



VERNON SWABACK
1940 -

Honored as 2017 Historymaker
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The following is an oral history interview with Vernon Swaback (**VS**) conducted by Diana M. Smith (**DS**) for the Historical League, and video-graphed by John Blake (**JB**) on September 17, 2018 at the Arizona Heritage Center in Tempe, Arizona.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.

DS Vernon Swaback, you are referred to as a renowned architect, a planner, and a visionary, agent of change. Your company, Swaback Partners, you are a founder, you're celebrating your 40th year. I think that deserves a major congratulations.

VS Thank you.

DS So, welcome to that milestone, certainly.

VS Thank you.

DS Let's talk a little bit about your life and how you got to enjoy 40 years of this kind of venture, especially in Scottsdale. You were born on Oak Park, Illinois, or just outside?

VS Yes. Just neighboring town.

DS Tell us a little bit about your family, what it was like to grow up back at that time in Chicago.

VS The thing I remember most about Chicago is that, in my life, as distinguished from today, is that technology was nowhere to be seen. The games we played were generally underneath porches where we'd dig holes and play marbles or play hide-n-seek, fly a kite. There was one big open square block which we called the prairie 'cause nothing had been built there and there was - you

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know, the highlight of our life was to get lost in the prairie and roast marshmallows or wieners or whatever. Obviously, it was a simpler time in that the distractions were few and the enjoyment was something that you had to create by yourself.

I walked to everything. I could walk to and from school, walk to all the stores, get some candy or walk to my doctor's appointments and so forth. The intensity of that time was that of my parents, both their commitment to fundamentalist Christian religion, but also the amazing amount of time they spent getting their children to music teachers and a variety of things. My brother and I were both trumpet players. My sister was a piano player and it was not an easy drive to take a son or daughter to wherever the best available teacher seemed to be. And so, there was a lot of what I consider now, they considered it to be just routine, but a lot of very sacrificial involvement.

We also lived in a - the five of us lived in a 1500 square foot house with one bathroom and I asked my 92-year-old sister recently, "Where did we all sleep?" I couldn't even remember. There were two bedrooms. My mother and father having one, my brother sleeping in a bed and I slept kind of in a crib behind a door. I remember that. And then there was a music room which had a pullout couch and my sister slept there. What's interesting about it is that we didn't have a fraction of what is today's luxury, you would - how they would be measured, but there was a joyful sense of family.

We were church goers and it was the time during the second World War. If you showed up at our church as a newcomer wearing a uniform of some kind, Navy or Army or whatever, unless you objected kicking and screaming, you would be at our house for lunch on that Sunday. Anyone who came in was - I mean, it was Sunday. It's so much more of an open society, you know. To go meet with one of my friends, I would go outside his house and just call his name, you know, up to the second or third floor and he would come out. There were no buttons to press. I remember it in a very warm and wonderful way. It's not something I want to go back to. I don't think you can really recreate things that are - what they are, just by circumstance. But it certainly was the basis for believing in family, believing in yourself, enjoying, you know? In the wintertime, you pulled up that shade and for the first time you saw this otherwise, kind of dirty place - now pure white. That was always very exciting.

DS Being in Chicago, of course, I take it you were downtown? You saw some of the Louis Sullivan architecture and you saw what was happening with architecture in the Chicago downtown area at least. When was your first recognition of anything to do with architecture?

VS It wasn't downtown, it was going the other direction to Oak Park, which was just west of where we lived and, without any argument, I remember looking at houses that transformed me. You know, and when you think about that, that's a pretty high calling if somebody can do that. Houses right in a line, and today if you were to visit Oak Park, you would see throngs of people doing the same thing. So that's the beginning of thinking about - I didn't know the name Frank

Lloyd Wright, but that's the beginning of thinking about the sort of achieving the impossible, while using the same materials, the same lot size, the same everything. And that's kind of the whole story of his life. But interesting about it, he wasn't a man who claimed some sort of magical powers. He just claimed that this is how nature would expect you to do it, you know?

DS And so, in these houses that you were looking at in the Oak Park area, did you pick up a piece of paper and a pencil and start drawing houses at that point?

VS I did. I did, and I remember very clearly, working away at it and then saying either out loud or to myself, the problem is that this doesn't mean anything. In high school, the only teacher I remember by name was a man named Eugene Jarvis. He gathered up from the University of Illinois, he gathered up the materials they were using in their architectural classes and he taught them to us in high school. And it was like, sort of like the Suzuki violin teaching. I mean, you don't have to be a certain age to learn a variety of things you might want to learn. But it was a very early notion. And he was in love with Frank Lloyd Wright. He had a quotation up at the front of the classroom. It said, "Remember a doctor can bury his mistakes, but an architect can only advise his clients to grow vines. - Frank Lloyd Wright." We sat on tall stools, every now and then one of us would fall over and he would always say, "I'm telling you; architecture is a very dangerous business." You know? As a consequence of his teaching us early, we'd enter these national competitions and we'd take all the first prizes, not because we knew something others didn't know, but we got there sooner. And that was my sense of - if you go by Frank Lloyd Wright's notion, it started when he was at birth, in a crib, you know? The influences from his mother.

DS So you took the architecture from the high school classes and in your own person that you were thinking about and wanting to do, you applied to the University of Illinois and in the School of Architecture or taking architecture there. What makes you leave or even want to leave the University of Illinois?

VS Well, remember I had these early images of Frank Lloyd Wright's work implanted at an early age. The step that made it closer to a reality for me is that Mayor Daley, Richard J. Daley, proclaimed Frank Lloyd Wright Day in Chicago. [date was September 11, 1956]. It was held at one of the major hotels and it was a very extensive show of his work. It was also the unveiling of his drawing for the Mile-High Building and as a curiosity, I have a photograph in my possession that somebody sent to me. I never remember it having been taken, but here is Mayor Daley, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Mile-High Building and there's this smiling teenager right in the middle of them. It's really quite amazing that I have this because I didn't know it was taken and I don't know who sent it to me. But, as a result of that, to go further, I met some of the people who were his apprentices and it was from them that I learned how one applied to have that distinction and so, they gave me a phone number and address for Taliesin in Wisconsin. And I remember writing a letter which, um, I've gotten quite good at ever since, that is trying to portray myself as

knowing something or desiring or being worthy of something, and I sent it in the morning and at noon the same day, I called Taliesin. I said, I have no faith that my letter will ever get there and probably be lost in the mail or whatever and I set a date to come up and be interviewed by Mr. Wright. That was sort of not music to my parents' ears. It was in the summer of 1957 and they drove me there. The only assurance they had is I told them it was very unlikely that I would ever be accepted. People weren't accepted all that often and so forth.

DS So you let your parents know that you've got an interview. The interview is here in Arizona?

VS No, it was in Wisconsin. It was the summer and Wright was always at Spring Green, Wisconsin during the summers.

DS Okay. What was your first impression of Spring Green?

VS A kind of a town that you couldn't tell it apart from any town in the area. There was nothing specific about it. They had this sign out front, you know, the Rotary Club welcomes you and the Kiwanis Club welcomes you and nine churches welcome you and all this kind of good stuff. And somehow or other during my first year there, I learned that Frank Lloyd Wright proposed to the town that they put underneath all this, "Oh Lord lead us into temptation." That just kind of is an indication of his playfulness.

DS So you end up actually being an apprentice at Taliesin? And you always talk about living in a tent, but tell us about your tent. How did you construct it? What did you construct it of? How big was it? Share with us physically what it's all about because I'm assuming that you had never slept in a tent before you arrived there.

VS Quite right. I arrived, late at night. Some family friends had picked me up at the train station and it, like I said, it looked like Brigadoon. I mean, all these buildings are all lit up. I mean, the roofs are like lanterns. I was met by two gentlemen, very nice, and they took me to a little place that was not much bigger than a single bed. It was up on a deck at Taliesin West and they said, "Tomorrow we'll take you out to where you will build your tent and that will be your new home." So, they took me out to a site that somebody else had already built. And it had a white canvas, sort of pyramidal roof and walls and it was all sort of torn and I had a hod of mortar with me. And they said, "You know, this is where you're going to live and, you know, as soon as you get it finished, you'll move in." Well, I moved in that night.

But the notion of - if I can kind of look back in hindsight - the notion of this being like hardship, like you did it 'cause you had to do it - it was more like the most luxurious way I have ever lived because the ceiling was not - it didn't stop at my tent. It was the starlit sky, the night light, the amazing atmospheric effects of sunsets and sunrises. Right next to me was a tent of a multi-

millionaire. I always point that out because, in the Taliesin way of life, you couldn't tell the difference of anybody's background. We had people of royal birth. We had people like me and I was told the only thing you need to bring to Taliesin is a hammer and a saw and a tuxedo. And that pretty much summarized our two kinds of involvements of working very hard, getting sweaty and dirty and then on Saturday and Sunday evenings, black tie dinners and our guests are sort of the hoi polloi of the Valley at the time, you know? People who came out here for the winters and that was wonderful, too, because we got to meet very distinguished people.

DS So, tell us a little bit more about these dinners and the happenings. Did you just sit around the dining room table and have dinner or was it more?

VS Well, they would always start in the living room and we would meet with very significant people that we wouldn't necessarily [have a chance to] meet with, like the founder of *Time/Life* and *Time*, and *Fortune*. One of the apprentices asked the founder, "Does *Life* magazine have integrity?" And he said, "About 80%." I don't know if you could get answers like that in any other place, and that was Henry Luce and his wife, Claire Booth Luce who were there. She would tell stories like when she was the ambassador to India. King Farook came to visit her in the evening and didn't seem to want to leave. And finally, she just said somehow, "You know, I've got to go to bed." And she tells the story that, after she left, one of her aides came up and said, "Do you know what he wanted? Do you know why he was here? He wanted a box of American toilet paper."

DS But I've also heard that Jimi Hendrix was out there.

VS Jimi Hendrix was there on a tour. I didn't have any connection with him other than looking out the window and saying, "Look who's there." But the other people were just, you know, Buckminster Fuller, who became a great friend. One night it was evening, and I was out in the kind of parking area and two Cadillacs pull up. One person gets out and he says, "Hi, I'm Mike Todd." I said, "Hi, I'm Vern Swaback." And he says, "Hi, this is Mrs. Todd." And I said, "Hello, Mrs. Todd." And the other car had her former husband with the children. Mike Todd kept calling them the, uh, the monsters, you know? Then we're in the drafting room with Mr. Wright and Mike Todd and Elizabeth Taylor had thrown a party for her husband - a birthday at Madison Square Garden... and by the way, Elizabeth Taylor was gorgeous. I didn't know who she was because I didn't go to movies. I always say I'm probably the most fascinating person she's ever met 'cause I'd be the only person who had no idea who she was.

But anyway, we were standing over this plan of, Baghdad and, what's interesting is that Mike Todd had his own area of being esteemed. Frank Lloyd Wright, you know, never the twain shall meet. So, Mr. Wright's talking about King Faisal and the design of the Baghdad Opera House and King Faisal said, "Mr. Wright, where do you want to put this?" And he said, "Well, I want it to be on this island at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers." He said the King

took his hand, put it on the map and said, "It's yours, Mr. Wright." Now, Mike Todd said, "You remember that little shrimp. We had dinner with him when we were over there." So, that's sort of, the reason he was there is that Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller had joined forces. Mike Todd had invented this thing called Todd AO, which was the first wide screen cinema. And he did a movie called "Around the World in 80 Days" which was a big blockbuster. But Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller were going to collaborate on a series of theaters to be built all over the country and it was kind of a funny thing because the bottom was all a great big massive stones --the way Wright would design and the top was one of Bucky's geodesic domes. Shortly thereafter, Mike Todd was in a plane crash and was killed and so all that fell through.

DS But, how else did you interact with Buckminster Fuller?

VS It was just magical. He visited Taliesin both in Wisconsin and in Arizona and we just kind of hit it off. For one thing, I would be the one to pick him up at the airport, so we'd get to talk there and, you know, talk later. And on one of our trips, he said, "I can't see what Frank sees in me. We're both so different." And they were. But in the year, I was born, 1939, the *Saturday Review* published Fuller's predictions for the future. And he had Wright commenting on them. The reason it was published in the magazine is he had written it for a book and the publisher left it out. But it's an interesting thing to read because he would say things like, "No change in the way of a man with a woman." Or he said that, "Manhattan would be called Radio City." A variety of things and so they just - they just appreciated each other. They had far more appreciation for each other than they had really any desire to understand each other.

DS So, after about 20 years working and staying at Taliesin, you begin your own company. What made you realize that that's what you needed to do?

VS Well, I had experienced at very close range, for the first 2 ½ years of my apprenticeship, working with Frank Lloyd Wright. If I were to criticize him, and especially Mrs. Wright, they probably thought that something would come along to make out of Taliesin whatever that something would. I don't think either of them ever had the slightest notion that it could continue the way it had been. In fact, Frank Lloyd Wright in the early formative years of the fellowship, which was started in 1932, told one of his friends who was a New York stockbroker, he said, "If the - if the foundation ..." You know, in 1948, he turned over all his earnings to a non-profit foundation, including everything he owned and everything that he would generate in the way of income in the future. Probably did things that I would think the tax codes now would probably get in the way of. But it was a legitimate thing that he did. And so he said to his friend, "If my foundation could ..." he called them his dependents, those of us who worked there, "If my foundation could provide for the life of my dependents for the next 50 years, that would be something that I would appreciate." And - it did.

But after that, and in fact, really when you are no longer with a master who is looked up to by everybody, no matter what their own thoughts are, the notion of sort of, competition between people just sets in. And even in ways that go beyond being helpful, being sort of destructive; and I left because I didn't see that getting any better.

As a result, when I was serving as chairman of the board, I actually was the one to make a motion to terminate what was called Taliesin Architects because they had created such a huge debt to the non-profit that, I just thought it was like a sitting duck for a - some kind of legal claim against it. So, combine two things. I never wanted to have my own firm and secondly, I had no reason to think I could. But I do have, like five written pages of every single step I was gonna take, every dollar I was gonna spend and so forth and so on. Beyond that level of planning, I would say something else just took over because to have dreamt that - I mean, I can remember wondering if there would still be an office in a year, you know? Whatever took over to create something that can very well function forever without me, and to have the blessings of something that wasn't the goal. It was a fallback because I had to leave the other [working under Frank Lloyd Wright], you know?

DS So you're an entrepreneur?

VS In hindsight. I never said to myself I was an entrepreneur.

DS But that's really the definition, in a sense, of an entrepreneur.

VS Well, I remember going to a bank saying I'd like to have a line of credit for \$250,000.00. And, the all wise banker said, "Well, we like to see three years of earnings before we would do that." And I said, "You'd like to see three years of earnings, how do you think I feel?" We somehow managed ...

DS Did they give you the loan?

VS No. But somehow, we managed. At the time that I wanted to build our own headquarters, I had three financial institutions competing to give me the money. And I often thought they should all be jailed because there was no reason to. With one exception, and that is they - it was a non-recourse loan. I mean, I couldn't just walk away from it. But what difference does it make if somebody who doesn't have any money walks away from something? I can't take any logical credit for anything other than embarking on something because there was never a strategically brilliant step along the way. And it was just kind of like trial and error.

DS So, for how long were you a single proprietor? Or did you hire somebody right away?

VS I hired somebody like six months later. I called up a few friends I still had at Taliesin [to tell them]. I said, "I've just hired this genius." This is a person who had his own firm. In fact, he had three firms and he said that builders would come in on a Monday and I could give 'em their full set of plans on a Wednesday, you know? So, I thought I had hit the jackpot. I was at the time traveling quite frequently to Kohler, Wisconsin because the Kohler company was a client that I had at Taliesin and they came with me. And while I was gone, I asked him to work on this house. It's a house that they actually built at the Biltmore right now. And when I came back four days later, he was in a cold sweat staring at what I had given him. I said, "But, you told me you could..." whatever he said. "But not a house like this." This house is very simple. It had one angle in it, and I realized - I mean, I later wrote about it 'cause, I wrote about everything, that he taught me something about being an employer. 'Cause, everything was a learning experience. Then little by little - there was another person, he came and told me all these glorious stories about his firm. They had a basketball team and they did all this kind of work and I kind of talked him into joining me, 'cause we didn't have any of that. And finally, I said, "Okay, I've gotta get over that." And I then started trying to talk people into joining me.

DS You mentioned Kohler, Wisconsin. That's a much bigger project than just a house that you mentioned earlier. Let's talk about Kohler, Wisconsin because it's a thousand acres, isn't it? Um...

VS 1,500.

DS 1500? Please share with us.

VS 5,000, excuse me. 5,000. This all started when I was at Taliesin. The local paper was interested in publishing some of these things that I was doing - having students do - about low cost housing. And that got the eye of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. They asked me if I could do a little booklet on how to improve the appearance of the mobile home and I said I would be delighted to do it, but I'd like to change the name to *Production Dwellings, An Opportunity for Excellence*. That book went viral, really a pamphlet. And one of the people who saw it, was National Homes Corporation and we got into what, at the time, was probably the most lucrative project the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation ever had. It had some funny moments because both the founder of that firm and Mrs. Wright and I were in a press release at a New York hotel and I was worried sick about this, because Mrs. Wright spoke in sort of royal terms and Jim Price, the head of National Homes clearly didn't. And so, she spoke first, then he came up and he said, "I'm like her. She gives her people the stick. I give 'em the stick." You know, and I go, oh no. But anyway, the work of that, I was probably - probably on 50 different television shows because it was just kind of an interesting topic for people.

One of the groups who took interest in it was the Kohler Company from Kohler, Wisconsin. And so, they wanted to get together and I talked to them over the phone and finally they came down

to Taliesin West, including Herb Kohler and his chief guys. And it was like a love affair. I mean, we were gonna go to work. It was like a half-million-dollar contract at the time. That was a long time ago. And then we never heard from them again. And so, I started this telephone messaging, which I think was rather strategic. I would send letters and make phone calls which never indicated I expected an answer. I never said, "If we don't hear from you this time then..." I would say, you know, "Things are going along well and I hope you're doing well, too. And we look forward to this." That went on for a year. Finally, I got a hold of one of the vice presidents. I said, "I have an idea. Instead of this massive contract, why don't we just start small? Just do..." This guy said, "I was thinking in a similar fashion."

So, the time came that we were gonna sign a contract and I had Herb Kohler and his right-hand man come to Taliesin in Wisconsin with Mrs. Wright and Wes Peters and one other person in this meeting. And it was wonderful. Herb Kohler talked about how Frank Lloyd Wright came to the Kohler Company and said, "I need a generator, but I don't have any money, but I'll give you these Japanese prints." And Herb Kohler said, "I still have them. I'm sure they're worth a lot more than the generator." But the next time I went to Kohler Company, they said, "You have a problem." They said, "Herb Kohler thinks one, that you wasted his time, and he thinks that the Taliesin is devoted to the past." And there was some other detail. So, I said, "Okay if I try to speak to him?" He said, "Yeah, you're worth keeping around here. That's why I'm tipping you off."

So, I went to meet with Herb Kohler, and I said, "You know, the only reason you think that we have a past, that we're devoted to the past, is that we have a past." I said, "If you had met with me in a storefront somewhere, you wouldn't be critical that we were living in the past, right?" And so, this went on like this. And so finally he said, "Okay, we can go forward." I was there once a month for about 14 years after that. And when I left Taliesin, they left with me. It was fantastic. We did for Wisconsin Power and Light, we did an energy saving house for one of the national magazines. We did a demonstration house. We did the master plan for - and interesting enough, the first persons to plan their acreage - it was called the 50-year plan, and so then they called what we did the second 50-year plan and you don't often have people with that vision.

Before I got there, they flew the town board, because there was an independent town board even though Kohler owned all the land, to Columbian Reston, which were the leading new developments at the time so that they could show them the virtues of good planning. They all came back to Kohler and the company voted them down. The government voted them down. So, in my first meeting, I said, "You know, if you could tell me why you think they voted you down, that'd be a great benefit to me." And they said to me, "After you've been here 10 or 15 years, and you could tell us why they voted us down, that would help us." So now fast forward about 18 months later and the whole village is in an auditorium, and I'm in the back stage and I'm getting ready to give a talk with all the stuff we had developed and so forth. Herb Kohler says, "Well, what are you gonna tell them?" I said, "Well, first of all, I'd like to give some sense of

humility.” And he slams and he says, “Don’t be too damn humble.” I thought, now I know. But, it worked, it worked.

DS But, that is just one of several projects you’ve done over the years.

VS At the same time was the Biltmore. So, there’s a thousand, forty acres. Now, the cities have ways of, going for rezoning for a master plan. The City of Phoenix didn’t have that. So, we had 40 separate parcels and we had to make a separate rezoning case for every one of these separate parcels. And this was before computers so it took three people to carry in the drawings, they were that elaborate. Jana Bommersbach, who was a kind of leading journalist at the time for the *Arizona Republic*, and kind of an enemy of the new owner of the Biltmore - it was for a long time, you know, owned by one family, the chewing gum family, Wrigley.

DS Wrigley, yes.

VS And then the new owner had owned it just about - now I’m talking about the restoration of the hotel. Let me go back to three people carry in the plans. The city staff recommended denial of every single thing that we asked for, which I thought on their part was very poor strategy, ‘cause, nothing can be that bad. And so, there were massive hearings. We would have the two greatest zoning attorneys at the time. They were Frank Snell of Snell & Wilmer and, I’m forgetting the other guy’s name, but independent person. And they sat in the front row and they just stared at the commission and council. And I did all the talking. We were doing quite well with the Planning Commission until the chairman of the Planning Commission asked for a recess. He walked outside. They came back in and they voted us down. Okay? So, I called him up. I said, “I’ve never tried to contact you, but I - I can’t believe, unless you had an ulterior motive, I can’t believe what you did. The project is that good.” And he said, “Well, I didn’t have an ulterior motive, but I’m not sure that I understood anything.” So, I said, “Well, would you meet with me?” And he said, “Of course I will.” So, I met with him and we talked it out a little bit. We went on to the planning - the City Council. But the very first house to be built at the Biltmore, I was the designer and the person that voted against it was the client. So...

DS And he - and do you - did you laugh about that for many years?

VS Oh yeah, we both laughed.

DS Yeah.

VS During the time that I was working on a proposal for that planning work, it was when the Biltmore had the largest, greatest fire in the city’s history. And Taliesin - because I was still at Taliesin at the time, and Taliesin was called down there to help figure out what to do. I was at

Taliesin writing up the proposal and Wes Peters, who was Wright's right-hand man, kept calling me. He said, "You've got to come down here, you know? We're gonna lose this." 'Cause, there were only 90 days to do it. It was at a time when all the resorts closed the doors during the summer. Price-Waterhouse was scheduled to be the first guest in September of that year. He said, "This is going down the tubes. We're gonna - you know, this isn't gonna work. And you have to come down here and help us." So finally, I did go down there. And I never even went back to Taliesin. They brought my clothes down and everything. And so, for about a 60-day period, or 90-day period, I did... we did. And it was before computers so we had a big wall taped off like the days of the month and we'd pin things up there and if things didn't happen, we'd, you know, make it back and forth. The extremes of this were such that we had to have police directing the deliveries because the deliveries were coming so fast and furious that one semi would've blocked all the other semis and so forth. We made it, but just a little anecdote, is that what started the fire was a workman's torch who was putting in a fire sprinkler suppression system, which the city had mandated. It burned the whole place down. And then the nature of the client was a little questionable, 'cause I was in one end of the great lobby putting flowers into a vase and Price-Waterhouse was coming in the other one and this person from Taliesin said we should've started the fire about 30 minutes earlier.

DS Oh, but that, of course is - Biltmore, Kohler, Wisconsin. Those are just two of the many, in fact, major...

VS Well, at the same we were doing Mountain Park Ranch, which, uh...

DS Okay. Where's that?

VS It's about 2500 acres right next to Ahwatukee.

DS Okay.

VS And I almost felt like I was guilty for planning something that no one would ever get to, it was that far out. For three years in a row, it led the country in sales of units. Of course, the Kohler Company kept going on and then among the other local major projects, of course, would be DC Ranch. The links we talked about like the athletic center, Scottsdale Center...

DS At Cactus - the Cactus Park...

VS Cactus Park Aquatic Center.

DS When you started that, did you know you wanted it to be an olympic size facility?

Vernon Swaback Historymakers Oral History Transcript

- VS** The city had a program that sort of dictated the terms of where, but we didn't - beyond that, we didn't know what auxiliary rooms would be attached to it or anything about it.
- DS** You've also done major work down at the Desert Botanical Garden.
- VS** Yes, we were selected. Usually these things went out to several firms and we were selected to do that work. There's a story I like to tell about it that's nothing to do with our work, but the docents would take school children through there all the time and I remember this one docent saying to the children, "Which of you live in a desert?" And this one girl who probably lived at the end of a dusty road put up her hand and the docent said, "No children, you all live in the desert. This is the desert." It's not whether or not you have grass or whatever, it's still a desert. But it was a wonderful experience. There's a building there called the Webster Auditorium and we remodeled that and then we did a master plan for everything. And, during hard times, people in the Valley would actually take 5-gallon buckets and take water to the garden just to keep it going. So, I mean, here's a place that was just loved into existence. And still going.
- DS** Still going.
- A couple of things that you've done - I understand that the first Scottsdale use-ordinance allowing for residential and commercial development to occur on the same site is because of you.
- VS** Yes.
- DS** Explain that because I think that's major.
- VS** Okay, the ordinance always existed, but it was generally used for one or the other. And we were the first ones. It occurs about the 6500 or so on Indian School Road. It's on the south side and there are two office buildings in front and you go through a common driveway and there are 12 townhouses behind it. And it was a fight to get the zoning. I mean, I got to where if the audience wasn't loaded with opponents, I felt I was doing something wrong. You know? That I had sold out.
- DS** But you're also responsible for the first use of the Phoenix high-rise and midrise ordinance outside of the Central Avenue Corridor.
- VS** The first...
- DS** What projects are those?

From Vernon Swaback 2018 Video Interview

VS What came first was the high-rise ordinance and it's the building at south side of Camelback at 22nd Street. It's where the Arizona Community Foundation is located now and a restaurant. The story is kind of interesting. The client was a combination of Rockefeller Center in New York and Anchor National Life Insurance Company here. And we would meet every week for breakfast at the Biltmore. This went on for a long time. And Margaret Hance was the Phoenix mayor and she was opposed to it without any question whatsoever, okay? So, our first strategy was to get everybody but her in support and we got that and then we started working on her. And I remember the story is she's at some sort of gathering in Florida. The guy sitting next to her said, "Hey, how about that great project that you're doing at 22nd." She said, "That's enough. That's enough." But that was the strategy, you know? Just 'cause she was opposed to it totally. We - one of the things we did, this was before computers. We had actual full-sized hot air balloons that were put up on the site, 16 stories were the highest, and then we had, I think 30 different stations around the Valley of people taking pictures of it so you could show in advance. And Jack London who had an office building right on the other side of 22nd Street, he was opposed to it. And so, I said, "Well, what can I do?" He said, "I want you to come in my office. I want you to sit down in my chair and I want you to draw a picture of what that building will look like at full development." Okay. So, I did. I went and I sat down in his chair and I started laughing. And I said, "Jack, you can't even see the site from your chair. You have all these columns outside that - that's where you're blocked."

DS Interesting. Interesting. One other project, before we move on, is that you've been working with the Navajo Nation. What is it that they are looking for? What is it that they need from you to create something within the Nation?

VS Well, let me give you two sides. One is sort of - makes one feel good about the effort and the other is the opposite. The Navajo Nation goes into three states, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. We entered this 18-month program of planning into each of those three states. And it took the first-place award in all three states. Now that's different than looking at a plan and the accomplishments apart from the people who are there. The Navajo Nation was and is so self-destructive in terms of the divisions of Navajo Power and Light. And so, our meetings together would be almost like, um, just wars.

Still we got to the point where there's a place 30 miles east of Flagstaff on Highway 40. We got to the approval point where there exists right today fully completed drawings for the engineering, the architecture, the design of the buildings and houses, everything to do with utilities and it still got stopped at that point. Now, one of the problems is that their land mass is bigger than West Virginia. But when you come to wanting to do something, there's no land. And the only way to understand that is all these - the land is all tied up in grants and things that have been given. I mean, you know, a family might own 100,000 acres and so when you get to trying to run a sewer line or power line, you may have to stop or go around it.

And then, add to that, the various Navajo authorities, have not yet come to the point of wanting to make things happen, wanting to work together. It's the opposite. We had financing arranged, all these drawings are finished and it wasn't even on Navajo land because there wasn't any. It was on a fee land so the Navajo Nation bought it. Now, I think they're like a hundred and twenty chapters, it's like an individual governing body. When we first had our first meeting, they walked in the room filled with drawings, all over the place. Could look intimidating, until we said, these are not our designs. These are your plans. Each of your chapters had to make a plan and we got them out of the archives and here they are. Some of the people were seeing them for the first time. Others realized that they were planning on a big shopping center here and it was right next to two other shopping centers. And so, we started with their work. And then when we got around to showing our work, this went on for a long time, the high point of that was a time when people said to us, "Can you take your drawings down and put them on the table, 'cause we want to work on them?" And that was like, wow.

Eventually the whole Navajo Housing Authority, NHA, that was our client, all those people were replaced. And so, this whole thing started by Navajo Housing Authority doing a survey in which they determined that they needed 30,000 new houses and probably, when we got finished with it, probably more like 40,000. So, it was driven by a need, not some sort of desire. And I - I just look at it as being sad. And right now, we're working with other tribes. I'd rather not mention them, but they are so different. They are so dedicated to the future. I mean, they're making magic out of far less to start with.

DS Well, that's encouraging.

VS Yeah.

DS Let's talk about architecture, but you're also a planner. Help all of us understand in your mind what's the difference between architecture and a planner, an architect and a planner.

VS Well, I'll tell you in a very personal way, okay? I became a member of the American Institute of Architects first. Then when I went to join the American Institute of Certified Planners, they said, "You can't be a member because you're an architect." Okay? Two years later, I was not only a member, I was their director.

DS You don't like to be told no, do you?

VS Well, first of all it's so foolish, okay? I mean, you can say there are different kinds of architects, there are different kinds of planners. For example, a very big difference between a planner would be like a city official who reviews the works of other people or the physical planner who brings in that work, okay? Or the cosmic philosopher who just dreams of a better world. You know?

It's sort of, the same thing is true with interior design. We, Swaback Partners, have a separate interior design firm. But with Frank Lloyd Wright, these were not separate endeavors. You know, how - how could they be? And that's how I come at it. Now, where they're gonna really merge unequivocally, is if I'm right about what's needed for the future and that is, community. And so now you have like a symphonic integration of pieces like tympani or a violin that have nothing to do with each other, in theory. But they rely on each other, you know?

DS When you were at Taliesin, two questions, one, did you also help with the design of the furniture. We know that Frank Lloyd Wright did a lot of his own interior furniture and décor. Were you also part of that?

VS The only way that I was - so much of what we designed was built in, but I never designed a specific chair or table or whatever, but where I did get heavily involved was in the related artwork, sculpture, murals, stained glass, you know?

DS My other question is that you are an author, a writer. Did you learn that skill at Taliesin? In high school? Where does that - I understand that writing becomes something from inside, but where did you learn to become so articulate and did Frank Lloyd Wright actually have classes in composition?

VS The only connection I can make is that in high school I - among the more aptitude tests that we took at times, one came out favoring architect, another came out favoring writer. But I would say that, you know, just the way a person wants to teach and preach, you're probably better off if that teacher is also doing what he or she is talking about and vice-versa. The writing became - one of the first things I ever wrote had to do with the low-cost housing, okay? Because you could write about things that you couldn't just go make happen. I mean, writing you don't need a client basically. And you can think more in an integrated way, comprehensive way. I mean, I don't care how brilliant our clients are and how giving and how wonderful they are, they're focused on their objective, you know? They're not focused on making the world a more artful place because they know they don't have that control. If they don't control the property, it doesn't matter what they think, right?

So, for me, and you know Wright wrote 14 books. I'm gonna pass him up soon. But hundreds of books have been written about him. And, you know, he - I remember - never forget a passage of - it was a headline, "It's Valiant to Be Simple." I don't know how you would talk about that with a model or something. But the whole notion was by simple, he didn't mean a barn door, but simplicity was at the other side of complexity, you know? Well, to me those are kind of verbal images, and right now my reason for writing is its really self-discovery. I mean, I've thrown away far more writing than I've kept and I've thrown away far more titles for books than I've kept. And it's just a way of, you know, major companies have their research departments, you know? Well, I don't know that the world has a research department. It has advocates for heaven

or hell, it has advocates for profits or loss, you know? But maybe the abstract philosopher gets closer, but that abstract philosopher probably stays abstract, you know?

DS Well, you've written a dozen books.

VS Yeah.

DS So you have a few more to go before you beat Frank Lloyd Wright's magic number, but are you currently writing one today and do you have a title? Do you have - will you share that with us?

VS I have titles that start off saying, "What's Next?" First of all, I discovered six other books that had the title "What's Next?" But it moved around to where the title had to imply what's next. The title had to imply both a warning and a promise and, the most recent version I can't remember right now, but came up last night, it sort of wants to set the stage that says this is important and this is what's it's about, you know? And I don't know any other way than writing, one could address the dilemma that we're in right now. Because the strongest powers, the ones that have sort of the increasingly iron clad grip on our minds, bodies and souls is everything in the digital world in which people are routinely being made billionaires and multi-billionaires. That's not probably the group that's gonna try to talk against itself. On the other hand, take the most conventional and comprehensive, religious beliefs, they're not in the arena talking about technology. They're talking about faith. They're talking about guaranteed life or death, heaven or hell. The developers, no one developer has the capacity to design for something that can't pay off the mortgage or pay off the loan.

So, to me, writing becomes - it becomes the closest thing to what one might imagine as a sense of reality because you get to - it's almost like you're allowed to finish the painting. You know, you can get all the brush strokes in and put it together and hope that it can communicate something to the intended audience which is, in this case, is humanity. And what I think makes that easier right now is that the fear of total annihilation is increasingly unavoidably clear. We've never had that clarity that we have now. Add to that, that it's not only the degree of weaponry, but the ease of which it can be deployed. It doesn't need to be a big exposed army. It can be, you know, Frank Lloyd Wright said one man and the right idea is a majority. Well, this is one man and the wrong idea is another majority, but in the different direction.

DS Share with us the good side of the technology. You've indicated what - where we're headed, but there have been some good things about the technology that we're experiencing today. Can you share a little bit from your standpoint how your company or you personally have benefitted from it?

VS I think we've all benefitted from it. You know, if you look at a graph of longevity, it's going like

this and I talk to people who are very deeply into this. I've said, well, yeah, but it can't keep going and they said, "Well, but that's what people have said here, here, and here." The keeping going that I don't like very much, and Ray Kurzweil, a very brilliant guy, inventor of the synthesizer, he's the head of this kind of department for one of the great big digital companies, he says we're gonna live forever, or be able to live forever. And that the idea of death and dying was just our excuse, the promise of heaven and hell, are just our excuse because we couldn't see beyond this. But so far, he hasn't - living forever, unless you take that as the goal itself - he hasn't added anything that would make me want to live forever.

Wright, I never liked him saying it, but Wright said when they put me in my pine box, that's my immortality. I didn't like that. But I like that a lot better than thinking we're gonna be able to live forever. We just won't be biological. We're at a time - this has probably always been the case - the first time somebody saw it get dark or the light from the sun, I mean, that mystery must've been as great or greater than anything we'll ever face, but what's interesting at the point right now is the clarity with which you can decide to understand the same reality. You know? You don't have to be a poet to find meaning in what's going on. I mean, you can be a technician, you know? So, architecture is a combination of poetry and technology, right?

DS And it's been a joy for you all these years, certainly. How has your life been impacted by Arizona and what's happening here, and how have you impacted Arizona and given back to our State today?

VS Well, I can much easier answer the first part of your question than the second. People have called Arizona the new start state. You know? Think of the number of people, both which we probably know, and the unknown number of people who come out here to retire and start all over again on something - being a member of the government or starting a new company or being a volunteer at Taliesin. I've had people tell me that they came here to retire and, about three months into that, they had enough. This one person said, "I took a compass and I drew a..." he loved the desert highlands, he said, "I drew kind of like a 5-mile circle and said somewhere in that circle, I'm gonna be a volunteer." And that's happening now with Uber. I mean, the driver who brought me here today told a story of his being a very successful industrialist and he retired and it didn't take him very long to realize that wasn't for him. And he didn't play golf. And so, he said, "There's no way economically to justify being an Uber driver if you have to factor in the cost of maintaining a car and so forth. But he said, "I'm not doing it for that reason. I'm doing it because I just need to do it, you know?"

DS But how has your work impacted Arizona? I've mentioned a couple of ordinances...

VS Okay. I have said that Arizona will incrementally become more and more like every place else or more and more its own special place. More and more like every place else is on automatic pilot, that's the marketplace. Keeping it special is the challenge. You know, I've given talks saying

that - when my first book came out, *Designing the Future*, saying that if something doesn't reinforce and make this more a place of what it is, it shouldn't be allowed. Well, nobody has those dictatorial powers, nor do we necessarily get geniuses or artists devoting themselves to public service. And so, if there's a leveling effect by way of democracy, it will always be down, not up. And I've tried to make this clear to myself. I took this notion of a tray of sand and you make all these little peaks and valleys. You shake it and get it to be as level as can be, but it will never be up. It's always down. I don't know if I said this before, but Frank Lloyd Wright said, "For every ten thousand persons nature makes that can withstand failure, she perhaps makes one who can withstand success." And it sounds like an inversion of being something, but you know, the more popular a place like way, way back when, I don't know how many years, when I was at Kohler, they had a *Town & Country Magazine* and they read this sentence. It said, "Scottsdale, even the name sounds expensive."

DS So, is there one thing that we're missing that - the top thing, that we're missing that would make us special? Make us unique, that you can think of that we've not even tried to do here in the Valley?

VS I don't think it could be a thing or a place. I think it has to be kind of a new awareness which is, you know, a - a wake-up call would be to look at communities like Gilbert and other communities who basically didn't exist at the time that Scottsdale was running pretty high. It's probably easier to measure the things they're doing to foster their own future positioning. You know, I've talked to so many people who were born rich, or even those who became rich, but they talked about their children. This one couple we designed a house for, very successful guy and he said, "You know, my daughters don't have a clue." And by that he meant, somehow or other success had robbed them of a chance of being what they could or should be. You know? The other thing about Scottsdale, when we brought in the speaker from one of the great think tanks for Scottsdale Visioning, he drove through the community, no I picked him up. He said, "Actually Scottsdale should divide itself into three cities." And he was talking about what he experienced kind of south central, middle, and then the far north. And I said, "You know, please don't bring that up. I mean, we don't need to think that way." But it's almost like, you know, a downtown Chicago and a suburb, I mean, that's more concentric and ours is more linear. But people are - have different feelings of one level or another and they also have different feelings as to the control they have. What they can make possible.

DS Before we finish today, share with us - you've been married twice, actually three times, twice to your first wife, and lastly to Cille. Share with us a little bit about that experience, those relationships and how they have certainly impacted you over many years.

VS My first and second wives, we became very, very dear friends again in her later years and right up to the time of her death. And she kept saying to me, "I must've been awful to you. I must've been awful to you." And I said, "No, Eloise, you were my teacher. You have no idea how much I

learned from you.” And I - I have the very detailed things I learned and very philosophic things I learned. And so, if we could ignore for the moment the norms of marriage, I would consider that a very successful marriage. A two-part, three-part marriage because it - it took on a life of its own afterward. Sitting with her once there was always a person, a caretaker, with her. She said to me, “I can’t remember. Are we still married?” And I said, “Yes, of course. We’re married in spirit.” She said, “Only in spirit?” I thought this poor onlooker wondering what are these people? Um, she was wonderful to Cille and vice versa. And, the marriage to Cille was either divinely inspired or a crap shoot, however you want to look at it because I had never seen this person before and three months later, I had proposed to her and three months after that, we were married. That’s not exactly being cautious. Um, but I’ve really, really come to think about marriage as being probably one of the most comprehensive relationships anyone will ever have; because, you know, this idea of falling in love with how somebody looks or how they think or what they own or, how they’re gonna make me a better person - none of that. I mean, I think it was Tolstoy who wrote this line saying marriage is a long dry marriage in which the dessert is served first. Let me tell you something about two of her [relatives] - an aunt and an uncle. They were devoted to everything equestrian. Always going, you know, breeding or riding horses and whatever. And I think near the end of their life, they discovered something. They each thought that it was the other person’s love of horses that caused this. I mean, I didn’t - I wasn’t doing it for you? They said, no, wasn’t I doing it for you?

DS Have you and Cille found any of those mutual loves that you didn’t realize you should...

VS No, but one of the things that I love about Cille is when somebody will ask her, “What’s it like to live with such a brilliant man?” Her invariable answer is, “He’s so brilliant about some things and so stupid about everything else.” I plead guilty.

DS You also have two daughters.

VS Yes.

DS And I understand that you’re looking forward to being a grandfather?

VS God - god willing.

DS Someday.

VS God willing.

Vernon Swaback Historymakers Oral History Transcript

DS Someday. And before we end, please...do you have anything that we've not asked you or that you'd like to add?

VS Well, other than to say, you've already asked me to answer twice as much as what I already know, so. I would give you a little delightful anecdote. My daughter, Katherine, was 7 years old. I was helping her go to bed and she said, "Daddy, why do you talk about Frank Lloyd Wright so much?" I said, "He was my teacher." And she said, "Really? What grade?" He's still my teacher. Although my daughters are my teachers as well.

DS What are a couple of lessons you learned from them?

VS To revisit my wife's comments, how stupid I could be. You know, that's Biblical, right? And a child shall lead them? Well, I've got two wonderful leaders, three wonderful leaders.

DS This has been a joy. Thank you.

VS Thank you.

DS Anything else?

JB No, I think that was great.

DS I think we're done.

VS Shall we do it again? And you turn on the recorder?

JB No, I wasn't rolling before. Forgot to run the recorder!

End of Interview

/gmc