good one that was done in the early days that we hired a local foundry in San Fernando Valley to take one of our sculptures, and with our conservators, they did molds of the sculpture, the Adriaen de Vries *Juggling Man*. [see page iv for image] From these molds, the foundry made, I think, ten different casts of the object in bronze, and it was documented and filmed and still images, too, of the whole process of making a mold, pouring the metal, and then finishing the sculpture, taking it out of the mold, cutting off the spurs, finishing it down to progressive levels of finish right down to the surface finish. With those ten or so casts, they were arranged in an arrested development at different stages of the process. That was very informative for people about the complexity of casting and the
nuances of different modes of casting. It was an exhibition that was presented alongside of the Renaissance and Bronze Collection of the de Vries sculpture of this from the Baroque period—I think it was Baroque.

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That exhibition was interesting. We did a little experimenting with sound in the space, that there were videos that were complementing the arrested stages of casting, which culminated, of course, in showing the actual sculpture in the space so you could see what it was based on, the real object that it was based on. But we had video showing the casting process, and because it's a very visceral thing when you're in a foundry, there are a lot of noises—the clanking of chains as you're moving a cauldron of molten metal and the noise of the metal pouring out and cooling and hissing. So we brought that soundtrack into the space, which kind of brought the fieriness of the casting process to fullness, a full transportation of almost being in the foundry. It was a very fiery kind of interior space. We had enlargements of photographs of the bubbly, orangey red molds in bronze that was a backdrop to the space. And the exhibition had a workshop-like quality to the finishes. So that was kind of an immersive environment. The other exhibitions were all of a similar nature that was hands-on, very tactile. People could touch the sculptures and feel the surfaces, feel the material temperature of the surfaces, and go and look at the objects then in the adjacent galleries with some deeper understanding, some fresh eyes about the process for creating those things.

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The Getty has a history of bringing objects from other museums, other countries and doing conservation work on them; bringing staff from those other museums along with them and working alongside of them to do the conservation work, learn from each other, export some knowledge back out into the world. If there's new information or new techniques that were being used to treat the surface of an object or remove a stain, let's say, remove old restoration work and replace it with more modern ways of conserving things. *Statue of an Emperor: [A Conservation Partnership]* was one such object that came, and this object was, I think, over life-size statue of Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor. It had some old iron components that were attaching different parts of the stone together and were embedded inside of the sculpture, and those were rusting and degrading and causing some damage to the sculpture. The sculpture had also stood in some standing water in a flooded vault for a long period of time, and so it had some nasty stains on its legs and feet. These were things that were being addressed. The old iron connector pieces had been removed and some more contemporary materials were replacing that to put it back together. This process was documented in film both still film and video.

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And the exhibition, we wanted people to look closer; that was one of our goals. And so unpacking the story, and there are some practical kind of just human interest stories and technical information to impart on people made for
a rich set of stories that could be shared with the visitor. We also wanted to make it as accessible as possible, so this was an exhibition where we introduced some fun facts, which were not something that was in the curatorial brief, but something that as we were dissecting the story and working together with them to reassemble it, we uncovered some things like, Well, this is a very heavy sculpture. We can see people moving it in the conservation studios with big winches and cranes. How can we impart the weight of this thing to visitors who weren't there to witness it? And so we said, "Well, what's it like, the weight of it?" It ended up almost the same weight as a Volkswagen Beetle, and so it was just a simple equation of: this sculpture equals the weight of a Volkswagen Beetle. It was a graphic that was illustrative, and it was placed down low in the gallery register below the more technical, scholarly information. That was one of a few fun facts. The other one is that Marcus Aurelius wore this leather armor that was called a *cuirass*, which is a kind of a curious name, and it makes school children giggle, *queer-ass*. The way that when you read the word, you're not even really sure how to pronounce it. So we went to the dictionary for the pronunciation, and we spelt it out phonetically on this fun fact sheet. And in the dictionary, we discovered that they had an armadillo in the picture with the *cuirass*, because it was like a body armor that was leather-like. And so we put up the picture of the armadillo beside the word *cuirass* to just share that information that we had discovered, and it made it fun to think of it as leather-like body armor.

Yeah, I think I've apparently been pronouncing that incorrectly my whole life, so thank you [laughs] for that. But were these fun facts really aimed towards younger visitors or a general audience?

They were, but they were good for everybody, as things often are. We did do some observations of that exhibition to watch how visitors used what we provided or circulated through the space. And people did spend more time with that object than they would typically, because they would see some information about like a joint that had been two pieces of stone reassembled and go back and look more closely to see if they could see it for themselves. But I remember, too—this was in the early days of computer modeling—that we hired an outside specialist to do a three-dimensional model of all the fragmentary pieces of stone. I think there might have been like fifty pieces of stone that were assembled to the final sculpture, and to show them all in a three-dimensional, rotating view in three-dimensional space, and coming together and snapping into place like it was a puzzle, a three-dimensional puzzle. So that was kind of a cool graphic to convey the complexity of what the conservators had done to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Yeah.

So those are the kinds of collaborative projects between the art specialist, the conservator, the designer, and bringing some outside specialty resources to it made it—those are the truly collaborative projects that what you end up with
as an exhibition is discovered along the way by unpacking the story together and looking at the possibility for how to present it to the public to make it both informative but entertaining. I learned in that project that the bodies of many ancient sculptures are a generic form that have musculature and kind of a body posture that's a certain way. So you could go to the sculpture shop and buy like a hero body form—I mean, I'm kind of joking a bit, but it was like that—and then you could put the emperor's head on top so that you could do a real likeness of that person and put it on. And if that emperor falls out of favor, you can remove the head and recycle the body. You'll see that in the Villa's collection, actually. It's a sarcophagus with an unfinished face, so it's a battle scene on the front of the sarcophagus and the faces had been unfinished. You could imagine going to a tombstone shop, and, Oh, I like that one to put my uncle's remains in, so now we're going to sculpt the likeness of his face on this. Otherwise, the sarcophagus had been pretty much complete; it's just missing the details of the face. So that was a thing that was done.

Tewes:

04-00:34:46

That's really interesting.

Price:

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Yeah. Other exhibitions that were important, because they were maybe the first major exhibition working together with that curatorial team or it was trying to find what a Getty exhibition was, how were our exhibitions the same or different from other peer—other sister institutions. So the kind of show we would show you would see at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], you might see at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, you might see at the Art Institute in Chicago, or you might see at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Those are the kinds of exhibitions that we would consider our sister institutions, because we have collections that are similar. You often borrow from one another, too, in the creation of an exhibition, or an exhibition might be both at the Met and at the Getty Center or at Boston and the Getty. So there were relationships with these museums, and how did ours set themselves apart?

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It wasn't really a grand plan, other than, as I said before, that we could do shows that were a little bit more esoteric or had a longer research and development arc before the creation of the exhibition. They were exhibitions that other institutions wouldn't tackle alone; they might do it in partnership with us. So this exhibition, *Raphael and his Circle: [Drawings from Windsor Castle]*, was fit into that in some ways, and it was loan drawings from the Queen's collection, the Queen of England, of Raphael drawings who had quite deep holdings of Italian drawings. And the notoriety at the Getty, the name of the Getty would allow us to make that request and probably have success in negotiating a loan, which we did.
It was actually a project that was done in partnership with the Art Gallery of Ontario [AGO], which is where I had worked before the Getty. And [Katharine] Kathy Lochnan, who was the head of Prints and Drawings at the AGO, got in partnership with Lee Hendrix from our museum. And there was a third party, I think he was from Toledo, and I forget the name of the curator, but they were working on it together on how to present this show. And Kathy from Toronto was very theatrical with her way about her as a person, but also in the way that she presented things. I had a good relationship with Kathy, and we had worked on a project at the AGO about William Morris and his earthly paradise [The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris] that was very immersive. She had ideas about how to bring this Raphael and his Circle exhibition to life, that at the Getty we were able to take one step further, because we had a bit more space than the AGO did for their presentation. So Kathy was a bit of a lever, a way to get Lee to go further than she would have ever dreamt in how to represent these drawings. Because they were really good Raphael drawings, but that's—they were that, too. They were smallish works on paper that needed to be seen under dim light and in sort of modest traveling gold frames from the Queen's collection. We were going to be presenting in the Exhibition Pavilion, which was a big space, so they didn't quite hold the space. We did a lot of work to reframe each drawing with its own individual wall to give it a little bit more presence in the space, and that helped for lighting, too, so that instead of pools of light, they were light that was more managed through architectural devices to reframe these drawings in a twenty-five-foot-tall gallery space at the Getty Center.

Through the course of working on the project, we realized—the Design team and the Education team who were helping to interpret the story—realized that there was a hook that we could exploit. It was coincidental that [Home] & Garden Television was really popular right then in the United States. And I made the connection through seeing these HGTV [Home & Garden Television] shows and the stories I was hearing about Raphael that if he was alive today and living in Los Angeles, he'd be maybe doing some really high-priced consulting work for wealthy patrons. In Beverly Hills, let's say, doing a fresco, painting on a ceiling. In his day, the high price or the patron was the Pope, and he was decorating the papal apartment. So many of the drawings that were a chapter, a component of the show, the drawings that we were borrowing from the Queen's collection, were these preparatory drawings for the decorations of the papal apartment. And so taking these fairly modest and delicate drawings, we then complemented it with some reproduction photo murals of the actual frescoes that you could see in the papal apartments and did them almost full size. We turned over one quadrant of a gallery to recreation of the Disputà, is the name of the painting, in the papal apartment. [see page v for image] We showed how the drawings were the artist's first study of a particular figure group or a part of the narrative scene that was going to be in this fairly grand painting, and how then it was enlarged,
transferred on to the wall, how the fresco painting process worked, and that there would be teams of people working under Raphael's direction to create these decorative murals inside of the Pope's private apartment.

So that allowed us to tell a little bit of the story of the Pope. We found a historic painting of what the Pope looked like, and he was in a long line of popes that looked at hiring artists, and Raphael was one of these artists. And you could imagine Raphael standing with one of his sketches and looking at the wall with the Pope by his side, saying this was a process at work just like a designer might with their client in Beverly Hills with the kitchen cabinets or the painting on the ceiling, whatever it might have been going on the project. I think that that made people get it that they then left that part of the exhibition with a new understanding of what these drawings were all about and could look at them differently. Or they could go back and look at some drawings that they had already seen that had to do with this particular commission of the Disputà and see it with fresh eyes. That was like added value and something that ended up becoming a signature of Getty exhibitions, where we would go into more depth, whether it was a conservation story or a process story or a story that was embedded in the socioeconomics of the time and the relationship with a patron, to peel back the onion a little bit further and show more than just the art but get at something that was beneath the surface of the art. So that ended up being a signature thing.

There's one little story I'll share that's to do with that same exhibition that Lee could never have imagined it; I think Kathy Lochnan from the AGO could have imagined it. But it was together working on it and building confidence as a working group that Lee gave us the free rein to explore that idea. Of course, it would have been approved by the director and the chief curator.

There was a new Paintings curator that had been hired at that time—Scott Schaefer was his name. I remember one day—maybe it was before the opening—he was in the gallery looking at the exhibition as it was being installed, and he came to me and he said, "Merritt, if you would have introduced this idea to me if we were working on a project together, I would have said no fucking way I would have allowed you to do something like this. Because it would have just to my mind's eye, been something that would have complete upstaged the art. But, you know, it really works." I took that as a big compliment coming from Scott and that he saw the value in it. He was more of a purist of: just show the paintings and put a label beside it and the job is done. He saw the value in adding to the experience for visitors, to tell a story in a way that was not purely just for connoisseurs or art experts.
Tewes: That's a great story. [laughs] Speaking of exhibits that required major international loans, you wanted to talk briefly about the [Holy Image, Hallowed Ground:] Icons from Sinai exhibit?

Price: Yeah. It also had some things about bringing those objects to life that were specific to the place where those objects came from, Sinai. Where in the world is Sinai? That was one of the questions that we answered, and so we used a map to help tell that story. Sinai is a desert environment, so the objects, many of which were on painted wood panels, needed to be maintained in the desert environment when they are on display. So there was quite a lot of work that had to go into designing the shipping crates and getting them shipped from Sinai, which is a remote—Saint Catherine's Monastery [Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai] is a remote location. And to pack these objects up, the monks that work at the monastery that are responsible for these icons, these painted images of religious people on panels, wanted to make sure that they were safe, they traveled safely.

These objects were objects that were used in the liturgy, and so they would be carried around in the monasteries. They'd sometimes have bits of wax that had dripped off of a candle on to the surface, so they were objects that were living and part of the religious practice there. And this monastery was at the crossroads of many different religious pilgrimages or crossroads with people moving trade goods from one place to another, that it was isolated and it was a stop along a path, so it had reflections of lots of different world faiths. It was a space that was so remote that it wasn't really ever sacked or ruined in a war, it had been retained pretty much. It was where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on a tablet, was on Mount Sinai. So that story is important, as well.

But in exploring this concept, we saw some parallels between the pilgrimage that people would make to the monastery to see these famous paintings and to be at the place where Moses got the tablet from God, that people were making a pilgrimage to the Getty, too, in some ways. I mean, it's not exactly a one-to-one parallel, but you get my idea. And the way that Saint Catherine's Monastery looked, kind of carved out of stone with narrow, little stairs that you could see similar sensibility of architecture in the Getty Center. So there were these one-to-one parallels of a scene from Sinai and a scene from the Getty Center that we did in some of our promotional materials.

We worked a lot with the Communications team on the storylines of what might be pitched to the press. We knew that there would be a dedicated audience from local churches that would come to see, so there were targeted advertising and flyers and things that would go out to churches to promote this
exhibition. There was a big book for the show, and we also did a smallish film. So we [the Getty] sent a film crew to Sinai to videotape the removal of the objects and the packing. And all the science and technology behind preserving them in their desert-like environment through the transportation and then display at the Getty Center was an interesting insider’s story that got some legs. This was one of the best and most collaborative projects, I’ve got to say, with our Communications team to look at the storylines early on and how they were going to be represented in an exhibition and how they could be exploited through pitching different stories to the press and having the right materials at hand to support the telling of those stories through images or drawings and what have you.

But this exhibition was curious in that the footprint of the monastery of the interior of the chapel space was exactly the same as one-half of the cube at the Getty Center's Exhibition Pavilion. So when you entered into this exhibition, you saw some of the icons, the star pieces in isolation, in a very modern way. Robert Checchi was one of the designers on this exhibition, and Simon Adlam, who was with the Getty for a very short time, designed this show. They did a very beautiful—it’s one of my favorite images of an exhibition, where you saw these icons, smallish paintings, maybe like twelve by sixteen at the most. But they also then had details on very big banners so that you had a big view, a big wow moment when you went into the first part of the gallery, and then you saw the icons in a support, like lower down in a closer register for you to view. It was a very modern, off-white. We designed some lighting pendants to make it look like a modern cathedral, special fiberoptic lighting. The showcases were really special, too, to retain the humidity level. The monks had to be able to plug into the computer with their own laptops—they were here for the run of the show—and download data to verify for themselves that the environment that the objects were in was what we promised that it would be. So you would see a monk in their robes walking through and whipping out a little cable and plugging it into the showcase to take a reading when we were open to the public. This was unusual to have the monks there for the full run of the show—the gallery was even blessed and made as a sacred space at the opening by the monks that were accompanying the objects.

But after you went through this first gallery that was a more modern lens looking at the objects, you turn the corner, and you went into a space that was more trying to be evocative of what the monastery's interior was like. It was dripping with gold and dark with only candlelight, some small windows, and so you were transported almost like you were there—it’s the next best thing to going to Saint Catherine’s in Sinai.

There was a side story there that the [Getty] Conservation Institute had been working at Saint Catherine's to do preservation of mosaics that were in the
nave, like these curved, vaulted spaces in the cathedral where—or the monastery with the mosaics were degrading and needed to be stabilized. And so that was a side story that we had to present.

Oh, there's so many good stories. This was one where there were things that were from the altar area and only the men could go behind a certain screen that would divide the public part of the monastery from the monks' part of the monastery. And so they are very concerned with how were visitors, including women, going to see these objects and go into the private sanctum of the monastery, and how were we going to do that with the right degree of reverence. It was a touchy thing on how to make it happen. We let people enter into the space, which you wouldn't be able to do in the actual monastery, in the cathedral—it may not actually be called a cathedral, but I'll use that word. We had music of monks chanting to give it a more hallowed feeling, and we changed the lighting and the preciousness, I guess, with the objects that were displayed. There was some sliver chalices and crucifixes and bowl of crucifixes, things like that, that made for a really special moment in the exhibition.

It was a complicated project team. It was a new curator that worked on that. Kristen Collins worked on that project, and she really cut her teeth on that exhibition. And we have forged a relationship through that project and kept a really strong relationship all these years after as she matured and grew in her abilities as a curator on the project. But I think that exhibition really showed her the power of an exhibition in transporting people to a different place, a different time.

And part of that happens through design.

Yeah.

Before we move on today, I really do want to touch on an exhibit that you put a lot of effort into personally, *J. Paul Getty Life and Legacy*, that showed in 2016. Can you tell me a little bit about the process behind that show?

Yes. So the exhibition development and approval process at the Getty, in writing it always said that anybody could prepare an exhibition proposal, and I took that at face value. Although typically it was a curator, maybe conservator would make a proposal, maybe somebody from the Education Department would make a proposal, but I don't think anybody had really imagined that a designer would make a proposal. But I made a point of reaching out to frontline staff, volunteers, security officers, tour guides, and others and heard frustration from some people that they were answering these same questions.
over and over and over again that had to do about Mr. Getty, like: who was he, did he live here, did he buy these objects, how does this place work, what are the finances, are Getty family members still involved? So there were many questions and I thought that it deserved—they deserved answers, and not only from casual conversations with frontline staff, but let's embed these answers in a permanent display. [see page xii for image] It was clear many visitors had curiosity about Mr. Getty and the collection.

Mr. Getty was a peculiar fellow. His focus was on business, not so much family, and he was thrifty in how he lived and what he collected in terms of art collection. You know, the objects that he collected, with the exception of things in the French Decorative Arts Galleries, were not necessarily the best in the world. There are some choice pieces—Rembrandt paintings, the Raphael painting, and antiquities objects—which was one of his deeper loves, antiquities—as well as French decorative arts, but there are some pieces that remain in the collection that are topnotch. But he was a person that wasn't held with the most reverence or he was a difficult person to represent in a story with a lot of sensational things written about him and his family in the press, yeah. He had five wives and many children with many of those wives, not all of them. And he lived apart from his family, largely because he was focused on business. So he was a difficult man to represent in a story. But enough time had passed since the Getty Center had opened and since he had left his fortune in the seventies to the Getty Museum, which then became the Getty Trust, that people were ready to hear the story.

I had pitched the idea of doing an exhibition about Mr. Getty and his history, his story, and I did it several years in a row until it finally got traction. There was an opening in the schedule, there was an interest in funding it. There was also a realization, a dawning realization that many people that would have known Mr. Getty, first person, were getting on in years, getting older, and so if we were going to do this and capture some of these stories, time was ticking. So it came together, the exhibition got approved. It was an exhibition without a space and so that was putting out, like where would it go? Eventually, it was decided to put in this kind of leftover space that was not super appealing, I've got to say, at first glance. It was a vestibule entering into the center of the South Pavilion, which is where the French Decorative Arts are. It had, at one time, been a little shop, and now at this moment in time before we transformed it through this exhibition, it was just a seating area with dust bunnies rolling around in the corners, had travertine walls that didn't have proper lighting, and so on, so it was a challenge.

But we took up the challenge to convert this vestibule into a gallery space. One nice feature, one we turned to advantage, was the fact that two of the principal walls were rough travertine, and we thought that it would be fitting to put the founder's story embedded into the walls as if it was part of the fabric
of the building. So we were really keen on removing selected stones and inserting the gallery graphics and computers. We ended up wanting to have an interactive computer as a tool for sharing a lot of information, embedding them right in the walls. That was a challenge to get the campus architect, [Lauren Friedman], and Facilities Department on board with agreeing to it, because it was changing the fabric of the building, but ultimately, we did persevere. There was a lot of infrastructure change for that exhibition, so we had to get power and data to it. It happened to be above some spaces in the basement levels below that made it easy to core drill through and get the wiring up into the space.

04-01:01:29

I led a project team that had—it was a true collaborative team. There was not one star curator. I took responsibility for writing Mr. Getty's personal story about his life. [Kenneth] Ken Lapatin and Mary [L.] Hart took responsibility for writing the story about antiquities, his love for antiquities in the Villa. Charissa Bremer-David took responsibility for writing the section of Mr. Getty's collecting—early days in French decorative arts, in particular. And then Elizabeth Escamilla, she got brought in from the Education Department, took responsibility for the legacy section, which had to do with after the will and getting of the money and what happened then. So we together ended up with, I think, around about 400 stories that we thought, Well, that's crazy for this tiny little space, what are we going to do?

04-01:02:33

And so the fact that we had these computers, one per chapter—touchscreen computers. I used the analogy of the Sunday New York Times, that very few people read it from front to back, but you flip through or you might go to your favorite section, whether it's the art section or the sports section and then you flip and find something that catches your attention. We used that as an analogy for the interactive computer, where you could scroll through the stories. They're mostly big pictures, so we did a lot of creative copywriting to make catchy headlines. Something catches your eye and you click on it, and it would reveal a story, lots of those stories. Then we have video content and new audio recordings and some films that we discovered in the vaults that have never been seen before about Mr. Getty talking about the collection. So that was another hook that we used for telling a story on a journalistic point of view, was, as much as possible, to use Mr. Getty's own voice.

04-01:03:41

He was an avid diarist, and the Getty Research Institute had recently acquired his diaries, and they had been transcribed, so we pulled words from his diaries. He was also a published author. He wrote many books about collecting and about business and other matters. I read every book that he had written and had been written about him, salacious stories, movies that had come out about the Gettys—his family and him—to find the right words from other people's words to embed in our stories, where it's a wealth like embarrassment of material of newspaper articles and photographs. We did a
lot of shopping online. There were baseball cards of wealthy industrialists of
the early twentieth century, and Mr. Getty's got a baseball card, for example.

And his fifth wife, [Louise Dudley Theodora] Teddy [Lynch] Getty, who he
lived with at the Ranch House at the Villa, was still alive, and she was 102, I
think, when I met her. She lived in Venice, California. She was very gracious
and welcomed us into her home to talk about life with Mr. Getty, to verify
some identity of people in photographs that we were unsure of or wanted to
double-check on them. She invited us back more than one occasion and
hauling boxes—shoe boxes and boxes of photographs and memorabilia from
her garage into the dining area to share different bits and different stories with
us. It was really good. She showed us Mr. Getty's chair that he used to sit in
when he was working on oil deals with the Saudis and his piano and, "Well,
these were our water glasses that we had in the kitchen at the Ranch House."
So it was really special relationship that we forged, Charissa, myself, and
Teddy and Teddy's daughter, [Louise] Gigi Gaston, who was always there and
helping to mediate the conversation.

Ultimately, she had a bust that was carved, and it was sitting in the corner of
her living room. She was worried about it falling over in an earthquake, so it
was actually a good thing that it was just sitting down in a corner. It was a
bust that was sculpted by the same sculptor that sculpted Mr. Getty's bust,
which was in the Entrance Hall at the Getty Center; they were done as a pair
at the same moment, and she was willing to gift that to the Museum. I mean,
we talked about it as just a notion initially, "Wouldn't it be good to reunite the
two busts?" One of the conditions of her giving it to us was that it wouldn't
just be put in a vault. They were very concerned about it just being in darkness
and never being seen. So we ended up striking a deal, if we took it from them,
to look after and rightfully be in the Getty's collection, since she was one of
his favorite wives. She's on display now—the bust—in the Ranch House
library, which was one of her favorite rooms where she could look out over
the grounds. The son that they had together, Timmy [Getty], she had really
good memories of Mr. Getty and herself and Timmy having good moments at
the Ranch House. Timmy died at a very young age, complications from a
botched surgery that had to do with eye cancer, so her heart was at the Villa.
She visited the Villa every year annually and went to the gravesite—Timmy is
buried there—and so she was really, really pleased that her bust ended up at
the Villa. And I was really proud to have helped orchestrate that gift and to
make one of her dying wishes come true that she had a home at the Villa.

She came to the opening of the exhibition with, I think, twenty-five
descendants of Mr. Getty, and so that was a special moment, too. Many of his
descendants contributed to the exhibition that we interviewed: Balthazar
[Getty], who had memories of his granddad, and Aileen Getty, who also had
good memories of him to share. They all were so thankful that we had retold
the story in a more balanced and positive light from many of the more salacious stories that had been told about him and his family. They lived with the Getty name, so it was important to them to feel really welcome at the Getty and a part of it. Mr. Getty's only surviving son also came to the opening and was happy to see this come to fruition. So that was a good feeling. I've got to say that's probably one of my most important contributions to the telling of the Getty story, but also it's a really good exhibition, if I do say so myself.

04-01:09:36
Tewes:

The best of all worlds there. So moving back in time, [laughs] theoretically here, you've mentioned that right after finishing the work at the Getty Center, you were right into the Getty Villa remodel, which didn't open to the public until 2006, but as you mentioned, this is a long design process. Can you give me some highlights of what you were thinking about maybe some of the challenges that were presented in that project?

04-01:10:06
Price:

Yeah. So a very different project, a different kind of architect. Machado and Silvetti were the architects of record, the design architects, and they are teachers at the graduate level in Boston. So that was at their core about being teachers and being architects, being scholarly in their approach. They're really keen on looking at historic precedents, so we had the great fortune—I had the great fortune of traveling with them and the curators to every major antiquities museum of note in Europe to see what other people had done for presenting their antiquities collections, as well as archeological locations like Pompeii and Herculaneum, where many of these objects come from, and gardens and Renaissance gardens and older gardens, as well as gallery spaces in Italy. There are other replica villas, too, in Germany that we went to see and important museums of antiquity in Stockholm. We got to see a lot together. It was a big entourage. It was an amazing trip to go together with these specialists, both architectural and curatorial, to see all of these things firsthand. That was like being in summer camp where we made fast friends. The architectural team was quite young, so we were all peers, same age, the lead architecture architects, as well as my team. So we made fast friends, and that made for a really enjoyable, collaborative process working with Machado and Silvetti. The whole tenor was quite different from the creation of the Getty Center, working with Richard Meier, and it was a much bigger project, too.

04-01:12:22

That was the kickoff, was a Southern European trip and a Northern European trip with the architectural team and the curatorial team and a few of our ground staff, as well as administrative staff in the Museum, to have a shared understanding of what it was that we were trying to infuse the Villa with, in terms of the spirit.
The Museum was almost gutted and taken back down to its raw, concrete form, and rebuilt with modern technology embedded in to the best of our ability for installing artwork. Many of these ancient sculptures are heavy, made out of stone, and need a lot of structure to attach them firmly to the wall or the floor. So we developed a system, the architects did, with the preparations team and the conservators, a thing that got nicknamed Art Support, which was a lot of steel on the walls. [see page x for image] They knocked holes in a couple of ceilings to bring more natural light into the spaces, so like the Pergamon in Museum Island in Berlin, which they were stuck with the quality of the light falling on the surface. Antiquities objects largely don't have any pigment or anything where it's sensitive to light, so that was okay. We had lots of light in the galleries, mostly. The architects came up with good plans for adding in some new skylights.

There was one branch of the architectural team that was all about interiors, and Mimi Love was in charge of that. So together, we worked on a color palette that was largely based on the colors that we saw in frescoes from Pompeii and ancient paintings. We also designed the terrazzo floors, which were heavily influenced from the [Ny Carlsberg] Glyptotek in Copenhagen, and the floors that were there, which helped to also define a circulation path for visitors. So there was like a carpet area of the floor where most of the sculptures went, the bigger sculptures, and then around the perimeter of the carpet—and the carpet was made out of terrazzo—there was more of a circulation space. And I think the architects came up with a great solution for integrating the entirety of all of the galleries by having a black border in all the galleries and black floors for the changing exhibition spaces and black baseboards, and then we had all of the display furniture ended up being black as well, so that there was a quietness to all of the detail of furniture. There had to be a lot of furniture in the Villa, because it's largely an object museum, as opposed to a painting museum. [see page xi for image]

By furniture, do you mean like pedestals and such?

Pedestals and—yeah. They all ended up being black and they anchored into this black thread, a border, that ran through the galleries. So that was a smart decision that we've come upon. The pedestals and furniture showcases were more architectonic, as well. We looked at the building blocks—literally—of architecture of a wider base and a shaft and a capital, and made it so that the furniture was like building blocks, which served a purpose, too, providing a good place to put an object label beneath a bust or a group of objects in a showcase.
One of the Machado and Silvetti staff, Steve Hoard, was deployed and worked in the Design Studio at the Getty Center with me and my team to design all of the showcases. And so he was able to plug in and benefit from my experience of having design showcases for the National Gallery of Canada, for the Art Gallery of Ontario, and then for the Getty Center to pick up all of that knowledge and redeploy it for a state-of-art set showcases for the Getty Villa. We hired Glasbau Hahn in Frankfurt to do the fabrication and detailing after we got finished with our pass at it. So those showcases were very fine showcases and of a particular piece. The architects were really into detailing. So when you go to the Villa and you see light fixtures or handrails, there's lots of little sculptural detail that you would see in decorative elements in ancient times.

Yeah. So that was the first pass at the Villa. Marion True and Karol White and Janet [B.] Grossman were the key participants from the curatorial side, I had more laughs working with them. That was the most fun to look at the objects, make scale mock-ups of the objects, and figure out how things would be combined together into group cases and presentations. And it was a thematic presentation that grew out of an exhibition that happened years before when the Getty acquired the [Barbara and Lawrence] Fleischmans's collection. The Fleischmans are a couple from New York and were really struck by how school children were embraced by the Getty, and it became a teaching opportunity for schoolkids to see their collection. It was one of the reasons why they ended up gifting their collection to the Getty, was because of how well the material was presented and interpreted and shared with the public. So that became, I think, a through line from Marion True that that was such a successful presentation. That, Why not do the whole museum that way, in a more thematic, easy-to-understand, not art historical way, but a more every person's way of understanding the ancient world? So there was a gallery devoted to men and a gallery devoted to women and a gallery devoted to gods and so on, a gallery devoted to jewelry. It was more of typologies than it was of evolution of art making and artistic expression, which it is today. It was taken back to more of an art history way of presenting the collection in more recent years. So [Timothy] Tim Potts and Jeffrey Spier undid all of that work of a thematic presentation, which would be more typical for an exhibition than it would be for a permanent collection, and took it back to a more conventional, let's say, way of showing it through an art connoisseur's lens, as opposed to an everyperson's lens.

Right, and that was a revamp that was done in 2018, I believe, or finished?

Yeah, finished in 2018. So that was a several-year project. Kind of breakneck speed, and it was done simultaneous to one of the Pacific Standard Time projects, which overwhelmed the institution. It was a very challenging time
for all departments. The mount makers, the conservators, the design team, the communications team, everybody was pushed to the limit, because we were doing the Villa at the same time as we were doing—it was *Golden Kingdoms: [Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas]*, so it tapped all of the same people, object show with, I think, 300-plus objects in it. So we were really stretched thin, as a resource base, for getting all of that done.

Tewes: Can I ask—

Price: So—

Tewes: —about that actually? Because I think the innovative thing that you brought to this position was really making this an in-house department and collaborating across all of these different entities within the Trust. But a challenge like that, where there's so much going on and you're so stretched thin, did that make you rethink what the Department could and should do?

Price: Yes, we had to, and there were other things that have happened over the years, too, where cutbacks on resources and laying off of staff made us have to rethink our focus and priorities, and make other departments rethink that, too. The Publications Department was doing a lot of ephemera at one point, and the Communications team were doing ephemera for different internal clients that they shook off a lot of that responsibility and we ended up absorbing it. Even though we had fewer people, I was able through hiring outside contract services to do as much as if not more than we were doing before with more limited staff. So that in retrospect probably put—or it did put a lot of pressure on my team, but people were ambitious. I was always very ambitious and wanted to help people, too, and wanted to integrate. And my theory of having a design department that was one-stop shopping that if we could do the galleries, the exhibitions, the souvenir product for the store that was related to that content, as well as the ephemera that would help guide people's experience, whether it was a map and guide to the site or signs or interpretive brochures, that it made sense to all be under one creative lead. And it made sense for the internal clients, too, that they could tell their story once to one creative team, and we would have the capability of designing everything that was required for the telling of that story, whether it was the things that were on the gallery walls or the things that you had picked up as a souvenir in the shop at the end of your experience to take a little bit of that at home with you.

So, yes, it was ambitious, and it's a model that not many museums have. It made it challenging to hire to serve that model, too, because you really had to find people who wanted to stretch themselves in terms of their design abilities.
Usually, I hire people that have that specialty in graphic design or typography or maybe exhibition design. I've hired a few people over the years that have master's in exhibition design. But it ended up being more of a type of person than a skillset, like somebody who wanted to expand their horizons and who was willing to learn to do things that they hadn't done before. Through the Studio practice, people were paired or were in small groups and so they could learn from each other and build skills. And people would rise to the challenge, that they really would get excited about being responsible for the whole thing from the beginning to end, no matter what. Like if we needed to make a film or there's an interactive computer or a story about sculpting in stone and understanding the tools and presenting all of that interpretive content, that we could do it all. People got behind that idea, and we teamed up and did it.

I might have said this in an earlier conversation: design teams are broken into subunits of like an architectural unit and the graphics unit and the signage units. And there at the Getty, too, things did come apart and get reassembled. The Media team was largely separate from us; although we would partner up with them to figure out how the media would integrate with an exhibition, the technological, physical aspects of it, as well as how the storyline would complement the more conventional graphics on a text panel or a label, and so on. The Media team had a different skillset that complimented ours. The Editorial team clearly had an integral role in shaping the words and understanding the balance between words and the illustrations or pictures and actual artworks, and needed to understand how they were being presented in the physical space so that they understood how the words were supporting that story. It was very hands-on and lots of facetime with the curators, with the editors, with the Media people, with the carpenters, with everybody who had to take a part in making the production.

So the Design Studio was an environment that welcomed everybody anytime to come and look at drawings, look at models, go together with the designer to the galleries to check out a space. I was always encouraging my staff to get out, too, to get out and meet with the curators and make personal relationships with these people. Because the magic of creating an exhibition that would make a mark or be the best that it could be came from having a personal relationship and really understanding what this person wanted to say, and for you then to be able to have their confidence that you could influence the way to say it and how to prioritize things. You could push on one area and pull back in another area or shift people from a more scholarly way of presenting it to a more populist way of presenting it. So I really encourage people to get out and to talk it up with their colleagues, to forge those relationships and be able to lever them to move it in a direction that was the best thing for the telling of the story.
Likewise, you needed to have the best relationship you could with the carpenter, because if they didn't understand your drawing and didn't feel like they could come and talk with you, or if they saw you in the hallway or at lunch in the café, "I don't really understand what it is you're trying to achieve, would you mind dropping by my worktable in the woodshop and could we talk about it?" that that's often where problems are nipped in the bud or resolved to a better way. That you get the expertise of the carpenter to say, "Well, let's do it this way instead," and you could broker a new deal and take that information back and redraw it and then share it to the next people in line who are working on the next exhibition about, "Well, we thought we would do it this way, but we actually ended up building it this way, so that's probably a better way to do it." That's often where problems are nipped in the bud or resolved to a better way. That you get the expertise of the carpenter to say, "Well, let's do it this way instead," and you could broker a new deal and take that information back and redraw it and then share it to the next people in line who are working on the next exhibition about, "Well, we thought we would do it this way, but we actually ended up building it this way, so that's probably a better way to do it." So being inside of the Museum is laboratory-like in the way that you could always improve on the recipe. It's like being in a kitchen too, like, Oh, that was a happy mistake or that was something that we did differently than we originally had in the recipe. Now this should be the new recipe moving forward.

That's one of the things I liked about working in-house at a museum, is that you have that sense of camaraderie and family and building on one on top of another. Rather than in a consulting office if you're doing exhibition design, you're just torpedoing in, you're seeing things in a surface way, and it's just for a dedicated, one-moment-in-time effort, as opposed to something that's accumulative. That was a really good fit for me professionally, is to be part of that ongoing evolution. And over the years, I got a reputation about having an encyclopedic memory, too, and being able to look back at past things that have been done and citing those as precedents that, "Well, we did something like that before, and here's the pros and the cons of that. Maybe we should look at that as a model and see how it applies to this situation today. We have new technology, new thinking about how historically evocative we'd be versus more of a modern contemporary feeling these days." And so it was a way to have stewardship over that, not only in the people who are the team that were creating it and supporting that effort, but the art directing of what the outcome would be. You know, it's a very rewarding job.

I think you make a really good point that this job is not just about creativity, but about building relationships and communicating well, so thank you for sharing that.

Communicating well, you can only sell your idea to the best of your ability. Like what are your public speaking skills and what are your presentation skills? That would be the downfall of many. Most designers, I would say, are reluctant presenters. They're more introverts than they are extroverts, so presenting in front of groups is a thing that strikes fear. Well, it's, I think, after
death, when you pool people, what are they most fearful of: it's public speaking. I've seen that in my staff.

I was involved in the Western Museum Association quite deeply for a couple of years, I mentioned, and had seen my fair share of, well, great presentations, that were competent, but really bad ones, too, that were badly planned and badly pitched. So I made a presentation at one Western Museum Association conference about how to make a good presentation and—did I tell the story before?

Tewes:
Not recorded. Do you want to tell that now?

Price:
Yeah. And so it was the very beginning of the conference and it was packed, the presentation was packed. We had Toastmasters [International], and I had a designer from Idea Design, I think it was called, and myself as the moderator to talk about different visual components of a presentation, how to structure a presentation, how to read your audience, how to speak extemporaneously, and how to use your original materials, if you have like a PowerPoint presentation or a backdrop of slides, to come into a seamless whole and a good presentation. And people really liked that at the conference and complimented me a lot about how helpful it was. They've never really thought about their presentations in that way before, and people were furiously retooling presentations for the conference that was right before them.

I took that presentation back and gave it at a brown bag lunch at the Getty, and it was packed, as well. There was so much interest in—because there are so many people at the Getty that are making presentations, whether it's to other staff or in conferences or teaching in the galleries, what have you, curators presenting at a lecture, that there was a real demand for improving your skills in presenting. [I] then founded a Toastmaster's club at the Getty Center with the support of Betsy Dill, who's our then head of HR. One of her goals was to make us one of the top ten employers in the country, and so that for retention and being a good employer, you want to have those kinds of benefits to staff. So we ended up making the Toastmasters club a Getty staff members benefit, that if you joined the club and put in a minimum of six months, that the Getty would pay for your membership to Toastmasters.

So I was the founder and first president to Toastmasters [at the Getty] and went faithfully for years and years and years, improved my own presentation skills, encouraged many of my staff in the Design Department to go to Toastmasters, which was a nontoxic environment to practice your public speaking skills, and get feedback about your body language and your gestures and how you can use visual materials in your presentation. And it
was an opportunity to meet people that you would never meet otherwise at the Getty. It's a staff of 1,200 people, and you have librarians and security officers and people that you really don't have any cause to be sitting in a meeting together with or talking to otherwise, that you had all of these doors open to other people that were working at the Getty. You saw different, new relationships being built then over lunch or coffee or in the hallways with people that knew each other from Toastmasters, as opposed to a project team. So I felt very proud about giving back to the community, the Getty community in that way and providing an opportunity to better themselves, improve their professional skillset through a different avenue than what they might just have through their own department. Community is a big part of the joy of working there.

Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. You know, one of the last things I wanted to close with is a discussion about the Family Forum at the Getty Villa. That was something I know you wanted to think about, in terms of audience engagement, as well as behind-the-scenes work.

Price: Right. So we had a Family Room done twice over at the Getty Center so had those under our belt and wanted to make a family audience space at the Villa. Peggy Fogelman was, at that time, the head of the Education Department, but previously was a curator in the Sculpture Department. And Marion True and Karol White are curators working on the project, Catherine Comeau was the editor on the project, and Nichole Trudeau and Reid Hoffman are the designers that were working within the Department. We had AldrichPears [Associates], which were a design company from Vancouver, British Columbia, come in to kickstart the project and to brainstorm with us different things that might be part of what we present.

We ended up settling on a theme of vases, because there are many ancient Greek and Roman vases that are in the collection. Vases are interesting in terms of technique, to talk about how they're made and fired and decorated, so there was a good technique section. There's the interesting story to tell about vases and the preservation and conservation, because most of them have been smashed and broken, they're fragile, and they've been pieced back together. How do you do that and how do you fill in missing pieces, and so on? So that was a good story from the conservation angle. And then vases, also, unlike most other ancient art, are telling narrative stories, because it's either a history story or a battle scene that's depicted on the outside or it might be a mythological story, so vases tell stories. That was a good angle, as well. So vases as the underpinning for the Family Room is what was established.

We realized through it how challenging it is to paint on a vase. Some of these vases are really intricately decorated and how figurative scenes of gods and
gods—Zeus and Hera and other people on them and creatures, mythical creatures, and we were thinking like, How difficult is it to paint on a curved surface and make that all work out? So we actually tried it ourselves and, Wow, this is challenging. We thought, Well, that's an interesting thing to even just appreciate the technical challenge of painting on a curved surface. So we ended up making some fiberglass vessel-shaped—which all the vessels have different purposes, too, whether it's for pouring wine or a mortar and pestle for mixing things in, so it was an opportunity to also teach people about vessels and their function in a household. But these fiberglass vessels that we made reproductions of, we gave them to visitors in a way that they could hold them in their lap or put them on the table and draw on them with Sharpies and just appreciate. Like put themselves in the position of being an ancient painter and thought, Wow, this is tough. And you go and you look at the intricate paintings then on the objects in the galleries and have a different level of appreciation for it, whether it's just graffiti that you're putting on it or you're trying to draw your mom's face on the vase, it's hard. So that was a good hands-on, creative area was being in the place of a painter.

And then there was another area about vases tell stories, where we took advantage of being an in-house design team to mock this up, because we really weren't sure how it's going to work. [see page ix for image] What we wanted to do was have different props that you could hold, like a lightning bolt you could hold in your hand or a mask, let's say, and we thought of how could we make people fuse with the storytelling on the surface of the vase. We called it shadow play, where we set up a light source, you know, like shadow puppets that you do at camp, so that people could stand between the light source and a screen, and they could act out a scene for the viewers—usually the mom and dad or cousin or whatever—that would be on the other side of the screen to depict a narrative. There were various slide backdrops, whether it was somebody who was being crowned with a laurel wreath, let's say, at the end of an Olympic run or somebody that was sitting inside a temple with birds flying around, because it was a beautiful goddess and the birds were holding on to tendrils of garments or something as might be depicted on a vase.

When we mocked this up, there was a certain contingent of people that didn't want sound in the space. So we brought visitors into a full-size mock-up of this experience, shadow play, and shone the scene and asked them to step into the scene. It was a theater-like moment, and people did nothing, like they were stoned, still, and mute. But we had some soundtracks prepared that were like a backdrop to the scene, and as soon as we turned the soundtrack on, it gave license to visitors to act out or to enter into the moment, and that just happened to be the ticket. As soon as you turned the sound on, people were animated. They would pick up the sword, and you hear the clashing of a sword against a shield, or you hear the roar of a crowd applauding as the
person crossed the finish line. That was what people needed to complete the moment and participate in the activity. We never would've learned that if we hadn't done a mock-up, and maybe the forces that didn't want sound would have prevailed and then it would have been a flop when we opened it. That became the shadow play area of the Family Forum, which is still there today; it's just been reshaped for a different space that it found its way into.

04-01:42:50
Tewes: Well, Merritt, we've covered a lot of ground today, but is there anything you want to fill in that we've been discussing or missed?

04-01:42:58
Price: Maybe when we get together the next session. I'd like to talk just briefly about *Michelangelo: Mind of the Master*, the last exhibition that I worked on at the Getty Center before my retirement.

04-01:43:15
Tewes: We can do that, all right. Thank you so much for your time today.

04-01:43:19
Price: Thank you.
Interview 5: November 12, 2020

05-00:00:04

Tewes: This is a fifth interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project in association with the Oral History Center at UC [University of California], Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on November 12, 2020. In this remote interview Mr. Price joins us from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thanks for joining me for our fifth session.

05-00:00:31

Last time we spoke quite a bit about a lot of the exhibits you've worked on over years, and I wanted to just finish up with some of those, because they have some significance to a lot of the major things that were going on in the Getty during your tenure. And one was Devices of Wonder: [From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen] from 2001. Can you tell me a bit about that exhibit?

05-00:00:55

Price: Yes, certainly, good morning. Devices of Wonder is a fairly early exhibit, and it was the Museum's first coproduction, let's call it, with the [Getty] Research Institute. [see page vi for image] So that had some growing pains with different ideas about exhibiting and different kind of materials that were going to be presented, different curatorial staff and the collaborative process for managing work between the two programs. Because they really are stand-alone programs, and so even works that are artworks that are coming from the Research Institute, the Registrar's Office there needs to make loan letters and loan them to the Museum, and so there's a lot of paperwork that needs be done. So it's like doing a big loan exhibition, although it was like just across the garden where the objects were coming from. Lots of objects were coming from outside the institution, as well.

05-00:01:55

Fran [Frances] Terpak was the curator. It's the first time I had met her. She's still an employee at the Getty and is—I've got to say over the years become one of my favorite curators to work with, because she's super enthusiastic and friendly and likes exhibits, likes doing exhibits and thinking about the environmental issues that come along with presenting an idea. But this was a big, big project. It has, I think, the claim to fame of being the biggest, if not the second biggest, in terms of number of objects that were ever presented in the Exhibition Pavilion space. I think there were over 400 objects in this exhibition; typically, a painting show with middle- to larger-size paintings might have 100, so it just was a lot bigger, in terms of processing individual objects. Now, there were a lot of larger objects, but a lot of really small objects, too, and objects of all make and descriptions. Devices of Wonder was the name, and it was an exhibition about how people perceive the world, whether it's through a microscope or a telescope or manipulating imagery with computers, so all of the mechanical devices that would affect the way that you
view the world. There were many, many challenges for presenting the objects—the mounts, power requirements, moving through the space. There were theatrical kind of setups, as well, objects that you had to just look at from a very specific angle so that they came into view properly. So there were a lot of challenges, too, for making it accessible to as many people as possible.

The thing that I remember in this project—because as a designer, you're often working off the edict that less is more to try to hone down to the essential and focus people's attention on the essential, but Fran's adage for this exhibition was more is better, and it took a while to get the Design team around to that way of thinking as a positive thing. Fran was a good cheerleader. She made signs, little signs on pickets with "more is better" for all the designers to have at meetings, so she really drove that message home. There's something to be said about it that if you get behind that and really try to make it work for you, it's as equally as good a rule to live by as less is more, so it's just a different way of thinking about it.

So that's part of exhibition design, too, is to set aside your own personal beliefs or predilections about what's the best thing. Set it aside and just try to go with it to see where that leads you, and to do it to the best of your ability and to make the story as clear as possible and to make it an enjoyable experience for the visitors that are going to come. I think that that does one well in any form of design, but especially exhibition designers to come into the equation with a fresh mind and set aside some of your assumptions about what should be done, how it should be done, because there are lots of different ways to think about it.

Yeah, so the Devices of Wonder project was a really tough one. We did a lot of growing in that exhibition. If you go back and look at images of it, you can see that it is chockablock with objects. They were salon hangs in many of the spaces that used the full height of the Exhibition Pavilion space. It presented some lighting challenges as a result that we addressed. I think the graphics for chapter beginnings of the story in the exhibition space, we had to use the full twenty, twenty-two feet of the height of the space to get them so that they stood out from the clamor of all of the objects. And objects that were very disparate from mechanical, moving marionettes and shadow puppets and hanging crocodiles, light fixtures and giant photographs of the moon that—DNA sequences that were seen through a microscope, that there was a real mélange of different kinds of works that were there. It certainly was wondrous at the end of it and a very full meal, let's say, from a visitor's perspective.

So the Museum, I think, had to come around more broadly than just Design getting with the program. The Museum did, too, to process that many objects, to do the mounts for that many objects, and that was early days of working
together as a team, so it was a big learning experience. There was some sibling rivalry, as I mentioned previously, between the programs and so the Museum and the Research Institute had to set some of that aside. It impacted everybody's workload—Design, conservators, the Registrar's Office, the Preparations team—everybody was impacted by the enormity of installing this exhibition. So it did mean that other Museum projects that might've had some priority were being set aside. We saw that again over the years with other projects that were ambitious from the Research Institute that took a lot of effort from the Museum and making some friction between how resources were being deployed. *Golden Kingdoms: [Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas]* fit into that category and the *[Cave Temples of] Dunhuang: [Buddhist Art on China's Silk Road]* exhibition fit into that category, too. Those were really major undertakings that relied heavily on Museum staff to help other parts of the Getty realize a project goal.

The last exhibition that I worked on that was notable was *Michelangelo: Mind of the Master.* [see page xiii for image] Carolyn Marsden-Smith, the head of Exhibitions then, was generous in letting me travel to see the works of art from the museum that they were being borrowed from, the Teylers Museum, which is just outside of Amsterdam. I had to travel there with the curators to look at the objects firsthand, sheets out on a table in a study room and see the museum that they were being lent from and understand the importance of this loan, that they hadn't traveled before as a group. It was largely as a fundraising effort to help underwrite the cost of the renovations to this old museum; it's like from the 1600s. So it was a good reason for traveling the drawings, and it was a project that was jointly done with the Cleveland Museum of Art. Cleveland was the first venue, the Getty was the second venue. So we collaborated with the Cleveland team, both the Curatorial team and the Design team there to come up with a shared approach to presenting the exhibition. Clearly, we had different spaces and some different priorities, different styles of doing things, but we came upon a common solution for the furniture, which the Getty took the initiative to do a lot of work early on the project, even though we were the second venue, because of particular needs we have for seismic stability that Cleveland wouldn't have exactly the same. But we wanted to make sure that those design needs were satisfied.

And also, they're all largely like 98 percent double-sided drawings, so they were drawings that were going to be presented on pedestals that you could see both sides of the sheet. We had some prior experience doing double-sided drawings shows, a Leonardo da Vinci show amongst others, and it's a challenge to where to put the label; it's is a very simple challenge but a complicated one. And so we proposed having a second podium that was adjacent to the double-sided drawing pedestal that had extended label information that could be at a much, much bigger size. The Getty used that for every drawing; Cleveland only used it for a handful. The pedestal system was
designed in a modular way, too, so that in Cleveland, their drawings were a few inches higher in display and they had more labels right underneath the drawings. Ours were lower, which make them a little bit more accessible for, let's say, somebody in a wheelchair or a shorter person, and put a lot of information to the side. So it sort of expanded the experience from what the curators thought at first might not fill the whole exhibition space, but working through the design challenge, we convinced everybody that it certainly could fill whole exhibition space easily.

And we, together with Cleveland and the curators, relied heavily on some large photo murals that showed these drawings were preparatory drawings for large, well-known works like the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the wall of the Sistine Chapel, as well as other—the Medici Tomb and sculptures that were done for that. So we had almost full-size reproductions of some of these artworks that you could see the drawings and see the finished work, and see the elbow that he was working on compositionally and then see the sculpted elbow in a photomural in the background. That was very successful, and it drew on the success of some earlier exhibitions—I mentioned the last time, spoke about Raphael [and His Circle: Drawings from Windsor Castle] and the Disputà mural. It's not an uncommon thing to be done for exhibitions, but it's something that the Getty over the years learned how to do well and made it for a more full, rich experience for the visitors.

We did canvas lots of other exhibitions of double-sided drawings from all around the world. The Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] had recently done a Michelangelo show with double-sided drawings, and they did a Sistine Chapel reproduction on the ceiling that was backlit, I think, which we thought was not the best solution. Our Sistine Chapel reproduction was vertical on a wall and it was just enlarging one segment with God and The Creation of Adam, you know, the famous fingers touching. There were drawings of Michelangelo's of the hands and of the leg of God and the toe of God and the side of angel that was—or I think it was Eve that was beside [him], a secondary character in that composition. Nevertheless, we showed just that tile, which was one of maybe a dozen on the ceiling, and we showed it full size, which really drove home the enormity of the scale of this project and then we showed the full Sistine Chapel in a smaller kind of key finder reproduction. That was powerful, and it was a big photo op for visitors, too, to stand in front of this mural.

Now, this exhibition ran its full course in Cleveland, and it only was open for a number of weeks at the Getty before everybody hunkered down and went home because of COVID-19. Friday, March the thirteenth, I think it was, where everybody said, "Go home," and we weren't really sure what was going to happen next. Everybody thought that it would be a much shorter time than it's turned out to be, of course. So only a few people got to see the exhibition, unfortunately. If I do say so myself, it was really beautiful. It was very
successful. It got a good review in the press in Los Angeles. I don't know if I've mentioned this before, but the way that exhibitions are reviewed in the press, almost universally, you read any press review in any city, they typically review it as if it's a catalog, it's a narrative story. They're reviewing the curatorial work largely, not so much the presentation. Unlike theater reviews where they're talking about the costume, the lighting, the performance, the actors—like the whole totality of the experience. But for exhibitions, unless there's a problem with the way it's been presented, there's very rarely a comment about the design or the presentation. The only exception to that is if it's a show about architecture, because it's a different critic who will review it, an architecture critic who thinks about it in more spatial terms, as well as the underlying curatorial thesis that's being presented. So we got a shout-out from the critic complimenting the design of the Michelangelo show. I think there's maybe only one or two or three shows during my career at the Getty that had any recognition of the design, and it was a positive recognition, as opposed to some failing. So that was nice, a nice feather in our cap.

I got to work with Alan Konishi, who was relatively new on staff, and he did a fine job designing all the furniture and figuring out the space planning for the exhibition; and Julie Garnett, who worked together with the team. She's now one of the—now that I've left, is the longest of the two for having how many years she's been at the Getty in the Design Department. She brought a lot of experience to the project and worked largely on the graphic design for that project. It was a great team, and I'm very proud of the outcome. It was good to work Julian Brooks and Edina [Adam] from the Drawings Department, the curators there who were very open-minded about how to present it, worried because it was a big show—everybody wanted it to be right, you know, to be as good as it could be—but went along with our proposals for showing these drawings on pedestals in the round, in clusters that were anchored by different commissions that Michelangelo was working on.

A couple of notable things about the exhibition, too, is that we commissioned a film that set Michelangelo in a larger context, because people might know him from the *David* sculpture, for example, or maybe they know, oh, he's the guy that worked on the design of St. Peter's Basilica. So we set his life and times in a larger context that these drawings were kind of a microcosm of all of the creative work that he did during his time as an architect, a sculptor, a painter, as well as a designer. He was also a poet, and so we included some of his poetry in the exhibition, as well. The film turned out great. It was done by an outside entity from the UK [United Kingdom] that we collaborated with through our Media Department. I think it set a bar for possibly future presentations that would include introductory films or some sort of a film that summarizes, if not the whole exhibition, an aspect of something that's being presented, yeah.
Tewes: That's an interesting addition. I was really interested in what you said about critical review or lack thereof for exhibition design, and I wonder how you get feedback or how you internally, as a team, think about what worked and what didn't in a show. How do you determine that without review, I suppose?

Price: Mm-hm. Oh, good question. Well, different moments in time at the Getty there had been different ways to debrief on a project on what worked and what didn't. There were a few very successful campaigns, communications campaigns that were collaborative with our Communications Department to be strategic about how we were going to frame an exhibition, the kind of materials that we would prepare in advance to make available to the press and kind of seed the conversation or steer where people might be interested in writing a story or reviewing an exhibition and getting results that way. I think I mentioned that the [Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai] exhibition was one that way that had a particular niche interest from different religious tour groups, in particular, and local audiences from that—like a community in Los Angeles that would be from the Sinai area that would be of particular interest to come and see this show. So that project, we worked hard with the Communications Department to tell different kinds of stories that would be of interest to different kinds of news outlets, and make sure that we had blogposts that were written that supported those that you could point to or crosslink, as well as materials, just available to share with the press, whether it's some technical drawings above and beyond just reproductions of the works of art themselves and the curatorial language that would describe those objects. Did that answer question?

Tewes: Well, in part, but I'm also thinking about internally how you and your team think about, Hey, did this show work out the way we thought it did, or, Did the design really add to the objects in this particular situation?

Price: Yeah. Sometimes there were more formal observational studies that were done where we would sometimes do it just internally with staff effort, but often we would engage the service of an outside specialist to do some assimilation, some integration of the findings, where you would track people moving through the space to see how people were navigating and time people how long they were spending with individual objects. Are the feature objects that we were intending to be the feature objects ones that people understood were important, and stood and or looked or had a conversation with a person they were visiting with about that work of art? There were tracking studies done for a select number of exhibitions. There were exit interviews done for certain exhibitions. There were quarterly things that were done by [Timothy] Tim Hart, who was doing a questionnaire. Sometimes these quarterly questionnaires that were about the overall experience at the Getty would have a couple of questions about a particular exhibition: How did you decide to go
to that exhibition, Did you enjoy it? So we had different questions that were inserted into questionnaires now and then to get like direct feedback from visitors. Did they understand the major points that we were trying to convey in the exhibition?

Often there were tours that were conducted for big exhibitions, and this was somewhat depending on individuals. Like [Elizabeth] Beth Morrison for the *Book of Beasts: [The Bestiary in the Medieval World]* exhibition conducted a few tours for staff alone to go around and just talk about the outcome of the exhibition, and so that seeded some conversation amongst the team members about what worked and what didn't. The Exhibitions team would often have debriefs and then consolidate like the top three lessons learned—positive and what could've been done better, top three items—and consolidated that into a report try to learn from your experience and bring it forward.

In the Design Department itself, we had a weekly operations meeting where we sometimes would invite an individual from another department to come and sit and chat with us. Sometimes it was a person that was working on an assignment, and we'd get feedback from the team, do a critique on some facet of the design project they were working on. But a standing item on the agenda was to do a tour of a recently opened exhibition. The designers that were working on that project would lead the entire Design team through the exhibition and talk a little bit about challenges, outcomes, production issues that might've come up, process issues, and get people out and just looking at things that we had a hand in helping to create. That was a good way to crosspollinate ideas and thinking, and give people a platform to kind of showcase their good work. And things that they had to overcome through the project, too, so that people might learn vicariously through just that or if they had a similar problem on their project, they would know, Oh yeah, I remember so-and-so talking about that in their exhibition. They're a resource for me to help sort through a similar problem on the project that I'm now working on.

Thank you, that's really interesting. Is there anything you would—

I think otherwise, people can just come to work, go to their desk, go to their meetings, go to the cafeteria using underground passages without ever setting foot in a gallery space or an exhibition space. So it's important to provide opportunities for people and like really compel people to get into the gallery spaces and to look at it, to watch visitors interacting with things that they had created so that you've got that firsthand feedback. I mean, that's one of the joys of working in-house in an institution, in a museum is that it is somewhat laboratory-like that you can see people using the fruits—experiencing the
fruits of your labor and learn from that. But it's easy to not take the time out of your busy schedule to avail yourself of that.

Personally, I tried to set an example by whenever possible when I was walking from one place to another across the campus, of not using the underground tunnels, but going through the galleries or public spaces. And whoever I was going to a meeting with from the Design team would be by my side, and we could take a little detour, look at something, pick up a piece of trash. Because I treated the facility as if it was my house, and you want it to be in the best order it would be if you're inviting company over, so just to instill in people that sense of ownership. Often, you'd encounter visitors, too, who might be looking a little bit lost, so you could take a moment and ask them if you can help them out. Striking up conversations in the café with visitors like, "Are you enjoying your visit today? I'm a staff member here," and they're always interested to hear from a designer and, oh, often they'll say, "Well, what's a tip, what should I absolutely not miss today?" It's a good time to just chat with people. Most designers largely are introverts, so getting them to talk to people or get out there needs a little push.

That's such a good point about treating the public spaces as a laboratory for what worked and what didn't. I like that.

Yeah, yeah. Well, one place that's very much that way is the Exploratorium in San Francisco, where they are literally sometimes making things out of foam core, like it's an exhibition that's in development, and the visitors are a part of that development process. It's something that I've advocated for, is to how—and others at the Getty, too, have advocated for space that's a working space where you can have an idea that's not as fully realized as a finished product as you might generally do it, but to have something that's more experimental or it's just a fragment of an exhibition idea where you can test it out on visitors to see if it works or it doesn't.

I mentioned this the last time we spoke, I think, about the shadow play for the Family Room [at the Getty Villa], and we did mock that up full-size kind of crudely. It was not in all the finished materials but enough that you could—it was a facsimile of the final product, and it worked well enough to get us some answers on whether to include sound or not. It helped others to be convinced, too, that sound was going to be an essential component of that experience.

Right. As we close out our discussion of all of these wonderful exhibits you've worked on, is there anything you'd like to add as maybe a general rule or anything specific?
No, but I think there was over 500 exhibitions big and small during my time at the Getty, from some shows that were just one work of art to others that were over 400. We were doing between twenty and thirty exhibitions annually, so it was a full slate, and that was just the exhibition program. There was lots of work on top of that that needed to be managed, so like the galleries, upkeep on permanent collection galleries, all of the program spaces, all of the printed material and signage, all of our responsibilities, that it was a busy shop. It took a lot of work to just manage the flow of the work, because there was no one central entity that was responsible for managing the total number of projects that the creative team was working on at any one point in time. And so that, in large part, fell to me to be a gauge or monitoring that and allocating the resources or hiring in outside resources to supplement what we had in-house to get it all done or to provide feedback about what was and what wasn't achievable. Yeah, it was a big—a constant puzzle of figuring out how to get the work done. It was a busy place. You were never sitting on your haunches wondering, What am I going to do today? It was a busy shop.

A few moments ago, you were talking about leading by example and getting the team to adopt certain behaviors or certain ways of thinking, and I think that's probably a good segue into thinking about your management and leadership of the group. I'm wondering how you thought about your role as a manager these past many years you've been at the Design Department.

Mm-hm. Well, as a designer, I was very hands-on with the Design team. Being as busy as we were, there were projects that were fairly few and far between where I would actively sit down at a computer and work through all of the details of a design of a showcase or a graphic. That was always a thing that you felt little bit limited by, of not being completely on top of the latest ins and outs of all the details of the software that people were using. I mean, I certainly knew what you could accomplish with all of the different software applications, but was by no means accomplished myself at using them in all of their intricate detail. I think that's partly a feature, too, of me growing up [and in] my school years in college not even using computers. Everything was done as hand drawings and more mechanical ways of describing the designs that you were striving to achieve.

[One big project that I had a direct and sustained hand in was the integration of the Fran and Ray Stark Sculpture Collection on the Getty Center campus, the Modern Outdoor Sculpture Gardens, which debuted in June 2007. Together with curator Antonia Bostrom, architects Richard Meier and Partners, landscape architects Olin Partnership, and with guidance from Bill Brice—Ray Stark's brother-in-law—we designed a series of outdoor sculpture garden spaces and individual installations to showcase the collection. [see page vii for image] One noteworthy day, Antonia and I met with Ellsworth Kelly to confirm the location I had proposed for his sculpture. It was placed in
line with the Museum courtyard's long fountain, and activated what Richard Meier might call an outdoor gallery space, with a ceiling of sky, between the South and West Pavilions. After suggesting it be shifted thirty inches to the west and then walking back to see it from a long view, Ellsworth agreed to the original position I recommended. [see page viii for image]

I'm digressing a little bit about that, but I think that keeping your hands in the work actively and not just pulling yourself out into an art directing role is important so that you can really understand what is involved. Like how much effort is involved to move something from point A to point B along the process, so that you can be realistic in asking people and reviewing what it is that they're getting done in a certain day, a certain week, a certain month. I think I mentioned before that teaching keeps you real that way, too, because you have to be very—if you're a good teacher, you're deliberate in what you're allocating for to be completed in a certain timeframe so that their assignments are practical. Now, I always set the bar very high in my classes, as well as the Studio, to make people be reaching for, getting the most accomplished, and to work hard at it, that the bar was really high and we were constantly trying to do it to the best of our ability. So I had super high expectations of myself.

And at hiring, you know, you look for people that are ambitious and wanting to do more than—like wanting to expand their horizons and being really involved in the development process. I think that slanted the kind of person that ended up in the Studio, where they were people that were not happy to just sit back and kind of coast. Everybody was ambitious and wanting to do more than what their area of expertise was from schooling. We were doing the 3D, the 2D, the media development, and that was a push for many people at least in their first couple of years of working the Studio—acquiring new skills and teaming up with other people and doing things that they really hadn't done before in their career. Made for a rich environment for partnerships and lots of mentoring that happened between individuals within the Studio, where people were paired up with a person who was skilled as an architect or an interior designer with a graphic designer, so they'd be learning from each other. And the more senior people, providing leadership for organizing their time and divvying up the responsibilities for a project, having their own responsibility for leading that project with their design partner to make sure that mini deadlines within the project were being met.

And so I manage the entire Studio, but then there were all of these individual teams that were making their own way forward. I was always keen on succession planning, that I felt that people that I hired were all eventually going to move on in their career, whether it was moving up the ladder within the Design Studio or there might be another opportunity that comes along in another institution that I wanted to be giving them the best skillset that they could and [be] well-rounded. So they understood 3D design, 2D design,
manage issues about management and good people skills, good presentation skills, really trying to create people who had leadership skills. And so within any project team, the design—I was always encouraging the designers to step forward and help to unpack the problem, rearticulate it collaboratively with their team members so that it wasn't a passive, just-making-it-look-good process, but to really dig in and be part of owning the narrative, the story. And not just taking for granted how it was going to be presented, but it's like, Well, have you thought about using a film, or is there something that's particularly interesting about the sculpting technique here that we could have a little focus exhibition about working with stone and the tools and things that would give some insight to a visitor about the thing that you're intending to say just in words on a label, but could we actually have a display that makes that more tangible? I was always encouraging people to ask leading questions and dig in and help form the story, you know?

That was sometimes welcomed by our colleagues and sometimes bothered [them] that, "Why do we always have to be pulling it apart and putting it back together? Why can't we just keep it simple and move it forward?" And honestly, sometimes shows were that way, too, that you did—we did have types of exhibitions where you intentionally didn't ask a lot of questions or didn't completely unpack it. It was more of, "All right, we're just going to get these works up on a wall and there's going to be one text panel that introduces it, your typical object labels, and to not try to make something special about it. We've just got to keep this one straightforward or otherwise we stretch ourselves too thin." There was always a balancing act, is to remind people, "This is an exhibition where I don't actually want you to ask a lot of questions, let's keep it straightforward."

For example, there was a series of exhibitions called In Focus photography shows, which were that way that they were just small exhibitions that were typically thematic, like a subject in focus, and ones that generally didn't deserve to have the full treatment, the full workup. We had some typical ways, like the text panel was always this production technique and this size. Let's try not to reinvent the wheel in terms of the color, could we just keep that gallery white or gray most of the time? So that you can reserve some of your energy and time for the things that really are big projects—that are challenging—and to make some of the other projects more straightforward.

But all together, I think it was important to just give people responsibility for their own day-to-day work, making clear what the expectations were. I really didn't micromanage people in terms of their time unless there was a problem. If people were consistently not delivering in a way that the project required or you were seeing that there were problems with one—like there were often two—usually, it was two people on a team. If one person was taking up slack for somebody else who wasn't performing as much as the—or to the level that
they should, and there were a few moments in my career where I had to manage those performance issues. They were very few and far between, I've got to say, because I took my time hiring. And even though sometimes you really, really wanted to have somebody in that position, in that chair doing the work, it was better to wait until the right candidate came along and maybe hire some freelance people to keep things moving forward while you waited until the right candidate was there. I learned that lesson once or twice where I was too anxious to make a decision; I just wanted somebody there to be doing the work and regretted it. Those are hard lessons, and fortunately I only had to learn it once or maybe twice.

Typically, too, I would—if I was a little bit worried, I might start somebody off on a limited-term contract, where I'm not sure that this is exactly right choice, so let's maybe do—bring somebody in for a six-month contract with some targeted projects to see how it goes. That way, if it's not working out, it's easier to say, "Well, we've concluded what we had agreed to, and that was nice, thank you." Or the other side of the coin is that, "This is working out really well, we've got more work coming down the pipe and let's extend the agreement for a longer period of time." There was more turnover in Design than there were in other areas at the Museum, because people's skillsets were much more flexible to be doing—somebody could be working for an ad agency or somebody could be working for a consulting firm or—there was a lot of opportunity for designers to go elsewhere if their career demanded or their interest changed or they needed a change of scene. A curator for Medieval Manuscripts, you can imagine there are fewer opportunities for them to find a new gig.

Generally, designers in the team would stay for a minimum of two years, and I had people that were there for, gosh, ten, twelve, thirteen years. So that's an earmark of like a good relationship. I think that people enjoyed the work. People enjoyed each other's company largely. There were only a few moments where—and it was largely workload related—that there were times when the Museum kind of overcommitted itself on projects, and the entire staff were a bit stressed for what was set out for them to accomplish. It showed with stress in people—anxiety and frustration and unhappiness with their lot. So that's a difficult place to be in, in middle management of trying to respond to what's been set before you by your senior management team, pushing back to say, "This is really stretching the team," and people still insisting that, "Well, we've committed to this, this is what we're going to get done. Figure out a way to get it done." Especially when you've got a whole institution of perfectionists, it's hard for people to not do it to the highest standard that they're always used to achieving, and so that really stretched the team thing.

In particular, it's like 2016, I think—2015, [20]16, [20]17—when we were doing the second renovation of the Villa and doing one of the *Pacific*
Standard Time extravaganzas at the Getty Center, including the Golden Kingdoms exhibition, where it was all of the same people. There were Antiquities shows, so it was all of the Antiquities conservators, mountmakers, the designers, preparators, and registrars, just that one team of people that were doing all of it: an entire museum, [i.e. the Villa], as well as an object show that was a loan show with over 300 objects from little museums all across Latin America that weren't used to lending, where it didn't have a track record of shipping things internationally. So there were many objects that were showing up that, Oh, this doesn't look like what we thought it was going to be. How are we going to mount this? Or the mount that we had prepared for it doesn't quite work the way we thought it was going to. So there was lots of troubleshooting and problem solving right through to the last moment on that show.

And the Golden Kingdoms exhibition just had some very unusual objects like this—I don't know if you would call it tapestry—this weaving of bird feathers that was ginormous. It was like twenty feet long by ten feet tall and needed a special microclimate case that you had to build the glass over the object after it had been installed and seal it in place. I mean, that was super expensive and complicated and a nail-biting experience for everybody that was involved to make this display of bird feathers work out. That was just one of a whole myriad of unique objects for that show.

So there were times when we were stretched thin, and it wore on people and some people had a hard time even recovering from that. I'd say that it was like a breaking point for them where they thought, I've got to move on in my career, this is not a healthy place for me to be. But that happens in work, you know, you've got to help people manage that and realize everybody's responsible for their own well-being, too, it's not just your employer's responsibility. You've got to know yourself what your limits are and work together with your partners on the project, as well as your manager, to make the best of the situation.

Right. Changing gears a little bit here, I wanted us to talk about some of the challenges that the Getty has encountered over the years and some being economic hardships. Despite the fact that the Getty has a lot of resources, a lot of those are tied up in the stock market, so the way—the whims of that certainly impact the work that you do. I was just thinking perhaps in general—or specifically thinking about 2002, 2008 and the recession there—how all of that has impacted the work you've done at the Getty.

Right. Yes, well, like everybody in the big economic downturn in 2008, it was a big hit, as you said, for the stock market and a moment at the Getty where everybody was asked to tighten their belt, to consider priorities. There was
quite a lot of shuffling around as different departments focused on just core things and got rid of some of the things that were around the periphery. It created both hardship and opportunity. The Publications Department, for example, in 2008 jettisoned almost all of the work that they were doing for ephemera—invitations, printed brochures, whether that was for a marketing reason or interpretive reason—and also pared down their staff. That ended up being an opportunity for us, where we were already doing some of that work. So I actually stepped forward and offered to do more of that work and turned it—you know, that little expression turning lemons into lemonade. Together with Toby Tannenbaum, the then head of Education, we took it as an opportunity for consolidating all of the Education Department's graphic needs in one place, which was our department. Previously, it had been spread between us, Publications, and Communications, and lots of outside freelance work, too, that was being directed by individual Education staff members. So we did a survey of all the Education printed materials, which was big. They do a lot of materials for teaching, online teaching, teaching courses with teachers out in the community; lots of brochures for guided-looking route for individual visitors coming to the site; lots of special programs, whether it's seasonal or what have you. There were hundreds and hundreds of pieces of printed material that the Education Department was doing, and it was not very cohesive.

We took a look at it and wanted to have a more cohesive brand from the Education Department, and hired some outside services. Even though it was in a downturn and a belt-tightening, we thought that, Well, we don't have to rush with this, we can take our time and try to fit it into the spaces in between. It was an opportunity, too, to take some of the production staff in the Publication Department over to my team to help with the print work. That all went together, too, with the strategy that Michael Brand had at that moment, was to save staff and try to minimize the staff reduction, but to decrease some of the things that we were consistently delivering.

For an example, before the downturn in 2008, pretty much every exhibition of a certain scale had a souvenir brochure that was made available to the visitor for free. That took a lot of effort to write it, edit it, design it, print it, and it took a lot of money to support that endeavor. That was a hard decision where it was decided to not do any more souvenir brochures. So that took a lot of staff time that was devoted to that that we could turn to the attention of something else. That was where we thought, Okay, I could probably do this work with the Education Department and take on some of those new responsibilities. And we made it through, the Museum made it through that downturn largely without laying off any staff, like just a really minimal number of staff.
Other parts of the Getty did lay off staff. And I think there was some bad feelings about that that ended up at the Trust level that the Museum had decided to manage their money in that way, and that they didn't take a hit with staff reduction. It was a few years later, I think it was 2012, where the Museum ended up having to pay the piper. There was some sort of retribution that was—in what was taken, and the Museum was forced to lay off staff in a 2012 staff reduction. It was much more than anybody else, anywhere else in the Getty, so that there was a lot of the teachers, the gallery teachers were let go, and there was a big outcry about that, and much of that responsibility was turned over to volunteer efforts. It was a sea change for the Education Department to deal with that. But the Design Department was also reduced by, I think, about 40 percent, so from a staff of like twelve down to eight, something like that—don't quote me on those numbers—but it was major staff reduction. Some of the reduction ended up—we preserved a little bit of money for freelance staff but—

And there was a major change in simplicity. There was a moment when instead of reimagining the Exhibition Pavilion space for every exhibition and moving the walls around, we kind of arrested it in a plan that was more of a fixed plan with just moving some partition walls around. Galleries that we would regularly reconfigure and repaint, we tried to come up with, Well, could we have the painting so it would last for two or three exhibitions and pick a color that would be serviceable for many exhibitions, instead of just assuming that it was going to change for every exhibition. There were a lot of strategies that we had to develop to stretch the money—to do the same amount more or less with less money and to simplify things. This is when I mentioned just a little while ago about some exhibitions being more predictable. Like the In Focus shows, where we would only have your typical label and a single text panel and not trying to mine that exhibition for what could we do with it, but just to keep it really straightforward and be a little bit more formulaic with the potential outcome, but also more predictable with the budgets, with the money that was going to be needed to deliver that exhibition.

But I did lose staff and had to manage that staff reduction, which is never a happy time to be giving people their pink slip, you know? The Getty was good about it—as good, as any employer can be with the staff reduction—that they provided opportunities for people to step forward and cash out, and there were some incentives. So people who had been in the Studio for a while took that and got a relatively generous severance and decided that they'd move on in their career. It was hard times coming ahead and a change from what they were used to doing, so it just was the right formula for them. A few people on staff took it as an opportunity, which made it easier on me. Other people did have to be asked to leave, but everybody landed on their feet and went on in their careers, even though some tears were shed, and it was of months of
adjusting to that new reality. I think we in Design, and because of my leadership, it's like, Let's make the best of this situation. It's tough, it's nothing any of us would've asked for, but let's move through it and try to salvage what we can and enjoy our job. It's still a great place to work, still doing exhibitions, still doing what we love to do, it's just that it's a new reality now. But it took a while for some people to work through that. Everybody had to work through that.

Tewes: Right. So some other challenges that you faced at the Getty, particularly in the mid-2000s with a few things happening at the same time: there was a California attorney-general investigation of funds at the Getty; there was the Italian antiquities scandal, which I want to talk a bit about; and there was also some leadership issues. I'm wondering how you thought about that moment in your tenure as a whole, and then maybe specifically thinking about some of those challenges.

Price: Yeah. Well, the Barry Munitz and Jill Murphy era was hard for many reasons. It was a new position that Jill held as the chief of staff, I think was her title, and what exactly was that position responsible for? It was at arms' length, too, because Jill and Barry were in the head of the Trust, and the Museum was an independent entity. But they wielded a great deal of power and kind of like the current political situation that we're going right now with the recent election and four years under [Donald J.] Trump's leadership is that, you know, you question some of their leadership decisions and some of the style about with which they went about their work. There were some difficult situations that we all had to grapple with.

I was sheltered from it a lot by more senior people in the Museum that were confronted with it more, on a more daily basis, like management style clashes. But, yeah, I came face-to-face with it, especially in the area of graphic design, signage design, and promotional graphics, because the Communications team were right there literally in the same physical space as Jill Murphy and Barry Munitz, and people in senior positions always have an interest in graphic design. It's a reflection of the institution's brand and messaging, so I mean rightly, they should have an interest in it, but it did bring us into meetings together with myself and Jill and people on the Communications team. It was a time when we were working on the redesign of the Villa with Machado Silvetti and Marion True. It was the first redesign of the Villa, and there were some power plays that worked through the system. Signage, for whatever reason, was always a bit of a hot potato, like where should it report? It was in the Design Department for number of years, it's been in the Facilities Department, it's been in the Communications Department. It was, at that time, in my department, but was wrestled away from me. And then some of the work that we had done, which was already well on its way to being realized
for the Villa, was undone. Jill was a prime mover behind that, so that created some hard feelings.

I remember being in meetings with her when there was just no real reasoning or adult conversation about what was unfolding and why things were being done a certain way. It was very personal and very—you know, not with any real good, underlying rationale for doing things. It seemed hurtful or spiteful or just because she had the power to make something happen, it going to happen that way. That was not just my relationship Jill, but it was a situation that played out across the Trust. It was not a happy time. We tried to minimize the amount of contact.

I mean, there was a silver lining to, I guess, them—Jill and others in the Communication having an interest in signage, that in retrospect, the fact that they took that group of people and that set of responsibilities and moved it to an area that was closer to them removed the friction. So even though it was a loss and I wasn't happy with the outcome, because I thought some of the design decisions that were being made were not the best for the solution, it got done, you know? It was just differently from the way that I would've directed the solution. But there was a loss of staff and a loss of opportunity, a loss of cohesiveness with the signage then being a separate thing from the rest of the design work that was underway for the Villa. I mean, we still had a role in it and continued to have some involvement. Looking at it from the outside, you would never know that it had been fraught with so much strife to get it finished. I mean, "How complicated can a sign on the wall be," one would say, but there are a lot of decisions and a lot of work that goes to getting it done like anything in life.

Funny with Barry, he was kind of a snazzy dresser and his favorite color was purple. He had a purple vehicle, and he often wore clothes that were purple or had purple accents. We were redoing some signs at the Getty Center, adding some fairly substantial pylons to address some reoccurring problems for Visitor Services. One of the problems for visitors was finding the café, because when you stood on in the campus of the Getty Center and looked around, all the buildings look more or less the same, and there was nothing that was distinguishing about where to go to eat. For a person that was posted at the front door of the Museum, they are asked this question hundreds of times a day like, "Where do I go to eat?" "It's over there," and they'd have to describe, "See that tree, and you would see the top of a set of stairs and you go over there and go down those stairs and there's a glass wall and you go through these." It was not obvious that that was the food building. So we ended up erecting a big pylon with this international symbol for food like a fork and a knife on a plate so that people could just point at, "See that big sign? Go down the stairs there." So it was addressing a practical problem.
But we had proposed that that sign be green, because there was a whole set of color systems at the Getty. Blue was for general information, so Visitor Services people had blue vests, and the map and guide to the site was blue. The Getty Center was on the hilltop and it was sky—you know the white buildings were seen against blue sky, so it made sense. At the Villa, terracotta was the color for the wayfinding, because of the terracotta roofs of the Villa, and so the map and guide there was terracotta. The website would have mirrored that, too, blue and terracotta as the two signature colors for the site. So blue and terracotta were kind of reserved for a certain function. We had purple for the store, and I think that was based on a set of shopping bags that were done when the Getty Center first opened, that the biggest shopping bag was purple, and so that kind of became, by default, the color of the store. The GettyGuide system was bright red, so that color was set aside, and so on. We wanted to pick colors that didn't crossover to other micro-identities and so we had suggested green for the food sign, you know, salads and food. It could work, maybe not your first choice—or orange, I think, was our second choice. But it ended up being a purple sign, because Barry said so, because that was his favorite color. We said, "But purple is the color for the store." "Well, I don't care, just make it purple, I like purple." Sometimes there were decisions that were made that weren't based on rational approach, but it was just a personal dictate. That was what life was like under Barry and Jill, was sometimes not rational.

And they got the institution into some trouble, you know, as you mentioned with the [California] Attorney General investigation. So it had ramifications for the whole institution for a while of being on super best behavior, being audited, and wanting to not have anything that was calling our not-for-profit status into question through no doing of our own, but because of the dealings of Barry and his right-hand person, Jill.

You also mentioned about the antiquity scandals. I mentioned before that working with Marion True and her team was some of the most enjoyable time I ever had at my work at the Getty, that Marion had an infectious laugh and really enjoyed working in teamwork. She enjoyed the design process. We laughed a lot together. We got to travel together and look at museums, so I got to know Marion and her team well. She was an admirer of design. We liked each other as people. Karol White and Janet Grossman, who were her—Mary Hart, as well—key curatorial people, all had good working relationships with Marion largely. She was a force to be reckoned with. I've learned over the years that she was a small-town girl, and came from a simple life, simple beginnings, and had risen through the ranks in the museum world to a position of some power and notoriety. And a woman in a position of power in those days was not typical. The antiquities field, like many fields, was largely a male field, so I've got to give Marion credit for having accomplished that in her career from simple beginnings. I guess we had that as a commonality,
because I came from simple beginnings, too. Well, we never really talked much about it. It's only in retrospect that I learned this.

And Marion ended up, from my perspective, being a scapegoat for some of the Museum’s problems of acquiring things. And times changed from the eighties and the nineties to where we were at that moment in time in the like mid-2000s, where antiquities and the whole policy around acquiring antiquities had evolved. It was somewhat unfair, I think, to use modern-day standards to go back twenty years and relitigate the acquisition of certain objects. These objects had been acquired not by Marion as an individual, but by the institution, so there were people more senior than Marion that were part of that decision-making process right up to the board trustees' level. So the fact that she ended up being the one who was in court I thought was unfair. The Getty, of course, paid for her lawyers, but she was driven out of that position. I don't really know all the ins and outs of the proceedings and how it really ended up unfolding, but I felt very badly for Marion ending up in the situation that she was, especially having worked so hard on the redesign of the Villa. It was right when the Villa was reopening that all came crashing down, and Marion wasn't able to be there to be in the spotlight and get credit for a work well done.

Now, objects did get returned to other countries. It wasn't only the Getty; you know, the Met returned objects. Museums all around the world were—there was a reckoning of objects that had been gotten through maybe not the most reputable dealers and maybe there wasn't the best provenance for the objects and maybe the dealers weren't representing them fairly. But the institutions, too, were acquiring these things without a good history, like a good history of how that object came into the marketplace. So the Getty, being a new museum who acquired most of these things in the late part of the twentieth century, had a larger share than maybe some other institutions did of these objects that came into the collection through maybe some questionable routes.

But that was all resolved over time and negotiated with the countries that those objects were originated from. I think the Getty did a good job ultimately of brokering deals with those countries and mending relationships so that now in 2020, with counterparts in Italy, we do have good relationships of borrowing objects and showing objects and sharing expertise and sending objects back in better condition than they were brought to us, because of conservation work that was done or a better seismic mount for presenting that object, and then the object would go back with the mount to the little regional museum in Italy or Sicily or wherever. So there's some largesse that the Getty provides to the art community, especially in the antiquities field, where it’s got a place and some importance in stature in the world for doing good work, whether it’s in world heritage sites or in museum work.
Most of the water is under the bridge now. It was a dark chapter, and some star objects from the collection were returned to the countries that they were removed from. And Marion was—it is unfortunate that her career took such a huge hit because of all of that business. It's a complicated story. Anybody can read about it in the newspaper articles and the magazine articles. I still keep in touch with Marion, and she's okay and still knows how to laugh, so she didn't—she came out all right.

That's good to hear. You've mentioned you had actually been deposed by the Italian government in this case. Am I remembering that—

No, no, no. I must've misspoke. I was deposed once for a small trip-and-injury incident that happened after the Getty Center opened. It was crowded conditions, and the Getty being a wealthy institution, there are some predatory people out there, whether it's Americans with Disability Act litigation or trip-and-fall situations, and so I was deposed about this trip-and-fall incident.

Ah, sorry, for my misunderstanding. [laughs]

That's all right. I think it was resolved in the Getty's favor, that incident, because we really didn't have any fault. Yeah. As I said, there are sometimes—you can see with camera footage, security camera footage of visitors kind of casing a situation and intentionally falling and then bringing the lawsuits. You had to be good about the way you were designing things and making them as safe as possible for visitors to circulate around, because we didn't want people tripping and falling, injuring themselves and/or catching their sleeve on something protruding and tearing their clothes or something. I mean, who wants somebody to have a bad day visiting the Museum? So we did our utmost to make things safe, but there are curbs and parking meters, and who hasn't been walking around with their GPS turned on and looking at that instead of looking at where they're going and stumbled over a curb or walked into a light post? Gosh I've done it, it's embarrassing, and goose egg hurtful. [laughs] But those things happen as you're navigating the world, and we've just got to make it as safe a place to navigate as possible. But when you've got pedestals in the middle of the gallery and people walking around them, sometimes people bump into stuff.

That's a good point. Well, I think that's a good stopping place for us today. Is there anything you'd like to add on to anything we discussed or haven't yet touched on?

Um, no, I think I'm good.
Tewes: Sounds good, all right. Thank you, Merritt.

Price: All right, next time.
Tewes: This is the sixth interview with Merritt Price for the Getty Trust Oral History Project in association with the Oral History Center at UC [University of California], Berkeley. This remote interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on November 19, 2020, and Mr. Price joins me in this interview from Palm Desert, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So, Merritt, thank you so much for joining me for a sixth session here.

Price: When we left off last time, we were speaking about some of the challenges the Getty has faced over the years. And in keeping with that theme, I suppose, I wanted to start today thinking about what impact COVID-19 has had on the Getty as a whole and on the Design Department in particular.

Price: Mm-hm. Well, the COVID-19 is kind of interwoven with my decision to retire from the Getty and a planned retirement date, so I think I'll address those two together, if I may. I'm just going to back up and speak about my decision to retire first so that it kind of flows as a chronological story or chapter.

Price: I think I mentioned we have a twelve-year-old son—or at least he was a twelve-year-old at the time—and middle school begins at that age. It was a time when we, as a family, were deciding what to do for middle school and weren't thrilled with the prospects of LAUSD, Los Angeles Unified School District, possibilities of middle school and high school, traffic and getting—commuting to schools, pick up, drop off, it just—and the quality of the education, we were not thrilled about the prospects. So we were looking at other opportunities, and we're familiar with the desert communities, because of having some vacation property out there, and that was a retirement goal was to retire to the desert communities: Palm Springs, specifically Palm Desert. We cast our eyes there to see about schools that might be a good fit and found one and ended up actually not that school but another school—that's another story. And so that precipitated a relocation plan to Palm Desert.

Price: Of course, it's kind of young for me to be retiring, because I'm only sixty now, and when I announced my retirement, I was fifty-nine. I left on very good terms from the Getty, that I gave them a super long notice, a nine-, ten-month notice, because I knew it would take time to recruit and fill my position and that they appreciated that continuity and the opportunity to have some overlap time with the person that would fill my role. It was a very leisurely exit with a lot of forewarning and people on board with that as a strategy. It gave me the opportunity, too, to really spend time with my staff, transferring responsibilities with my boss, also talking about who's responsible for what and moving some files into other people's hands, and attending lots of
meetings where I was able to wean myself off of projects and responsibilities and put other people into the foreground taking on responsibilities. That was all very, very good, in terms of succession planning and transfer of responsibilities, and gave everybody a lot of time to warm up to the idea.

My planned retirement date was May. I had given my notice in July the prior year, and then on Friday, March the thirteenth, we were asked to go home and possibly come back to work the following week to wrap anything up, clean anything up that we might need, because of the spreading COVID. We had seen the writing on the wall within the Department and had really worked hard that week to get work done, package up files, move work onto servers that could be accessed remotely. Our entire department a few years ago moved to having laptops as their principal computer with larger-scale monitors on their desks so that we had the flexibility of already telecommuting, which some people did, and moving your laptop from the Getty Center to the Getty Villa so that you didn't have any file lost and what have you. I had been telecommuting two days a week since August through March, because of my relocation to the desert. My family moved in the summer. I was in three days at the Getty, a day telecommuting, and then the next three days in Palm Desert for a number of months. But that day in March, we all went home and I ended up coming to Palm Desert, and we have never been back really since then. And so here we are in November of the next year. We thought that it would be days or weeks at most, and so we picked up and left. Now people have gone back to pick up a couple of files or a tablet or get their bigger screen delivered to their home, but we started working remotely.

That was a lot of work just to move your work into Zoom meetings, as we're all so familiar with now, and adjusting plans for the exhibition schedule for: were we going to be reopening in June, were we going to be reopening in July? And so we were re-doing work and getting ahead of the game on some projects, assuming that we'd be back at work in the summer, let's say. Then, it got pushed to September/October as a possible reopening date, which meant a lot of changes, again, to the exhibition schedule—dealing with international loans, and changing opening and closing dates—and a whole ripple effect of how that affected things down the road, because our exhibition schedule is planned out for like five or more years.

Also, because of the Black Lives Matter movement and race issues across the country and specifically in Los Angeles, there was a board decision to want to recognize that through the exhibition program. So a new idea had been established in the summer to engage a guest curator who had been working with photographers, local LA [Los Angeles] photographers dealing with issues of racial justice and so on, to do a custom exhibition that would be there when we reopened to the public. That was a fast-paced project and all done remotely. There were one or two visits to the site by my staff to do some
measurements and then take some photographs, but it was all done remotely. So that exhibition plan was developed over the summer and put in place. The whole review process was done remotely. There were some minimal work crews on site from the Preparations Department and Facilities Department, who did some of the work—painting walls and some electrical work and what have you.

But we also, then, were turning our attention to reopening with physical distancing and watching the health guidelines for our classification of facility, which is kind of a mixed use. Because, as well as it falling into category of museums, zoos, and theaters, we also have a restaurant facility and a retail facility, so there were different sets of regulations that needed to be reviewed and understood how they would apply to the Getty's campuses. Oh, we also needed to change our system for visitors arriving at the site, at the Getty Center where people were going to have to make reservations. That was a familiar thing, because people need to make reservations for the [Getty] Villa visit.

We had decided initially that we would open the Villa first, because it's a smaller campus and we already had a reservation system in place, so it was familiar operational work for the frontline staff and ticketing and what have you. And maybe have the Villa open for a few weeks to see how our physical distancing plan for one-way-through pathways, additional signage and cues, temperature checking, maintaining a reduced number of visitors in the spaces. We assumed that we were going to be opening with like 25 percent of our normal attendance and then ramping up from there as regulations would allow and as we felt comfortable. And then the Getty Center was going to open a couple of weeks following, and we were proposing a phased approach to first opening the big special exhibitions. So the Michelangelo: [Mind of the Master] show was extended at the Getty Center, and we wanted to maximize visiting of that. We know that the Impressionist galleries are popular as a destination, so that was also on the checklist of things to open first. The garden and architecture is always appealing at both sites, and that would provide an opportunity for visitors to visit and not go inside, to just visit the site, so that was a good thing. Fairly easy at both sites to introduce one-way-through pathways, as well.

And then it was this exhibition that I just mentioned, which was titled Photo Flux: [Unshuttering Los Angeles], and it's just idling and waiting to open when the Getty Center reopens. Following that, there was another international loan show about Dora Maar, a photographer that was at the Tate [Modern] and ready to be de-installed and shipped, and it's frozen in place there until everybody in the world knew what the next step was going to be. At the Villa, the Mesopotamia: [Civilization Begins] exhibition, which was a big loan show from the Louvre was going to open actually the next week after
we closed in March, so that never happened. It was ready to go and then just went dark. We had to negotiate with the Louvre that we could keep it in place and ensure that it was safe, extend agreements for insurance and all of those kinds of logistical things.

There were things that needed to be maintained, there were daily walk-throughs of security, conservation people going to review the galleries to make sure systems were working, things were safe and in their place. The grounds needed to be maintained so that they didn't turn into jungles. Some of the garden areas were left to go—not fallow, but just unplanted and with seasonal things, so that was a change for the Grounds crew. We relied heavily on our planning on people from the Facilities Department: Steve Hutchison, who's the principal fellow who helps deliver signage on the site and—oh, I'm blanking on her name, that's sad—Neville is her last name, Naomi Neville, who's the campus architect, were kind of our eyes on the ground, because they were reporting to work every day and taking photographs and helping us with our deployment plans for the myriad of signs and stanchions and dots that would go on the ground to indicate how far to stay apart and messaging about wearing a mask, and so on. What the options were for your visit that day, how we were keeping you safe, and the cleaning protocols that were in place, and encouraging people to use stairs instead of elevators. Just it was a long list of things that needed to be considered.

I struck a team of designers—I think there were five from my team—who were working on preparing plans for reopening. And the Getty, as a whole, developed a task force at the most senior level, and then within other parts of the organization there were various subcommittees: one to do with the visitor experience, one to do with communication, one to do with logistical issues, and so on. So all of these subcommittees met. The Design team was on a number of those committees, and I provided leadership to a couple of the efforts showing what the possible routes and plans would be for reopening with diagrams and some high-level thinking about like what our priorities were going to be, and synthesizing a lot of the conversations that were being held with Security staff and Operations staff and Visitor Services staff to hold into a cohesive, strategic plan, as well as the detailed plan for signage deployment and staff deployment, where volunteers might be standing and where security officers would stand, and so on. Buttons and T-shirts that would have people's names. You know, because of masks, you wouldn't see a person smiling, and if you were relying on lip reading, you couldn't see their lips. There were conversations, too, in those granular levels, like, Wouldn't people be wearing shields instead of masks, or, How would we have that kind of friendly face forward with the engagement with our visitors? There were lots of different avenues of conversation that initially were quite pressured, because we had like a two-month horizon for when we were going to be reopening and then it was shifted off a month, so we had more time to more
fully consider the plans. We had to order a lot of stanchions and sign holders and fixtures to support everything that we were planning on doing.

And then one thing led to another, where the Getty took the decision to not reopen until January, and I think that's still probably the current plan, although things continue to stay level in terms of the spread, community spread. At this point, we couldn't even if we wanted—if the Getty wanted to open, they couldn't, because it's the tier that it's in in California prohibits that kind of facility from opening to the public.

So we laid out plans, worked a lot with Richard Rand from the Collections area to talk about priorities of what would be on view. Carolyn Marsden-Smith, the head of Exhibitions, was intimately involved in the effort. John Giurini [from Public Affairs] was a key person in the work of how we were going to communicate. Maureen McGlynn and others in the Communications Department, too, making updates to the website and making clearer what the visiting protocols would be and how we were doing our utmost to make sure that the visit was both safe and enjoyable. Right from first thought of, Would I visit the museum; and then checking on the website, making a reservation; tracking systems that needed to be established for if there was a COVID case on site, then you'd have to do the follow-up with visitors who were there that day to let them know that there had been a case identified. There was so much to think through, all the procedural things, as well as changes in the physical space.

So those plans were laid in place. I made the presentation to subgroups and Museum teams, Trust teams up to the senior management level. Gosh, I could've done that presentation in my sleep, because I had made it so many times, and it had been updated and changed and dates changed. And then the Getty Center was going to be open before the Getty Villa to maximize visitorship of the Michelangelo show, and things kept jockeying a little bit, in terms of the order. But we had approached the whole problem as developing a kit of parts to solve problems of different kinds of signs. We were making them in multiples so that they could be deployed fairly quickly, and assume that our best-laid plans would probably need some adjustments and refinement.

When my last week came up, we were just moving to establish some Operations teams of how it would work when we were actually up and open to the public, and meeting in the morning, meeting in the afternoon, making adjustments to pathways or sign deployment or procedural things with frontline staff, like how to resolve disputes. If they encounter somebody that's not wearing a mask as requested, then what do you do? There was a lot of
training that was just being set up, as well, for what the scripts would be for different scenarios they might be encountering.

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We had some advanced knowledge from other museums that had already opened on issues that they have been encountering. The Huntington [Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens] opened and had some feedback. The Petersen Automotive Museum had opened, and so we got feedback from them. The Cleveland Museum of Art opened early in the summer, and so they had feedback about the temperature-checking technology that they were using for their facility, and we were friends with them already, because we had worked so closely together for the Michelangelo exhibition. So we had lots of feelers out with other institutions, how they were dealing with the problem. One of my peers, the head of Design from the Boston Museum of Fine Art, set up an every-other-week Zoom meeting with heads of design from across the country and Canada. That was an interesting get-together that had never really happened before with that regularity of heads of design meeting and discussing issues of common interest. Initially it was all about COVID reopening plans, but as the summer went by, it turned into a conversation of that was broader and issues that we were all dealing with just more generally designed for art museums—it was principally art museums that were in this group—and they continued to meet.

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Some good things happened as a result of COVID, of realizing that the telecommuting could really work and provide staff with more flexibility of working from home, working in the office, and made people kind of reevaluate the future of work generally. It opened doors like this and set up some conversations with people where you could step back and meet some colleagues that you didn't have a conversation with before. And there was a lot of research going on, too, of people just watching feeds on LinkedIn or news on how other cultural institutions were faring with reopening.

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Right towards the end, I also shared this presentation of the Getty's preparation and plans with other heads of security and heads of operations from Southern California museums. So [Robert] Bob Combs, who’s the head of Security, has a regular meeting with heads of security from across the Southland. So that was an opportunity to share with them what we were planning on doing. It was an interesting, busy time and a good chapter, in a way, to really coalesce as an institution around this problem-solving effort, using technology differently than we had before with remote meetings. It gave to the Design Department—put a spotlight on them, because our presentation materials that were used in the Zoom meetings was a focal point of the discussion. It helped people to get down to brass tacks and really understand some of the nitty-gritty of how it might work and give something concrete for people to push back against and fit their plans into.
As I said, we were taking on bits and pieces of other subcommittees' presentations and integrating it into more of an executive summary that we would be sharing with the President's Office and board members and so on. Yeah. So I had a lot of airtime, as it were, with my colleagues and more senior people at the institution over the summer months preparing for the reopening.

I think it was good for the Design Department to really show that it's—some people don't understand fully what we do, even to this day. They think about us picking colors and doing labels, but it's a bigger, more in-depth problem-solving kind of expertise that we have, and so that came through pretty clear. And our communication ability through drawings and spoken, like an oral presentation, were highlighted through the summer.

That all happened over a period of months, and the hiring freeze was lifted. My replacement was hired and started in job on Labor Day, just after Labor Day, and we spent like a month together of Zoom meetings with staff. We actually walked the site together. I had to go back to the Studio to pack up some boxes and return my badge and keys and computer equipment, so that was an opportunity to meet face-to-face and walk around the Studio—physically distanced, of course—walk around the galleries and talk about some of the challenges at the Getty Center. Then, one of my senior staff, Amanda Ramirez, did the same with Jessica over at the Villa, so it was a good baton pass—to use an analogy—in that month of September: to be in meetings together, get to know the staff through some shared introductory meetings. I couldn't really imagine what this would be like to start a job under those circumstances without even meeting any of your new reports face-to-face. It's such a strange situation.

Certainly unique.

Yeah.

For the record, we should say: who is your successor as head of the Department?

Oh, I've wiped my memory banks; my God, I'm embarrassed. Um—you're going to have to erase this part of the—[laughs]
Tewes: We can come back to it, no worries. [laughs] Well, I'm interested in what your role was in—

Price: It's Jessica Harden, sorry. My apologies, Jessica. Jessica Harden, and she came to us from Texas from the art museum there.

Tewes: Excellent.

Price: Yeah, Dallas Museum of Art.

Tewes: What were you looking for in a successor to keep the Department moving on?

Price: Well, I was not doing the recruiting. It was my boss, Carolyn, who did the recruiting, and senior team at the Museum did the final interviews. There was a courtesy interview with me just to talk about the Department, how it's organized, and the staff that the new person would be taking on, so yeah. I wasn't actively involved in the recruiting. But I think she was an excellent choice, a really good fit, full of energy, talented, smart, thoughtful, a good people person, yeah, so ticks all the boxes. It made me feel really comfortable and confident in turning over the reins having had that opportunity to spend a month together working shoulder-to-shoulder virtually.

Tewes: Yes, as it were.

Price: Yeah.

Tewes: I want to back up for just moment. You mentioned something really interesting in regards to remote work, because I think from my conversations with you, I have taken away that you've always felt that it's very important to be near the space and walk through the galleries, do your mock-ups. So what has working remotely had done to the process, the design process you have all been doing?

Price: Right. Well, I've wondered about that, too, moving forward, that so much of the ease of being able to do the COVID reopening planning work relied on myself, in large part, but then other people who have been on staff for a long time, knowing the spaces so intimately that you don't even really have to be there to imagine. Like you stand in a room and know what's on that wall and know where that doorway is and how it leads into the next space and where the signs are and where the—– we do have good drawn records on what's where
in the facility—so you can imagine it by closing your eyes and just walking through the spaces in your mind. Now, much more difficult for people who don't have that experience with the spaces over the period of time that we've had. It relied a lot on just past knowledge and experience and knowing where to find drawings, what files to bring forward as reference material. Even the planning effort for picking colors for some upcoming exhibitions, since we weren't able to go in person and look at color swatches in the galleries with the lighting conditions, one or two of the projects we really relied heavily on past decisions. Now, I wouldn't have liked that to be the case for a long time moving forward, but it was certainly a good way to bridge.

We were making decisions for an upcoming exhibition at the Villa, and we looked back on the history of several years of exhibitions at the Villa—similar shows, similar media, what colors had been used. [We] had good photographs of those exhibitions, so with our Curatorial colleagues and Exhibition colleagues, we could, through sharing some of those photographic images, conjure up a memory of what those colors were like—photos never do justice to color—and make decisions just based on past decisions. How that those kinds of things might work moving forward is difficult to imagine if we can't get together in person to see. You know, we're dealing with real, tangible objects in space, so to not be able to see them in the conditions and make some fine-tuning decisions might be very challenging.

It was interesting with just talking to Jessica Harden, my successor, and thinking on why so many people that are in design and museums stay in it and like or love it. It's because of the teamwork, it's because of the working together in a collective, it's because of being in a physical site where you can see visitors interacting with the things that you've made. So those are all very visceral kind of experiential things that is the reason why people do it. Now, most of the people that I've worked with—and myself included—could make a lot more money working in private industry or for an ad agency or a similar skillset applied to a different end product. But working in a not-for-profit and in an art museum context, it just has all of these other tangible benefits from a social kind of perspective of what your colleagues are like, what you hold dear, and that work of getting together with people. To imagine that all just being done remotely would be—it's hard to imagine it. It doesn't have all the same payoff, as it were.

Certainly we're not quite sure what all of these challenges will bring. [laughs]

Yeah, you know, the Getty had already embarked on a plan with an outside group to do a twenty-year look into the future of facility requirements. And so we already gone quite a long way down that path, and then with the COVID entering into the equation, it did provoke some questions about remote
working and whether anything can be gained from this experience to reduce the desire for office space, work space, and was there really an opportunity to really change the approach to have shared workspaces, and maybe would we—where we're going to have to have workspaces that were more physically separated with screens and shields, who knew what? So that question was put out there, like whether remote working could be a thing that was a bigger part of work life in the future.

The Getty was really good about recognizing some of the challenges of remote working, especially for parents, people with school-age children, and needing to be teaching—be at home with your kids at the same time as trying to do your work, and providing some relief and some extra financial support to help people with that life equation. Recognizing that people were using their mobile devices and home printers and needing to buy supplies, that there were cash stipends and things provided to staff to help them get everything up at home to continue to do their work. I know from conversations with lots of other department heads there was a big effort to just do social activities online with your department, with other departments so that people who, all of a sudden, were dealing with that loss of that regular contact with their workmates to kind of fill that void in a way. I know there were lots of reading groups and kind of coffee check-in opportunities. All of the graduate interns left and had to finish out their internships remotely, so that was challenging to have sendoffs for them. Our graduate intern had to return to India, so that was a challenge to book flights and deal with some potential impacts to her visa and getting back to India in early September when air travel was not easy. So we had a virtual send-off for Sudha. Yeah, there is just a lot to grapple with.

Well speaking—

Yeah. It was a peculiar send-off for me, too, with a Zoom farewell, as opposed to—after twenty-five years, I was really looking forward to a good party and some facetime with people and to have that—it was a nice event. People really went above and beyond to program a nice event and have some nice parting gifts and nice speeches and things, but it's not the same as being there in person when you're doing it with a lot of little boxes on the screen in front of you.

Yeah, that was what I was going to ask you, so thank you for reading my mind. It's certainly an interesting time to be leaving the Getty.

Yeah. Well, I do hope to go back if things normalize and be able to have some in-person goodbyes with some people.
Tewes: That would be nice. Switching gears here a little bit, I want to talk about some of the most significant changes you've seen at the Getty in your twenty-five years with the organization. In particular, I just want to note for everyone that the Department has changed names a few times. [laughs] First, Exhibition Design, and I think around 2008 it became Design, and now we're moving towards Museum Design.

Price: That's right.

Tewes: Yes, but other than that important change, is there anything that stands out to you as significant changes—be it leadership or people or procedures or anything?

Price: Yeah. So the Department name was something that, as I said in an earlier interview, that it was realized even during the recruiting for my position that there was more than just exhibitions that we'll be designing. It was galleries, signage for the site, public spaces, and all of the creature comforts for both staffs and visitors in public spaces and systems of how things work. And through the COVID work—again, being the people who can visualize and put together a cogent presentation on what integrated solutions for a problem and moving people through visitor experience—that it's more than just exhibition design. I thought that that was always a misnomer and too narrow of a focus and campaigned to have a broader name. Just simple Design, because we were designing exhibitions, we were designing souvenir product, we were designing signs, we were designing the visitor experience, we were designing street banners that would promote an exhibition, so it was much broader than—and all of the printed ephemera, maps and guides and what have you. It's much broader than exhibition design, per se.

So Design was a good fit; however, in a big institution like the Getty, there are other areas of design. There's always a little bit of friction, because there's publication design that's doing the books. There're the designers in the communication design area that are doing some broader messaging and advertisements, annual reports and invitations and things for Getty Medal Dinner, or what have you. And then there are centers of design that are doing more with media planning or web design. There are lots of different departments that have a design component, if not a focus. So just being called design had, I guess, some room for confusion.

Over the years there have been, like any big institution, HR reviews of job families and job descriptions and pay scales and what have you. More recently, there was yet again another review of job families and looking at all of the design job families at the Getty, and were there areas of commonality
with how these jobs were described and what the levels of responsibility within the job families were? It was the initiative of the HR, the Trust HR group to rename our department just this last year. They suggested to go back to Exhibition Design, which neither myself or Carolyn Marsden-Smith were keen on. So we did some brainstorming on what other possible names would be—Experience Design is one—and settled on Museum Design. So that's a name that's in some official documentations and organization charts, but I think that the Department will continue on with their business cards, and what have you, just calling themselves Design. Yeah.

In an earlier iteration, I looked at different design associations, Industrial Designers' [Society of America] and the American Institute of Architects and looked at standard organizational structures for different professional groups. We adopted something very similar to what an architectural group would have, with progressions of designer one, two, three, four; associate would be in the architectural field; and then partner and how that might apply. We're actually adding an extra step, an extra rung on the ladder, as it were, in the design family so that there was more room for people to advance through a set of steps in the Department and provide some longevity within the Department, too. People naturally do move on in their career, so it provides openings, and you can promote people up through these different levels of responsibility.

Often in other industry, my job would have been called art director, but the use of the word "director" was reserved for program director, so that was a title that was not easy to apply to my position. It ended up being head of department, so head of Design with the Department. Earlier on, it was Design Department manager, which I thought sounded too administrative, so head of Design team, like a good middle place that it was both responsibility for the administrative aspects, as well as the creative aspect.

Any other changes at the Getty during your time here you feel that it's important to note?

Well, I think it's noteworthy that over the years I had five directors, five director changes in the Museum, and then there were some people in interim roles, as well. That's quite a lot of change over a twenty-five-year period. Now, [Timothy] Tim Potts has been there longer than most. Some of the earlier changes were closer together. The whole Museum would have to adjust to a new leader, a new style of working, new ways of communicating. I think that's noteworthy. There has been changes at the President's Office level, as well, which has made for internal reorganization. It's a young institution, so it's natural that you'd be trying on different sets of clothes and different organizational models, and it seems to have settled down over the last five-year or ten-year period to a little bit more stability.
Hm, other changes. Well, technology changes. The early days at the Getty, we were still doing a lot of things mechanically for graphics production with pasting things together and sending it out for camera work and using hand tools, which were fairly early in the nineties replaced by digital tools. A lot of that work was streamlined where mechanical preparation of art files was replaced by doing that on the computers. So yeah, early days, we were hiring people to do watercolor renderings and people to do hand drawings of illustrations of maps and illustrations of antiquity fragments and how it fit into a larger architectural context or something. Many of those people that we worked together with in traditional paper and pens, and what have you, ended up migrating to digital tools and evolved along with the rest of the world.

So there was technology change. I remember getting rid of our old waxing machine ten years ago. Like, Why are we holding on to this? We're never going to use this again. It's just a relic and kind of a curiosity that new staff would come in, people who are digitally native, and look at some of these things and like, "What is that?" [laughs] Even on site, there were payphones, and over the last few years, the pay phones were removed. I remember seeing like little children looking at that thing on the wall and asking their caregiver, "What is that thing?" because they've never seen a telephone. They're used to seeing a mobile device that's a little rectangle, not seeing something that tethered to the wall with a cable. There've been lots of technology change, rapid technology change during the twenty-five years that I've been at the Getty.

And speaking of which, you mentioned a waxing machine, and I'm not even sure what that is. Could you explain that? [laughs]

Well, let's say you were doing a paste-up of getting something camera ready for a brochure that would have illustrative parts, maybe some text that was in a certain area that you'd have a blue line like a grid, and you'd literally glue things on to a big card, a big piece of firm, stable board, and you would use wax. It was heater that had—you would roll it in and roll the wax on the back of your artwork, and it would stick it down and make it repositionable. You could wipe the wax off of the edges to make it clean so that it didn't show up when you took a camera picture of it. The waxing machine was used by graphic designers getting camera-ready art, yeah.

It certainly is a change. [laughs]

Yeah.
Tewes: Anything that you would like to mention—

Price: Very old-fashioned. Other changes?

Tewes: Right.

Price: Hm. Well, lots of changes in different heads of department that would have like an opportunity to establish a fresh relationship with a person. The Education Department being an important one, with Diane Brigham being in the role initially, and then a succession of people following with all different interests and different priorities and different leadership skills, different ways of organizing their departments. So me being in that position for such a long time was kind of an area of stability and predictability. We always had a welcoming approach to people new coming in to the institution and getting together with them, introducing who we are, what we do, what we could do together, and being a welcoming, supportive voice: "How can I help you achieve your goals in your area of responsibility?" I think I grew into that and was more comfortable in that as time passed by.

You know, Lisa Clements, who was not the current but a very recent head of the Education Department, and I struck up a really strong relationship, because she came from Disney and was used to working with creative people and so we kind of spoke the same language and enjoyed each others company. She was an agent of change in a department that was rooted in not changing. She wasn't coming from a museum education background, but from more of an entertainment education background, so there was some bumps along the path for Lisa in her position at the Getty. But I did whatever I could, whenever I could to support her projects and team up with her on the creative side of things, so we did a lot of fun work together. Much of it wasn't fully realized, but lots of it was.

The *Unshuttered* project was one in particular that became concrete. When the Villa was being renovated, we spearheaded this project called Roman Holidays, which was over the summer months when much of the Museum was closed. The Museum decided to ramp up the programming opportunities so that there was more for visitors to do out and about around the grounds, and not necessarily because half the galleries were closed. There was some fun things like a liver reading, which was a thing that ancient people did. They would slaughter a sheep and take out its liver and like you would read tea leaves, they would read the liver, and it would help to tell you something about an individual's future, so yeah. [laughs] Lisa and some of her staff found a place that could do an anatomically correct liver, something that to the touch
feel felt like a liver, that you could share with the visitors and do a full liver reading.

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We had lots of laughs together and did lots of fun and good work, including the Roman Holidays, which was—and that project was somewhat prototypical, too, about how we could bring a voice to Mr. Getty's love for antiquity and answer some of the visitors' frequently asked questions about Mr. Getty and the Villa. We were able to use the Roman Holidays initiative as a prototype for testing out some of these ideas and a little bit of extra money where certain quotes or certain fun facts were experimented with through the six-month Roman Holidays initiative. Some of that ended up being embedded in some permanent displays at the Villa that addressed some of these frequently asked questions about ancient times, as well as Mr. Getty's interest in the ancient world and why the Villa was created.

06-00:54:02

Tewes: Great. We've been talking about this throughout our conversations, but I'm interested in hearing from you how you think the field of exhibition design has developed over the years, because when you started, it was not a concrete area of study or even of work. So I would love to hear more about that from you.

06-00:54:28

Price: Yeah. Well, it's still, I think, a fairly rarified, like specialized niche that only a few people find their way into. I think technology has changed it a lot with mobile experiences and—like your mobile device and computers entering into the exhibition environment. So technology has helped to bring stories to life and to shift information into the palm of your hand. That's also expanded the possibilities of the kinds of people that you might be collaborating with. You might be working with some people that are more technologically grounded, dealing with virtual experiences or an augmented reality or virtual reality experience.

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We did some very interesting work early on, like in the early [two] thousands with the Annenberg School of Communication at USC [University of Southern California], who are doing experimental work with digitally-supported, nonlinear narratives. And putting the reader or the viewer or the person that was at the center of the experience more—giving them more power to decide what path to pick through a narrative and how to convey that in an environment—like not something that was just on a screen but was more immersive. I think there has been some interesting explorations about immersive environments and new technology that would transport you to a different place and a different time. We did this a little bit with the Mogau Grottoes, the Dunhuang Caves project, [Cave Temples of Dunhuang: Buddhist Art on China's Silk Road], where it was a virtual experience. Robert Checchi in Design was super excited about that and worked together with a company
called yU+co in Hollywood that was doing virtual experiences. And so we had one in the Dunhuang Caves project, where you could go into a theater in a round kind of environment and put on a headset and be transported to one of these caves that are in Mongolia.

I think technology changed the nature of the work, to some degree. However, at the end of the day, in an art museum—or a living history museum, you're dealing with artifacts, with tangible objects, and it's about creating a space where you can have a moment or series of moments with works of art, paintings, sculpture, decorative arts. And to allow people to get up close and inspecting closely while keeping the objects safe and giving people inroads into questioning and understanding the objects and experiencing them in a way that makes for an expanded understanding, just an enjoyable experience. I'm constantly amazed at people's lack of understanding of art museums and not even realizing that they're original works of arts on the wall, and many people assume they're reproductions and the originals are kept in a vault for safety reasons. So see, even that, just dispelling myths, I suppose.

I think the practice has evolved a lot. There's some interesting research work that a gentleman by the name of [John] Falk, who talks about visitor types, discussed at a lot of museum conferences in the late twentieth century, like in the nineties and the early [two] thousands, talking about visitor types. That got some traction in museums, that some people were experts in their own right and maybe the peers of the Curatorial team, who had a lot of expert knowledge that were coming with one set of expectations and one set of eyes for the art collection. But there are other people that were just coming to the Museum to relax and recharge, like we might do going to a garden. There are another set of visitors who are ambassadors or visitors from further afield whether it's family visiting from out of town or you are in a tour group, and so there's those kinds of visitors who are planners and concierge in a way for other people to experience this. So there was quite a lot of discussion about different visitor types and expectations and delivering things that would satisfy their interest and their needs, which is always a challenge with working in an art museum, because the directors are almost always from a curatorial background, and the stories, the things that are being presented in exhibitions and in the galleries are generated from the content experts, which are the curators like the experts in the field. And so to shift away from that expert aficionado focus, which is maybe 5 percent of our visitorship, to a broader offering is challenging to get resources put into expanding the visitor experience to address all of those different interests and abilities.

I think that's been an evolving part of the field, and something that I've always been keen on, is to talk about the visitor experience very broadly. Because visitors to the Getty as a destination are there because it's—it is not just that it's a destination, it's an architectural destination, it's a garden destination.
There are galleries there with artworks and there's a research institute, a conservation institute. There are many different audience segments that are coming to enjoy the Getty for different reasons and different seasons and different seasons of your life, too, that people have different needs. People are coming just for lunch, and that's a valid reason to be visiting the site. If you make that the thing that's guiding your efforts for making that visit as good as it can be, that has nothing to do with the work of art in the gallery, or maybe there's something in the restaurant menu that's derivative of an exhibition that's on view. We have a big French painting show, so maybe there's some French entrées on the menu that are connected somehow to what's on view in the galleries. I think that that's been the thing that's—you know, it's a richer experience and has more people thinking of it in broader terms than in earlier days where it was more of a curatorially driven exercise. I've got to say that the Getty and California is a little bit more broad and open-minded than some of the more established, say, like blue blood older institutions that really have deep roots in that being the core focus of the institution.

Tewes:
Speaking of which, what impact would you say the Getty has had on the field as a whole?

Price:
Uh-huh. Well, from the Design Department, I've had over 120 staff, volunteers, graduate interns over the years, and they've all gone on in their careers largely in the museum industry, museum work. So that notion of one-stop shopping for design under one roof in a department has traveled on with them to other institutions. Now it always hasn't taken root and changed the way another institution approaches the work of design, but in some instances, it has. And so I take some credit for the diaspora of museum design professionals that are out there working throughout the world and have been touched by the experience at the Getty Design Studio and the approach to work there.

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I think the Getty is also—it's not driven by box office receipts like many art museums are, it's not driven to have blockbuster shows that make the turnstiles tick and bring in cash to a box office; although that is one measure of success is how many people are in attendance. When you are comparing your attendance to other museums, because that's the industry measuring stick for success, is who's got the most popular exhibitions in a given year. Now the Getty as a destination, it's always having their exhibitions in the top ten nationally if not internationally, because of the number of visitors that were just coming to the Getty period. So our exhibitions were always very well attended, some more than others.

06-01:05:35

But because we weren't driven by box—aren't driven by box office receipts, we could do some exhibitions that were esoteric. And because the Getty is a
wealthy institution, we could do exhibitions that required extra resources, whether it was for the research or for covering insurance costs of traveling objects, and also is an institution that's respected on the world stage, so when the Getty comes knocking and asking for things, your request is taken seriously. It does allow people in the Museum to pursue big ideas, rare ideas, ideas that other institutions couldn't. Often, those more esoteric ideas, though, had that added challenge then of how to make them accessible to a regular Joe and Jane public. I think that's value added by the Design team and the interpretive planners and Education folks of how to make some of those story threads through an art exhibition accessible and interesting. So the Getty is known for that, kind of the added value of storytelling or accessibility, I'd say.

Tewes: And thinking more about your time at the Getty, I'm wondering what you would count as some of your greatest achievements there.

Price: Well, staying for as long as I did and keeping the Department's focus pretty consistent and organized in a way that I wanted to organize it with people delivering all facets of a project. There were pressures from other areas at the institution, leadership sometimes, like, "Well, why are we organized differently than some other Museum departments? Why don't we have an area that's focused on architectural design and another area focused on graphic design? It fits more neatly into boxes and makes it easier to recruit perhaps, because there are people with those subspecialties that are packaged and kind of ready to hit the ground running." But I've always thought that even though it adds some challenges for recruiting, it makes for a better end product, where—and a more interesting kind of reality for the designers, too, to have to grapple with the whole problem not just an aspect of the problem. I'm sorry; I've lost track of the question.

Tewes: Oh, just some of the achievements you hope you are leaving behind at the Getty.

Price: Yeah, so I think that, keeping it as an interdisciplinary design studio that delivers everything that's required for a project is an achievement. And one that I'm proud of having established and kept it running that way and defending it from sometimes when another area of the institution might have been interested in taking over the communication design aspect of an exhibition, doing the street banners or the promotional campaign. It's always together with my boss and the head of the Museum, the director were able to defend that and demonstrate that good work had been done and would continue to be done, and that there was some sense in keeping it under one roof.
I think many of the exhibitions from colleagues from around the world, especially to shows that were traveling to different venues, we would often get the feedback from the curators and other experts in different facets of design, whether it's Exhibitions folks or Registrar folks, conservators giving us congratulations for presentations really well done. We have a reputation of presenting things at the highest quality, and that's a worldwide reputation, I'd say. You see, we're always very conscious, too, about, as I said earlier, making things accessible, right down to practical things like decent-sized font dimension for labels and signs and what have you. We took that seriously, that, Why frustrate people if we're putting labels on the wall and making them difficult to read? Let's make them easy to read. Now, they could have even been bigger and satisfied even more people, but you do have to keep some things in balance and not have labels that are four times bigger than the artworks that they're talking about, for example.

I'm also just proud of the fact of really engaging with other professionals, whether it's the Visitor Services staff, all the frontline staff, the teachers, to let them know that they had a friend in Design and that we were interested in what they were interested in doing, so that we could be their partners in helping them achieve something they were trying to accomplish. That's the difference from, I guess, being territorial, and I think it's way better to be a friend than to be an enemy.

And I think that speaks to the way you've tried to integrate a lot of departments and really have this collaborative work happening at the campus, so—

Yeah. Now it's always a bit frustrating the few times when somebody from the press wants to talk to you about your role in a project that typically they want an individual, like the creative pursuit is seen as a solitary pursuit, and they want a star to stand up in front of the camera and take the credit. It's not as simple or sexy a story to talk about a team effort. I always found that frustrating that people didn't want to talk about team efforts, they want to talk about individualistic stars. I think that's particularly an American thing, too, about individual creativity and achievement. But work in a museum setting is best done in a very collaborative way.

As you've proven. What do you hope for the future of the Getty and of the now-Museum Design Department?

Well, I hope that they'll continue to do the strong work that we've been known to do and to continue to be a place that's welcoming to colleagues from across the institution and other museums that we collaborate with. I've seen other
jobs that I've had when after I've left, they have not been able to hold it together and not to keep it the same way that other forces have come to bear and pulled it apart or it degrades or changes and becomes something else. On one hand, things change, and there's not just one way to do it. But I do think that having a multidisciplinary department, it does develop an idea, an experiential idea and then does the promotion, does the experience, does the souvenir product, like from cradle to grave of an idea is sensible. It's particularly sensible for the curators or the content experts to tell that story to one creative group and then that creative group spins it out in all of the various applications. There's some efficiency there, I feel, and some cohesiveness then, too, in the way that the story is sold and told and packaged. I do really hope that that way of working persists, right? I think it's successful. But if it doesn't, somebody else has a different idea and wants to try out something different, power to them. I'm sure something good would come of that. There's always something that's gained and something that's lost; it's just different.

06-01:16:17
Tewes: Right. And what's next for you, Merritt?

06-01:16:22
Price: Well right now, I'm taking a sabbatical, I guess you could call it, where I've deferred projects on the personal front. We got married in 1994, and our wedding photographs are still in boxes, they never made into an album, so things as simple as that. Having a child in teenage years, so I'm excited about doing some more volunteer work and spending more time with him growing up, so that's a thing to do. COVID has kind of changed the opportunities and dynamic of that now. And see what comes my way. I've got a good reputation. I'm young, and I still want to work. I know my way around museums and would be open to doing some consulting work for museums, but not driven to do it. I'm just taking a little break right now, and I don't really have a concrete answer about what the next chapter might be. But I do want to do some giving back, some volunteering. There's lots of work to do out here in the Coachella Valley area, and especially now with people being on hard times, whether it's doing some volunteer work in a food bank or getting involved in some of the arts organizations out here. We'll see what comes. I don't really have a concrete thing. Travel.

06-01:18:17
Tewes: When that is possible, that sounds lovely. [laughs]

06-01:18:19
Price: Yeah. Fitness, yeah, just keeping in shape. I've been enjoying the weather, riding my bike and—

06-01:18:32
Tewes: Is there anything you'd to add from our many hours together that we haven't touched on or you'd like to add on?
Price: Hm. I feel that we've had a really full conversation, and I've shared my experience and story pretty fully. Sometimes gone over some of the same territory from a different angle as we've wound our way through the years, so I can't really think of anything that's left unsaid that's particularly noteworthy. Lots of details.

Tewes: Yes, we like the detail. [laughs] Well, thank you so much—

Price: People in museum design are very—it ruins you for a being regular museum visitor, because you go and you look at the baseboard molding and the lighting and the things in the corners and the details around the edge of the pedestal that you're just so observant about all the details that it's hard to peel all of that away and just focus on the subject matter that's being presented. It often takes like two visits, where one visit is to deal with all of the trappings of design and presenting things in a museum, and then another is just to enjoy the subject matter that's being shared with you. Once you're in the business, it kind of ruins you for life, or I guess maybe enhances your experience, is another way of thinking about it. It's just you're looking at it from so many different perspectives that are not even—most people aren't even aware of, right? I think that's the true compliment of good art museum design, is when people really don't even notice it, don't notice the design, because it's so integrated.

Tewes: I think that's a wonderful way to end. Thank you so much for your time, Merritt.

Price: Thank you.

[End of Interview]