

## **Interview with I.M. Pei by Gregory Heller**

*I interviewed I.M. Pei at his office in New York on September 23, 2004, as part of my research on Edmund N. Bacon—Philadelphia's former city planning director—and the redevelopment of Philadelphia's Society Hill neighborhood. Below is a transcript from the tape recording of that interview, with my questions omitted.*

### **On the Society Hill Development Competition**

There was a certain period of time when I was involved with [Bacon], and he was very well known back then in Philadelphia. You have to set the time of your watch back to 1959. Society Hill [Towers] was built in 1964. It was a competition (I don't know if you know that) and the idea of the competition was probably originated by Ed Bacon, but I don't know that for sure. You have to check that. You see what made that competition novel and new, unusual at that time was it required an architect plus a developer, and I don't know if before that there was a competition that required a similar combination. Usually it's the architect; the architect comes in and makes a design, and if they like it, they build it. The developer was never included really in the competition. Usually the competition comes in after the fact.

I persuaded [William Zeckendorf] to join me on that. It was a pleasure. He didn't have to do very much, but he was a wonderful raconteur. He can talk about anything. He was very effective. So the two of us sold the idea to the committee. Also you have to turn the clock back to Philadelphia at that time. There was an Old Philadelphia Development Corporation, I think formed by the influential people of the city of Philadelphia at the time. I remember the head of the OPDC. I think the banker in charge was named [William] Day. Also very important. So Ed Bacon has to work with OPDC because they have certain rights. I'm only turning the clock back for you since you have to do research. The role that OPDC played was quite substantial. They were represented in the jury.

### **On the Society Hill Greenway System**

Now when we were called to participate in the competition—the only New York firm—there were about five or six teams. The best Philadelphia firms—[Oskar] Stonorov, [Louis] Kahn—the best people were there. I think we were the only outsiders. But I studied before making the proposal the planning document prepared by the Planning Commission which Ed Bacon headed. I remember quite vividly the greenway system in that plan, where he tried to connect this part of Philadelphia, which at that time was a slum, to Rittenhouse Square [note: likely meant Washington Square], and from that point on there was a series of greenways that he planned so that people could walk from Rittenhouse Square [Washington Square] to Society Hill.

That greenway system impressed me. It was a wonderful idea, and they had a chance to do it. They did do much of it. That's from the Planning department for which Ed Bacon takes credit. That greenway system was what led us to our design. We wanted ours to continue, since we were at the end of a greenway, we wanted a greenway to lead into our project—our development—and therefore the placement of the towers.

### **On Towers versus Slab Apartments**

What Ed Bacon remembered best was “do you know why you won the competition?” he said, “because you didn't use slabs.” Everybody else used slabs and we only used towers. I explained with Zeckendorf there, towers are a little more expensive to build, but the reason towers were chosen instead of slabs is that there are very many major landmarks surrounding the area, like the old marketplace [South Street

Headhouse] and that house and the churches—church steeples. You can see between towers the steeple, but once you build slabs, you erase it.

The reason we built towers was so that we don't eliminate the major [landmarks]—[South Street] Head House is one. Head House is still there. There are several churches. Towers enable you to have a glimpse and frame the steeples. And not eliminate these landmarks, and he [Bacon] thought that was the reason why he chose us. I remember that very well.

And actually, our plan provided for not three towers, but five. The other two were not built. What a shame. Those were the back between head street house [Head House] and Rittenhouse Square [Washington Square]. But they were all carefully positioned so that we can see, have a glimpse of these landmarks. Nearly all the competitors except ours used slabs. Once you use slabs, you eliminate the view. It doesn't matter how tall they are, over ten stories. We chose towers instead of slabs because we wanted to reveal these major landmarks which are still there.

Then also many of... see the scale of those streets, many of them are historic houses. We cannot build towers alone. We have to build low-rise townhouses that can extend into the old Philadelphia. The combination of townhouses and towers formed the basis of our plan. The towers absorbed the density. You have to build a lot of apartments to justify this kind of redevelopment. At the same time, we don't want towers standing by themselves in the middle of these old buildings. We want buildings that can form a transition from the old to the new. Towers are behind these townhouses.

Ed wanted to have some slab buildings, but he now agrees that his idea did not prevail. Towers are not cheap to build. I chose towers because I want to see these landmarks. Once you put a slab there, you erase it. You don't see them. So I brought the landmarks into the development, and that is one of the reasons that Ed Bacon tells me why we were chosen. The other reason was we respected and extended the greenway system, which he initiated.

### **On the Outcome of Society Hill's Redevelopment?**

I can only judge Society Hill this way. It turned out very well. I went back recently when they honored me at Society Hill Towers. The people like it and it is so well maintained. That's a good sign. If that's the case, then there must be something right. I'm not trying to blow my horn. If you ask me how it turned out, it turned out very well. The people love the place. They take care of it. They will not do anything without consulting us. They wanted to change the entrance to the towers and they went to my old firm. Out of respect they continue to consult us.

### **On the Dock Street Wholesale Market**

At that time there was the [Dock Street] market there. The market was very low rise. I miss some of that because the old Bookbinders restaurant was there. The new one is not as good as the old one. I rather enjoyed the old market and regret that it had to go. I'm not going to say why it should remain or whether it can remain, but I think it would be nice to have some of that life. But they had to take it down to improve the access to the highway.

### **On Bacon's Reputation**

I think [Bacon] lectured at the university of Pennsylvania and was well regarded as a planner. Well regarded and feared. I think some of the people in Philadelphia, not all of them enjoyed working with him. You know, Ed is very critical. What he said about [Louis] Kahn. So very critical. He is very, very...

I would say he's really a rarity—a planner who has a keen architectural judgment and sense. He knows what he likes, and he knows why he likes it.

I think Ed Bacon probably was the one who invited us to compete. Zeckendorf was very well known at the time. I had done something already, but not too much. I was very involved in planning. More involved in planning than in architecture. At that time 1962, '64 I had already done the planning for Southwest Washington. I was actually better known as a planner than as an architect, because I hadn't built too much by then. I built quite a few museums, something in Colorado, a few things like that. I hadn't done much housing. I did Kips Bay, though. And whether Bacon liked Kips Bay or not I didn't know, but I did do Kips Bay and Kips Bay today is considered a success.

Unfortunately he's not as well-known as he should be. See, planning in those years was a very serious business. Today planning is not treated as seriously. Much of that came out of the 1949 Housing Act. Urban redevelopment was part of that under Eisenhower [*note: Truman was President in 1949, but Eisenhower was President for the 1954 Housing Act*]. He was the president then and initiated that program to redevelop cities in the United States partly to provide jobs, for soldiers coming back from the second world war. Many of them were still coming back, trickling back, and they had to be settled down. And this urban redevelopment once it was initiated went sweeping like wildfire. Then all the cities in the United States took it up. New York had Moses. Kips Bay was one of them. Philadelphia, Pittsburgh had one. Boston had several. So that was a time when planning and urban design became important because the money was there.

I think within the planning architectural profession in '64, he already had a reputation as a very capable and discerning planner. Quite discerning and demanding. Not an easy planner to satisfy. If you ask Philadelphia architects of that time like Kahn and Stonorov they would tell you better than I can. I didn't work with him until this project came, and after that I had the greatest respect for him. I wish Mr. Moses were more like him.

### **On Bacon Compared to Robert Moses**

Moses and Bacon. One is a planner and one is a developer. Moses was really a developer... head of an authority. He had tremendous power, lots of money to spend, but good planning, good urban design, good architecture was not his cup of tea. You can see what he did. Except for Jones Beach and the parkways which are quite bad. They're not architecture. He did some good work there, but by and large people did not think of Moses as a design-conscious chairman of an authority. Whereas Ed Bacon was. But Ed Bacon was not the head of an authority. There's a different level. Moses was very high, and he was even more important than our mayor, at that time.

### **On Pei's Work with Bacon on the Society Hill Towers**

I had considerable interaction with Ed Bacon. After we won the competition we had to discuss with each other how we refined the plan. I think by and large he approved of that. He did not make too many demands on us to make changes. I think he rather liked our plan. He was a very demanding client. He had considerable power in that city as a planner. I don't know of any planner in other cities who had as much power as he had.

I had a few like him that came out of cities like Pittsburgh, Boston with Ed Logue. These are the ones who followed, if not contemporaneous with Ed Bacon. That was a high point for urban planning, because they had the wherewithal to do it, and there was a need for it because our cities were pretty rundown. I cannot imagine any city that doesn't have a very bad slum. At one time they called them slum clearance projects, but the term was not well liked. Then they tried urban renewal. And that's not well liked. I think

urban redevelopment finally became the name. My project in Washington came out of that same 1949 housing act.

He interfered very little in the architecture. He did have some say about how to arrange the greenway system so that it fits in better with his master plan. But overall he accepted our plan, about 90% of it. From that point on my problem was to deal with the kind that all projects take money to do it. Zeckendorf was very well known then, already, but he always had to go to banks to get financing. It was a difficult time for him, because he was involved in many other things which are not doing too well. So there was a transition from Zeckendorf to Alcoa who took over this project midway. So I had to deal with another client and that makes it a little difficult. Alcoa had a good man, John Romera [*note: unsure about spelling*]. He eventually took over the charge.

See this group of men would participate in urban redevelopment in one city. Once they had done something, immediately another city would say, “come and work for us.” This is how John Romera had come from Philadelphia. After he succeeded in Philadelphia and was hired by New York University to handle their share of urban redevelopment on Houston Street.

### **On Pei’s Shift Away from Urban Redevelopment**

By then I had already done quite a few: Washington, Boston, and New York. So I started to think perhaps I should do something else. I would continue in the field of urban redevelopment and planning—Pittsburgh was one and Chicago was another that came afterwards. But I was beginning to feel that I had done enough at that point. So after that I was less active in this field, I moved into other areas like museum, university buildings. In those days, jobs were hard to come by. Architects today are lucky.

### **On the Relationship of Architecture and Planning**

Every project of that magnitude has to link to the city. The difference is that in Philadelphia, the plan for the development of a larger part of the city, other than our site, is already there because Ed Bacon had already done it. So in that way it was a little better for us to have something to join into, than doing something all by ourselves, like in Kips Bay, and then eventually no control anymore. Kips Bay we had pieces of land surrounding Kips Bay which we held at one time, but eventually sold to the residents and did something else. That didn’t happen in Society Hill because of Bacon’s control. On the other hand, the NYU project here, we did have some link to Washington Square. I would say, planning a project of that size you have got to have some kind of a link to either existing plans or plans that would come later on, but not to the same extent as Philadelphia. Philadelphia was a ready-made thing for us to join into.

### **On the Architecture of Kips Bay and Society Hill Towers**

The buildings are very simple. Nothing remarkable about it. Using the same ideas as in Kips Bay. That is the concrete structure. That’s it. That’s the façade. All you have to do is put glass in and you’ve got it. So it’s all a question of economy. At that time in the early ’60s, most of your housing projects were made of brick with punched windows. And that was still the cheaper way to build even though brick layers were less and less efficient. They needed more and more help, because of the unions. I thought that going the direction of concrete would save me. I could prove that it wouldn’t cost much more, but I couldn’t prove that it was the same. Actually the result of course is that you have a big glass window where you have the maximum view. With a brick façade you wouldn’t have that.

That’s why the people in Kips Bay like it so much. They look out and it’s open. But that’s something I personally am very proud of. That’s nothing to do with Ed Bacon. That’s a question of how to build low-cost housing and still be innovative. Still make some contribution. At that time it was not easy, because at

that time all the financing was through FHA and they had very strict standards. Those standards are very difficult to try to do something special if you want to conform to those standards. You had to break some rules here and there.

Kips Bay was built for \$10 a square foot. Philadelphia was built for maybe \$14, \$15. Philadelphia came about 10 years later. Kips Bay was 1952-53 and Philadelphia was 1963. Prices had gone up. But still, under \$15 a square foot. NYU here came later at \$15 a square foot. It's really low-cost housing, but because of the good planning. Because of, I think certain amenities, such as the big glass windows, that you can look out and see the view, makes it desirable. Then when people move in, they like it, and they if they want to sell it, there is a market for it.

So today, Kips Bay must have made four or five fortunes before it became a condominium. This was not because of architecture—architecture contributed to it—but because of time. Construction costs were low then and everything then has gone much higher. Whoever held the apartment then did well when they wanted to sell it.

### **On Society Hill Before Redevelopment**

Locust and 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> street, there were prostitutes working. This was the meat district. Truckers were there. How can you make it into a high-priced neighborhood? You have to wait. Now it is. But not at that time. We built those houses to sell for \$34,000 a house. Today they can probably sell for half a million or more. To transform a neighborhood, which is acceptable under the redevelopment act, you have to prove to the federal government that it is bad stuff—I won't say a slum. Otherwise you won't qualify for urban redevelopment. To qualify you have to prove that it is dilapidated and should be updated and can be. But once you've done it, you have to wait for time. Landscaping—the trees were tiny—you have to wait for the trees to grow. You have to wait for several waves of ownership and tenancy before you can say, now this is an established neighborhood. Now I buy and invest and upgrade. If Ed Bacon thought he could do it overnight—it cannot be.

### **On the Role of City Leadership**

I thought it had the potential, too. Across the street from our development there was a house called the Powel House. There were a few gems already. OPDC loaned money for people to upgrade old houses. They played a very important role, too. I think they financed much of this redevelopment, because these local banks wouldn't do it. OPDC said let's make it easy for people to buy these houses, provided they upgrade them in a certain way that is acceptable to Ed Bacon's group or the planning commission. That's why it is not just what we have done, but also what they have done surrounding the area—locust street, 2<sup>nd</sup> street. It's not just the planning commission, but also the city fathers, in this case OPDC. They played a very important role. Their incentive loan program was very important. Otherwise all of those old houses would have been torn down. This was a combination of the city leadership and the planning department agreeing for the need for this kind of effort.

Philadelphia at that time was very fortunate to have good leadership. Not planning leadership alone, but also leadership in city government and in the financial community. It's something that happens once in a long, long time. It didn't happen here and didn't happen anywhere else that I know about. Boston, Ed Logue came in, but Boston is much more difficult to deal with. A bit of that in Pittsburgh, some because of the Heinz family. Cleveland had good planning but didn't have local support from the city leadership—[William] Rafsky, [James] Lister. Rafsky eventually came to Philadelphia.

## **On the Construction of Society Hill Towers**

On the site of the [Society Hill] towers there was nothing there to speak of. On the other side of where the towers were, there was the market. Because this is right next to the market, there was a lot of trucking. The only good thing was Bookbinders, but the rest was coarse, junky, very noisy. On the site there were old buildings, not houses, but buildings which were designated to be removed. Houses bordering on 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> and Locust were kept, and young couples came and bought them and remodeled them. On our site were some junky buildings, but not houses.

The towers' progress was quite slow. They were just rental in the beginning. People hesitated. But after some people moved in and said, "gosh it's nice here, and inexpensive." Then before you know it, more and more people come and then the place becomes successful. The houses were selling, but the renting of the apartments were slow in the beginning. We expected that. We expected it to be slow. The houses sold because they were opposite some good houses. Powel House for example. And there's a need for that. The important thing is the street itself. If across the street you have good houses and some are being remodeled and kept intact, and the new houses happen to be designed to the needs of that time, for families that are coming with children. And those houses were a good buy. They must be four bedrooms, and the price was \$35,000. Then if you look across the street and see Powel House, you say, "why not?"

The urban renewal program called for apartments. If you do not build "X" number of apartments, you cannot justify it for the land. One solution is to build slabs rather than build towers. But nobody used towers except for us. Slabs were cheaper and more common. But I think the towers today more than made up for it.

In those days there was so much limitation, you have to think in terms of time. At that time when they were new, financing of FHA was very restrictive. We squeezed as much out of FHA. I will not go into details about how we managed to get a larger living room by eliminating balconies. At that time if you add the balcony to the living room, you make that room habitable. The financing they give you was based on room counts. The balcony has half the room count but doesn't cost half the money to build. So I sent to Washington for Kips Bay to tell them, can I have the half room count financing from you if I bring it into the living room, rather than the balcony. I fought for that. We succeeded in making our living room bigger, as a consequence, through that special compensation that FHA was willing to give us.

## **On Bacon's Legacy**

Ed Bacon's legacy will be what he contributed to Philadelphia, and secondly the influence the [Philadelphia] Planning Commission had on other cities and other planning commissions. He was very well known to people who were involved in planning at that time. He occupies a special position because he was very powerful. As a planner he was able to command a kind of respect from the city. Ed is a planner who made important plans. There were not too many in the U.S. at that time.

Ed was someone who was able to persuade the city leadership to accept his idea, and it worked very effectively. When you talked to OPDC as I have, they frequently referred to Ed Bacon: "Have you talked to Ed Bacon?" He was respected by the city leadership and he was actually quite politically engaged as you have to be if you work for a city planning commission. Also it's a city that doesn't have a Moses type. If you had a Moses in Philadelphia, he would probably overwhelm a planning director, and bend to his will. OPCD, the city fathers, deferred a lot to Ed Bacon and that's what made it possible for him to be so effective. He must have caused that condition by getting their respect.

## **On Bacon's Personality**

He was very decisive and very firm. He knew what he wanted. He praised you if he liked it, and he would bash you if he didn't. I like to say I got more praise, because I understood why he planned, in some ways. I was deeply involved in city planning with Zeckendorf. I was able to tell the difference between one city and another and the planning efforts of one director and another. We got along very well.

He can be abrasive, because he's a man of firm conviction. He doesn't take another opinion too easily if it's not in line with his. But I would disagree with that. A lot of people say it [was] that way about Ed Bacon in those days—if you cross him and disagree with him, you have a hard time. But I didn't find it so. Just to give you an idea, I did towers. He never thought of that. Just slabs. But when I explained to him why I used towers, I said, "yes my plan may spend a little more money, but it is very important to make *your* plan work," because he had already emphasized in his preamble that there are important monuments, cultural monuments that should be preserved and brought into play. How do you bring them into play? That's something that I came through with, and I was able to persuade him to take it and he did. He accepted it. So my relationship with him became very good. I had no difficulty with him. But I only did one project in Philadelphia.

## **On Bacon's National and International Reputation**

In Philadelphia, Bacon definitely was an important figure. Nationally, I would say the planning professions and maybe the architectural profession knew what he accomplished. Internationally I would say his book *Design of Cities* has influence, and people read it. He looked at the world when he commented on the planning of Rome, planning of Beijing. He had a pretty good view on the great cities of the world at that time. So that book *Design of Cities* is there. He wrote it. Not to the general public, as much as Lou Kahn or Robert Moses is.

## **On Bacon, Louis Kahn, and Robert Moses**

Bacon, Kahn and Moses were different. Lou Kahn only became known long afterwards. When Lou Kahn was practicing, and Bacon was planning director, Lou Kahn was not effective as an architect in that city. It is only later that he became important because he became a professor at Penn and built some important buildings but that came long afterwards. Lou Kahn's fame was established, I think, in probably the '70s, whereas Ed Bacon's work was done in the '50s. Moses was long before, in the '30s. Moses is so well known because of his power. He had tremendous power. He was the head of half a dozen authorities. His influence was incredible. Whether his projects were done well or not was another matter. But he was able to do a lot. Some successful, some not. I think he was less design conscious than Bacon. But he's not Bacon, he's much higher than Bacon. He's the head of an authority. He had control of huge sums of money and Bacon didn't. They had different roles to play. Because Bacon's so respected and persuasive, he probably has so much [more] power as a planning director than anyone else.

## **On Chinese Influence on the Society Hill Greenways**

The idea of surprise, a change of vista, this is an Oriental way of planning. You never see [designs] like Versailles. Versailles is one long axis with fountains, parterres. But China gardens are small. You come and go through one gate, then you are struck by a rock formation. Then you turn and you see a tree. That's what he meant. Yes, the greenway system twists and turns with constantly changing perspective. But the scale is different from a Chinese garden.

I think all old cities have something like that, but they are not green. Greenway, I think in that sense, the Orient, China is probably closer. China loves trees, plants, flowers, but in most of the well-planned cities in Europe they are not green. Maybe in England, maybe London has some of it, more than the continent.

### **On Interaction with Bacon After Society Hill**

After Society Hill I only met [Bacon] at professional meetings. We talked to each other sometimes. He asked me some information on this architect or this and that, and I gave him my opinion. But mostly our interaction was on a personal basis and not on a professional basis. We would exchange our greetings and he remained a friend. Although our contact was infrequent, unfortunately, because I left city design and went into an entirely different field.

### **On Architecture and Current Fashion**

It is important to take the long view, have patience. Do not try to get instant gratification, because architecture is something that lasts a long time. If you don't take that view, [you] tend to fall into fashion more easily, and then eventually suffer having your building destroyed. That is a very serious matter, because for us to build something at such an expense from such durable materials and have it go out of date, in 10, 25 years is such a pity, waste of resources. Beware of fashion and try to take time to do it right. But that applies to everything else, too.

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