AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHITECTS OF LOS ANGELES:

Harold L. Williams

Interviewed by Wesley H. Henderson

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: August 4, 1924, Flemingsburg, Kentucky.

Education: Talladega College, 1946-47; Miami University, Bachelor of Architecture, 1952; University of Southern California, 1976.

Military Service: United States Navy, radioman, third class, 1943-46.

Spouse: Dr. Betty Smith Williams, married 1954.

CAREER HISTORY:

Draftsman, Fulton, Krinski, and DelaMotte, Cleveland, 1952-55.

Project architect, Paul R. Williams, Los Angeles, 1955-60.

Architect, Orr, Strange, and Inslee, Los Angeles, 1960-63.

Partner, Sheldon Pollack and William P. Neal, Los Angeles, 1960-67.

Architect, Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams, Architects and City Planners, Los Angeles, 1967-74.

Architect, Harold Williams Associates, Los Angeles, 1960-present.

SELECTED PROJECTS:

Compton City Hall, 1976.

South Central Los Angeles Multiservice and Child Development Center, Los Angeles, 1976.

Compton Civic Center, 1977.

State Office Building, Civic Center, Van Nuys, 1982.

Fire Station Number 3, Compton, 1989.

AWARDS:

Society of American Registered Architects (two awards, 1973).

National Organization of Minority Architects (awards, 1984, 1985).

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:

Committee to Save Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, 1966-70.

American Institute of Architects; minority affairs task force, 1983; minority resources committee, 1984.

Association of Minority Architects and Planners of Southern California; founder and president, 1969.

National Organization of Minority Architects; co-founder, 1971; president, 1971-82.

PROFESSIONAL REGISTRATIONS:

California License, 1958.

Ohio License, 1977.

Colorado License, 1979.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Wesley Henderson, B.S., Art & Design, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Master of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Ph.D., Architecture, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Williams's home in Los Angeles.

Dates, length of sessions: October 28, 1989 (86 minutes); January 31, 1990 (79); February 15, 1990 (45); March 1, 1990 (89); April 18, 1990 (72); May 24, 1990 (82).

Total number of recorded hours: 7.5

Persons present during interview: Tapes I-III, Williams and Henderson; Tapes IV-VI, Williams, Henderson, and Mrs. Williams.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series related to the history of African-American architects in Los Angeles. In preparing for this interview and others in the series, Henderson had a preinterview with Williams, interviewed his associates, and relied on the background research for his UCLA doctoral dissertation, "Two Case Studies of African-American Architects' Careers in Los Angeles, 1890-1945: Paul R. Williams, FAIA, and James H. Garrott, AIA."

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Williams's childhood, schooling, and military experience, and continuing on through his architectural career in California. Major topics include Williams's work with Paul R. Williams; his partnership with Carl M. Kinsey and Virgil A. Meeds; their work on the Compton Civic Center; involvement with the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA); the Watts Towers and the Watts Towers Arts Center; and African-Americans in architecture.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Williams reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Steven J. Novak, editor, prepared the table of contents and index. Rebecca Stone, editorial assistant, prepared the biographical summary and interview history.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 28, 1989

HENDERSON: Usually we start by asking you your full name and birth date and where were you born and family background.

WILLIAMS: Well, my full name is Harold Lewis Williams. I was born, actually, in Flemingsburg, Kentucky, the home of both my parents. We actually lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, but, as some children do, returned to their mother's home to have their children. I am a second child in my family. I was actually a citizen of Flemingsburg, Kentucky, for about three weeks, and then I was back in Cincinnati, Ohio.

HENDERSON: What's your birthdate?

WILLIAMS: I was born August 4, 1924.

HENDERSON: I did just a little bit of research on Flemingsburg. I read that on your résumé and want to be sure I've got the right Flemingsburg. Maybe I'd better show you on the map. It was in Fleming County?

WILLIAMS: Fleming County.

HENDERSON: Okay. Up near Cincinnati?

WILLIAMS: Cincinnati, yes.

HENDERSON: Near right in here?

WILLIAMS: It's only eighty miles from Cincinnati, actually. Yes, Flemingsburg. Yes. That's it.

HENDERSON: But you were living in Cincinnati? Your parents were living in Cincinnati.

WILLIAMS: My parents were living in Cincinnati. As I say, both were residents, or citizens, of Flemingsburg, Kentucky.

HENDERSON: So they had met in Flemingsburg?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

HENDERSON: What were the circumstances?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Do you mind if I ask what your parents did for a living?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Mother [Geneva Timberlake Williams] was a teacher in Kentucky and was a graduate of Knoxville College. The years I couldn't tell you, but they had a very good teachers' school, from what I understand. I know some other graduates of that institution who are my parents' age who filled me in on a little detail of Knoxville College.

HENDERSON: Now, this is Knoxville in Kentucky? Or Knoxville, Tennessee?

WILLIAMS: Knoxville, Tennessee.

HENDERSON: Was that a black school?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And your father?

WILLIAMS: Dad [Leonard H. Williams] was a student at--

At the time it was called Frankfort College, and then I think later it became known as Kentucky State University. He did not graduate from the institution because he wanted to get married. He left and traversed to Cincinnati, where he took a job as a redcap with the--

HENDERSON: Railroad?

WILLIAMS: Railroad, yes, where he remained in that job, even after marriage, for forty-six years.

HENDERSON: Redcaps and porters back then were making good money.

WILLIAMS: They were making very good money. They were almost solely dependent upon tips, but tips were very, very good in those days. I guess it was enough for Dad to build a house for his new bride. And that he did. Then we lived there until I was about eighteen or nineteen years old. Eighteen years old.

HENDERSON: He had the house built? Paid for it?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: He didn't design it himself? He just bought it? Or was it--?

WILLIAMS: No, he had it constructed. They constructed the house. Because the house at that time-- It was a two-bedroom house with one bath, a dining room, living room, and kitchen, two-story. If I remember correctly, he built that house for something less than $6,000 in those years.

HENDERSON: What particular neighborhood?

WILLIAMS: It was Walnut Hills in Cincinnati. You may know, Cincinnati is built on seven hills. Walnut Hills was one of those. It was there that they gave birth to my brother. He is the number one son, named after my father, whose name was Leonard Harrison Williams. And my brother is a junior [Leonard H. Williams, Jr.]. Mother was from a family of Timberlakes. Her name was Timberlake. Geneva Clara Timberlake.

HENDERSON: Do you remember much about your grandparents? You know, you can mention as much as you want to.

WILLIAMS: I remember both my grandmothers and only my dad's father [Benjamin L. Williams]. They lived in Flemingsburg and had a sizeable farm there, Dad's mother especially. As my brother and I were growing up, we enjoyed going there and riding horseback on their hunting dogs. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Now, your grandparents had property in a rural situation? Or was it in the town?

WILLIAMS: It was in the town of Flemingsburg. Flemingsburg itself is a rural community. [laughter] It had a downtown. I think it had a downtown, Main Street. My granddad, Dad's father, was a mason.

HENDERSON: Brick mason?

WILLIAMS: Concrete mason. In fact, Dad used to take us

downtown and we could see his stamp in the concrete. His name was Benjamin Lewis. And that's where my middle name, Lewis, came from.

My mother's mother lived in a little town just walking distance from Flemingsburg, called Nepton [Kentucky]. I remember Mother's mother as being very talkative. She used to relate stories and things to me and my brother in our early years. I used to love to go walking with her. In fact, she passed when I was probably four years old, five years old. I just remember the incident of her wanting to take a walk after dinner one evening to visit a friend of hers and my mother's. It was there she, that night, decided that I shouldn't go walking with her. And it was that night that was the last time I saw her alive. She died climbing the stairs to visit her friend. But she was a very interesting lady. Mother, I think, kind of inherited a lot of character from her. I tell a lot of folks I had a tremendous childhood.

HENDERSON: It sounds like a very pleasant childhood.

WILLIAMS: Yes, it was very different than a lot. Mother played piano. Dad played violin. Both of them sang and, therefore, became very active in the church choirs.

HENDERSON: And what kind of church did you go to? Baptist? Methodist?

WILLIAMS: Methodist. Methodist Episcopal.

We spent a lot of time with other children our age. My brother is a year and five months older than I. So Mother got us involved, also, in the church. We sang in the choir as children. That church had adults and children singing together in their church choir. Mother and Dad--Dad was extremely handy with his hands. I can remember his carving the trim on a bookcase that he made for the living room with a small pocketknife.

HENDERSON: That's all?

WILLIAMS: That's all. It was something that I would have taken a coping saw to do, with the curls and twists. And I had that knife. I kept that knife for a long time. In fact, I had it here in Los Angeles. I don't know exactly where it is at this moment. But I found that extremely interesting.

So he and Mother got together, and they wanted to involve the children in the church, in plays. So they started a drama club. Mother was also handy at sewing. She would make the costumes. She would teach the lines. Dad would make the scenery and would act as the--

HENDERSON: Stage manager?

WILLIAMS: Yes. We did that for years. I did that until I grew up. In fact, there are people in Los Angeles today who grew up with me, who talk about those days of the Stagecrafters Dramatic Club. We used to enter skits with

the Delta Sigma Theta [African-American sorority] Jabberwock, which was an annual competition between various clubs and organizations. They would judge their skits and give prizes. We won several prizes.

HENDERSON: Let me interject at this point. You're fairly young at this point. You're growing up through the Depression. This sounds very pleasant and very happy.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Is this a real contrast from what you think other black youngsters were going through at the time?

WILLIAMS: The black youngsters that I knew were part of our group. Well, let me say this--

HENDERSON: Now, I'm not trying to say that you had to have a social consciousness back then.

WILLIAMS: I know.

HENDERSON: I don't want you to apologize for it.

WILLIAMS: No, that's just the way it was. But in contrast to that, Mother had a brother who moved to Cincinnati in the early years. As I said, my dad was a redcap. So his number was two.

HENDERSON: What do you mean by "number"? Is it seniority?

WILLIAMS: The redcaps had numbers: number one, number two, number three, number four, and they gave them in sequence as to the time they were hired. So what I'm saying is, my dad was number two.

HENDERSON: Oh, he was a senior man.

WILLIAMS: He sure was.

HENDERSON: See, I'm too young to know all this!

[laughter]

WILLIAMS: Let me tell you, my mother's brother, Dad got him a job there. He was number three. His name was Scott Timberlake. Now, as I talk, I may lose my train of thought in trying to relate some of these experiences.

HENDERSON: I'll keep you in line. I had stopped you in the middle of talking about your childhood. You were talking about the theatrical skits and plays that your family would put on.

WILLIAMS: I think I made that point.

HENDERSON: What about schooling and schools?

WILLIAMS: I was going to say, I was talking about, in contrast to my childhood, Mother's brother was a parent of eleven children. The circumstances were totally different, totally different, even from the standpoint of where they chose to live. Instead of Walnut Hills, it was downtown Cincinnati, closer to the river, closer to the train station.

HENDERSON: Not such a nice neighborhood.

WILLIAMS: Row-house situation.

HENDERSON: Your house was separate? That is, it had a yard all the way around it?

WILLIAMS: Yes, a yard. I think it bothered me and my brother when the cousins would get together. There was that little thing of social difference that affected our cousins more than us. That caused an upheaval every once in a while. I think that is when--

HENDERSON: You mean with cousins today?

WILLIAMS: Not today. At that time. But I think it made me conscious of social differences and how these social differences come about sometimes and how thinking is sometimes colored by social habits. I think that that is with me still. Skipping all the way from there to Los Angeles: how that made me aware, for instance, being a member of the Watts Towers Committee, one of the first black members of that group. It helped me to sort some things out and to get some other people, who live around the Towers, involved with this group, from out of the community. I think all that activity there kind of stemmed from how things were happening in my young life.

HENDERSON: Yes, that's why I'm asking these questions about the background.

WILLIAMS: But all in all, we had a very, very good life.

HENDERSON: Well, let me ask about schooling. What do you remember from elementary school, junior high school, high school? Actually, kind of start with the elementary, if you have any memories, positive or negative.

WILLIAMS: I started my education at a totally black elementary school. It was walking distance from my house. I remember my first visit to that school was walking with Mother, who was taking my oldest brother to his first years at that school.

HENDERSON: You don't remember the name, by the way?

WILLIAMS: Douglass Colony Elementary School. It was a sibling school of a high school called Douglass. It was Douglass Colony, and it was an offshoot of a larger school.

HENDERSON: I'm confused. You mean, like a high school had this as a feeder school?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Or the faculty had come from the high school and they were related to--?

WILLIAMS: No, no. It was separate. No, that was totally a separate faculty, but it was-- How can I explain that?

HENDERSON: Maybe like an experimental school?

WILLIAMS: No. They weren't thinking too much about experimental schools in those days, I don't think. But its parent school was also called Douglass.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: It was named after Douglass.

HENDERSON: Frederick Douglass?

WILLIAMS: Frederick Douglass. This was Douglass Colony. Usually the graduates that finished--I think the school

went through the sixth grade--would enter Douglass Junior High School in the seventh grade.

HENDERSON: And then go on through Douglass High School.

WILLIAMS: They go on through. Douglass High School.

At the end of my third year--and I had some tremendous teachers--Mother decided that we should go to another school that had more activities, different kinds of subject matter. I transferred in the fourth grade to a school called Hoffman Elementary School. It was an integrated school and--

HENDERSON: Was it also near your house? Or did you have to--

WILLIAMS: We could walk. That was walking distance, also. That school was surrounded by different racial groups. I did miss some of my teachers. I can remember all my teachers from kindergarten-- Mrs. Henderson, first grade; Mrs. Jordan, my kindergarten teacher; Mrs. Brown, second grade; and Mrs. Sadie Samuels. You notice, I remember her first name.

HENDERSON: Sadie?

WILLIAMS: Sadie Samuels. Fantastic lady. She had a lot of influence. She used to talk to me all the time about education. And then transferring to Hoffman School, there I completed eighth grade. In ninth grade, I entered Withrow High School.

HENDERSON: Which one?

WILLIAMS: Withrow, in Hyatt Park. That was located in another section of town, where you had to take transportation. The section, at that time, was a pretty upper-class white community. We found the school to be extremely prejudiced. They did not want--

HENDERSON: When you say "we," you mean you and your brother.

WILLIAMS: Well, the black community. That was a time that they had swimming. They had a very nice pool. Blacks swam at the last pool on Friday, just before emptying the pool. I lasted at that school for three years, and I decided that I was going to get into another situation. I transferred to Wilberforce University Academy, where I graduated. I graduated in 1942.

HENDERSON: And Wilberforce Acadamy was also in--

WILLIAMS: Wilberforce University. It's on the campus of Wilberforce University.

HENDERSON: So that's not in Cincinnati.

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: That's in the town of Wilberforce [Ohio].

WILLIAMS: Wilberforce. There I had some just fantastic experiences with black faculty, black students, black faculty who meant for their students to become somebody, and many, many, many black students who wanted to be

somebody. My roommate was a college student. I had two roommates.

HENDERSON: You were on the campus?

WILLIAMS: I was on campus. I stayed in O'Neil Hall, men's dormitory. And that is a fantastic experience for someone in high school who is able to socialize and communicate with college students.

HENDERSON: Wilberforce, in my opinion, is a fairly sophisticated place.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

HENDERSON: I'm sure you were in a real sophisticated atmosphere. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: We had some very sophisticated students. I'll tell you, even in my class, we had some very sophisticated students.

HENDERSON: Now, did your parents give you any static over doing this?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. No, they encouraged, really, my leaving Withrow. In fact, they knew-- You know, Wilberforce University was a church school.

HENDERSON: Now, that I didn't remember. I didn't know. Associated with what church?

WILLIAMS: African Methodist.

HENDERSON: Okay, AME [African Methodist Episcopal].

WILLIAMS: AME. They knew one of the ministers who was on

that board, and they discussed my situation with him. He's the one that introduced me to the university. That was the late Reverend Page.

HENDERSON: Now, you got your bachelor's at Miami University.

WILLIAMS: At Miami University, which is a neighbor. Oxford [Ohio] is not too distant from Cincinnati or--

HENDERSON: Or Wilberforce. Why did you decide to go there rather than Wilberforce?

WILLIAMS: What? Miami?

HENDERSON: Miami.

WILLIAMS: Now, we have to skip some years because--

HENDERSON: I'm skipping.

WILLIAMS: Because the thing is, from Wilberforce, I went into the service.

HENDERSON: Oh. I'm sorry. Yeah, I'm jumping. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I went into the navy in 1943. It was after I returned and spent a year at Talladega College--

HENDERSON: That's in Alabama.

WILLIAMS: --in Alabama, that I entered Miami University.

HENDERSON: Maybe we should back up and let you get out of Wilberforce, and then we'll talk about the service. Or do you want to keep things in chronological order? I prefer to have them in a chronological order.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Well, Wilberforce did not have a lot to

do with my university studies. I did learn some character from Wilberforce University. Dr. [B. H.] Heard, Mrs. Askew, these were professors in the academy.

HENDERSON: How many students were in the academy?

WILLIAMS: I don't know if I can recall that. In my class--

HENDERSON: You can just give me an approximate number. I'm just thinking this is--

WILLIAMS: In my class, there were probably only about thirty-five students, which was extremely good, because it gave a lot of time with the professors. Classes were small, and they were really college preparatory.

It was prior to that that I had met [Sam Burch], who I referred to as an architect. This was a black individual who lived about a block from my home in Cincinnati who designed homes and buildings but had no license. So in the technical sense of the word, he was not able to use the title of architect. But he gave me my first drafting board and instruments with which to draw.

HENDERSON: And this was at about what age?

WILLIAMS: This was about twelve. And I remember a design that he did for a Baptist church in Cincinnati where the church body could only afford to build the basement level and the first-floor slab, which became its roof for a number of years. But he had completed the design.

Finally, some years later, after I came out of the service, the church was completed.

HENDERSON: As designed.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, as designed.

HENDERSON: Do you remember his name?

WILLIAMS: No. That I'd have to really research. Because I really-- You know, each year now, it gets a little harder. [laughter] I really have to go back and-- I can remember sitting with him and watching him draw in his home. To call his name right this moment, I just cannot do that.

HENDERSON: That may not be crucial right now, but it's interesting you got this exposure to an architect who was in your neighborhood and you were able to see somebody manipulating lines and turning that into a physical structure.

WILLIAMS: Structure. Right. As I say, that was my very first introduction to design, and I think it really had a lasting influence. After I was graduated from Wilberforce University Academy in 1943, I was inducted into the navy.

HENDERSON: When you say "inducted," you mean drafted? Or you joined?

WILLIAMS: Drafted. Drafted! [laughter]

HENDERSON: You had graduated from high school and you were fresh meat. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: That's right. I wanted, of course, to go to the air force. I loved to fly. I had one roommate, who is now in Los Angeles. He was a college student. His name now is Dr. Marcus McBroom. Mac is a psychologist. He and I both loved airplanes. We had the wall in our room littered with pictures of army aircraft. But I went to the induction center one day, and we got around through all the physical, and I remember stopping at this last table. They ask you in what branch of service you would like to be in. I don't know why they ask it. Of course, I said, "Air force! I want to go to the army!" Because I knew the navy was not--

HENDERSON: It was reputed to be prejudiced.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Very prejudiced. And I wanted to go where I had an opportunity to fly. I had five buddies from Cincinnati who were in the Ninety-ninth Pursuit Squadron, and two of them were in the 101st. I remember the fellow looking up at me, rear back in his chair--of course he was white--and he said, "Son, your health is too good." And he took this big red stamp that said N-A-V-Y and stamped it on my papers. I almost cried. And that's the way it was. I went into the navy. They would not let me in the navy cadet school because they say, "Keep this in his record until service is further required." I forced the chaplain to tell me exactly what that meant. That meant they were not taking blacks into navy cadet schools.

HENDERSON: They just didn't want to tell you that straight out.

WILLIAMS: Right. They sent the application and everything to Washington, D.C., and that's the way the answers came back. I got the same answer when I asked for submarine service, as a radio operator, which was, "Hold in his records till service is further required." They were not taking any in submarine service except steward's mates. And of course, "I do not do windows."

HENDERSON: How did you happen to get trained as a radio technician, or a radio operator? I'm sorry.

WILLIAMS: Operator, yeah. I went to Great Lakes [Naval Training Center]. That's where I was in my boot camp. That was my very first experience of real blatant racial prejudice.

HENDERSON: In the navy.

WILLIAMS: In the navy. At Great Lakes, there's a main highway that goes right through the service center up there, through the training center. On one side of the road were three camps: Camp Moffatt; Camp Robert Smalls (these were named after famous blacks); and Camp Lawrence. Black sailors. On the other side of the road was the main headquarters for the entire training camp, and all the white sailors were being trained over there. I used to have a friend--at least an acquaintance--by the

name of Calvin Deque. I don't remember the spelling of his name. He's from New Orleans.

HENDERSON: It's a French name, I bet.

WILLIAMS: Yes. We met at Camp Robert Smalls, which was my camp. He told us how he got there. Calvin was extremely fair, straight brown hair--light brown hair--and light eyes. He said when he was in New Orleans and he went to the induction center, they didn't ask him anything about race. They made some assumptions. So he ended up at Great Lakes, and he was on the main side. He was put into the training companies on the other side. He was drilling with his rifle and looking around and didn't see any blacks. He went to his officer and asked them. He says--at that time, I guess the word was Negro--"Aren't there any Negro sailors here?" He was told, "Oh, yes. They're on the other side." He says, "Why aren't I over there?"

HENDERSON: Oh, wow. He gave himself away. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: He did it purposely. He could understand. He ended up at Camp Robert Smalls in my company, 991. Very interesting. He thought that was a very interesting story himself. But he understood very well how he got there. They did not ask him about race. He was aware of that, when he was--

HENDERSON: So he decided deliberately not to pass.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

HENDERSON: Well, how did you get the training of radio operator? That is, did you select that? Or did they select that for you?

WILLIAMS: They selected that for me. Because I wanted-- I told you I like planes.

HENDERSON: You wanted to fly, yes.

WILLIAMS: The closest thing that I could get to an airplane, not being a pilot, was an aviation machinist. So I asked to be an aviation machinist, which would have transferred me to Memphis, Tennessee, for training. They felt, from aptitude tests, whatnot, that I'd make a radio operator. So I ended up in radio school, and I was rated from service school-- Three of us received radioman third class out of school. And that's the way that was.

Then they put me in charge of about ten or twelve fellows, then transferred us to San Francisco. Here I am, eighteen years old and in charge of all these older guys.

HENDERSON: You were in charge?

WILLIAMS: I was in charge of these guys because I was the only one that had a third-class rank. They were seamen first class. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Now, San Francisco is known as a wicked town! [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes. I was glad to get there so I could give up-- I had all their I.D. cards and everything. They

couldn't go anyplace, you see, unless I permitted it. But we became very good buddies, all of us. Two of those fellows became shore patrol. I used to see them when I was on liberty in San Francisco. And they'd have fun, because I was small. Some of these guys were big. They'd [recall] how they came here on the train when I was in charge. [laughter] "Yeah, he wouldn't let us out of his sight."

HENDERSON: Did you always remain in San Francisco while you were in the navy?

WILLIAMS: Well, no. I was transferred to Treasure Island [Naval Station], and I was put on a subchaser. I had subchaser duty for about a year, and they transferred us to the Pacific, see? In the interim, I got out of the radioman second class, and I spent most of my time overseas in Manila.

HENDERSON: The Philippines.

WILLIAMS: Philippines. We moved in shortly after it was taken by our navy, and we formed the Philippine Sea Frontier. I stayed there until I was discharged, in 1946. One of the officers told me, as the days were getting close for our group to leave, "Williams, why don't you ship over to regular navy? You could become the first Negro pilot." At that time, it was too late in my mind. I told him to take the navy-- Dit, dit, dit, dit. [laughter] He said--he was a colonel--"I understand."

It's just ironic. The first Negro pilot in the navy was an Ensign Brown from Mississippi.

HENDERSON: What year?

WILLIAMS: Nineteen forty-six. Ensign Brown was killed in Korea attempting to pick up a downed white pilot.

HENDERSON: Irony of ironies.

WILLIAMS: Isn't it?

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 28, 1989

HENDERSON: I had some questions about the military. When you got discharged, where were you discharged to? Or where did you travel through from the Philippines back to where you were discharged?

WILLIAMS: Oh, we were discharged at-- I tried to get discharged at California, but they sent us back to Great Lakes and through Chicago. I was discharged as a radioman first class. I had a good job as radioman. After you start getting your ranks, your jobs become more interesting and you get to see coded messages that are going to the various bases and whatnot. It's very interesting.

HENDERSON: When you came back from Manila, did you come back through San Francisco or L.A.?

WILLIAMS: No, I came back through San Francisco.

HENDERSON: Then you went back across the country on a train.

WILLIAMS: On the train, yeah. During that term, though, in the Philippines, I met a professor of architecture who used to teach at Santo Tomas University [Universidad] in English Saint Thomas. We met. He learned that I had some interest in architecture, and that interested him. He used to come around our base in Manila and pick me up and take me back into the country. I got to see Santo Tomas. He

was showing me where the architecture department was before our ships had gone in and bombed out the Japanese and bombed everything in its path. That was a first-rate school. I've talked with a number of Filipino architects here, now, and they talk about Santo Tomas.

HENDERSON: So it's still going?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

HENDERSON: It was rebuilt?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: And he was a Filipino.

WILLIAMS: He was a Filipino and was an architect. I had a very interesting time in Manila. It was a good place to be.

HENDERSON: You know, personally, I've noticed that Filipinos tend to be very, I don't know, simpático with blacks, have fewer hangups about being friendly with blacks.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Let me tell you. On my base, the Philippine Sea Frontier, which was on Dewey Boulevard, I was the only black on the base, and it was very easy to make friends with Filipinos. I remember a young kid. He was ten years old. His parents had been killed earlier in the war. After a while I'd see him, and his hair was all curled like a beautician had done it. I've forgotten his name right now. It may come back to me. It was a snappy

little name. But I asked him, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm trying to make my hair like yours."

HENDERSON: Oh, no! [laughter] And he was going to a beautician to have that done?

WILLIAMS: I don't know where he had it done. But he was trying to get it curled in small curls all over his little head, his little black hair. The cutest little kid. Some black soldiers really took him in, and he stayed in their camp. Filipinos were very-- I remember meeting a black man who had lived there since the Spanish-American War. He had five beautiful daughters. They were called mestizo. They were the nicest people. You would think that they might have been from San Francisco. So the mixture and the mingling was very interesting. But they have a racial prejudice among themselves. The Filipino was dark-skinned, and those who were mixed with the Spanish, Chinese, kind of segregate themselves. There's a group who used to live around the winter capital. At the time-- I'm trying to remember the president. I think [Manuel] Roxas was the president at that time. These people, a lot of the Spanish types, lived around that area, so there was a little tension between those groups themselves, which I found kind of interesting.

HENDERSON: Let me ask you a conceptual question, and that is: at what age do you remember being aware of race and

whether or not that was positive or negative in your mind?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I was made aware of race very early. Seven, eight [years old], maybe even before that.

HENDERSON: By your parents? Or who?

WILLIAMS: No. I remember the first time, walking near my house in Cincinnati, some little children run out and call, "Nigger."

HENDERSON: For no reason?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. The skin was different from theirs. And undoubtedly, this came from teaching of the parents. That was very obvious. I remember a long lecture, Mother and Dad talking about that whole thing, and race, and how they encourage you to [gesture of knocking a chip off his shoulder] knock it off with--

HENDERSON: Don't let that bother you.

WILLIAMS: Brush it away. Not let it bother what you want to do. Oh, yeah. Our neighborhood then was a mixed neighborhood: Jewish and blacks, you know, who've always been there. And our neighboring community-- Walking distance, of course-- Avondale, which was a highly Jewish community-- You might have an intersection with four synagogues on the four corners. The Jews always, when they were ready to move to another area, they would always notify the black community that they're going to move. So

blacks in many communities would follow Jews. Jews first. Jews move. Blacks come in. Avondale right now is about 99.9 percent black. And at the time that I was growing up, it was 99.9 percent Jewish. Very interesting.

HENDERSON: I have noticed that-- That sort of hop, skip, jump exchange of neighborhoods.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Yes. I had a rabbi here, who is now back in Cincinnati. Cincinnati, you know, they have a fantastic university for the Jewish community in Cincinnati. Rabbi [Alfred] Gottschalk, from Los Angeles, is now back at that university [Hebrew Union College] in Cincinnati. They used to talk to me about racial things. One of the things that-- I remember his wife, Jeannie Gottschalk, used to work with us at Watts Towers. She mentioned the fact that one of their fears was that if blacks become supplanted, the Jewish community is next. That's one of the reasons they are very instrumental in working with black organizations and black groups to get things on a normal keel. Self-protection.

HENDERSON: I hadn't realized that. They were concerned about events here in L.A., not necessarily Cincinnati at that time?

WILLIAMS: Not at that time, no. Yeah, they were working here. That's why Jeannie's very busy collecting things and everything for our art center down at Watts Towers and

trying to influence these young kids that are growing up so that they flourish and our community becomes more and more stable and it protects that second line. I thought that was kind of interesting myself.

HENDERSON: Interesting. This is another conversation we'll have, maybe not for this tape. Watts is sort of being supplanted, anyway. [laughter] But we'll leave that for another time.

You mentioned that many of your friends, or many people that you knew in Cincinnati, are out here in L.A.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

HENDERSON: Is that a pattern? Do you see a real strong pattern? I guess what I'm asking is that, have enough people moved out here so that there's sort of a Cincinnati network for you out here?

WILLIAMS: Not really. Not really. I've had a lot of others who have moved from Cincinnati who have moved back.

HENDERSON: Moved--?

WILLIAMS: To Los Angeles.

HENDERSON: To Los Angeles and then moved back.

WILLIAMS: And then back to Cincinnati. As we've always said, if you can't make it in Cincinnati, you can't make it anywhere! Property, food, everything is on a much lesser scale than in Los Angeles. Some come here not prepared for

that and, therefore, have to return.

I came, though, for several reasons. One, I had met Paul [R.] Williams when I was in the service, and I used to write him. After I was discharged, I attended school at Talladega. I used to write him all the time, let him know where I was at Talladega. Then I left Talladega and entered architecture school at Miami University, and I used to write him all the time. He used to send me little things showing what they were doing. I remember a blotter with Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, in sketch form on it. It said they were designing that building at that time.

HENDERSON: How did you happen to meet Williams while you were in service? I mean, did he come to you? Or you went to him?

WILLIAMS: No. Yeah, I went to him. It was-- Let's see. Let's see, when I first met him, I was living on Thirty-fifth Street, I believe. Thirty-fifth Place.

HENDERSON: You came from San Francisco all the way down here to--

WILLIAMS: I used to come down to Los Angeles quite a bit.

HENDERSON: So it wasn't a special trip?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no. No. I let him know that I was interested in going into architectural school. And we didn't-- The first time we met, we didn't have an

opportunity to talk. I think most of our talking was done through letter writing. And he hired me strictly from Cleveland, Ohio, after I had graduated from Miami University, hired me from Cleveland to come out here and work.

HENDERSON: This is actually getting just a little bit ahead of ourselves. I'd rather stick with the college years and then get into how you came to Los Angeles. After you got discharged, you went to Talladega. Tell me something about that, how you decided to go there and for what reasons.

WILLIAMS: Well, one, I think my brother probably had a little influence. He was a graduate of Talladega College. He did not go to service. He did not want to go to service.

HENDERSON: How did he escape the draft?

WILLIAMS: Premed student at that time.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. [laughter] Well, let me ask this question: at that time, were you even thinking of going into architecture?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. I had totally decided what I wanted to do. I think, at the time, there were only fourteen accredited schools of architecture.

HENDERSON: Total, in the U.S.?

WILLIAMS: In the country. This was 1946. I wrote to

fourteen schools of architecture. And Miami University had a very interesting program. MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] had an interesting program. Cornell University and Howard University. The only thing, Howard was not accredited in 1946. I think they became accredited in 1949. But their program-- I was very much aware of Howard because my minister was a graduate of Howard University. But the program at Howard at the time was, for my liking, a little too socially oriented, with social concerns, more than learning design. They were not heavy in design, and I wanted, first, to be able to design, so--

HENDERSON: And you were judging all this from, say, pamphlets, brochures?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Looking at the program for the years, plus the fact that they did not have accreditation at the time, helped influence me away. I decided that I would attend Miami University. They wrote, I remember, a very interesting letter. They had no blacks at that school. Had never had a black in that school.

HENDERSON: And when you wrote to them, you told them you were black?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: How did they find out you were?

WILLIAMS: No. Not until I went.

HENDERSON: Oh. Oh, okay. Now I'm getting ahead of you.

I'm sorry. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: They didn't find out until I showed up. But I just knew the history about that school. University of Cincinnati was another one that had no blacks in their architectural department. I don't know how many black faculty they had at that time. Very, very small.

HENDERSON: Okay. Now, I don't think Wilberforce has architecture.

WILLIAMS: No, they don't. That's why I couldn't consider Wilberforce. Talladega did not have it. Had Talladega had architecture, I would have remained. That is one fantastic college.

HENDERSON: Did you check out Tuskegee [Institute]?

WILLIAMS: Yes. In fact, I'd been in Tuskegee. At the time I think there were some problems with accreditation also. Tuskegee, Hampton Institute, at the time-- Because Hampton was one of my favorite-- I used to write for a new catalog every year when I was in high school. Hampton Institute-- I liked the name, Hampton Institute. But their programs leaned toward a carpenter, brickmasonry--

HENDERSON: That's true. They were sort of vocational-type programs.

WILLIAMS: Vocational, yeah. That's the thing that turned me, again, away from there. I think my selection was good. I could have gone to Ohio State [University], but I

went up to Ohio State. We had 250 students in all five classes at Miami University. I went up to Ohio State and looked at that first-year class. One hundred twenty-five students in the freshman class. I said, "This is ridiculous."

HENDERSON: Not many of those students are going to remain for the second year.

WILLIAMS: That's right. I know. Many of them would not get the attention that they needed in order to make the second year. That's the other thing I looked at. That's why I liked Talladega College, for instance, as a liberal arts college. At the time I was there, it had 362 students, 35 professors.

HENDERSON: I thought Talladega was bigger than that.

WILLIAMS: It may be a few more than that now. Not many more, I'm sure. But we had 362 students. And I forget how many of those were vet[eran]s. I have a photograph I look at. Every once in a while, I look at all the young faces who were there in-- When were we there? That was September of '46. Yeah, I was just there that one year and transferred to Miami University.

And Miami, it's a good school. Students had some say in the curriculum, in what they were studying and how they were doing it. I found that very different than many institutions and their curriculum.

HENDERSON: And this is September of '47.

WILLIAMS: This is September '47. Yeah, it was Miami University. It was September '47 until June '52.

HENDERSON: That's five years. Now, how did they receive you at Miami? You were saying when you got there, you discovered there were no blacks and--

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Well, I knew that before I went.

HENDERSON: You'd visited the campus before because that's close to your home.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Thirty-three miles. Now, I got a very nice welcome. And my classmates, just fantastic.

HENDERSON: No problems?

WILLIAMS: No problems. It surprised me. There were five of us that used to be very close. We were all in five different directions. We had said we were going to form a firm, and we all took off after we got that little piece of paper.

HENDERSON: C'est la vie.

WILLIAMS: That's right. And Tom Neiderkorn became a planner. He worked with Bartholomew. Bartholomew used to be in Saint Louis. They opened an office in Hawaii, and Tom joined them there. A lot of fellows wanted to get into planning. Two friends and students-- One was from Cleveland-- I'm trying to recall names as I talk. And another one--

HENDERSON: Well, let me ask this question now: Miami is a state school?

WILLIAMS: Yes, a state institution. Tuition at the time was $25. It's a little more than that now, but it's still in that proportion to other institutions.

HENDERSON: Did you stay in the dorm or off campus?

WILLIAMS: I stayed off campus. Prior to that--let me see--there was one fellow who played football who they allowed to stay in the basement of that men's dormitory.

HENDERSON: Oh, no! [laughter] Oh, no! In the basement!

WILLIAMS: Yes. He was from Cleveland. Bill Harris. Fantastic runningback. You know, I was at Miami when Ara [R.] Parseghian, who coached Notre Dame [University] and Northwestern [University] prior to that-- He was a runningback at Miami when I was there. That used to be a team of-- Well, so many of the fellows are coaching football now. The other runningback was a smaller fellow. I can't recall his name, but he was coaching football at University of Indiana. Two of the linemen-- One was an army coach, one was a University of Mississippi coach. It's been that kind of history.

But 1946 was the first time they had had as many black students on that campus in its history. We had-- I want to say '52-- I don't remember whether it was '52 or '46.

HENDERSON: And what's the population for the whole campus?

WILLIAMS: Five thousand. I stayed off campus with a family named Williams who were students at the university. I think that's the main reason, because we all became very good friends. The dad worked on campus. Mr. Williams was a utility man around the campus. One of the brothers was a photographer. Another one of the boarding students was named Brooks Lawrence. Brooks came from Springfield [Ohio]. He was about six foot four, weighed about 218 or 220 pounds. He came down on a football scholarship but grew to be one of the star baseball pitchers. From Miami, he became a Cincinnati Red. Fantastic. He threw up those [size] thirteen [shoes] and you couldn't see his face and here comes that ball. [laughter]

HENDERSON: How did you happen to get that living arrangement? You just met Mr. Williams on campus since he was a handyman? The school didn't refer you to them?

WILLIAMS: No, I met a number of people in the community, and I preferred staying in the community. I stayed with two other families that boarded students. And I enjoyed--All of us. The Williams family was the last one where I stayed. Of course, they had so many boys in the family, and they had dogs and cats, and they used to have horses. I loved all that. That was a good arrangement. But that was just from going up and meeting people who lived out in

the community. All these people had children or relatives who were students at Miami. So it was a good arrangement.

Let me talk about having problems. In the school, actually, none. I remember a young fellow from Lincoln Heights, Ohio, down just outside Cincinnati, who wanted to become an architect. And I was--

HENDERSON: Was he a black student?

WILLIAMS: A black student. I was told that, when he went to the University of Cincinnati to apply, they told him, "Why don't you go to Miami? There's a Negro student that we know that's a student at Miami's architectural school." That kid did not ever enter architecture. I don't know what he's doing. His sister was a controller at Wilberforce. That's how I happened to know him.

But I worked for an architect professor during the summers. I remember he had me lettering and lettering and lettering and lettering and lettering. That's all I did. I thought that was all there was to architecture. [laughter]

HENDERSON: They had no Kroy [lettering] machines then.

WILLIAMS: That's right. I would border sheets for the older guys, the more experienced guys, and whatnot. His name was David Maxfield.

HENDERSON: Well, let me ask this question about the Miami

University education. Was it a beaux-arts system? Or what kind of design did they teach? Did they teach you particular methods or any particular styles or--?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: Just a general education?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they did not want to get into styles. And I thank them for that! They taught you how to think. That's the main thing. They taught you how to think, how to think design. I don't know if they are still doing the things they did their first year there, in terms of arrangement of spaces and those kinds of things. I think some of the schools are still doing that. I have seen some of these first-year projects, and they're similar to the kinds of things that we were doing, teaching you how to think three-dimensionally and how to organize space three-dimensionally, but not any particular style.

HENDERSON: There was no controversy at that time about following a Bauhaus method of education or--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. We've talked about that. I think one of the schools who did follow beaux arts was University of Illinois. University of Illinois, Miami University, MIT, all had an exchange program. We used to have our projects photographed, and they would be sent to the sister schools. I remember all the things. I can still see those things that came from University of Illinois, all very

similar kinds of things, even the way they drew trees. In fact, working for Paul Williams--getting ahead again--he had a collection of these in his library, in his personal library, from beaux-arts schools.

You have another question that you were about to--?

HENDERSON: Now I can't think of it. I think I was going to ask, after you graduated, you said you went to Cleveland. I want to find out about that situation. When you graduated, did you know where you were going to go or what you were going to do immediately, right after graduation?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, by that time, because I had been doing some investigating prior to that. A couple of fellows in class took the state board exam right out of school and got their license to practice architecture.

HENDERSON: You could do that right out of school?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I was one of those people who said, "I cannot get myself that title until I know what the field is about." I refused to go with the guys to take that state board exam. I said, "Now, you may be lucky enough to pass. And then what?"

I decided to go to Cleveland. There was a firm that I investigated there. I took another fellow who was a year behind me, Marty Bricker, who was from Mansfield, Ohio. He and I drove up to Cleveland and went to this firm, Fulton,

Krinski, and DelaMotte. Ray DelaMotte, at the time, was about thirty-eight years old. No, I take that back. He was a graduate of Miami University, class of 1938. That was it. They had a very interesting partnership in Cleveland. Marty and I ended up working there. We went up for an interview, and they hired us. We went up about a month later.

HENDERSON: Now, this was not a black firm. This was--

WILLIAMS: A white firm. Black firms? There was only one in Cleveland, and it was like a one-man firm. Today it's about a ninety-man firm. That's Madison and Madison. I don't know if you know them.

HENDERSON: I don't know them.

WILLIAMS: This Madison was a graduate of [Case] Western Reserve [University]. I think the class of '48. His dad was an engineer. And upon his dad's death, he took over the firm. He had a younger brother, who used to work there during the summer months, who was a student of Howard University. And, I think, at Howard-- My wife [Betty Smith Williams] knew him at Howard, and I had met the oldest Madison in Cleveland. I remember they started their firm in a two-story house. I remember seeing this sign very artistically mounted on cord from the top floor, and it was suspended in the center: "Madison: Architect, Engineer." I was very impressed with that.

So the thing in Ohio-- Let me tell you, today I think there may be only one or two firms more than the six that I knew in the entire state. In Cincinnati, there were none. And I had thought about opening an office in that area. A lot of people have encouraged me to do that, but--

HENDERSON: Even after you had opened your office here?

WILLIAMS: Here, yeah. I'm jumping around because things come to mind. You can put these in context.

HENDERSON: No. They're on the tape. They will be transcribed as is. But I do have this question. I notice that, as I'm asking you about different people or personalities, perhaps I'm injecting race as an issue into situations where it wasn't necessarily thought of in that way. But when you graduated, and you're facing sort of a real-world situation, and you're discovering that, yes, there are these firms. There are white firms, black firms, etc. What was your concept about the working world in racial terms at that time? Did it even come up? Or did you even think--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. We discussed a lot of that, even my classmates, knowing the prejudices that exist in everyday life in the United States, and wondering what I was going to do. Everybody's wondering what--

HENDERSON: They were wondering this at the time?

WILLIAMS: At the time. What are you going to do? Outside

of that class and off campus in Miami, it was pretty bad in terms of blacks working in that area. That's why you find fellows with firms. Because it was very difficult to go into a white firm and become a part of that white establishment. Very difficult. I remember, even as a second-year student, during the summer, there was a job offer in Cincinnati.

HENDERSON: A job offered to you?

WILLIAMS: No, a job offer in the newspaper. An architect by the name of Howard McCloskey. I called Mr. McCloskey. He was looking for a beginning student, described the work that he wanted to do. I called Howard McCloskey. He interviewed me on the telephone for the job. He felt that I met his specs perfectly. "Why don't you come down, and we'll sit down and talk about it?" And we set a date and a time. I was on time. I walked into Mr. McCloskey's office. He was standing behind his desk reading a document. I walked in, and I said, "Mr. McCloskey, I'm Harold Williams." And he looked up, and then looked again. The man was beet red. "Come in, son. Have a seat." Then he started talking about some students that he had hired in the past. He said, "Now, here's one. Majinski"--or whatever the name, but it was a "ski" from Detroit that he had hired--"I trained him well, and he left me and went to another firm. Here's another one"--another

"ski"--"he left and went to another firm." And we haven't talked about this job yet. He's asking me why did I become an architect. Why do I want to become an architect? "Why don't you become a Pullman porter? Mail department? And get yourself some good secure funds." We had a nice little discussion. If I could have shown it, I was beet red, but I was angry. I let him have a little bit, and I bid him farewell.

At the university, I brought his name up before some of the faculty, as to what some of us had to expect in the real world. I think that is a common story during that time. I think it's changing a little bit. It's changed a little bit. But during that time, that was a common story. I'm sure that's why there you only find six black offices throughout the state of Ohio. I'm saying there may be eight or ten now, but not many more. Not many more. I knew all the fellows who had an office back there at that time. But that's one of the reasons that I left that part of the country and came out here.

HENDERSON: You thought you could make a better start out in California?

WILLIAMS: Oh, of course. California had Paul Williams. California was the land of sunshine. They don't do everything in brick. They use some stucco out here, and we get into some colors. And it's a little different kind of

atmosphere. At least that's what I've conceived.

HENDERSON: Now, I'm curious about this. There were black architects in New York and D.C. Or were you aware of them? Were you aware of other black architects, other than Paul Williams?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Sure. The professors at Howard [University], I knew two of them: Hilyard Robinson, who reminded me very much of Paul Williams, and [Howard Hamilton] Mackey [Sr.]. In fact, I used to talk to Mackey on the telephone. He wanted me to come to his office at one time. I think I was either a second- or third-year student at that time. There was a offer to go to come to his office, but I couldn't afford to go to Washington, D.C., to live and to try to work, because salaries were not what the fellows are making today. In fact, when I came to California, I took a $2 and-- No, that's what my salary was: $2.75 an hour.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: You see? It was 1956, '55, $2.75. I had three years of experience when I came here.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 31, 1990

HENDERSON: I wanted to ask you five questions about information that I had questions about on the first tape. One of the first questions was, did you go to school on the GI Bill? When I say school, I mean to Talladega [College] and Miami [University]. Did the GI Bill pay for that?

WILLIAMS: Yes, it did. I think I had a total of forty-nine months of GI Bill when I was discharged from the navy, which served to take me through one year at Talladega College and five years at Miami University.

HENDERSON: The GI Bill had no problems on paying for schooling at a black university? You could use it anywhere you wanted to?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yes, you had choices of any of the schools. I was at Talladega, of course, because, at that particular time, there were very few schools that were accredited schools of architecture. While I was on the waiting list at two or three of those schools, I decided to spend that first year getting acclimated back into the college scene, and I decided to go to school at Talladega College, which was a missionary school. It had a student body of about 360 and a faculty of 35 professors. My brother [Leonard H. Williams, Jr.] is a graduate of Talladega College, and I learned about it from him. I

decided that would be a good expenditure of time while waiting for an architectural school.

HENDERSON: Now, I've got another background question related to this. When you were being mustered out of the navy, when you were preparing to leave, did you get any counseling on what to do once you got out? Or did they explain to you all the rules about the GI Bill? Or were you just sort of discharged and that was it?

WILLIAMS: Well, details of the GI Bill were explained. But as far as counseling as to what you wanted to do, no. That was-- Nothing. In fact, if counseling was a term to be used, I was counseled by one of the officers to ship over to the regular navy and become its first black pilot, since they knew that I was interested in flying. But that's the only counseling that was received.

HENDERSON: Okay. The second question is, where is Great Lakes [Naval Training Center]? Your boot camp. Where exactly is that?

WILLIAMS: Great Lakes is in Illinois, oh, approximately forty miles from Chicago.

HENDERSON: West or north?

WILLIAMS: North. It was getting close to the Wisconsin border.

HENDERSON: When you were at Oxford-- When I say Oxford, I mean Miami.

WILLIAMS: Oxford, Ohio.

HENDERSON: Oxford, Ohio. I know that Miami is--

WILLIAMS: Miami University.

HENDERSON: Miami University is in the town of Oxford.

WILLIAMS: Right.

HENDERSON: Did you have a particular teacher who was like a mentor or a motivator? Anybody you related to especially?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think there were probably two or three, maybe. The one that seemed to be mentor, not only to me but to a number of young people going into the school of architecture, was a gentleman by the name of Andy Wirtz. Andy taught structures at Miami. Andy enjoyed teaching structures to young people. Andy was one who made you feel comfortable studying structures.

HENDERSON: In structures? That's a notoriously uncomfortable subject.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. So many of us felt that it was fantastically complicated. Andy said it's fantastically simple. That's the attitude with which he taught. And that's the attitude that he brought out from the students, to learn structures. He made it much more simple than we thought it was. I think structures is still a complicated subject. [laughter]

But then there was another instructor in architectural

design. His name was Koeppel Small. Koeppel was one who was a fantastic motivator by keeping up your morale and whatnot. I can remember, there was one young man in my class who had a lot of architectural experience, working in an architect's office even before he came into architecture school. He had a real head start and really disheartened the rest of us, because he was so far advanced, and we were just beginners. Both Koeppel Small and Andy Wirtz said, "You don't worry about that." He said, "By your third, fourth, and fifth year, that gap will have closed." This young man was of the temperament such that, when the gap closed so fast, he left school and entered another school, [Case] Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. He was an "A" student in our class. But, seemingly, he could not take the idea that all these others, who started with no experience, had caught up with him.

HENDERSON: It's an ego problem. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: We found that extremely interesting. That gentleman's name is Robert Fox. He was the student.

HENDERSON: Has he gone on to greater glory or what?

WILLIAMS: I have no idea. We didn't hear any more about Fox after he left school.

HENDERSON: He's not part of the Kohn, Pederson, Fox group?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. [laughter] Now, at Miami you had

several buddies. You had five buddies, and you'd formed a sort of clique.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I guess we did.

HENDERSON: How did that get started?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I think it was, number one, the personalities fit. Number two, I banged around on the piano, sort of. One of the other fellows, Don Stewart, played trumpet. A couple of the other fellows did some other kinds of things. But because of the commonality of interests, I guess-- One fellow, Tom Neiderkorn, was an "A" student in our class. Allen Jacobs, another "A" student in our class. Since I've been out and have been to other schools, I can see why these fellows were "A" students in our class.

Allen Jacobs went on, won a fellowship and studied in Europe for a year, came back, and worked, I believe, in Pittsburgh, with the planning department for the city and eventually became the planning director for the city of San Francisco. Now, we graduated from Miami in 1952. Since being in California, I was on a team of architects. We had been awarded a part of the project in San Francisco called Hunters Point. Well, that fell a little bit in the jurisdiction of the planning department of the city of San Francisco. There was one time that I heard that the director of San Francisco was a Mr. Jacobs. So I had to

call that department about this project, and I called for this Mr. Jacobs. I asked if this Mr. Jacobs was a graduate of Miami University of Ohio. His direct answer to me was, "Yes, it is, Harold." Stunned me! Now, we were graduated in '52, and this was about 1968 or '69. And both of us had been in different directions since the day we received our diplomas.

HENDERSON: But he still knew your voice.

WILLIAMS: It really threw me. It really threw me. But he was one of those that was of this five.

There was another one by the name of Dick [Richard] Shoppe. Dick was from Florida. Since graduating--I get all the information from Miami--they're still looking for him! [laughter] Nobody knows where Dick Shoppe is. But that was one of the sharpest sketch artists that I have ever met. Very clever, very fast, and very, very, very, very artistic in his approach to things.

The five of us said that upon graduation we were going to work together. We were going to form a firm. But, of course, upon graduation, five different directions. Tom Neiderkorn went to work for Bartholomew [company], a planner who had an office in Hawaii. Don Stewart is still in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I think he's teaching faculty [at the University of North Carolina] there, plus has his own practice. And Jacobs, of course-- I don't know

where he is now. He's no longer the planner in San Francisco. He's gone on to some greater things, I'm sure. And Dick Shoppe, I don't know where he is. [laughter] But we were very, very, very close in school, and nobody shied away from sharing information, input about the project that you might be working on, or all these kinds of things. It was a great experience.

HENDERSON: Now, did other students see you five as a group?

WILLIAMS: Not really. See, our class-- We started with a class of fifty-two, and by the time we had gotten to our fifth year, we had sixteen. So all of us were-- We had two young ladies in class, Nancy Howell, who went on to New York. I think Nancy is married. I don't know her married name, but I don't think she practiced architecture. And another one, Ruth-- I've forgotten Ruth's maiden name, but she married one of our classmates, Don Ross. And I happened to be at an AIA [American Institute of Architects] convention in Hawaii, sitting at a table with another architect from out of state. I found out he was from Ohio. Oh, he was from Cincinnati--home. He talked about one of his office managers, Don Ross. He found out that Don and I were classmates, and he had a ball talking about Don and Ruth. Well, he went back to Cincinnati and told Don and Ruth that he had met me. This was 1984. Don and

Ruth came to California with their son, who was a rifleman on the Olympic team. So we had a ball talking about all that. That's the first I'd seen of Don and Ruth since graduation. But again, it was like old home week and brought back all the memories of Miami and some of our studio workshops. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Last question: your neighbor who gave you your first drafting board when you were twelve and--

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. I learned that his name was Sam Burch. To me, then, he was an architect, but he was never licensed, I don't believe. But he understood the construction industry and understood the design of buildings. That's what he was doing.

HENDERSON: He was a very concrete role model for you.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. The only one that I had at that time. Because, as you know, this is a field that has few black licensed architects, even in 1990. And I have talked with fellows back at Miami University. Since my graduation in 1952, there have been no other blacks in that school. And that's a state school. When I went there, the tuition was only $25. But I think that there's a reason for some of that. You know, in the state of Ohio, there are now fewer than twelve black architectural firms.

HENDERSON: I didn't know that. Because there are a lot of blacks in Ohio.

WILLIAMS: When I was there, there were three firms in Cleveland: Madison and Madison, Whitley and Whitley and--oh, gosh, this one fellow was a one-man office, but he did have an office--Art [Arthur] Sanders. Those were the only three in the state. Only three offices in the state. Then came one other, a graduate of Howard University, [Robert] Mangrum, who is now deceased. Mangrum ended up in Cleveland with an office, although he was from Cincinnati, as I am. Then I think there were two firms in Columbus, Ohio, then one black engineering firm in Cincinnati, and that was its limit. Now I understand that there may be two other black firms in Columbus, Ohio. No architects in Cincinnati. Just the one engineer is still there.

HENDERSON: That's not a good situation.

WILLIAMS: Though, that was-- Well, I'll tell you, I don't know if Ohio is the best-- Oh, there's another architect. I forgot one in Youngstown, Ohio. Harris. Nelson Harris. All these names, I don't recall them that often. They've kind of slipped away from me. But Harris had an office--has an office--in Youngstown now. He had one in Youngstown and in Chicago, and he closed his office in Chicago. And he, with a nephew who is an architect, runs that Youngstown office.

HENDERSON: Now, was there any, or is there any sense of organization among these architects in Ohio? Do they have

like an active NOMA [National Organization of Minority Architects] chapter or anything going on there? Or are they all just kind of scattered?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't believe there is an Ohio chapter of NOMA, although Nelson was one of the founders. Nelson Harris was one of the founders. But he was the only one who came from Ohio to form the original organization.

HENDERSON: I think it's a shame that black entrepreneurs tend to be isolated.

WILLIAMS: Very much so.

HENDERSON: You try to work at a kind of common problem all by yourself, and that's what NOMA was intended to try to fight.

WILLIAMS: That's right. It's been successful, I would say, on a limited basis, probably.

HENDERSON: Okay. You had some questions for me, and I'm ready to talk about those. Not questions. You wanted to talk about your family.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Well, I just felt that from that first tape, that I didn't talk about my mother [Geneva Timberlake Williams] and dad [Leonard H. Williams] a whole lot. I skipped over a lot of things getting to some of the things that really stood out in my life. But I think it's important to note their backgrounds, in terms of where they came from.

Dad was born in 1891, and Mother was born in 1896. I don't know if it was common in those days for parents to send their kids to school, on a general basis. For instance, my dad's family, as I said, lived in Flemingsburg, Kentucky, on a small farm that they owned. Dad was the youngest of five boys with two sisters. Here was a family who at least sent that youngest kid to school, and then to Frankfort [College], which is now Kentucky State [University].

Mother, on the other hand, was one of four: two boys and two girls. Her family name was Timberlake. Here again, a parent who decides to send at least one of their children to college.

HENDERSON: Was she the youngest?

WILLIAMS: Yes. She then matriculated to Knoxville College and became a teacher. I'm sure there are some other stories of other families and how they decided to try to educate their children.

My brother [Leonard H. Williams, Jr.] is married and has a family. My brother is married a second time. His first marriage, though, gave me a lovely niece, Anita [Williams], who is living in Vicksburg, Mississippi, who is an extremely talented dancer. That was her education and school, and she has since been teaching dance to young people. She is seemingly concentrating on the younger

generation, in terms of getting that art form out. Then, my brother has, of course, a second marriage. I have another niece who is now living in Detroit, who--

HENDERSON: What's her name?

WILLIAMS: Her name is Vicki [Lynn Williams].

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Vickie is gifted with a voice that is really tremendous. She has a brother by the name of Steven [Williams]. Steve had some-- I don't know where he picked up all the skills to play piano, but I would go home to visit these two, before they got of age, to listen to Steve play and his sister sing.

HENDERSON: A wonderful ensemble.

WILLIAMS: It was something, though. But neither decided to pursue that avenue, and maybe for the better. That's an extremely competitive field.

HENDERSON: Excuse me for asking you at this point, do you have any children?

WILLIAMS: No, I have no children. The only thing I have had are pets. [laughter] And speaking in terms of pets, that's been my thing since I was a little kid. I've always had pets. Until just recently, I lost--natural causes--two dogs that I have had. I've kind of missed them, not having a pet running around. This is one of the first times that I have not had a pet. But I don't know if I could take

losing one again, so maybe that's why I don't have one.

But then, back into talking about how one is educated and how one is encouraged to become educated, I think this comes from a lot of the values that both Mother and Dad taught us, because one of the things that they always talked to us about was going to school. Go to school. Get that education. They started us out by going to Bible school, you know, on Sundays.

HENDERSON: This was at your church?

WILLIAMS: This was at my church, yeah. That's one early form of getting that education. And then, in my experience with Boy Scouts, I became a Boy Scout when I was about eleven years old. I didn't go very far with merit badges and all that, but the experience of having that camaraderie with other human beings, that kind of thing is one, I think, that is extremely worthwhile, in terms of knowing and learning how to get along with others in your group. We used to do a lot of things together in Boy Scouts in terms of camping out and hiking and all these kinds of things. I kind of think that the influence that that had on me was working together for a common goal with others. I believe in that. In fact, I think, even still, I often say that, yes, you are your brother's keeper.

HENDERSON: That's an important statement.

WILLIAMS: I think that if we don't accept that attitude,

we're not going too far. We can't remain selfish. I think Boy Scouts had an influence in teaching me that as an early influence.

And another early educational tool, I think, was Mother and Dad's entering me and my brother in a program at our art museum. We had art classes.

HENDERSON: About at what age?

WILLIAMS: This was early on--fourth, fifth grade.

HENDERSON: Goodness.

WILLIAMS: We used to go to the art academy every Saturday morning. That we looked forward to every Saturday, because that was a lot of fun. And even-- Well, in high school, as I had indicated, I attended Withrow High School in Cincinnati.

HENDERSON: For a while.

WILLIAMS: For three years. Yeah. It was a racial prejudice situation that I could not take. I left and went to a greater experience at Wilberforce University Academy. Those were some days that I will never forget. With many other black students, black professors-- That was quite an experience. And it was from there, I think, that I went into the navy and started another phase of my life. But I thought I wanted to get some of these things mentioned.

HENDERSON: That's interesting about the art academy and

Boy Scouts, especially the art academy. At the art academy, were there other black students?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

HENDERSON: Was it an integrated situation?

WILLIAMS: It was integrated. It was an integrated situation. I think that was a time when the director of our symphony in Cincinnati [Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra], was Eugene Goossens, who has since deceased. We were even given some experience of being exposed to some of the symphonies at that young age. I got to learn something about opera and ballet and symphonic sounds starting back at that period.

HENDERSON: Most interesting. So you were ready to come to Los Angeles, in terms of your career.

WILLIAMS: Yes. I had a chance meeting with Paul [R.] Williams when I was in the navy, and I used to write him when I was at Talladega, let him know what I was doing. I think I found two books by Paul Williams [The Small Home of Tomorrow (1945), New Homes for Today (1946)] when I was at Talladega that had some sketches of his early homes.

HENDERSON: Now, you had met him by that time.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Tell me about the chance meeting. How did that happen?

WILLIAMS: I think that Paul Williams lived on Thirty-fifth

Street.

HENDERSON: And you'd obviously heard of him before you came to Los Angeles.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Someone took me to a party of the children there. I think he had a recreation room behind his house, and the kids had parties out there. That was when his youngest daughter, Norma [Williams Harvey], was quite young, and his oldest daughter, Marilyn [Williams Hudson], was about sixteen, seventeen years old. At that time, she was written up in the Pittsburgh Courier as the best-dressed teenager in America. [laughter] I can remember that. That was the time that I decided that I wanted to come back to California and I wanted to work with Mr. Williams. It so happened when I did come back in 1955, I went to a barbershop that was very near my mother's friend's home, where I stayed.

HENDERSON: This is in Cincinnati?

WILLIAMS: In Los Angeles.

HENDERSON: In Los Angeles. Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: That Saturday night I decided that I was going over to that barbershop, whose owner's name was Williams, and get a haircut. So I walked into the barbershop, and I sat down in the waiting area and looked up, and in that seat was Paul Williams getting a haircut.

HENDERSON: Himself.

WILLIAMS: Himself. And I told him that I would see him on Monday morning. Yeah, that was kind of interesting, too.

HENDERSON: See, my impression was that you had an interview set up with him for that Monday.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Well, it was starting work for him.

HENDERSON: Oh, for him. Yeah. You came out here specifically to work with him.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Absolutely.

HENDERSON: And you just happened to run into him.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was happenstance. That was strictly happenstance.

HENDERSON: You don't remember where that barbershop was, do you?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it was on Western [Avenue] near Thirty-sixth Place.

Oh, in that barbershop, I have met Jack Benny's [acting partner]--

HENDERSON: Rochester? [Eddie Anderson]

WILLIAMS: Rochester and Rochester's brother. Both used to attend that barbershop.

HENDERSON: I've found that in black communities a barbershop is the main crossroads of the community.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. But that was my beginning in this business of architecture.

HENDERSON: Before you went to work with Paul Williams, was

Los Angeles totally a new experience to you? Did you have problems when you moved to Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: What kind of problems?

HENDERSON: Was the weather bothersome? Did you miss home?

WILLIAMS: Let me tell you! [laughter]

HENDERSON: You loved the weather!

WILLIAMS: Where I came from, that winter, in December of 1954, as I stood on top of my car at the curb with a broom, sweeping off piles of snow, I vowed that that was my last winter in snow country. I was in Los Angeles with a car full of all my belongings and a wife [Betty Smith Williams], April 28, 1955. And I want you to know that I am here to stay. [laughter] The weather was just--

HENDERSON: Maybe my question should shift a little bit differently. You had no problems fitting into this community?

WILLIAMS: None, none.

HENDERSON: I mean, you found a church right off?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: You fitted right into a certain life-style and circle of friends?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and I'm going to try to remember how all that happened. Now, my wife is a graduate of Howard University and of Case Western Reserve [University], Francis Paine Bolton School of Nursing. She, likewise, had

a lot of friends that she had made at Howard. This weather seems to bring people from wherever they are across these borders into Los Angeles. There was one fellow by the name of Louis Johnson, who was a graduate of Howard University, in my wife's class, who was living in Los Angeles. We became very close, and we're still very close. Their children-- I think they had one boy, that was Michael [Johnson], who-- At the time, I think, Michael might have been a year, about two years old. And they had recently given birth to a young baby girl. It was from that time-- We've been around for diaper-changing time and these kinds of things, helping one move from one location to another. We became that kind of friend. Then, there were just a whole host of people that we began to meet and to befriend. It made it very easy.

HENDERSON: Out of curiosity, is that same group sort of living in this neighborhood?

WILLIAMS: Louis is living in Sacramento, and his boy and girl are in-- Well, let's see, I think Michael is in Sacramento, also. But their daughter is-- I think she's gone back East. Louis was from Houston, Texas, and I think Louis is planning to retire in Houston, Texas.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

JANUARY 31, 1990

HENDERSON: Let's talk about your working with Paul Williams and how that started. We know you had been corresponding with him. Maybe you can tell me something about how you fitted into the office. What were his working relationships? How many people were there? What year did you start with him? This was '55?

WILLIAMS: Nineteen fifty-five, in April. Talking about influences that brought me here, other than weather, California, or Southern California, anyhow, seemed to be an area where-- You talk about contemporary architecture and contemporary design, it seemed to have an appealing style.

HENDERSON: Now, you're referring to people like [Richard J.] Neutra and--?

WILLIAMS: No, I'm-- Well, I'm talking about just the-- I wasn't speaking of any one particular architect, but the style of architecture that seemed to exist in California. Eastern architecture deals a lot with masonry, and in California masonry is not that prevalent. I saw stucco, different colors of stucco, and this was appealing to me as a change. There are some extremely interesting things to do with masonry, of course. I don't take anything away from that. But it was just totally different.

HENDERSON: Did the houses or buildings here just seem more open?

WILLIAMS: Open, absolutely, and that was extremely appealing. I would have come to California under any circumstances, to tell you the truth.

The other things-- I went to work for Paul Williams, and the very first project that he gave me was a residence. And it was colonial style! [laughter] I was crushed! I was crushed, because that's not why I came. But it was interesting. Paul Williams is an interesting person. The most interesting thing about that residence to me was not its exterior and the fact that it was authentic, with the egg and dart and the pediments over the doorways and the windows and the muntin window designs, but it was the floor plan. I think he was unique in that area of how you relate spaces and how you organize spaces. The one thing that he told me that I'll always remember is, "Harold, become a good planner. You can always hire skin men." But the organization of space was the most important thing to him. And from talking with others, I think that was the thing that made him unique to them--how he took space and how he used it. And that was the most interesting-- After that, I said, "This is fine. It doesn't matter. We'll make it authentic, whatever it is. Use brick exteriors and--" It's a very nice house. It's on

the corner of Lexington [Road] and Crescent [Drive].

HENDERSON: This is in Beverly Hills.

WILLIAMS: In Beverly Hills. And that house was owned and lived in by a general contractor who hired Paul Williams to design it for him. I can't recall the name of that owner. [John and Rosamond] Landis. His first name, I don't remember.

HENDERSON: On that corner, Lexington and Crescent, which one of the corners is that house on?

WILLIAMS: Lexington goes around the property in one direction, Crescent goes round on another. It comes to a point right there. That's his property.

HENDERSON: It's on the short point.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That's up behind the Beverly Hills Hotel. But the house turned out so well, and people liked it so much-- I tell them they'd like it better if they'd get in and walk through it, because it's a nice use of space.

I think every home-- He designed Frank Sinatra's home. Again, it was the floor plan. How he used the space was very, very intriguing.

HENDERSON: Now, the Frank Sinatra house that I've seen pictures of, that was in the Ebony article, which was in [November] 1986, that house looked sort of modern.

WILLIAMS: Quite.

HENDERSON: When did Paul Williams make a shift from colonial to modern? Or did he do them both at the same time and it didn't bother him?

WILLIAMS: I think it's called-- He's capable of doing either, but I think it depends upon the client. He really designed for his clients. Many of the clients, like E. L. [Errett Lobban] Cord, wanted that particular style. Paul Williams was good at doing it. Frank Sinatra, on the other hand, wanted something that was contemporary. He was capable of doing it.

HENDERSON: With no qualms? No ideological problems on doing that?

WILLIAMS: None. None. None. None. I remember, before I came here, he sent me a picture of the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] office building, which, at the time, was quite ahead of its time. He was telling me that that was a project that was on the drafting board at that particular time. That must have been some time in, oh--

HENDERSON: It was completed in '49.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. This was a time that I was probably a second-year student at Miami [University]. God, I used to write to Paul Williams. He used to write back and tell me what's going on in the company. But--

HENDERSON: Do you know if he was doing that with other people?

WILLIAMS: I have no idea. When I worked with Paul Williams, I was one of two black designers in that office. The other one was Roy [A.] Sealey. Roy has his own practice. Roy is a very talented young man. And Roy worked for Paul Williams since he first came here from Texas and--

HENDERSON: This was about in what year?

WILLIAMS: Boy, now, I may make a mistake about those years.

HENDERSON: It can be approximate.

WILLIAMS: I don't know if I can even answer that. Let me see now. Paul Williams had an office on Wilshire [Boulevard] and Manhattan Place, I believe, in 1946. So it might have been somewhere around that time, '47. It was probably somewhere around that time. I think Roy had worked for Paul Williams, and there was another black architect, who now lives in Westlake Village, who was actually the first black architect to work for Paul Williams, Roy, then, being the second, I guess. And maybe I was the third. Because the other black architects in the area, they don't seem to have worked for Paul Williams. I'm thinking in terms of those who I met when I first came. Clyde [H.] Grimes [Sr.] worked for-- John [D.] Williams was working for someone else. Bob [Robert A.] Kennard was working for the same firm, Victor [D.] Gruen

and Associates, I think. Bob Kennard was working for Victor Gruen. Clyde Grimes worked for Victor Gruen. But none of these fellows seemed to work in Paul Williams's office. I personally liked the Paul Williams office and atmosphere because of its size.

HENDERSON: How many people were there?

WILLIAMS: Well, then, the maximum that we had was twenty-two, and all that group worked in teams on different projects. I think that kind of influenced me to stay smaller, because he was involved in all his projects.

HENDERSON: Personally?

WILLIAMS: Personally. And I think that's important to me. I've talked with some bigger architects who tell me they're not practicing architecture. "We are running a business."

HENDERSON: That makes a difference.

WILLIAMS: Yes. I've always wanted to practice architecture, and I will always practice architecture. I personally get involved in all of my projects. We don't have to talk to someone on the drafting board as to what's going on with that project. I know what's going on with the project. I know where it is, and I will always be involved that way. I think the key to it is having heavily experienced key people. I think a person can take eight good, experienced people and turn out as much work as an

eighteen-, twenty-man office.

HENDERSON: Really?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, especially with the change in technology now.

HENDERSON: Computers?

WILLIAMS: Computers. Absolutely. The thing that we're running short of are those with architectural backgrounds with experience in using a computer to do the mundane part of the work. It's hard to find. Schools are not seemingly turning them out very fast. But that's going to come, because I think that we're just on the verge of using computers in this business.

HENDERSON: Let me ask you about one project, in particular, that's become sort of-- Well, it's become not dear to me, but I know a lot about it. That's the addition on the UCLA campus to the psychology building [Franz Hall].

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Now, that's had two or three additions. I worked on the first one.

HENDERSON: Which was a low-rise three- or four-story addition.

WILLIAMS: Three-story, yeah. Three-- Just a minute. Let me remember. From the street, how is it? Three? And one below in the back?

HENDERSON: Well, they've closed off the street there, so it's, I guess--

WILLIAMS: That's right.

HENDERSON: I guess you'd say, front.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's right.

HENDERSON: It's one, two, three stories, and then on the other side it's lower.

WILLIAMS: It's four.

HENDERSON: So it's four.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I had some good experience in Paul Williams's office, working on those buildings. I worked on a couple of buildings out there.

HENDERSON: Which other buildings?

WILLIAMS: The Botany Building. That came after Franz Hall. Franz Hall was the first building that I worked on in Paul Williams's office for the UCLA campus. That was interesting in terms of the research that had to be done. There was a lot of testing going on in that building, psychological testing, that called for a lot of rooms to be shielded against radio waves and this kind of thing.

HENDERSON: Oh, really?

WILLIAMS: That building has a chamber that you call an anechoic chamber. At the time, I think there was only one [other] building. If I'm not mistaken--and I may be--that building was in Germany that had an anechoic chamber. This was one where the testee is sort of suspended. In order to do that, we had to string a wire floor.

HENDERSON: What? Wire?

WILLIAMS: You were actually walking on heavy wire floor that was open. I mean, open spaces all over, so that the floor did not interfere with any sound, did not reverberate any sound.

HENDERSON: Yeah, there were no vibrations. Goodness.

WILLIAMS: Below that, we had thirty-six-inch wedges of absorbent material. That was on the floor. And I think the only example of something like this that we could find was Douglas Aircraft [Corporation], where they have an anechoic chamber that was closed off with a man door that was a refrigerator door. It was thick like a vault door. Then they have a hole cut in there where they stick the body of an airplane, a portion of a fuselage, that you want to test. There was only one way to complete the building, and that was getting all these wedges on the floor, then on the side walls--

HENDERSON: And the ceiling.

WILLIAMS: And the ceiling. And there's one little three-foot-by-three-foot trap door at the ceiling where the worker-- One worker is the last one out of the room, and as he goes out the trap door, he pulls that last wedge up into place.

HENDERSON: Goodness!

WILLIAMS: The one at Douglas Aircraft, the only sound that

you hear is the blood flowing through your veins.

HENDERSON: Goodness.

WILLIAMS: And you can hear that. One of the workers at Douglas Aircraft was carried out on a stretcher. He couldn't take it.

HENDERSON: That can psychologically mess with somebody! [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. Well, that was kind of interesting, doing that one at UCLA in Franz Hall.

HENDERSON: Now, I have a question about that building in terms of the contract, how Paul Williams got the building. On the plans that I've seen, the drawings, they say, "Paul Williams, working under supervision of Welton Beckett."

WILLIAMS: Welton Beckett. Welton Beckett had an overall contract for all of the development of the campus. Any architect that worked on the campus, I think, 2 percent of the fee went to Welton Beckett. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Raked it off the top.

WILLIAMS: It's a shame. But that's all it is.

HENDERSON: But Welton Beckett had no control over the building?

WILLIAMS: Nothing. No, nothing to do with it. I think they probably-- You'd send your drawings over to his office, they'd make sure they're complete, and this kind of

thing. That's what they're supposed to be getting their 2 percent for. And I guess they did it. I don't know. But that was their job as supervising architect. That's what they call it. I don't know if they have that still.

HENDERSON: They have a campus architect, but I don't know if they're a supervising architect.

WILLIAMS: Well, they had a campus architect then, but I don't know if they still have a supervising architect that they hire to do that.

HENDERSON: Do you have an idea of how Paul Williams got that commission? The reason I'm asking the question is that I've found out through research that Paul Williams knew Welton Beckett personally from way back. They had had an office that was adjacent.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Probably politically. It was probably political. I, personally, have no idea about the politics behind getting work then. I just know the politics behind not getting work there [at UCLA] now. [laughter]

HENDERSON: You do have to know somebody.

WILLIAMS: And the fun of it is, who do you have to know?

HENDERSON: I don't know. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: It's very, very interesting. Things have changed so much since those days. See, at that time, I remember Paul Williams and I used to talk about blacks in

architecture across the country. At the time that I was working with Paul Williams, there were only forty-eight black architects in the country. And of course, he was the only one west of the Rocky Mountains. Others were practicing and teaching at Howard University: Howard [Hamilton] Mackey [Sr.], Hilyard Robinson, Lou [Louis E.] Fry [Sr.]--

HENDERSON: He's in D.C.? Lou Fry? Fry was in D.C.?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: I'm kind of curious as to how somebody who would have been, let's say, a young black architect coming along at that time-- How would you have found out about all forty-eight of those people? Would it just have been word of mouth?

WILLIAMS: Yes. There was one document that I have seen, and Paul Williams showed that to me. Somebody dealing with black publications in New York City published a Colored Map of the United States. On that map, they placed little photographs of prominent blacks around cities where they were. And I remember Paul Williams was sitting all the way out there in California.

HENDERSON: By himself.

WILLIAMS: And then all those architects were not on that map, but like Hilyard Robinson, some of those from Howard University were there. There were some other people that

were on that map, writers and things like that. But to answer your question about young people knowing-- There was probably no way to know. Now, I guess, through all the varied publications of black architectural rosters and things like this, it's possible to find them. And they're out there more--

HENDERSON: It's still tough to find them, though. I'm constantly surprised at young students coming up to me and saying, "Well, I don't know which way to go, where to go, who to find."

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

HENDERSON: And I'm sort of puzzled and stunned by that, because there are directories out.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was another function of knowing, was to organize students across the country and get them involved with professionals on various levels and get all the schools involved on various levels. But once you have a good president of that organization, and he graduates from school and becomes a professional himself, then it seems to go [makes sound of something flying away]. We've had two or three such good leaders among students, but they're all out there now. We don't even have a student as a member of our board anymore. We had that. The students used to show up at our meetings, and they used to communicate with the various campuses.

One of the best presidents, I think, we had was a student from Princeton [University], who is now working for Wendell [J.] Campbell. He is also an ordained minister, but he communicated with the various schools.

Then we had another young lady as recently as 1982, who was a student at Southern University, who was very much interested in this. She used to come to our board meeting and participate. She'd talk about student problems and how she would like to see NOMA [National Organization for Minority Architects] work with it. As I'm talking, I'm trying to recall some of these names. She married an engineer and is now in Virginia, working with a big firm.

There was one other young lady who was from the University of Arkansas, who used to participate. Now she is a licensed architect in Illinois, and she comes to NOMA meetings when she can and participates. I like that. She's working for government. I remember receiving a letter from this young lady--I think I still have it--that was all script, by hand. One of the most beautiful little documents you'd ever want to see. It was her résumé, just beautifully done by hand. You know, most of these things come out--

HENDERSON: Typed.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, typed, offset. Yeah. And she hand-scripted that. Just absolutely beautiful. I'm sure I

still have it, because I thought it was a beautiful document.

HENDERSON: Before we leave the Paul Williams area, I want to ask you one question on how he worked, because I've talked to some other people who say they observed Paul Williams working, and they would describe a design process where he might start and kind of work in a processional way, or he had an axial design idea, and he liked circles and ovals, and he had some sort of residual background ideas, training ideas, from his beaux-arts schooling. Did you also get that same sense?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Oh, oh, yeah.

HENDERSON: Like when he had a client and a design idea, how would he start from that? How would he even get a design idea?

WILLIAMS: Oh, now, that, I don't think he went into with a client. I think he does that to get himself involved. Most of the things we were doing at that time, of course, for most of the clientele that we saw were residential, other than the institutions. In that instance, you've probably heard stories of his drawing upside down to his clients.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Which was no trick. As he said, "If you can draw, you can draw. It doesn't matter what direction."

But it was just logical for him to show people looking to them, not drawing to himself. Then they'd be looking at it upside down and wouldn't understand. He just developed that to a great degree. But his beaux-arts training-- I don't know that it showed up a lot when it gets to the drafting room. Now, he would give you a sketch idea sometimes. Other times, he let you know what the program is and let you develop the scenario.

HENDERSON: That's a lot of freedom.

WILLIAMS: That's right. Now, the thing that he was fantastic at was-- Well, you've probably had the experience of laboring over a design problem, and you know that this is not exactly what I want, but I don't know where the problem is. Paul Williams can walk up to your drafting board and stand there for about sixty seconds and then ask you for the canary paper, stretch it out over your design, and start with a point, and [makes busy noise]. And after he's done that for about another thirty seconds, you say, [snaps fingers] "That's it." Well, he could do that. He could really do that and make you feel terrible! [laughter] You've been working on this thing for hours, and he comes in here for five minutes and works out the solution [snaps fingers] just like that.

But sometimes Paul used to forget what he told you to do. So we got in the habit of stretching the paper out a

little bit longer, and we'd write the notes over here, date it, "Mr. Williams, will you sign this?" [laughter]

HENDERSON: Pin him down. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he laughed. He'd laugh.

HENDERSON: Okay. I guess it's time to move you on through, because I want to kind of wrap this segment up.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: When did you leave Paul Williams and where did you set up your own practice? Or when you left Williams, did you know what you were going to do?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I kind of felt-- This is 1960. I just felt I needed another kind of experience and wanted to move on. I have to remember that Mr. Williams talked to me about becoming an associate in his firm. And I remember sitting out on the street the day that I left. We sat in his 1955-- What was that car? Ford-- What were they? Mustang?

HENDERSON: No. It wasn't out then.

WILLIAMS: 'Fifty-five--

HENDERSON: Thunderbird?

WILLIAMS: Thunderbird. That's what it was, a '55 Thunderbird. And he bought that car and talked about its styling. You know, he was always interested in design. If you remember, the '55 Thunderbird was a fantastically designed automobile.

HENDERSON: It's a classic.

WILLIAMS: That's right. And we sat out and talked about my leaving. In fact, he recommended to the firm where I'm at to hire me. That was Orr, Strange, and Inslee. I went from his office to the firm of Orr, Strange, and Inslee, where we designed churches, which were very interesting, and schools.

HENDERSON: Where were their offices located?

WILLIAMS: On Chateau Place, just one block east of Vermont [Avenue]. Their building's right on the corner of Chateau Place and Wilshire [Boulevard]. It was another one of the smaller offices. I've forgotten the number of people over there. Probably no more than sixteen. So there was a lot of freedom. I got a lot of freedom in that office, in terms of designing. In fact, they were calling me Isamu--Isamu Noguchi. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: It was kind of fun designing-- The last thing I did there, I think, was a design for First Church of the Nazarene on Third Street, one block east of Vermont. We had to design this tower--I've forgotten the height, but it was fantastically high--and detail it all the way down. It was simplified. It was not-- It was contemporary in feeling. And to get the heights and the widths of the tower just right as it--

HENDERSON: Tapered upward.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That was a ball. I keep passing that church. They got to the top of the base, and it's been like that for years. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Oh, you mean it's not complete? [laughter]

WILLIAMS: So I don't know what they could do about that to add the other part to it.

HENDERSON: I assume you have pictures of all these projects.

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: No? You might want to consider getting some pictures made.

WILLIAMS: I'm not sure. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Of some things. Maybe not everything.

WILLIAMS: Mr. [Robert R.] Inslee. I see him every once in a while, and we talk about it, and we both laugh. I know he remembers that church, because he's one of the guys in the firm who used to go out and tie down projects. He was good. In fact, that was his project--Mr. Inslee's. I still run into him at AIA conventions and whatnot every once in a while. But I think most of that firm has retired.

HENDERSON: When did you open your own practice?

WILLIAMS: January 1960. As I was working for others, I decided to open and-- I can remember my first project was a remodel and an addition. It was a-- What was the firm?

Advertising agency. Enyart and Rose Advertising Agency. I don't remember how I got that job. They had bought a building near Vine Street on Melrose [Avenue], that was used as a storefront, Harry somebody's musical instruments. They wanted to remodel that building. And I think there was an apartment. Harry, who owned the musical instruments, I think lived upstairs. And they wanted to remodel it into an office for themselves as an advertising agency, and with a mail-out facility behind for the bulk mailing and whatnot. They had things in Life magazine. They were good. They were good artists, good advertising people.

HENDERSON: Now, did you have a license at this time? Were you registered?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Oh, yes. I was registered in 1958.

HENDERSON: In California?

WILLIAMS: While I worked for Paul Williams. In fact, of the black licensed architects in Los Angeles, I was the ninth. That's including Paul Williams and Jimmy [James H.] Garrott and [Carey K.] Jenkins [Sr.] and some of those guys. John [D.] Williams and I were licensed about the same time. In fact, we showed up at the same AIA congratulations party.

But Enyart and Rose talked to me about that project. After we had completed it, they moved in. They liked what

they had. Finally, after a number of years, they sold it to somebody. Enyart told me one day, he says, "Do you know that we made a $26,000 profit on that building?" It was some figure like that. But they made this profit on it after using the building for those years and selling it to somebody. They had moved into a larger facility that was already suited for them, that didn't need any architectural work. But they really grew and grew and grew. They're further out on Melrose, in West L.A. now. That was an interesting project. My first client.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 15, 1990

HENDERSON: You told me in the last session what your first project was with Enyart and Rose [Advertising Agency]. You may take it from there, wherever you want to go.

WILLIAMS: I don't even know if I talked about the year that I started my practice, but the year was 1960, the beginning of the year, January. My first office was on Serrano [Avenue] between Sixth [Street] and Wilshire [Boulevard]. The building where my office was was kind of interesting. It had the flavor of a Frank Lloyd Wright architecture, with its wide overhangs and a lot of the planters and things, natural elements that adorned the building.

HENDERSON: Is that why you chose it as your location?

WILLIAMS: Partially. The fact that it was very convenient and available was the main reason that I chose the facility. And I learned, after I had set up my office in that building, that the building was originally the residence of Lillian Gish, the Gish sisters. In fact, on that block of Serrano were a couple of buildings being used as offices that were originally residential. The building next door to it even still had its ballroom up on the third floor. So it was evidently--

HENDERSON: Some of those houses are still existing.

WILLIAMS: That's right. That's right. And others are giving way to, quote, unquote, "futuristic" designs or structures. I guess you'd call that an advancement. I question that sometimes, our contemporary design. But it was at that particular location that I did find my first client that I spoke of, Enyart and Rose, and designed their structure.

HENDERSON: Did they come to you, or you went to them?

WILLIAMS: I believe, if I can remember, someone, who was a friend of Enyart, introduced us, and then we, through our discussions, decided this was what they wanted to do and I would be their architect. It's interesting, because I had never really cared to practice as an individual. I have often felt that the ivory tower kind of architect was no longer relevant today. I feel, still, that the profession is such that it really requires the input from several sources. Therefore, group practice, as in many other professions, I think, finds its way into the architectural profession.

HENDERSON: So did you get a partner?

WILLIAMS: We tried an early partnership with two fellows, Virgil [A.] Meeds and another fellow, Leonard Brunswick. Both of these individuals presently are deceased.

HENDERSON: And both were black?

WILLIAMS: No, one was black, Virgil Meeds, and Leonard

Brunswick was white. The common background, I guess, of the three of us-- All three of us worked for Paul [R.] Williams.

HENDERSON: Did you all three leave at the same time, or you sort of left on your own?

WILLIAMS: No. I left first. I set up the office, and neither partner felt that they could break away from their source of steady income. Therefore, they practiced with me part-time. I have found that in several instances--and that's one of the things, I think, of many black businesses--that they are usually started on a shoestring. Totally undercapitalized. But that is the history of most of the black firms that I know. Most black firms were undercapitalized to start.

Even during that time, I even practiced and worked at the same time until such time that projects were coming in and I had a steady flow of work.

HENDERSON: When you say "worked," do you mean you worked for other architects?

WILLIAMS: I worked for other architects.

HENDERSON: Subbed out?

WILLIAMS: Contractors. I chose contractors to work with to learn more about that phase of the business.

HENDERSON: Who was that? Do you remember?

WILLIAMS: William P. Neal [Company] was one contracting

firm that I worked with. And another friend, also from the Paul Williams office, joined me with William P. Neal. We established a design and architectural division and an engineering division for the William P. Neal Company. They were located, at that time, in Vernon. Another contractor that I worked with was Sheldon Pollack.

HENDERSON: I've heard of him.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Sheldon was Design-Build. I worked with Sheldon in the architectural division there, where we had about eight architects.

HENDERSON: I think Sheldon is doing something on Crenshaw [Boulevard] right now, or maybe had started something on Crenshaw near Inglewood.

WILLIAMS: I don't know. When I was there, we did the 9000 Sunset [Boulevard] Building. That was an interesting concept in itself. The building was originally extremely costly, so we set about to reduce costs. We decided, with our mechanical contractor consultant--he was a designer and contractor--to develop the system of using the space above the ceiling as a plenum, rather than the typical double-duct system. And we could, by doing that, reduce the distance between floors by almost three feet. If I remember correctly, that building is fifteen stories with a sixteenth-story restaurant. By doing that, we lightened the load on the footings. Therefore, we could use less

concrete and steel. At the end of that job, I remember Sheldon made such a profit that he gave the owner a $15,000 check.

HENDERSON: What? Oh, goodness! You know, that kind of planning, with air return through through a regular plenum, is how a lot of buildings are done now.

WILLIAMS: Now, yes.

HENDERSON: It's a standard way of doing it now.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

HENDERSON: And when this was being done in 1960, it was pioneering.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. We were doing it in-- That was 1962 or '63.

HENDERSON: Now, 9000 Sunset is still standing.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

HENDERSON: It's one of the buildings that's just outside Beverly Hills, I think.

WILLIAMS: Right. Sunset and Hammond [Street]. But working with contractors, I learned a lot from the inside, and it's helped me in my practice.

HENDERSON: Now, did you have a particular strategy as you're getting your practice going? You know, you said you wanted to work for contractors, so that implies a certain strategy. Were there particular clients you were going after? Or was there a particular sort of direction you

wanted the firm to go in? Or things were kind of--? You took advantage of opportunities as they came up?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I think all of the above, really. I was just getting to the point of getting to know how some projects in the city come about. One of the things I learned early was the fact that, as an African-American architect, your clientele was, by and large, rather limited. Mostly, clients came from the public sector. Realizing that, I began pursuing the public sector. This was an area where it was against the law to discriminate, whereas with private developers, many contracts are made on the golf course, country clubs, private clubs, and African-American architects, by and large, were cut out of that arena.

HENDERSON: You didn't see yourself following Paul Williams's formula? That is, Paul Williams had been doing houses for the very wealthy and movie stars, and that kind of tracking.

WILLIAMS: No, I'll tell you, I found-- Even before I came to Los Angeles, there was a firm in Cleveland, Ohio, that I cannot remember it's name, but their biggest business was residential architecture. I learned early, then, that if those weren't flowing in at a very, very steady rate, you would not survive doing strictly residential architecture. So I have attempted to diversify my client type, and I

think I've done that, pretty much. I find it extremely interesting. No two projects alike. With the residential design, I found that working on some of those very expensive homes, that there's a dues that one pays. That is, with the client. I can remember one residence, and I don't think I should call it by name--

HENDERSON: Wait. This is while you were on your own? Or with--?

WILLIAMS: No, while I was with Paul Williams's firm. The wife of that team used to meet us at the door in the morning and would stand and watch over your shoulder as you put lines on paper, making all kinds of requests. It was almost intolerable sometimes. That same residence, I remember, during the construction period, the same lady would appear as cabinets were being placed in the kitchen and say, "I don't think I like it there."

HENDERSON: [laughter] When it's going to the standard position, right?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. So I decided a long time ago that a residence of that caliber would be fun every once in a while, but not as a steady diet. So I have shied away from residential, so to speak. I have gotten involved, at one time to a great degree, in multifamily dwelling units, because I found that, in past years, one of the things that I've noted is that those units usually, when they are for

low-income families, lacked attention to design. And I felt that design is not expensive. It's a matter of how one plans and one pays attention to detail. If one really cares, that can certainly be incorporated in almost any budget level. So I did get involved in some HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] projects. This came, though, after another attempt at a partnership.

In 1967, Virgil Meeds introduced me to another architect, Carl [M.] Kinsey. And we talked about architectural practice, and we wanted to diversify even more. Virgil had received his master's in planning from USC [University of Southern California] School of Planning and was very much interested in city planning, regional planning. Carl Kinsey's background, I guess, was more similar to my own.

HENDERSON: Being an architect.

WILLIAMS: Yes. And we decided to pull in some other people-- Cut that off. [tape recorder off] That's '67.

HENDERSON: 'Sixty-seven? Okay. The six partners in that firm-- Oh, give me the name of the firm.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: And the six partners.

WILLIAMS: Let's see, where did I stop?

HENDERSON: Oh, let me back up. [tape recorder off]

Okay. We should be ready now.

WILLIAMS: Some of the disciplines that we decided to--

HENDERSON: Oh, wait, wait, wait, wait. The name of the firm.

WILLIAMS: I'm going to get to the firm.

HENDERSON: [laughter] All right. You have your process, okay. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I'm going back to the point before we decided to name the firm. At that time, we brought in a young man by the name of Julius Holder, who had his master's, I believe, in public administration, from New York University. So his discipline, adding to our firm, was, again, in planning. Another individual that we brought into the firm was an architect by the name of John Marshall. Marshall was a very sharp designer. He was a graduate of the University of Michigan. Another individual was John Moehlman, who had a strong background in construction, as well as design. That made the firm partners number six. And we decided, at one of our firm meetings, that we should name the firm, but we would certainly not name a firm with six principals. So they decided, at that meeting, that we would name the firm after the three of us who decided to go into this venture. And we took them in alphabetical order. That was Carl Kinsey, Virgil [A.] Meeds, and Harold Williams. We named the firm Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams, Architects and

City Planners.

I would want to note that that was an interracial mixture in this firm, again, going back to the philosophy that we should all work together. John Marshall was white and John Moehlman was white. And we were all very close friends, as well as professionals.

HENDERSON: Now, when you say you were close friends, you had all known each other before starting the firm?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And some of you had worked together at Paul Williams's office and some hadn't?

WILLIAMS: Right. There were different arrangements of friends mixed up in this conglomerate.

HENDERSON: Where were your offices?

WILLIAMS: Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams started at Crenshaw and Olympic [Boulevard]. You know, I don't remember that address, but there was a pharmacy on the ground floor, and Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams's offices occupied the second floor of that building. We had probably two thousand square feet on the second floor.

One of our first clients, as a firm, was the Los Angeles Unified School District, with whom I had a relationship. We started with West Vernon Avenue [Elementary] School. That was an interesting project because of the fact that we kind of organized the community

to assess the needs. They became part of the design process, and we even developed the scenario-- If you know West Vernon Avenue School, it's located on Vernon Avenue near Figueroa [Street], or just adjacent to the freeway, actually. Was that the 110 Freeway?

HENDERSON: Yes. Harbor Freeway.

WILLIAMS: Harbor Freeway. The site was actually too small for the number of students who attended school. They had well over a thousand students at that school. And for that size school, the size of the entire facility was [about the size of] an athletic field. So we, through the community and their involvement, did a master plan for buying more sites, closing a street, and we even gave them a scenario of building at least the athletic field over the freeway, using air rights.

HENDERSON: Now, is this a high school or junior high?

WILLIAMS: Elementary.

HENDERSON: Elementary, okay.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That, of course, didn't fly, but it was an interesting process putting it together.

Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams lasted-- Everybody did not remain with Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams. For various reasons, people decide to drop away, especially the planners, because we were not able to get involved in planning immediately. But the nucleus was always there:

Carl Kinsey, Virgil Meeds, and Harold Williams. And we began to pursue projects with HUD at that time.

HENDERSON: These are the residential projects?

WILLIAMS: Yes. This is 1967, '68. We got involved through some community action in San Francisco. People from the community came to Los Angeles and visited our offices and invited us to become participants in the development of Hunters Point. We had been very much involved in the community development, and this was noted by this community group from Hunters Point. We developed two sites up there. In fact, we joint-ventured with another local architect, John Williams, John D. Williams [and Associates], and together we developed two sizeable parcels at Hunters Point.

At the same time, we became involved in one of the largest HUD projects in the city [of Los Angeles]. It was three hundred units at 120th [Street] and Central [Avenue], called Ujima Village, which is Swahili, I believe. That turned out to be an interesting project with some two-story single family units, to two- and three-story multifamily units, mixed, with a child care center as part of it, and the beginnings of a commercial site. We did a shopping center on a ten-acre parcel. And that was the way that the cost of the project was justified, I guess, by involving commercial activity in that development.

HENDERSON: Was some of this residential development in response to the Watts riots? Because that location is right near where I think of as--

WILLIAMS: Ujima definitely came about because of those Watts riots. Most of HUD activities at that time came about during the Watts riots. I had some friends who are architects on the East Coast who were doing nothing but that. Some very nice design. I'm thinking, especially, of a very close friend of mine, Jeh [V.] Johnson, who was the youngest son, I believe, of Dr. [Charles S.] Johnson, who was president of Fisk University. Jeh was extremely talented, and he was very meticulous with how he detailed some of the residential units. Here in California, a lot of things are done in plaster. There, a lot of things are done in brick and stone. Some beautiful work came from that.

HENDERSON: I should tell you, I've been writing to Jeh Johnson, and he's called me. I was asking him about Paul Williams, and he said you were the person to talk to. I said, "Okay, fine."

WILLIAMS: Oh! My goodness! That's old Jeh.

HENDERSON: I hadn't made the connection that you two were real good friends.

WILLIAMS: Yes, we are. Jeh used to come here and bring his son. I can remember a chair sitting here and his son laying back on his dad's chest, looking up at the balcony

and making comments about design and architecture. That young man is now out of college. [laughter] He is a very well developed attorney in New York.

But that practice with the HUD projects went on until Mr. [Richard M.] Nixon became the president of the United States and chopped off the legs of many of us. It has not been the same since then, in terms of community development with government sponsorship.

I don't know where you want to go.

HENDERSON: Well, continuing with you, you had been a member of a partnership, and now you're on your own. So maybe I should say, what happened to your partnership?

WILLIAMS: That partnership lasted until 1974, 1967 to 1974. I guess at that time we were all going in different directions, our philosophies, our thinking, and this kind of thing, as often happens. And we decided to--

HENDERSON: Amicably.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Now, you've told me in the past you wanted to maintain a small-sized firm.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Why have you wanted to do that? Give me some idea of your philosophy on that.

WILLIAMS: Well, the largest number of people that I have been working with in my practice has been sixteen. I found

that when you get to that number of people, that means you're working with a great number of projects to such an extent that it is very difficult to maintain control and involvement. It has been my thing to be involved in architecture. I kind of separate the practice of architecture and the maintaining of a business. I'm much more interested in being involved in architecture. So I think the maximum number of people, in my mind and in my experience, has been eight to ten. That makes it possible, in my mind, to be involved in the number of projects that that firm size can handle at one time. Because I've always hated the idea of having to call upon someone else to answer a question that deals with that project. I find that a lot of clients don't like that, either. The clients that I have worked with seem to appreciate being able to ask you a question and get a direct answer now. That's the way it has been throughout my practice, and I want that to remain that way. I like to turn out a quality project, good design, few problems during construction, and the client comes back a second time.

So my practice has been floating around repeat clients. We've done several projects for the L.A. Unified School District. We're just now completing our third elementary school rehab, and we're talking about some new work. And that will come. We've done several projects for

the city of Los Angeles. We've just been awarded two rehabs and additions to two police stations.

HENDERSON: Do you have a list of your projects? Do you keep such a thing?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I have those at the office.

HENDERSON: I'll get that from you someday.

WILLIAMS: Okay. I might give you a 254 form. Most architects keep 254s for government, those of us who are doing public work. And that has a--

HENDERSON: It has a list of your projects on it?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, a list of the projects, the cost, the client name, and that kind of information. But that is the thing, dealing with my philosophy and size of the practice, that just basically I just want to practice architecture. And I'm doing it now. Not to the extent that I would like.

HENDERSON: Let me ask you one question before I turn this tape off, and this is more of a speculative question. When your partnership was, say, doing schools for L.A. Unified, as schools to me are sort of a good project--I mean, it's not residential, you can bring in some design ideas, and you don't really have to deal with a physical client--was there thought at that time of doing a school in a certain sort of design style or pattern that is--? I guess what I am trying to ask, in a way, is, when you were designing a school, were you thinking of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd

Wright, or any of those folk? Or were you just doing something modern? Or what was on your mind?

WILLIAMS: No. I think, most of the time, you try to do a school that has some kind of recall of the community in which it lies. I know at the time that I did the child care center [South Central Los Angeles Multiservice and Child Development Center] across the street from Locke High School, we tried to make that as residential in appearance as possible, rather than institutional. We try that with schools, to make them less institutional.

One of the projects that we did, in terms of getting into commercial office buildings, we again did a joint project for the state, which was the Van Nuys State Office Building. We brought three firms together to do that.

HENDERSON: What date was this?

WILLIAMS: We started in July. Let me see. It was probably about 1979.

HENDERSON: This is the high-rise building that's still existing now.

WILLIAMS: It's four stories.

HENDERSON: Four stories. I think of it as taller.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. It was four stories. It's part of the administrative center at Van Nuys. It sits on the southwest corner of that site where there's City Hall, Federal Building, Post Office, County Building, and the

Probation Building is out there. One of the criteria for design was that it not be institutional. In talking with several of the people who were going to use that facility, that they were adamant about. They did not want it to look like the typical state office building that they had been accustomed to. We took care that that didn't happen. It is a very noninstitutional structure.

HENDERSON: So you didn't have a particular model, aesthetic model, per se, that you were aiming at?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: You just went to meet each particular project on its own terms?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. If there is such a model, it would be to have the user of the facility in mind when you design it. That is, again, part of an overall philosophy, in terms of how you develop a facility.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

MARCH 1, 1990

HENDERSON: You mentioned the Van Nuys State Office Building. That was the last project you talked about. Before that, police stations, Los Angeles Unified School District, and a partnership until 1974.

WILLIAMS: Okay, did I go into that partnership?

HENDERSON: Yes, Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams [Architects and City Planners].

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: What we ended on--I don't have it written down here--was I'd asked you a conceptual question about how you designed, and I said, "Were you interested in any particular designer, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright?" You said no, you want to design for the user. Each project stands alone.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Maybe you can pick up on your design philosophy and then go into projects after Van Nuys State Office Building.

WILLIAMS: I think I probably mentioned the fact that I had always wanted to be in practice with the group, with others, and with some definite roles to play. That was the thing that really led to the Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams firm. At the beginning, I did have great hopes that that

firm could really prosper.

HENDERSON: How large did it get? How many employees did you have at your peak?

WILLIAMS: Sixteen. We had sixteen employees. That's where I had indicated that that's when I really began to learn that it was difficult to practice architecture and maintain large staffs, because a large staff was the element in this business that seems to hold one away from the fundamentals of architecture.

HENDERSON: The fun part.

WILLIAMS: Yes. It was during that period with Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams that I had pursued work in the city of Compton, and it was during that period that we were successful in getting the commission to design the Compton City Hall. It was interesting to me because there were some other communities that also needed city halls, but it was very difficult for this black firm to pursue the same kind of work in other communities. The city of Compton, of course, is a city that is-- Oh, at the time, I guess they were about 80,000 to 90,000 population, and they were probably close to 70 to 75 percent black.

HENDERSON: And this is 1973, '74?

WILLIAMS: This was around-- Well, we first got the city hall in 1968. We first started design of the Compton City Hall. That design is very interesting. It went through

three mayors, three full-time city managers, five part-time city managers, and ten different councilpersons. That was from 1968 until 1974. It was very interesting, because each city manager came in with a--

HENDERSON: Different idea?

WILLIAMS: --different idea of how he felt the city hall should be. It was really up to us, because we, the firm, were the only catalyst among all the players. We were the only common denominator.

HENDERSON: Let me ask this question, though. When you say you pursued the work and got it, what was your entrée into the city government? I mean, was that a personal contact you made with someone?

WILLIAMS: That's personal contact.

HENDERSON: Okay. So you pursued that rather than they coming to you.

WILLIAMS: Yes. They didn't know-- Most clients don't know architects, and we don't meet on golf courses and this kind of thing, so we have to bird dog our own clients. That's what we did with Compton.

Something else that I have noticed: some other structures built in black communities by other architects did not seem to give much attention to fine detail. So many of the structures were really not first class. I personally took exception to that, and that's another

reason I like to work in my community, because I want to bring to that community quality architecture. Because I feel that all people deserve quality architecture. That's another reason that we worked very hard to make this come about in the city of Compton.

After we pursued city hall, we began to pursue the civic center. The county of Los Angeles, we found, wanted to build a civic center. One of the main structures that was to be a part of that complex was the courts building. Courts buildings seem to have a stigma. The courts building that now resides in the city of Compton was first-- Because that particular supervisoral district includes Rolling Hills, it was going to be located in Rolling Hills.

HENDERSON: Now, that's Palos Verdes, right?

WILLIAMS: Palos Verdes. The citizens of Palos Verdes threw up their hands and said, "Not here!" They did not want that criminal element, of course, coming into their community. And it ended up in, where? The city of Compton, on the other end of the scale. So once again we attempted to even make that structure, because we were given the master plan for the entire civic center site-- The county [of Los Angeles] and the city of Compton formed an authority which was given the charge to develop the Compton Civic Center.

HENDERSON: Now, the complex, or civic center, was your idea? Or was that the city's idea or the county's idea?
WILLIAMS: No. The county wanted to develop a civic center. They weren't sure quite how they were going to do it, because the property was owned by city of Compton. That's when there were a lot of politics involved between the supervisors and city council people and that kind of thing. It finally ended up where the city would develop--because of the fact that they had a police station directly behind the site, or adjacent to the site, where the old city hall resided--that they made an imaginary property line between property that they were going to maintain and property that they would be able to sell off to Los Angeles County to develop the balance of that civic center.

So we were given the task. We were hired by the city of Compton to do the city hall. We were hired by the county of Los Angeles, and then eventually this authority, the Civic Center Authority that was formed between the two entities, to develop the civic center. So we had to make sure that everything is tied together. And now, although there is a legal line between city-owned property and county-owned property, one cannot see where one stops and the other begins.
HENDERSON: Yeah. It flows seamlessly together as a civic center, to me.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. Which was an interesting task, because then we had to get involved in designing open space. And to me, that's what is most important in that whole civic center: that open space, the space where one walks outside, and the feeling that we wanted to project. One of the things that we wanted to do, we wanted to memorialize Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.]. We decided to develop a memorial fountain and make that the focal point of the plaza. It was very interesting, because each time that we came with an idea, the advisory committee, which was made up of citizens throughout the county, would meet and would talk about how we could cut that piece of sculpture out of the project and save x amount of dollars. So we decided to develop the site that called for specimen trees. You know, a specimen tree can cost $25,000, $30,000 dollars. We gave them a number of specimen trees and whatnot, so that when they wanted to do some cutting, we cut specimen trees out of the site and maintained the memorial fountain to Dr. King, which stands there today. We worked with a sculptor from Toronto.

HENDERSON: Was this a black sculptor?

WILLIAMS: No. He was a Canadian [Gerard Gladstone]. We met him through our landscape architect. The development of this whole plaza, really, involved all of our consultants. We used our structural engineer, Benito

Sinclair, who interfaced with the architect of the courts building, John [A.] Martin of John Martin Associates. Our landscape architect was Howard E. Troller, who has an uncanny sense, through the use of landscape materials, hardscape and softscape, to touch the senses of people. Our mechanical engineer, I think, was William J. Yang and Associates. Electrical engineer, Saul Goldin, who now is a lecturer, and from what I understand, recently has gotten an architectural license, and he is a lecturer at SCIARC [Southern California Institute of Architecture]. He is a very imaginative guy. And the thing was that we all used to come together at our office and meet. A lot of people say you can't design by committee, but you can if you know how to structure your committee and if you know how to control your committee. We had a lot of input from all these people. Civil engineer was B. L. Engineering. Carlos Lorentay was the principal in that firm who worked with us. He did a fantastic job in making sure that none of the site puddles after it rains.

Howard knew of this sculptor who was designing monumental fountains in Australia and England. That's why he thought that he might be interested in this project. So we called him and we talked long distance about the project. He got extremely excited because he was very much an admirer of Dr. King. So first, he and I got together,

and we discussed how we thought something could be done to the scale of our civic center and the scale in the area where we wanted to place--

HENDERSON: He came here to L.A. to see it?

WILLIAMS: Came here, yeah. The first time he came down he was on his way to Australia, so he stopped through here and sort of combined his trips. Then, after a lot of conversation, we ended up with the idea of developing the mountain thing from some of Dr. King's words, where he'd "been to the mountain top."

The sculpture that stands there now is reinforced or-- I don't want to say prestressed concrete, but it is some prestressed concrete, all of the elements being of the exact same size and design, but the placement makes it seem to flow to a point, a peak, at the top. It is a fountain which one can walk inside, and you can be within this fountain. And there we're thinking in terms of meditation. We have a fountain that has eight jets. A sixteen-foot-diameter fountain within the circular platform at the base of this simulated mountain.

And we have only one problem. The county, that controls that part of the development, doesn't seem to want to turn the fountain on! We have colored lights. We had first developed a fountain that had water surrounding this platform at the base of this mountain, but the county felt

that energy was of such importance that we could not afford to do that. But we had designed it with all the water jets. Of course, the water is used over and over and over--I don't know how to change it. It would have been consumed. But finally, we capped the water lines to all the jets underneath the concrete under the inside of the parking garage, which is just beneath all this, and we made a planter. One day, maybe when we have recouped from our energy losses, we will be able to uncover that planter and get the water flowing in as it was originally designed.

HENDERSON: Yes. I have to sort of confess my ignorance. You had called it a fountain. When I drove by it and I didn't see any water there, I thought, well, maybe they hadn't turned the water on.

WILLIAMS: That's right. We had water in there that would shoot up about seventy feet. The concrete panels that form that fountain, standing vertically, are about about fifty-four feet high, and water shoots up above that. We have some sensors on it for wind and whatnot, and if the wind is too high, the water shuts down. But the county doesn't turn it on. I have complained a number of times. They do not take care of the plants that are in the planter, and we've complained about that a number of times. We have planters and areas where people can sit and meditate and talk, again, to reflect some of Dr. King's philosophy. We

made several what we call human catchment basins around that site. We've even had some areas where indigenous sculptors could sculpt pieces and they could be placed in and around outside.

Again, I'm thinking in terms of people who use the facility. We have a platform on the south side of the courts building for entertainment on Sunday afternoons. We have a full P.A. system in there. We have two thirty-foot light poles with colored lights that are zeroed down onto that platform. We formed a curved wall behind the platform and left it for an indigenous artist to do a tile mural depicting something of Compton, whatever was their choice. Thus far, that still sits. It's been sitting like that now since 1976. So I don't know if people today are as interested as they were when we first started in talking about that project.

But we envisioned jazz groups, singing groups, speaking, everything going on out in that south plaza. But today I don't think it has been used nearly as much, and now it's getting to a point where all the new people know very little about what's going on with that site. I keep bringing it up to new council people as to what's there so that maybe they can generate some interest in getting things moving out on that Martin Luther King Plaza. One thing, they do use the sculpture quite a bit. In fact, the

new councilpersons were installed at that fountain on the plaza. When they have some special things, they do seem to get out there and use it, because they like it as a backdrop.

HENDERSON: It's a very symbolic piece.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And let me ask this question: was your firm involved with making the entrance signs into the city of Compton?

WILLIAMS: No, someone else has picked up on the sculpture and decided to make the entrance signs of all the main streets using that sculpture to welcome one to Compton. The first people to use that sculpture were the police officers of Compton, the police department. They made their shoulder patches of that sculpture. The second was Pacific Bell [Telephone Company] that took the photograph of that and used it on the telephone directory. I have a copy of those around here somewhere. And then came the signs, the welcome signs.

HENDERSON: When were those done, by the way?

WILLIAMS: The signs?

HENDERSON: The welcoming signs, yes.

WILLIAMS: They are only about a year old, maybe two. Even the way we designed city hall, we separated the council chamber, which we envisioned as a multiuse facility for

community groups. And it is used the way that it was intended. That's one thing we are very thankful for, the fact that that is something that gets used. They can lock up the business portion of city hall and keep the community area open and available. They hold all of their city elections in that council chamber. They've even had interviews of architectural firms taking place in that council chamber. The council chamber has some overflow spaces in the rear that can be opened, and they can have additional seats, or they could use two separate groups with, say, whatever you call it, a sound-retardant curtain that separates the two spaces. We did visit a number of council chambers around town, and all of them seemed to have the same problem. In some new and some older city halls, the audience sits facing the councilmen. The councilmen usually sit at a nice, curved table. But now, when it comes to having any kind of an exhibit where something is being shown to the councilmen, they also want the audience to be able to see it. Everybody seems to have a problem. Either you put it on a screen behind the councilmen and everybody breaks his neck looking, or you put it over to one side and everybody breaks his neck looking, or you show it to the council and then you turn around and you show the same thing to the audience. Or you have to make two of everything.

We solved that problem in that council chamber. We did a lot of view diagrams to see how all those things were working. We have a room up on the second floor. The toilet facilities and whatnot are on the second floor. Likewise, news commentators' rooms, or the news coverage booth, is on the second floor so that they can watch the council and also see exhibits. We designed that place so that the council was to one side of center. We beveled the walls so that the wall on the other side, opposite the council chamber, all the council people had to do was turn their heads in a very comfortable position. And all the audience has to do is turn their heads in a very comfortable position, and they can both see the same thing at one time. We had an electric screen with a projection booth that can project onto that screen where the council and the audience can both view the screen very comfortably. And that's the only chamber I've been in where that kind of thing seems to have been solved.

HENDERSON: You addressed that problem really well. I had wondered why the council chamber was sort of asymetrical.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: I think I looked at that plan some years ago and said, "Well, why did he not have it in on axis?"

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.

HENDERSON: And I didn't say anything at the time. Now,

there are curved walls there, and I think that the material is stone, like a fieldstone?

WILLIAMS: On the exterior?

HENDERSON: On the exterior. I've never been inside.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, on the exterior. Yeah, well, that-- If you notice, the council chamber itself-- I mean, the city hall itself has the vertical slabs that come down into that reflecting pool. They are like soldiers, and they are set at an angle. On the street side, there are also vertical concrete fins set at the same angle on the other side, against the sun, so that they act as sun shades for the offices behind. Likewise, and because of the reflecting pool, we have-- If you notice, the courts building is twelve stories. Although it's designed by another architect [William Allen], we established the shape of the building and the exterior design of the building. We gave it it's verticality to shorten it, just like a woman's skirt with pleats. We kind of pleated the building. A shortened, wide, pleated skirt makes a woman look a little larger.

HENDERSON: Some women may not agree with that, but--

[laughter]

WILLIAMS: No, I think they will. I think they will. Some may not know that it does.

HENDERSON: That building does not look twelve stories

tall, from my memory of it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, right. Yeah.

HENDERSON: I think of it as like seven or eight.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. No, it's twelve stories. And it was to be thirteen. I'll tell you, there's thirty-three courts in that building and the sheriff's station and everything on the first floor. We minimized that footprint so that the total building, which is 176 feet square, does not touch down on the ground. It's too massive. So we made the columns come down. We recessed the first floor just to fit its purpose with the sheriff's station, and we made an arcade on four sides of the building. A little more lacy when it gets to the ground. And we felt that that was more compatible.

The fins on the city hall-- Because the city hall is only two stories but is one of the most important buildings on the site, to compete with that massive courts building, we added the reflecting pool to give more vertical to city hall. The people don't use that reflecting pool properly now. The city manager that was just dismissed, I think, Mr. [William] Goins, had the reflecting pool looking like a swimming pool. Light blue. And now there are little fountains going off in the pool. But it was originally black base. You couldn't tell the depth. We had lights, underwater lights, and continuous movement of the water.

It was recirculating. It was a real reflecting pool for that purpose that I just stated.

HENDERSON: Now, the overall color scheme, to me, as I remember, besides the stone, is a white color scheme.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, because-- Now, that we had tied in with the county. They wanted to use marble, and, of course, we couldn't use marble. It's too expensive. The county uses marble. Well, they feel it's maintenance free. So our building, sitting next to a marble building, we used plaster, and we used divider strips to begin to look like the slabs which were used to put together the exterior covering on the courts building.

Even the council chambers, although it's concrete block, we stuccoed. We plastered the exterior and the interior. In fact, the interior is studded and then dry-walled. But we stuccoed the outside so that we could-- Again, it carried that module of panels that mimicked the marble on the courts building.

HENDERSON: That's a very successful strategy, because I haven't been up close to the buildings, and they look similar.

HENDERSON: They look similar, yeah. In the eyebrow that we developed for the courts building, at the first story or at the beginning of the second story, I guess, we developed that for that building to stop the eye so that the eye did

not zoom up the twelve stories of that structure. For that, then, we suggested a change of color, and we got into the red-browns and that alabaster. Then, that has kind of become a color scheme for the city.

Recently, we were commissioned to design their Fire Station, their new fire station, number 3. And because that is near the west entry into the city, at Rosecrans [Avenue], they wanted to make sure that our color was reflected in that building. That's why that building has the red-brown base and the white stucco residential part of the structure, second floor.

But it came from what we had done at the city hall. Even the deck at the city hall, at the civic center, we used chip-marble and patterned concrete. Chip-marble turned out to be the light portions, and the patterned concrete was the reddish-brown repeat of the color scheme again. Then that was carried into the city hall, the floor in the city hall. Only there, we got away from using concrete, and we actually used the paver tiles that were similar color, so that the pattern seems to flow on into the city hall, through the city hall, out to the street on the other side.

The other thing with designing that city hall, it has no front or back.

HENDERSON: Correct.

WILLIAMS: That was intentional. We didn't know what the future was going to be across the railroad tracks there, but we didn't want to have the city hall turn it's back on whatever that future development was.

But that civic center is, I think-- It's successful. And I think, although we used antigraffiti paint up to a ten-foot height, they haven't had a problem with graffiti. People seem to respect the fact that it's there.

HENDERSON: They do. They really do.

WILLIAMS: And that's important. That's important to me.

It reminds me of another project that we did in South Central Los Angeles. For the Bureau of Public Buildings, we did a [South Central Los Angeles Multiservice and] Child Development Center. That building--

HENDERSON: Oh, where was it?

WILLIAMS: It's across the street from Locke High School. It's East 111th [Street]. That came out of a community effort. Before we even talked about the building, I used to meet with some people that I knew who were interested in child development, child guidance. We used to talk about problems and how some of those problems could be resolved. Then that grew into a real program, and all we did really was wrap a building around their program. That's why they kind of like it. We tied it in utilizing students from Locke High School. In fact, we even had a

competition between five high schools, in their mechanical-drafting classes and those that were teaching architectural drafting and whatnot, and we had them design a child development center.

HENDERSON: Now, what year was this?

WILLIAMS: Let's see, this must have been about 1975, '76.

HENDERSON: So you're an experienced hand at high school competitions.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. We were even doing that with NOMA [National Organization of Minority Architects].

HENDERSON: That's what I was leading to. But don't let me stray you off the subject. Back to the child development center.

WILLIAMS: But that one, again, I think because we involved the young people in some of the decisions that were made, some of the architectural decisions that were made-- It was a long time, because that building, some of the screened play areas were made of modular concrete block and wire screen, so that you could see in and out of the site. And for years that has stood there with no graffiti. That was the other thing I was thinking about when I was thinking about people who respect some of the projects that you put into their community. That was another one. They still show respect to that building, because they know why it's there.

We even found that some of the high school seniors--women, young women, who become young mothers--are able to put their child across the street and continue going to school. And that's part of what that program was designed to do. We have an area for toddlers, and we have even some of the students, on their hours that they're free, come to work, and they're taking care of some of the small babies and toddlers. We have an infant's area and toddler's area. And it works. It works. I remember receiving a letter from a young lady, Patricia White Knollcox, who was the instigator of that project. Her husband, Noble Knollcox, was the director of that facility and is still the director of that facility. And they both say it still works.

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HENDERSON: We were talking about the Child Development Center and the Compton Civic Center. I have a question for you about symbolism. Both those buildings, as you say, are respected by the community, and in fact, the Compton Civic Center has become very much a symbol for that city. Were you consciously out to make a symbol? And if so, were you trying to do something African or say something about African-Americans? What was the symbolism? Because the symbolism has been very effective. Does symbolism come from respect by the users, rather than a form that they see as grandiose?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. When you ask me, style and this kind of thing, one can sit and intellectualize about architecture and styles. Most of the people that use these facilities know nothing of your intellectual approach. I think it gets to be a little more fundamental than that.

My thing with the Compton Civic Center or the Fire Station Number 3 or the Child Development Center, they try to reflect simplicity. The Compton City Hall is very simplistic, very straight, simple lines. The stone wall that occurs at the end is almost like something being in rhythm with the concrete fins, and somewhere at the end of

that sentence comes a period. That stone wall begins to terminate that whole statement. And around that whole facility, I think, if you start over at the library [gestures], if you're standing out there by the fountain, you start over by the library and let your eye carry around through the curved steps with planters that encircle that front plaza, that north plaza, past the rhythm of the courts building again, to the rhythm of the fins of the city hall, your eye stops at the council chamber. And I think that is the end of that particular statement.

HENDERSON: You know, it's poetic watching your hand gesture along as you're saying this. I can visualize this. You have a way of speaking with your hands as you describe what your doing that-- I guess what I'm saying is that you see a lot of symbolism in these forms.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And so simplicity is sort of the essence of symbolism, if possible.

WILLIAMS: Yes. The King Fountain, the mountain, same theme, carries out that same theme. All of those panels are exactly the same. It's just a matter of one lying flat and being set more vertically as they come around to the one directly in the middle, which is perfectly straight and begins to slope down on the other side, which gives you that sweep. It's a very simple form. And they all set in

a circle. Another very simple form.

The Child Development Center, of course, looks much less institutional than the school across the street. But if you look at the balance of the community, it's all residential, and we tried to tie that in to the residential portion of the community. We did not want an institutional project there. And the Bureau of Public Buildings felt that it worked.

HENDERSON: Do you have a favorite project out of the ones you've done?

WILLIAMS: Well-- Not really. I get my satisfaction from anything that I have a hand in that the people who either use or live with that facility like. It makes them feel good. That's where I get my satisfaction. I do not get my satisfaction out of, as I say, intellectualizing with other architects.

HENDERSON: Let me ask a different question. Do you have a project where you think the users just totally misunderstood everything that you were trying to do? That's not a real fair question, because you as creator have a certain view. But is there one project where, if you could, you would do it again or change it, or one you call your least favorite, least successful project? Which one would that be?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't know how much control you have

over some of that, but some of the schools I have been involved in--

HENDERSON: For L.A. Unified--

WILLIAMS: L.A. Unified School District. Yeah, my first school that I did was in 1966, for L.A. Unified School District.

HENDERSON: Was it the Vernon Avenue [Elementary School]?

WILLIAMS: It was the Lillian Street School. It was an addition, and we altered some of the existing buildings there. Very old school.

HENDERSON: Where is it located? Or what neighborhood, if you can't give me the street?

WILLIAMS: South Central Los Angeles.

HENDERSON: That covers a wide territory. I mean, is that--?

WILLIAMS: South of Slauson [Avenue], and, I think, east of Main Street. It was in the area--and you heard the year, 1966. That brings back something to mind, I think. That was the year of the Watts riots. Well, in '65 or '66, I mean, actually, the feeling was still there. Yeah. At the time of the burning, I believe it was '65. But there are a lot of Los Angeles Unified School District facilities south of Slauson, and architects who had been doing schools for L.A. Unified School District for years, and years, and years, none of whom where black, all of the sudden started

getting calls. "Got work for you to do." And none of the architects who were doing the schools in the [San Fernando] Valley wanted to travel south of Slauson. So Harold Williams got a call. Many of the good brothers began to get calls from L.A. Unified School District to do these remodelings. But I was saying that some of my least favorite work was some of these jobs that you do for L.A. Unified School District: putting two-story bungalows on an existing site as classrooms. I don't think they are designed well, but they're cheap. And they could haul all these things around from campus to campus, you see, and that's what they did. But that was my first experience with L.A. Unified School District.

I'd been pursuing work with them since 1960. I remember they had a superintendent down there by the name of [Ernst R. C.] Billerbeck. Billerbeck would let you come down and talk and say, "Oh, just keep sending your materials down. We'll put it in a file, and one day we'll call you." He never did call a black architect.

Then Billerbeck left, and we got a superintendent by the name of Volla, Virgil Volla. We had a little joke that Virgil Volla carried his little million-dollar list in his own breast pocket. But he would let you have a school or two. It was under Virgil Volla that I did get the job south of Slauson and east of Main Street. But the larger,

significant jobs, I think, he, as others, had their special people that they saved these schools for.

Things are slowly changing. And we have taken those, what I call insignificant projects, and have made the best of them that we were allowed to.

HENDERSON: When you say "we," are you talking about the black architects that you know of?

WILLIAMS: In general. Yes.

HENDERSON: Do you guys get together and discuss these clients, or exchange information on who's good to work for? Who to avoid?

WILLIAMS: Not on a group basis. I think there was a time when we tried, here in Los Angeles, to organize some years ago, because of situations such as this. We formed, then--this must have been around 1970--a group called [Southern California Association of] Minority Architects and Planners, MAP, of which I was the first president. We had programs, and we would discuss these kinds of things. We would have guests come in and talk to the group and try to forge through some of the racism and bigotry that exists in this business. But as so many organizations do, they come, they peak, and they die. And MAP did last-- Let's see, Vince [Vincent J.] Proby became president of that organization. We met around town different places. We had pretty good turnouts in those days. What I find that makes

organizations like that go is really confronting issues. If you don't feel there is an issue, and just program, people's interest-- Well, we had some issues in those days.

HENDERSON: Racism seemed to have been more evident then.

WILLIAMS: Well, it's still upon us. And man has learned to be a little more subtle, especially when you have a black mayor [Thomas Bradley].

HENDERSON: [laughter] Well, question: now, I've never understood the tie-in between the school district and the city government. Are they intimately connected? Or they're very separate?

WILLIAMS: Oh, they are separate.

HENDERSON: But there is black control of the school board? That's the question I'm asking.

WILLIAMS: No. Of the school board? Board of Education?

HENDERSON: I guess the Board of Education does control the school system in terms of choosing architects?

WILLIAMS: No. Oh, no. They approve the recommendations for various assignments. On that board, of course, we have only one black. We have, I believe, one Hispanic and one Asian. No, the architects are selected by the director of architecture and some of his staff. That would be Sam [Samuel M.] Moore and Robert Donald and some of their staff. They recommend certain selectees to the board for approval, and then they go into contract negotiations.

So I think that many of us, in past years, have spent a lot of time talking with people like Sam Moore, even before Sam Moore had the job that he presently holds, who seemed to be amenable to making black architects' presence felt a little more. He's done a good job, I think. Most of the firms that I know about are doing some kind of work for L.A. Unified School District. Some of the newer firms and most of the older firms are still working for him.

But then, again, we will see what happens after the bond issue this time, in terms of giving those same people new schools from the ground up. They have not been so free with those assignments. When they become decent size, they always talk joint venture. And they may put two of those firms together, so they kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

HENDERSON: Do you pursue work with other school districts?

WILLIAMS: I haven't done a lot. I've been out to La Cañada. I've talked with them, the school district.

HENDERSON: Which school district was this?

WILLIAMS: La Cañada. That's out past Pasadena, in that area. They talk well. I've pursued high schools with the city of Oxnard. They've been very responsive. It depends on how we continue to market. I think there's a possibility.

There are a lot of agencies, but, as you hear me talk,

most of the people for whom we provide services are government agencies. This is true for most of the firms across the country. Private clients, for most firms, are hard to come by. Private clients can pick and choose developers. People who build your buildings on city-owned property, downtown Los Angeles, they come bringing their own people.

HENDERSON: And they get a tax break on top of that.

WILLIAMS: That's right. And you don't find anything black in downtown Los Angeles. Paul [R.] Williams, I guess, was the one and only who had a hand in the design of the Courts Building in downtown Los Angeles. That is something that I feel is an issue that's going to have to be dealt with, but I don't know if we can organize to do that.

HENDERSON: Talking about organization, now may be a time to ask you about NOMA [National Organization of Minority Architects] and how that got started. Give me your background on that.

WILLIAMS: Well, I received a letter in 1971 from a young man that I met in Los Angeles, by the name of Jeh [V.] Johnson. I think I had mentioned previously, the son of the late Dr. [Charles S.] Johnson, president of Fisk University.

HENDERSON: Yes, you did.

WILLIAMS: And Jeh wrote a letter. This happened after the 1971 AIA [American Institute of Architects] convention in

Detroit, Michigan, where a black caucus was called to talk about the position, or the nonposition, of black architects. So it was decided that we needed to organize, that that was the best means of addressing all of those issues. So Jeh took it upon himself to write a letter and address it to two or three people. I received that letter, and I don't know how many others in Los Angeles might have received that letter. It was also addressed to [William] McKissack in Nashville, Tennessee. I'm trying to think of his first name. Do you know the McKissacks?

HENDERSON: One of the McKissacks was at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] with me, Eric McKissack. But he'd be, you know, like a grandson or-- I don't know if he's a "third," or a "fourth," or something like that, but his name was Eric McKissack. Their firm was McKissack, McKissack [and Thompson].

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah, that dad [Moses McKissack II] started it, and then son [William McKissack], and now daughters--who are now his granddaughters [Andrea and Cheryl McKissack]--are running that firm. Very sharp firm there in Nashville. But that letter spoke of our coming together and meeting in Nassau to begin some kind of an organization to address the issues of black architects across the country.

HENDERSON: This is Nassau, Bahamas?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I decided I would go, because I felt very strongly about all that. I had the feeling that what was happening to architects in San Diego was happening to architects in Maine. And I found that to be so.

So I got to Nassau--we stayed at a hotel on Paradise Island--and I began to meet other black architects from other areas of the country. I was there from California, and one other fellow was from California. That was Jim Dodd, James C. Dodd, in Sacramento, California.

HENDERSON: I think I've met him.

WILLIAMS: Dodd eventually became a vice president of the AIA national. We were the only two from California. But they were there from Chicago-- That's where I first met Wendell [J.] Campbell. Jeh Johnson from Poughkeepsie, New York. Bill Brown from Newark, New Jersey--graduate of Howard [University]. Bob [Robert J.] Nash from Washington, D.C. Nelson Harris, from Youngstown, Ohio.

HENDERSON: This sounds like a good turnout.

WILLIAMS: Oh, it was great. It was twelve people. It was there that the idea of the organization was put into place. Our next meeting-- We stayed there for three days. Our wives and families were there, but we hardly saw them, because we locked ourselves in a room. We did not hit the casinos. We went down there for business.

HENDERSON: Now, this was in '72?

WILLIAMS: 'Seventy-one.

HENDERSON: About what time of the year?

WILLIAMS: November. So in March of '72, we called to have a meeting to ratify what we had put together in Nassau. That's when the name of National Organization of Minority Architects came about. We were primarily concerned with the condition of black architects, and we had agreed to call ourselves the National Organization of Black Architects. But someone happened to be there from one of the government offices--I think the Department of Commerce--who felt that, if we did that, we would not be able to receive any kind of funding to perpetuate your organization from the government, whatnot. Later, we learned that that was not true at all.

HENDERSON: That you wouldn't get funding? Or that the name wouldn't be a problem.

WILLIAMS: That the name would be a problem. "Black." That's why it is called NOMA. They felt that it was a softening and would generate less animosity, I guess. But later, as I say, we found that wasn't true. We have the National Council of Black Nurses, and they are strictly funded-- I remember their very first conference came from a $6,000 grant from the Department of Commerce. [laughter] So that was in 1972, in March, and we elected Wendell Campbell as the first president of that organization. Oh,

yes, from Washington, D.C., Leroy Campbell was one of those founders. I haven't named them all. There are a couple of others that I haven't named. But in all, there were twelve. We would all receive a little brass plaque that they gave out one year, somewhere back there, the NOMA Onyx Award. There were only twelve of those Onyx Awards until, in 1982, under my presidency, we gave that coveted award to Richard K. Dozier for the beautiful work that he had done. We made him a recipient of a NOMA Onyx Award. Now there are thirteen Onyx Awards that exist.

HENDERSON: And just for the record, you gave him that award because he's a historian.

WILLIAMS: Historian.

HENDERSON: Well, he was teaching at Tuskegee [Institute] at that time, right?

WILLIAMS: No. Let's see-- Was he at Tuskegee then? Let me think a second. Oh, in '82. Yes, he was at Tuskegee.

HENDERSON: So you met in March. You had decided on a name. Now the AIA meeting is coming up. How was NOMA going to relate to AIA? Or was that part of the scheme?

WILLIAMS: Well, in the beginning, it was a little confusing, because most of the people in NOMA were members of AIA. Jim Dodd was very active with AIA. I was not as active in the AIA. I have never been that active with AIA. I have my personal reasons. Bill Brown was president

of his chapter in Newark. So there were very close ties with AIA. In our beginnings, our meetings took place at the same time as AIA, because we were all going to be at AIA, so we were all going to be there for NOMA. But it made it very confusing, in terms of having to respond to AIA at times that we wanted that response here and this kind of thing. So we had to separate the two, and we did.

We then started meeting in Washington, D.C. And we found the interest of some other black organizations. We finally met black architects, black housing specialists, black mortgage bankers, black contractors, and there was another, because there were five black organizations that met at the same time. We would have our individual meetings, and then we'd have our joint meetings. I wish that it could have worked out to where we could have all worked together, the architects and the mortgage bankers and the housing specials, where we could develop projects that we could all get into. But then, we all have our own agendas, and things begin to--

HENDERSON: It sounds like it could have been a networking session par excellence.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. But whatever the reasons were, that did not come about. So NOMA started meeting on its own. Right now, this past weekend, they were meeting in Miami with--well, this was a

board of director's meeting--the black business league, the national business league. I don't know what the outcome of that was. I haven't heard anything yet. I had intended to go, but there were some-- Because I was interested in the things we started in D.C. They were going to continue that in Miami, and I wanted to be there.

But NOMA-- It's very difficult to maintain an organization with no money.

HENDERSON: That's true. And no staff. Well, without money, you don't have staff.

WILLIAMS: Right. And so everything is voluntary. It's just difficult to do what you know has to be done. So I don't know where NOMA is going without that. They can't make it on dues. There are not enough people. Like, AIA can make it on dues. But there are not enough black architects who are interested in being part of NOMA to support it.

But one thing that's come out of it is a lot of camaraderie. I have really immensely enjoyed the guys I've met in this business. It's just a good feeling when you know you're not alone. That's what NOMA has meant to me and a lot of other guys. Because on an individual basis, we do get together and talk about some of the problems and how some people address these problems and how they maintain their sanity. All these kinds of things get

discussed on a one-to-one [basis], which is, in itself, extremely important. A lot of things you just can't do on a group basis.

I remember when we were having some of those growing pains, Jeh Johnson mentioned that maybe that's what our agenda should be: strictly social. I've never been one to agree with that, but I understand where he's coming from. Because even on a social basis a lot of problems are discussed.

HENDERSON: That seems to be the only level that some black organizations can operate on.

WILLIAMS: That's right. Isn't that interesting?

HENDERSON: It just seems people want to party, and that's it. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Which reminded me of the NOMA convention that met in Los Angeles. When was that?

HENDERSON: 'Eighty-six?

WILLIAMS: Was it '86? The only time that we saw the young architects from Los Angeles was on a Friday night when there was a party. But they missed a lot of goings-on with the talk of the professor from [California Polytechnic State University] San Luis Obispo, who talked about architecture in the twenty-first century and where he sees it going. I think there was a lot of meat talked about there. We talked about computers, where they're going,

with Allen Kemper, who had edited the big volume on architects, Pioneering Architects in CADD [computer-aided drafting and design software]. I don't know if you've seen that.

HENDERSON: I'm not familiar with that one.

WILLIAMS: I'll bring you-- I have a copy downstairs. I had gotten Allen to come and talk about the things he's doing in CADD right now.

I thought that was kind of significant, the fact that we turn out for parties and we don't turn out for the meat. So you see, I don't get a lot of enjoyment of intellectualizing stuff with a bunch of architects, anyhow.

HENDERSON: Was there a point when the MAP group, the Minority Architects and Planners group, sort of merged with NOMA? Or do you think that died out and then some of the membership came back into NOMA?

WILLIAMS: Well, interest didn't die. People are still around here, for the most part, who were part of that group. But we had a little more participation of some of the more established firms. Bob [Robert A.] Kennard was out to almost all the meetings. Carey [K.] Jenkins [Sr.] would come to the meetings. Of course, [Carl M.] Kinsey and [W.] Chris [Christopher] Jones, Vince Proby. Even Ed [Edward C.] Barker showed up at a couple meetings, and Jimmy [James H.] Garrott, who is probably now the oldest

living architect in this area.

HENDERSON: About how old is he?

WILLIAMS: Jimmy? He must be close to ninety years old. He's very ill. Good designer.

HENDERSON: The reason I asked that question is that I was thinking that maybe that's somebody I should try to interview. It's too late?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it may be. That would be great. I wish that that could have come about. I have talked with Jimmy and-- We were friends with Jimmy and his wife. Maybe you should pursue that. I don't know how his memory is, but I think he's documented a lot of things. He was one of the architects right here designing libraries for a-- I don't know how many libraries Jimmy Garrott has designed.

HENDERSON: Do you know how I might get in contact with him?

WILLIAMS: Oh, boy. I think I have a number where we can reach him. He designed his own home. It's two-story, but now he can't even make it up to the second story, so they had to fix a bedroom up on the first floor of his house.

HENDERSON: Where is his house? What area?

WILLIAMS: Silver Lake area.

HENDERSON: Do you know when he arrived in California? Or was he native to California? When did he start his practice?

WILLIAMS: Well, now, that I don't remember. But he was practicing at the same time Paul Williams was practicing.

HENDERSON: Okay. One of the points that I've made, in fact, in a discussion of this project I had today with my boss [Dale E. Treleven] was that there are plenty of black architects out there. It's just that some of them get fame and some don't. Paul Williams is focused in on as, quote, "the" black architect, and the only, or the first, and there were plenty of people around doing some other architecture.

WILLIAMS: Well, there weren't plenty.

HENDERSON: Well, yeah. I guess you're right. Not plenty.

WILLIAMS: Because even when I came here, in 1955, there were only fifty black architects across the country. Fifty.

HENDERSON: That's still more than one or two.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Nobody else on the West Coast, you know. In '55, Paul Williams was in practice. Jimmy Garrott was in practice, John [D.] Williams was in practice, Carey Jenkins was in practice, and Robert Kennard, and it was about Bob's sixth year in practice. That was about it.

Then later, a few years later, came Clyde [H.] Grimes [Sr.], and this young man, the first black draftsman that worked for Paul Williams. I don't think I can recall his name. Ralph-- Ralph-- Ralph-- Ralph-- He lives out in

Thousand Oaks, I think. [Ralph A. Vaughn]

HENDERSON: He's still alive?

WILLIAMS: Oh, sure. A good artist, boy. He was a sketch artist. He did a lot of interior stuff here, restaurants on Restaurant Row, you know, La Cienega [Boulevard]. A lot of those.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

APRIL 18, 1990

HENDERSON: We're going to discuss the Watts Towers and [Watts Towers] Arts Center. Mr. Williams has brought a package of pictures and photographs and things he hasn't looked at in years. I see one here with Bill Cosby in this photograph, and he looks young, from his "I Spy" [television series] days. I wonder where these kids are now.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I often wonder that, too.

HENDERSON: "I Spy" was in the sixties. This would have been right after the [Watts] riots?

WILLIAMS: It probably was, because I was president of the Watts Towers [Committee--Committee to Save Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts] 1966 to 1970. So that probably was about that time. [looking at pictures] Oh, boy.

HENDERSON: Well, I think what I would like to get from you is your perspective on how the Towers got saved and how the arts center got started. See, my perception is that those two are sort of separate, and yet they are joined. I don't totally understand how they were either separate or joined at one point in time.

WILLIAMS: Well--

HENDERSON: You have lots of photographs.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. This is not all. This is a few that I have in a folder that I-- I suppose I have a box of

materials that tall [gestures]. I got involved with the Watts Towers Committee about 1963 or 1964, when it was a small group of people who had been with the Towers from the time that the city [of Los Angeles] attempted to dismantle them, which took place about 1959, if I remember correctly.

HENDERSON: I've been reading this pamphlet. Maybe I should let you just take a quick look at that pamphlet.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. That's one that came out of the arts center?

HENDERSON: I have forgotten where I got that pamphlet. I think I got it at city hall, downtown.

WILLIAMS: That's what I was going to say, because it is a cultural monument. Oh, very nice. Some nice photographs. In fact, I have that one.

HENDERSON: Yes. Now with the fence up, you can't get that outside photograph anymore.

WILLIAMS: No. Oh, Marvin Rand. Yes, he was part of that group. He was a photographer. Does this go into the details of--? No, this says '75. Oh, '54. Yeah.

HENDERSON: [referring to pamphlet] It gives a sort of capsule history, but, you know, it's only one page there and it doesn't go into a whole lot of details. Part of my curiosity is to get the description from an insider who has a black point of view. Not so much that you have to inject race into every situation, but your descriptions will be--

WILLIAMS: But, unfortunately, race seems to inject itself into every situation. [laughter] Because that committee was a totally white committee when I joined. I was interested in the committee and the Towers, I think, strictly from a cultural perspective. It was so interesting to me, because here sits this monument, created by [Simon] Rodia that-- And it was surrounded by a black ghetto. It was interesting to me that here were people, some of whom where on welfare, kids who belonged to street gangs, but the Towers seemed to exemplify something to them. You didn't find graffiti over those walls that were down there. Nobody really tried to take hammers and chisels and chisel off pieces of tile and that kind of thing.

So I really got interested, and that's why I decided to go to a meeting out in Hollywood. That's where all the meetings were taking place. In fact, Bud Goldstone, I think it was at his house that I attended my first meeting. He was the engineer with Douglas [Aircraft Corporation] that designed the test for pulling down that center tower. And of course, you know the results of that test. Those things were so strong that it tilted the crane up off its track when they tried to take the crane. The city fathers were saying, "Now, stand back. It's gonna fall right down through here." You see, it's still

standing today.

HENDERSON: It's still standing. Now, were you there at the test?

WILLIAMS: No. I just knew about the test. I remember the news. There was a young lady that was a policewoman who was a friend of ours, Joan Fusilear--at that time she was Joanie Green, married to, I think, Delaware Green--who told me about the Towers. Betty [Smith Williams] and I took a ride out one Sunday to see this glass menagerie, this tile menagerie that she had been talking about.

HENDERSON: Oh, so when you had arrived in Los Angeles, you'd never heard of these things?

WILLIAMS: No. Right. But anyhow, after I started going to these meetings and-- They used to have some free discussion about the Towers and what we could do with them and this kind of thing. At that time, this group hired some people to sit at the gate and collect entry fees and this kind of thing. I don't know if they're still doing that. But one of the things that I thought important, since the Towers were located in Watts, and they're commonly known as the Watts Towers, that the people in the community should be a part of this. The fact was that people in the community could not be traveling to Hollywood to meetings. So this group was in a better position to travel. Why don't we move the meetings to Watts? Why

don't we enlarge this board to include some community people?

HENDERSON: And you were asking these questions at the meetings?

WILLIAMS: At the meetings, yes.

HENDERSON: How did they react to that?

WILLIAMS: Positively. We decided to enlarge the board to about forty people. We got some of the people on the street who were very happy to be a part of this. They were kind of taken aback that they were asked by this group of white folks to become a part of it. And they became very active. Some of the ladies on the street--I've forgotten a lot of the names now--wanted to invite people to come in. They were doing fund-raisers. We started talking then about the possibility of buying a building out there and making a place-- Because they were already beginning to teach art. And there was one young lady-- And I'm trying to remember her name [Lucille Krasne]. But they used to teach--

HENDERSON: Oh, in this photograph, okay.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Teach art right at the center.

HENDERSON: Right on the floor.

WILLIAMS: At the Towers. Right on the floor of the Towers. And it was very active. That young lady there-- Oh, gee whiz. I'm sure I'll find her name around on some

of this material. But she herself was a professional. And she gave a lot of her time with those kids. In fact, she really loved the kids, and they learned a lot from her, not only doing art, but how to deal with each other. A lot of that rubbed off on a lot of the kids. It was just amazing to see the reaction of the kids as time went on.

So it came time to-- We said, "Let's see about buying a piece of property" that was right up the street from the Towers. There was a house up there, a two-bedroom house that became for sale. And we said, "By George, that's a facility that we could take over and turn into an art center."

These are-- Well, no, that's getting a little ahead of the story.

HENDERSON: Photographs.

WILLIAMS: You can't see in this photograph too well, but that is the two-bedroom house that we had all the windows taken out of--the glass windows, of course--because that's the first thing that's easy to break. We had a young man that knew how to mold plastic. We molded plastic designs the size of the panes of window and put them in. They got a test immediately. Somebody took a brick and threw it at one of these things, and all it did was bounce off. [laughter] So that worked, and we began teaching classes.

HENDERSON: Now, about what year is this?

WILLIAMS: That's about 19-- If you cut your machine and delay that tape a little bit-- [tape recorder off] I was looking for this. I knew it was in here. That is a picture of the house.

HENDERSON: Okay, I can see it clearly now.

WILLIAMS: I wanted to mention about-- [Leo] Politi is a children's book illustrator.

HENDERSON: Is this house still standing?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no.

HENDERSON: Yeah. I think most of that block has been cleared off.

WILLIAMS: I'll tell you why it's not there. It's a good reason that it's not there.

HENDERSON: I also see you in one of these photographs. Is this--?

WILLIAMS: Well, during that time, I was president of the committee.

HENDERSON: Because in this photograph, there's a building under this Plexiglas box, it looks like.

WILLIAMS: Let me see. I would just like to read some of this, because, I tell you, I think it's germaine. This was a group of photographs of the building with the kids decorating the fences between the properties and all that. Politi had brought a group of kids to mingle with the kids from Watts.

HENDERSON: Now, these are kids from--what?--suburban areas, white kids from outside the community that he brought in to mingle with the kids?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, from outside the community. I don't know if this mentions the area, because I think they came from Pasadena.

HENDERSON: Well, go ahead and read that.

WILLIAMS: Lucille Krasne. That's the girl that was teaching out there. It says here that "This was paint-up day at the Watts Towers Arts Center. It brings a class of [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] students out to help local kids decorate their second home. This is the place where so many hungry kids come to work out their feelings. It's their house, and more than a hundred a day come from all over Watts. Arthola Lee, who is curator at the Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, was talking about the next-door Community Arts Center on East Street, which is sponsored by the Towers Committee and provides free art classes, supplies a place to hang out, and most important, the loving help of such people as Miss Lucille Krasne, Arthola Lee, Debbie [Debra] Brewer, and William Blum. Since art classes were moved from the lot behind the Towers, where they had been conducted for more than six years, into a much-used little house a year and a half before this article was written"--which was August of 1966--"the arts

center has become a symbol of the whole city's concern about the children of Watts. This is one thing that they feel Whitey can't move out of the area. It's theirs."

And this was Arthola Lee that was relating this. "Last week, eighteen children from the outside joined the Watts kids in fixing up the center, painting the outside with the bright-colored and imaginative designs. They even painted the back fence and the trash cans. The young artists were brought there by Miss Krasne, who teaches them in summer classes at the county museum.

Plans are also afoot to construct a new, modern center. Complete plans have already been donated by a group of architects and approved by the city planning department. All that's lacking is $75,000 in estimated construction costs."

And it was following that that we went on a real strong fund-raising program to build the center that stands there now. That's why the building isn't there [in the photograph], because that's where the present arts center is. In fact, we did a little thing called selling square inches of land for a dollar. We had drawn the square inches over that plot to know how many square inches we had, and we had certificates made up for each square inch. And each certificate indicated, like, it's latitude and longitude so they knew what square inch they owned.

HENDERSON: Oh, my goodness.

WILLIAMS: And these [indicates] were the certificates.

HENDERSON: Oh, of ownership. This looks very official. And your signature is down there.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it is.

HENDERSON: You were the president. And you've sold some.

WILLIAMS: Oh, we sold a stack of them, enough to build a $54,000 facility. That was a very interesting campaign. A lot of different people around town were selling those square inches.

HENDERSON: This deed that you just showed me has the stamp on it that the Committee [to Save] Simon Rodia's Towers was incorporated June 30, 1958.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. See, the Towers were originally bought by one individual. I think it was only a $3,000 investment. Bill [William] Cartwright-- Bill is a film editor. Bill had funds, and he had a feeling about the Towers. He bought them and then sold them to the committee.

But we did a lot of fund-raising. Anna Bing Arnold was a big donor. And King Vidor, of course, who people know in the movie industry, his daughter worked with us and was a big donor and also brought people to the Towers site and worked with our committee for a long time. Her name was Suzanne Vidor.

HENDERSON: Let me ask this question: since you were one

of the black organizers there, were you joined by anybody significant from the black community? Especially in the early days? I'm sure as things went on and got successful various politicians or other people got on [the] bandwagon.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, well, Tom [Thomas] Bradley's always been-- In fact, he was present at our dedication.

HENDERSON: He wasn't mayor then, though.

WILLIAMS: No, he was a councilman, Tenth District. I'm trying to think of some of these legislators that were from the area who were in Sacramento. And I can't recall names. [referring to photograph] There's one who has a shovel in the ground down there. He was an assemblyman. [Leon Ralph]

HENDERSON: Golly, he looks so young. I can't tell who this is.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I will come across his name.

HENDERSON: Were there any black politicians or folk otherwise who were opposed to what you were doing?

WILLIAMS: Oh, nobody was opposed to any of this. It was almost like motherhood. [laughter]

HENDERSON: The reason I asked that question is that I had gotten part information or stories on Watts Towers from some of the other interviewers [in the UCLA Oral History Program] and they were telling me [Los Angeles City Councilman] Robert Farrell had been an opponent of

conservation in the past and had expressed views at one point that-- Or he was one of the people that had advocated tearing the Towers down, and I just wanted to check on that.

WILLIAMS: In '59? Bob Ferrell?

HENDERSON: Not necessarily in '59. It might have been in the seventies.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he must have come later. I didn't even know his name in 1959. He might have made some statements. I am not aware of any of his activities. But we didn't run into-- We ran into a lot of help, people who wanted to help. See, when you look at faces like that [pointing at photograph], how can you not want to help?

HENDERSON: You can't. I mean, that's a little child playing and expressing herself.

WILLIAMS: That's right. That's right. And kids like that, see, they're hanging around on the Towers. Or they could be hanging around somewhere else.

HENDERSON: Doing a lot worse.

WILLIAMS: Doing a lot worse. And anybody that's against anything like that should be hung.

You know, after we-- Let's talk about that group of architects. There were several architects who designed that building.

HENDERSON: The new [Watts Towers] Arts Center.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Although we chose Herb Kahn, who was one of them, and his partner-- These were architects from Santa Monica-- Kahn, Farrell and Associates [Herbert I. Kahn, Edward Farrell, Paul C. Erickson] were sort of the instigating group. They were part of that committee also, when I joined it. But we got a local contractor to bid on it and to construct it. And I supervised construction for that facility until it was completed.

HENDERSON: Through your office, or just--?

WILLIAMS: No, it was strictly volunteer. This was just me.

HENDERSON: Oh, let me look at that plan.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, this was a plan where we talked about enlarging the activity.

HENDERSON: Oh, my. This is a big plan.

WILLIAMS: Now the [Los Angeles City] Community Redevelopment Agency [CRA] has an RFP [request for proposal] for planners to go through that. We had been thinking about that many years ago. I don't know if there's a date on that, but that had to be 1968, '69.

HENDERSON: I don't see a date.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Oh, I wanted to look at that closer.

WILLIAMS: Which, this?

HENDERSON: The plan you had.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

HENDERSON: Yeah, I want to get some names off that.

WILLIAMS: Oh, are they there?

HENDERSON: Down at the bottom, Kahn, Farrell, and Associates.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but that's the-- There's more than get credit for doing that. In that one firm there are about six or seven architects who actually sat down and did the drafting and everything. I have the original drawings at the office.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. I may want to look at those at some point in time. Just a quick scan.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That's where the names occur of all the people that were involved. The architects, the mechanical engineer, and the electrical engineer.

Speaking of electrical engineering, for the first time, we brought light down to the Watts Towers. And that was done through the efforts of an electrical engineer, who was also a member of the committee, by the name of Saul Goldin. Saul did it with the help of some of the teenagers and larger kids in the community, digging a trench to bring the conduit from up at the building down to the Towers so that we could bring light inside.

And we had the lighting of the Towers out there on 107th Street one night, and Bill Cosby came. Bill's always

been supportive of the Watts Towers Committee. We struck the note and said, "Let there be light in the Towers." It lit up for the first time.

HENDERSON: Do they still light those Towers at night? I haven't been over there to check and see.

WILLIAMS: I don't know. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure that they do. But we had it on a time clock, and they used to come on at the same hour every night.

HENDERSON: Okay. Let me say this for the tape recorder: I'm looking at the plan for the proposed Simon Rodia Community Arts Center. It goes down to 109th Street, over to Wilmington [Street], and then over to Graham Avenue, and is bordered by the railroad track. That's a large piece of area.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Because right now, I've seen plans where the CRA wants to go from 107th Street up toward the railroad station [Watts Train Station]. So they're going in an opposite direction from what this plan indicates.

WILLIAMS: I think they'd do a lot better with this kind of an effort. You'd have some relocation to do, but I think it is worth doing a relocation. There are a lot of people that would like to be relocated. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Oh, yeah. Well, let me return to one question that I asked earlier. You were one of the black

organizers. Who else in the black community was helping you out, particularly in, say, the architecture area?

WILLIAMS: Oh, none of the architects. We had-- Well, just let me look at the makeup of our board. These are names that you won't necessarily recognize, but they were heavily involved in Watts Towers.

HENDERSON: You might just go ahead and read off the names.

WILLIAMS: This was a time--I'm not sure exactly what year this is--that I was chairman, and it indicates the officers: chairman, Harold L. Williams, architect; first vice-chairman, William Cartwright, a film editor; second vice-chairman, Mrs. Charles McCladdie, social worker, black.

HENDERSON: It says that on there?

WILLIAMS: No. I'm just letting you know that she was. Recording secretary, Mrs. Paul Barton, who was a probation officer, black. They were very heavily involved with the committee in terms of giving their time to go pick up kids, to drive kids here and there and this kind of thing. Because we did a lot of things away from the arts center. We would drive people around. Corresponding secretary, Mrs. Henry Corden--she is a housewife--treasurer, Jack Levine, attorney. I believe Jack is still involved with the Watts Towers Committee. Then we have directors: Nicholas King, another film editor; Leon Ralph--that's who

I was thinking of in that photograph--assemblyman, Fifty-fifth District; John Espinoza, who was a professor of architecture; Mae Babitz, who was an artist.

HENDERSON: Oh, does it say where he was a professor of architecture? Do you remember?

WILLIAMS: John Espinoza-- I'm not sure.

HENDERSON: Okay, I'll look it up.

WILLIAMS: I have an idea, but I don't want to say if I don't feel certain. But I can find that out very quickly. Mae Babitz is an artist. Mae had done many pen-and-ink sketches of Bunker Hill before it was demolished in the name of progress with all the high-rise structures. Max Gould was our business administrator, and that's what he did in real life. He knew the books and the finances and kept us on the right track.

HENDERSON: And you need that for your group.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Oh, yeah. Jim Burks, a human relations consultant. Ruth Greenberg, a very interesting lady, an artist, who came to Watts Towers to teach. She worked with us for a number of years teaching woodcut and printmaking. Very talented. Bill Watts, an artist and a building contractor from Watts. Bill Watts from Watts. In fact, that piece of sculpture over there is his.

HENDERSON: Oh, the head?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Maurice Tuchman, who happened to be the

curator of the L.A. County Museum. They were the officers at this time, and they all had assignments and worked, and they weren't there just in name only. But that was just the board and its directors. Then we enlarged that, and we had at least six families from 107th Street involved. Of course, they would show up in big numbers after we built the arts center and we could meet there. We had a big room, large enough, in which we could hold our meeting.

HENDERSON: This sounds very successful.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I think it's a successful effort. I introduced them to the first director out there, who was a black artist from Cleveland, Ohio [Curtis Tann]. I knew him in Cleveland when he was around a similar program there, Karamu House. I'd always looked at Watts Towers Arts Center and this kind of thing as sort of Karamu West. I liked what Karamu House was doing. They had drama programs. In fact, they built this community center that had two stages. One was a proscenium theater and the other was a theater in the round. They'd have performances going there on both stages at the same time. People would come from all around to see these kids act. It was a program where race did not make any difference. It was whether or not you could portray that character. So they were--

HENDERSON: What was the director's name?

WILLIAMS: Oh, this is Curtis Tann. This is a product of his. He does enameling.

HENDERSON: Oh, this dish.

WILLIAMS: Out of sight. That blue one over there on the table is a product of his.

HENDERSON: This house is full of memories.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. That pot over there. Yeah. There are lots of things here. These were some good years. These were some good years. The struggle. But I like the struggle. I should make you a copy of this history. This history of the Towers is very accurate, and it's a little more detailed, maybe. It's not long, but I think it's worth having.

HENDERSON: Because I would add that as an addendum to the record.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

HENDERSON: I'll just have the copy there, maybe, added into the record.

WILLIAMS: I think that's good. Because it brings back some dates and things that I have even forgotten.

At the time that we were interested in this development that you were looking at--the Community Arts Center at the Watts Towers. We had even phased out that development, how it could work. I may take this down to the Community Redevelopment Agency and show this to them,

because I think they need to make a little more concerted effort. There's not much money being spent for the community. They spent a lot of redevelopment money developing all kinds of other things, but I think they can-- But we broke this down to four phases and did an economic analysis at that time. Of course, the money is different now.

HENDERSON: I think so often history gets kind of lost. There needs to be continuity just so that people know what's happened and gone on.

WILLIAMS: That's right. I would agree. I would agree. But I plan to make an appointment, anyhow, to talk with the director of the redevelopment agency, John Tuite. I'm interested in talking more about how minority architects can get involved in the downtown about this city, which is a large percent minority-occupied. Yet you don't find a facility downtown, at the heart of the city, that has any significant role for blacks and other minorities to play. So I'm very anxious to talk about that. And while talking, I think I would like to talk about their RFP, which I did not respond to. I don't think the effort is a good one.

HENDERSON: Let me shift the discussion just a little bit to ask a question. As the center got going in its dealing with art, were there pressures on it to become political or to make statements through art or--? I guess what I'm sort

of searching for is, did various people want to take the center in a certain direction? Or did it more or less go on its own sort of steam?

WILLIAMS: No, that was one thing that we did not want to have, and we kind of saw to it that that didn't happen. When there was an interest shown in certain things, such as music, we saw to it that music was provided. For instance, there was a music company--and don't ask me for its name, because I would lose my life trying to remember--who brought about forty very nice guitars down to the arts center. They gave them to the arts center. There was someone who was interested in teaching guitar, and they did.

When dance was needed, there was a young lady, who was a professional, who came down to Watts Towers Arts Center, to teach dance, and did, and go back and perform on her stage at her time. And that was one young lady who was very talented. In fact, that print on the wall, in white, out in the dining room, is her. Suzanne Jackson. Suzanne was a very talented young lady. Very talented. She's from San Francisco, originally.

We've had some young kids out there that have just shown so much talent that they've been entered in competition, they win competitions, and that kind of thing.

No, there was nothing about making statements or how

you make statements. That was free for you to learn.

HENDERSON: What my question is leading to is that some of the, say, music festivals, or art festivals, or I don't know what other festivals that were centered around the Watts Arts Center, did those get to be political? Or did the committee not want to even get involved in that?

WILLIAMS: We didn't get involved directly. We participated by having the arts center open and exhibits shown. But that one, the Watts [Summer] Festival, did become much too political. We were just not a political group of folks, and we steered clear of that.

HENDERSON: People, when they see a successful center, will want to get on the bandwagon and take it in their own political direction.

WILLIAMS: Well, sometimes you see something that is successful and-- Now, I have to talk about my race of folks. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Be kind. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Sometimes we see some blacks who might be involved in a program or a project that is successful. Another may be working with a project that will never be successful because of certain interactions within the group. And then it was my personal experience to be questioned by a person from another group, "Why are you involved? What are you getting out of this? You must be getting some money."

HENDERSON: Yes. That's the kind of question I'm curious about.

WILLIAMS: I remember a young man that approached Betty. We happened to have this Watts Towers group up at Barnsdall Park at the Frank Lloyd Wright house [Hollyhock House]. This fellow just could not understand how somebody could come out to Watts and get involved in a program without there being something going on under the table. He just

could not.

HENDERSON: This was a black guy?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And he's suspicious about blacks--

WILLIAMS: Blacks.

HENDERSON: Coming into Watts and getting involved?

HENDERSON: Trying to make some change. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There were three of us architects, once upon a time, that put together our little venture, because the three of us were already involved. I was working with Watts Towers. Clyde [H.] Grimes [Sr.], at the time, was working with another group who was trying to save the [Watts] Train Station. John [D.] Williams was working with a housing group of developers, trying to do housing out there.

So I said, "Hey--" They wanted to do a master plan for the Watts Redevelopment Project Area, and I called John Williams and Clyde Grimes together and said, "Let's put our firms together, since we're already involved in the community, and let's make a presentation to do the master plan." And we were successful in doing that. We did the only plan that was done for that community. You know, you will come up with a plan, but it has to be approved by the community in which it's part of. And it has to be approved by [Los Angeles] City Council. We decided that the way we would go about it was to meet with every group in the

area. Housewives-- We put meetings together at a time when they could come and we would explain what we're doing. We would get their feedback as to what they would like to see and this kind of thing. We met with businessmen at another time, when they could make their input. And the schools that were in the area-- We set up about thirteen meetings with thirteen different groups of people in that community.

And of course, there are always some folks who don't like "you blacks who come from Baldwin Hills coming out here to do planning for us." We've gotten a lot of that. I remember an older lady who used to make her speeches a lot, and she'd always get up and have a book of matches in her hand. And you always let people have the floor. Let them get off their chests what they want to get off. She would talk, of course, against doing any planning. They knew that we were there as an ally of the Southern Pacific Railroad [Company].

HENDERSON: [laughter] Oh, my goodness!

WILLIAMS: Well, see, Southern Pacific Railroad, out there, wanted to take all that land and make it industrial. That's why--

HENDERSON: So it wasn't too farfetched, I guess.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. At the end of her speech, her son--I don't remember if he was incarcerated and was coming home

soon-- But she would always end up by saying something like, "My son will come home soon, and when he does, you don't have to be concerned about any of this, because fire will settle anything."

HENDERSON: Golly! And she'd light one of those matches? Goodness! This is right after the Watts riots?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, right. Very interesting meetings, though. But there are all kinds of people in there, and everybody's suspicious of the other guy, and all this. Just like, being involved with the Watts Towers, somebody else out here is suspicious because you are. "You don't have to be here. Why are you here?" It's hard to make some people understand. I enjoyed those days, though, I'll tell you.

But we came up with a plan that the community approved. We went to [Los Angeles] City Council, and there was nobody that stood up to talk against it. That's the plan that they're building right now. Now, we did an illustrative plan-- They came by and got another firm to do an illustrative plan, but they didn't change any of the land uses. We did a good land use plan out there. And it works.

HENDERSON: What year was that finished?

WILLIAMS: 'Sixty-eight. We gave them a document that talked about all the land uses. It was very official, and it still stands.

HENDERSON: Well, maybe I'll shift the question to another area. Of course, you couldn't maintain your same level of commitment to the Watts Towers indefinitely. What sort of series of decisions led to your separation from them, or stepping down, or sort of letting go in some ways?

WILLIAMS: It's called burnout. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Okay. I understand burnout very well. But it wasn't any particular person or incident or--?

WILLIAMS: Not from the community, but by that time I had formed a partnership called Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams [Architects and City Planners]. One of my partners just could not understand my continued involvement with the Watts Towers. So I kind of pulled back. Then we finally dissolved that partnership in 1974. But things begin to take shape, and you need new blood. I laid down the gauntlet in 1970. That's when we kind of moved our firm from where we were at Crenshaw [Boulevard] and Olympic [Boulevard] to Wilshire [Boulevard] in '71. That began to take a lot more time.

I always enjoy getting involved in community, and I do that still. I combine community and architecture, because I just think they are related. So I find it easy to do both. After leaving there, I started working with Avalon-Carver Community Center. I was on the board at Carver Community Center before they merged. They finally merged

that with Avalon Community Center and made it Avalon-Carver and went on with that program.

HENDERSON: Did you remain in contact with people at the Watts center? Were you involved in, say, getting John Outterbridge brought there?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. John I met in Compton. We were architects for Compton Civic Center. At the time, I was trying to find some local black artist or sculptor to help develop the theme monument [Martin Luther King, Jr., Monument] for the plaza. I went over to where I knew John Outterbridge had his sort of school [Communicative Arts Center] and talked with him and a friend of his, [John] Riddle. By George, I haven't called that name in a long time. His first name, I've forgotten. Riddle was a sculptor. But it didn't work out. They had not worked on sculpture of the scale that we were talking about and this kind of thing, and that's how we ended up with Gerard Gladstone, from Toronto. But seeing the things that John was involved in, I told him that I was going to submit his name to our committee for director of Watts Towers, because Curtis Tann was pulling out, the new arts center was coming into play, and it was perfect for him. He wanted to do it. I submitted his name, and they hired John, and he's still there. I haven't seen John in quite a while.

HENDERSON: John is supposed to be interviewed by one of

the people in the arts series [African-American Artists of Los Angeles].

WILLIAMS: Is that right? Very good!

HENDERSON: So I'm just sort of cross-referencing. You know, we [UCLA Oral History Program] have got the Black Leadership in Los Angeles series, and I'm doing the architects [African-American Architects of Los Angeles], and somebody's doing black artists, and that's how that ties together.

WILLIAMS: I see. Very good. But John came in and got everything moving. From what I understand, he's quite a leader. He's quite a leader. I know he's talented. I knew that. I was glad to meet him, because at that time he didn't know that the arts center was looking for a director. I just remember from early conversations that we had that he was really interested in that position, and I am sure glad they saw fit to hire him. He and Curtis. Curtis was a good director. Curtis Tann was a good director.

HENDERSON: Let me ask this conceptual question. You were describing the atmosphere at the center as being very successful, people coming and going, and artists sort of doing impromptu things. Do you think it was better to have had the center under private control? Did it sort of lose some spontaneity when it went under city control?

WILLIAMS: Well, I haven't been so much involved with it since it's been under city control, but I am one who would be against city control.

HENDERSON: You want it to stay private?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I would like to see it stay private. I would like to see the city fund it. The city doesn't have to own everything it puts money into. [laughter] You read about all these other rip-offs that goes, too, with their involvement. No, I would like to have seen it remain private and fluid. I think it's very possible to do. I'd rather have seen it come under the sponsorship of L.A. County Museum [of Art].

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. That might have been the best scenario. They're a private organization with plenty of money.

WILLIAMS: Sure.

HENDERSON: Oh, or no-- Is that the County Museum?

WILLIAMS: County. But I don't know what the future-- As a private agency with no funding, it's difficult to try to maintain those Towers, to keep them waterproof, to keep-- We used to get a young fellow to come down to waterproof those Towers.

HENDERSON: I have another question I'll ask you. This is sort of conceptual. The Long Beach transit line is going through that area. The light rail?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: What do you think the impact of that transit station is going to be on the Watts Towers? Because I'm hearing from some people that they're considering putting in a tourist shuttle from the-- You know, the [Watts] Train Station has been preserved and made a station.

WILLIAMS: Right.

HENDERSON: And so the CRA [Community Redevelopment Agency] wants to put in a shuttle for tourists from the train station down to the Watts Towers.

WILLIAMS: Well, any time you talk about light rail, it always is a conveyer of people, so you'd be able to get many more people down in that area to see what is going on, to learn something about other people and this kind of thing. I think that's important. From that point of view, I think it's excellent that that's going on.

HENDERSON: Another question I've got is that there was a big conference on the Watts Towers a couple of years ago. I've found from somebody-- They gave me the date, 1985. Charles Moore was supposed to have been the media star at this conference.

WILLIAMS: Charles Moore?

HENDERSON: I remember hearing something about it, but I did not attend. Charles Moore, the architect that did the Beverly Hills Civic Center.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. What was it? I haven't heard anything about that. No.

HENDERSON: I was going to ask you what you felt about having, in a sense, white star architects do charettes on Watts. You know, we had another miniature charette last spring.

WILLIAMS: They don't have anything to do in their own community, son-- [laughter] I don't know why architects do that.

HENDERSON: What? Have these charettes?

WILLIAMS: It just reminds me-- And this is architects as a generic group. It's not white architects. Because in 1982, I was president of the National Organization of Minority Architects [NOMA]. We had a convention in Saint Louis. And a group of black architects wanted to go over to East Saint Louis--which is terrible, terrible--and do a charette. [laughter] So it's architects.

HENDERSON: Not just the black ones.

WILLIAMS: It has nothing to do with race. I find that very interesting. It's a good question. But we always seem to seek out something that we feel we can do an intellectual exercise about. Usually, it has no effect, good, bad, or otherwise, on the problem. But it's a nice exercise, intellectual exercise. I didn't know about that one out there, or I might have blocked it out.

HENDERSON: I think the charette you might have heard about was-- Last year, I think USC [University of Southern California] had a charette on Watts. You know about that one?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: And NOMA was invited.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Charles [G.] Lewis represented us there. I didn't have time to go get involved in it.

WILLIAMS: Me, either. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Roland [A. Wiley] wanted me to go. I knew I could not go.

WILLIAMS: They're nice exercises, but I think that's as far as they go. What was the intent?

HENDERSON: I don't really remember. I need to talk to Charles Lewis about that. Now, you know Charles Lewis grew up in Watts. Why he was our representative was that he knew the area. I think he told me he was, in fact, giving them tours about what was significant to the area.

WILLIAMS: You know Ed [Edgar J.] Goff?

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Ed will take you anywhere you want to go in Watts. Ed knows Watts. And Gene [Eugene T.] Brooks--

HENDERSON: Yes. I've met Gene Brooks.

WILLIAMS: Gene can take you anywhere you want to go in

Watts. The two of them had a studio in Watts, practicing architecture. That's right.

HENDERSON: Now, when was that?

WILLIAMS: That was 1966, '67. That's when I first met Gene Brooks. I'm trying to remember what they called their [studio]. I can't remember what they called it [Urban Workshop]. Gene Brooks and Ed Goff. Ed is full of the early history of the Eastside of Los Angeles.

HENDERSON: He's a native of L.A.?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember, but I think he grew up here, because he can talk about some things that I know about, being out here in the service, when the Eastside of Los Angeles really was flourishing.

I've seen Bette Davis on Central Avenue. People flocked down there from Hollywood to the Club Alabam, to the Last Word [Cafe], and the Memo Club, and that hotel.

HENDERSON: What, the Dunbar?

WILLIAMS: The hotel down there. Dunbar. That was a time when Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and all of them would be playing down at the Lincoln Theatre and staying at the Dunbar Hotel.

HENDERSON: One of our UCLA interview series is going to be with some of the jazz musicians of the Central Avenue area. I won't do that interview, but that's another one of the areas that we're--

WILLIAMS: They need to find--I don't even know if he's still alive--Dan Grissom.

HENDERSON: Dan Grissom.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Dan Grissom was a singer and a leader of a band that used to appear at the Last Word. Fantastic. Dan Grissom. I have sat there at that little circular bar many an evening to listen to good music.

HENDERSON: At the Last Word?

WILLIAMS: The Last Word.

HENDERSON: When did that close?

WILLIAMS: Well, Betty and I came back to California in 1955, and everything was boarded up. I cried like a baby.

HENDERSON: Oh, so you were here during the war when that was going on.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah. That was quite an avenue. I enjoyed that so much. The thing that I liked, you might find a person on welfare living here, a schoolteacher living here--

HENDERSON: Next to each other, yeah.

WILLIAMS: --a physician living next door, or across the street from them, and somebody on welfare living next to him. It was just fantastic. And everybody knew everybody. Run out and jump on the red car and go to Long Beach.

I remember looking at Jefferson High School, and, boy,

was that futuristic to me. This was 1942, '43, with its curved corners. Beautiful building. Beautiful building. And then came progress, and those who could jumped to the Westside and left all those who couldn't make the leap. And that's what we had. Boarded-up clubs. That was sad. That part was really sad, when I came back and saw that.

HENDERSON: What do you feel about the Central Avenue area now turning Latino?

WILLIAMS: It's not only Central Avenue. You know, when NOMA had its convention here two years ago, I guess it was. Three years--

HENDERSON: No, it was four years ago.

WILLIAMS: You're kidding.

HENDERSON: 'Eighty-six. This is 1990 now.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it was '86. Okay. We did the competition with the L.A. Unified School District, with the various schools. The winner and the runner-up, from Jefferson, were Latino. And Locke [High School] was black, but there was another school that was Latino. It just told you what's going on, what's really happening. I don't know where the black community is moving to, but they're being encroached by the Latino community. It's very interesting.

HENDERSON: I used to think that the black community was just headed south and west, but that's not totally true. That is, part of it has broken off and dispersed to

Palmdale and Lancaster and--

WILLIAMS: That's what I was going to say. That's right.

HENDERSON: And what's the name of the town? Riverside.

WILLIAMS: Riverside, yeah.

HENDERSON: Rialto and-- There's a young lady who is a student at UCLA, and she commutes from Rialto. I say, you know, "Girl, you must be crazy!" [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm talking to someone who works here who's planning on living in Palmdale, making that commute every day.

HENDERSON: Yeah. How far is that? Fifty miles? Sixty miles?

WILLIAMS: It's about that, yeah.

HENDERSON: That's one way.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

HENDERSON: See, to me, time is money. I wouldn't want to put that time on the highway. And every moment you're on the highway, you have a potential for an accident.

WILLIAMS: As you say, but property's so much cheaper there.

HENDERSON: They spend the money on gasoline. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Boy! Whew! And hospital bills to relieve the stress from driving! Oh, that kills me.

HENDERSON: Well, it seems like we're nearing the end of this session. What we'll take up next time is where you

think architecture is going as a community resource and its future. I want to get your ideas on architectural education.

WILLIAMS: Very good. Good.

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WILLIAMS: Thinking in terms of architects rather than architecture, and where architects are going, I have to separate out black architects versus the majority architects, because I have a special concern as to where black architects are going.

HENDERSON: I hear you.

WILLIAMS: This is my thirtieth year in business, and during those thirty years I have met black architects across the country. I've been in offices, I've seen what they're doing. Through our own separate professional organization, NOMA [National Organization of Minority Architects], I'm able to discuss with them and listen to discussions in terms of what they're doing. I have seen the talents and the skills, the managerial capabilities of many of these individuals, and I must say that I marvel at the majority of those, because they have been able to withstand the pressures and the prejudice of this racist nation and have survived. It just really breaks my heart to see all this talent and skill being wasted because there is that mechanism that disallows black architects from entering the mainstream. Some of our own white counterparts fight to keep black architects from entering the mainstream. I don't know of too many firms that have

elevated black employees to the level of partnership.

HENDERSON: In many ways, that's what sort of prompts black architects to get out on their own and form their own-- And they stay in a small little situation.

WILLIAMS: Black architects have only two opportunities. You either work for a firm as a draftsman or a small black firm. Possibly, in the big firms, they give you titles such as vice president, but all the time knowing that that vice president can be fired tomorrow. He does not have the say-so in terms of firm policy. He does not choose projects that they should pursue and is just a gilded employee working for the firm. Well, they pay them decent salaries, and maybe that's their bottom line, those who accept that. But either you do that-- There are firms, of course, like SOM [Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill], who have elevated blacks to partnership level. And I would love to be able to recall the name of the one individual that met with us in Chicago at the NOMA convention in [1987]. That must have been three or four years ago. I don't remember the exact date, but the individual came from SOM's office to talk with this group of black architects. Of course, he knew many of the fellows around the Chicago area. But there are not too many firms that can boast of that. So I must pay SOM credit for being a visionary.

As I say, it's just heartwrenching to see all the

skills-- So, as I say, either you become an employee in a big firm, or you strike out on your own to try to do your own thing. The only thing with doing that, what I have found, is that there are so many individuals or small teams who attempt to start an office, everybody's been starting a business ever since we have been able to get into this business. What that means is you end up as very small offices, sometimes even one-man offices, doing projects, creating projects that are not of great magnitude, and the big projects and the opportunities for the big, significant contributions go by the board.

What I would love to see are individual black architects who think in terms of getting into the large-scale project format and begin to bring their various skills to the same table. You know, there are firms that have eight partners, ten partners, and all the names don't have to be in the title of the firm. Even one that we attempted, as Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams [Architects and City Planners], was more than three people. We started that firm with six people. But because of the length of titles and this kind of thing, they voted to use three names.

HENDERSON: Just out of curiosity, you didn't decide to have a name that was just totally neutral?

WILLIAMS: A generic name?

HENDERSON: Like The Architect's Collaborative [TAC] or

something.

WILLIAMS: Well, that was discussed. A lot of things were discussed by all the people that were involved in it. And that was stricken down in favor of three individual names. But I do feel that if a team of people could come together, recognizing their skill, their capability, their desire to take on certain kinds of responsibility, and form a large nucleus of people and begin to grow from that, rather than starting with that one person attempting to get work and this kind of thing, which takes forever-- And sometimes never. Because, going into the the twenty-first century, I think we're going to see a whole new ball game in terms of the demands on architects. Different kinds of projects to meet differing community needs. Institutional needs, I think, are going to be a totally different ball game than we've seen. And I do feel that there will always-- Number one, I'll say there will be room for those individual firms, those individual architects. There are always things for them to do, and that need will be there. But it will not be as great a need for that individual as it will be for team action.

HENDERSON: Do you forsee more specialization? Like hospital architects, school architects?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I think you'll probably always get the specialists, but that, again, depends upon what the

individual wants to do. I personally have never wanted to be a specialist in anything. I consider myself a generalist. I have interest in different kinds of projects. That's why I think the field is so interesting, because there are so many different types of projects. And the work that you get in the office-- You can't pull out a fixed sheet off the shelf and shove it into this other project over here, because it's so different from the one that you did before. That is the kind of thing that I prefer. It's one of the reasons I came into this field, because everything was so different and unique. Each project is unique.

One of the things I think that black architects are going to have to do--in fact, all architects are going to have to do--is to strive a little bit harder for excellence in design. I think we have a problem with that with most firms.

HENDERSON: Yes. Definitely.

WILLIAMS: And I think, moving into the twenty-first century, we're going to see a demand for greater excellence, and we're going to have to be much better prepared to work in this field than we have in the past. It's been easy for people to just accept things from architects because they are the professionals--those who have names accepted even before they put pencil to paper.

But I think we're going to have to do something about dealing with the excellence in design.

HENDERSON: By excellence in design, do you mean something a little more fashionable or get into the debate on deconstructivism and that kind of stuff? Or do you mean just craftsmanship in terms of putting the building together?

WILLIAMS: Well, first, I think that one has to define for himself what actually acts as criteria for excellence in design. I remember an architect who had talked about the fact that perceived quality in building is provided for the profession, it's provided for those who participate in the project, and it's provided for the public. If you use those three areas as measuring sticks: if the profession accepts what you have done as quality architecture; if those who participate in it--your consultants--know whether or not what they have done is quality; and then if the public accepts what you've done as quality, you have done a quality project. There have been some architects who've been asked how much time they spend doing design. One individual had indicated that 75 percent of his time is spent in design. Another one-- This is one of the firms that is quote, unquote, "design" firms, the big names. But there are some, and they've been studying these firms. Arthur Erickson, some of these people, the HOK [Hellmuth,

Obata, and Kassabaum] firms on some of the things that they've done, CRS [Caudill, Rowlett, and Scott]. They've learned that these people have a different definition for what constitutes design. You know, there are some who feel that once you've finished all the work on canary yellow [sketch paper], the design is finished. "Here, you take this and draw it up." And that's the end of it, of design. Then go on and do something else. But then there are those who even during the construction are still looking at the hardware, studying the doorknob, and they're still involved in design. And they're still making design decisions. That's what we're going to have to do.

HENDERSON: It seems fashionable though, these days, to not care about those things. For example, Frank Gehry buildings. They upset me when I get close to those buildings. You know, the material is so shoddy, and the thing's been kind of thrown together and-- Ugh!

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I don't know what some of his goals are, and therefore a lot of things he does do not appeal to me. But I am not willing to put them down, because I don't know what his design goals are. You have to stop and look. But the profession seems to buy it.

HENDERSON: Yes, they do.

WILLIAMS: I don't know if his consultants or his participants buy it. I don't know. And the public is up

and down on some of that work. So when you put it with that criteria, you begin to wonder. But then, on the other hand, you take people like Paul Rudolph. The profession buys him. I'm sure the people that are involved in those projects buy the projects that he turns out, and I'm sure the public does. So I think there is an individual who turns out quality architecture.

You know, I've been one who really looks at the user as one of those important ingredients--the user of the facility that you're designing. Because it's got to work for him. I don't know if all the buildings that we see the profession giving gold medals and these kind of things to-- Physically, to the public, they may look great. I don't know if the people who use that building-- I don't know if it works for them. I'm one who says if it doesn't work, it should never receive an award.

HENDERSON: How would you find out from the users that it does what you--?

WILLIAMS: All you've got to do is have a talk with them.

HENDERSON: Surveys, or what?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. The only thing you can do is check with the users. I don't know if that's done, but I think it's one of those areas that the architect is supposed to address.

HENDERSON: I read in a magazine that the users in the

Portland [Oregon] City Hall by Michael Graves didn't like it at all.

WILLIAMS: I don't know what they didn't like. I don't know if the plan worked. I don't know if the--

HENDERSON: I've forgotten the exact complaint.

WILLIAMS: Because in a city hall, there are several things that have to work: people flow in the building; departmental flow, when information flows from one department to another; the paper flow, how easily it is moved around through city hall, and how people can communicate with each other. So I don't know if it was something physical that they didn't like in the building. That's a personal kind of thing. But the building could still work. They may not understand the language of the architect. That's something that comes with some education.

Again, in our community, I think we have an obligation to our community to educate in this field, to get people to understand our language, to get people to begin to talk about, accept, or deny, the things that we do in our community. This is the only way I think you can begin to better the quality of what is done in our community, whether we do it or whether "the man" does it. That they understand what he's attempting to do, and they can judge his success or failure.

HENDERSON: Let me ask this question: do you think there's such a thing as a black design aesthetic? Is there something that black architects would express that is unique about the community? That you're pulling values or aesthetic looks out of the community? Like there's black music and there's black painting. Is there a black architecture that you can pinpoint or even see some features of? I mean, there may not be a whole system of black architecture, but can you think of things that, quote, "look black" without being negative? [laughter] Is there such a thing?

WILLIAMS: This is something that I think many architects have tried to address. Every time you go into a school of architecture--a black school--that's one of the things that always pops up: black architecture. I've often wondered what they were really feeling. And I've never really gotten a student to explain to me what he is talking about when he talks about black architecture. Some may think that he's trying to relegate facades back to the African hut. Which is ridiculous. So I'm not sure what black architecture is. The life-style of black African-Americans is much the same life-style as white European-Americans. After all, blacks in this country were brought from another country and taught.

HENDERSON: I'll give you one example of sort of what I

mean. When I was teaching at Prairie View [Agricultural and Mechanical University of Texas, near Houston], I started a collection of photographs of rural black churches in Texas. Then, I got out here to Los Angeles. I was driving around South Central [Los Angeles], I think, when I first got here. I went down this street, and then I saw this building, and I said, "Wow. That thing must have been brought here from Louisiana or someplace. It looks just like what was built back in the backwoods of Louisiana or Texas." I thought, "That's black architecture." I did not photograph that building. I don't have any film to do what I used to do, but--

WILLIAMS: Why did you say that was black architecture? Now I'm interviewing you! [laughter]

HENDERSON: Yeah. There was something about this squatty little white building that immediately said it was a church, and there was something about the steeple. It was short and had this sort of look that said, "It's not a school. It's not a store. It's definitely a church." And it had a very rural look. I mean, very literally a rural look, but I can't put my finger on why.

WILLIAMS: Have you gone into rural white communities--

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: --and looked at rural white churches?

HENDERSON: Yes. At least in the South.

WILLIAMS: Is there a difference?

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: What's the difference?

HENDERSON: The rural white churches seem to have proportions that are taller. Plus, of course, there's a little more affluence, maybe, to the church. The windows are a little taller and narrower and the steeples are taller.

WILLIAMS: Any idea why?

HENDERSON: Well, I'm sure money and economics have something to do with that.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

HENDERSON: I'm not totally sure that money and economics now or always has something to do with that. I think that at one time it did and then somehow the vocabulary got going and now that's a recognizable style. Maybe what I'm also leading up to is that in Houston, I continued my photo collection, because I saw several black churches that had been built in the thirties and forties--maybe even in the fifties--that were brick versions--

WILLIAMS: Of that squatty--

HENDERSON: Of that squatty little rural thing. But they were tall. They were big. They were tall, but they still had that same sort of language. I'd have to look again at the pictures and really be careful with how I'd describe

them, but they were definitely wealthy versions of their rural cousins, still religious, but not looking like a white church to me at all. Now, that system broke down, I think, after the sixties, because now I've seen some black churches that do not have a, quote, "black" look anymore, and now they're just like any other church.

WILLIAMS: Even glass.

HENDERSON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: Have you found any other life-style that is reflected in architectural structures that can relate to black culture?

HENDERSON: No.

WILLIAMS: The only thing that I can think of is, for instance, in Louisiana, the shotgun house.

HENDERSON: Yes. Yes. There's a scholar [John Michael Vlach] who has studied where it came from and says it comes from West Africa via Haiti, and has documentation.

WILLIAMS: Right. Right. Right.

HENDERSON: He did a real good job on that.

WILLIAMS: Right.

HENDERSON: Oh, and let me add one more thing to that story on the shotgun house. This white guy that did research on the shotgun house, he had maybe a paragraph or two on previous literature about shotgun houses that he had studied. And he saw that white scholars in the forties and

fifties kept saying, "We don't know where the shotgun house came from. Maybe it's a Cajun thing. Maybe it came from Europe." Maybe it came from, you know, who knows where. Nobody wanted to say that this thing came from Africa.

WILLIAMS: That's very much like a community here in Los Angeles that was a totally white community, affluent. A black couple--the fellow was a psychologist and his wife was a physician--decided to buy a house in that community, on that street. Well, these people were not ones to demonstrate.

HENDERSON: They weren't militant.

WILLIAMS: That's right. But the word was out. And one of the neighbors, talking to another neighbor, indicated that "we have Africans on our street." We don't have any American Negroes on our street, we have "Africans" on our street.

HENDERSON: Goodness.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Racism. But in terms of black architecture, I just do not feel that today there is any symbolism left. Churches are as affluent as anybody's. In fact, probably the most affluent type of architecture that you can borrow money to build is a church. People find it difficult to borrow money to build an office building or to build a high-rise condominium or something like that, but they can always borrow money-- It's almost like "keep them

on their knees." [laughter]

HENDERSON: Let me ask this question that I've asked some other of my interviewees: Do you think the profession is going in the right direction with computers? Do you see that as a coming trend? And do you have a computer yourself? Would you buy a computer in the future if you could?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I listen to people discuss computers, and I hear totally different kinds of things. Yes, I think there will probably come a time when it's almost impossible to proceed without a computer. You may not necessarily have to use it for CADD [computer-aided design and drafting software] and doing all your design and construction documents with it, but I would suggest to many of the black firms to get yourself computerized.

HENDERSON: What? For things like billing? Specs?

WILLIAMS: All of the above, including CADD.

HENDERSON: Including CADD.

WILLIAMS: Of course, if you are not really familiar with the computer industry, you can put terrible information into a computer, which means you get terrible information out of a computer.

HENDERSON: That's right.

WILLIAMS: Only faster. And I listened to an architect talk about that you can't design with a computer. You

still need those tons of yellow canary paper, I guess. He only uses his computer to do construction documents. I'm sure that helps him quite a bit. But there are others who use a computer just as that architect uses canary paper, and they do design with a computer. I'm one who feels that, yes, you can design with a computer. You can do everything with a computer that you can do with a pencil. It depends upon how much you know about how to manipulate it. I think one has to change his thinking process working with a computer. But I would tell a young man today, if you can't type, if you don't know anything about keyboard, typewriter, you're not going to be able to get a job after a while.

HENDERSON: That's right.

WILLIAMS: In fact, I have been looking for that young man with an architectural background who knows something about computers, and he's very difficult to find. I don't know how far schools are involved in teaching kids about computers, but I don't think they're teaching nearly enough. So there is a shortage. That's another thing that I have been telling some young people. In fact, talking with a group in [Houston] Texas, during the AIA [American Institute of Architects] convention this year, talking about how to prepare yourself to go into an architect's office for an interview--

HENDERSON: Did you talk to the group at Prairie View? Or where these--?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no. These were just individuals. This young man happened to be a graduate of Southern [University]. He's talking about coming to California. And another young lady who was from Houston, who was a student at 'SC [University of Southern California] this year, we'd been talking. Take something to the firm. If you're only taking what he has dozens of already, he will most likely not give you a job if you have little experience. But if you have prepared yourself and know something about how to operate a computer, you know something about CADD and how to put drawings on the system, you have something else to offer. And that is marketable. That is really marketable. There are many training centers all over the country, and, fellows, get involved in that. The day of the triangle and the t-square, I think, are coming to an end. No more of this boring-- Once they start working with the computer, it's another whole thing.

HENDERSON: A different way of thinking.

WILLIAMS: Talking with Wendell [J.] Campbell, black architect out of Chicago-- Wendell has just invested in a CADD system by Intergraph [Corporation]. Intergraph was wise enough to get into the micro field during the past

three or four years. They've been sitting out there all by themselves. Big, expensive system costs you $250,000, when I first learned about Intergraph. That's $250,000 a work station. Then it dropped to $125,000. Now they're down to micro. They have a micro version of Intergraph, and it is very good.

HENDERSON: And how much does that cost?

WILLIAMS: It's $3,000 for the software.

HENDERSON: Damn! That's cheap!

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Same as AutoCAD. AutoCAD's $3,000. So he has the micro version and the Intergraph version that works on IBM [International Business Machines Corporation computers]. And that's his design tool that he uses.

HENDERSON: Now, he uses that for sketch design? Conceptual?

WILLIAMS: Yes. You can do so much with it. He took me to the demonstration at the AIA convention and had the fellows demonstrate it. It is just fantastic. It's all over AutoCAD. It does so much more than AutoCAD. AutoCAD's good. The thing that makes it good is the fact that so many third-party manufacturers are developing things that interface with AutoCAD because it is so popular. They're approaching eighty thousand users all over the world. The thing speaks in Italian and French and Spanish and German. It's all over Europe, and it's all over here. You

just have to configure it to work for the way you want to work. It's up to the individual, but it's that flexible. Basically, it's a generic drawing tool. But there are so many things out there that you can find to make it work for architects. So Intergraph has entered the competition for the IBM.

What Wendell has done, he has taken the IBM version and has one work station for two people, and he has networked them all together. So he has one person here, a sketchboard on his desk, a workstation desk set up here, and another person on the other side, and a computer--

HENDERSON: In the middle.

WILLIAMS: Being used by either one of them. That is the IBM version. So only he is using the other version--he or a designer that he has trained to use it. That's another thing: getting people trained. He's had to do the same thing. I'm starting to train a guy coming in on Monday who's going to be trained on AutoCAD in the office.

HENDERSON: Your office?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And that's the only way-- Now, this is someone who has a lot of drafting experience. He's a senior, a draftsman. He just needs to get his license, really. But he's been around a long time. I've known him a long time. He worked with one of our deceased black architects, Vince [Vincent J.] Proby. That's where I met

him. He has wanted to come into my office. But I want him to come and bring something. He doesn't have that, so I'm going to give it to him. I know he's going to enjoy it. He's wanted to get into it for a long time. I think he would enjoy learning it. What I'm going to do is, once he knows that, he can train other people. But yes, I think the computer-- I think we're just scratching the surface.

HENDERSON: Well, you know, when you mentioned that schools aren't doing enough these days, let me ask this question about education: Do you think there's still a relevant place for black architectural schools? And are they turning out good graduates, in your opinion?

WILLIAMS: Well, I'll tell you. I've been on some campuses--white architectural schools and black architectural schools--and I have seen some fantastic quality at black architectural schools. I think Southern [University] has turned out some fantastic students. I don't know where they get all their motivation, but those whom I have met, I have helped get several of them placed in offices when I was not able to accept one at that particular time. They come with such energy. And during my tour of Prairie View, looking at some of the quality work of some of those seniors, my gosh!

HENDERSON: Was that during this visit for this convention?

WILLIAMS: No, not this visit. No, this is before, when

you were there.

HENDERSON: Back in '84.

WILLIAMS: When you were there. [laughter] And comparing the quality of what we saw then, there is no difference. There is a seriousness in some of those students that I think you don't find even in black students at white institutions. I think it has something to do with the family [atmosphere] of the campus. I just have-- Oh, I don't know. I have a thing about architectural schools, what we are really try to teach people, trying to teach the students. Some schools--and I don't want to get into naming institutions--but some teach students how to render. They become artists rather than a technician who also knows how to put something together and make it express what you're attempting to express. So there's a lot lacking in terms of teaching young people how to put buildings together, and they bring the lack of that to an office when they go in to work. I think schools need to take a look at--if you want to express your structure--how to put that structure together, how materials go together, what materials go together to form a portion of your structure to make it make the statement that you want it to make, instead of learning how to render it without knowing what's behind those colors. It makes a difference. I just remember a student who was designing a church. I think

this was a senior student. It was shown in one of the exhibitions of church architecture by that particular committee of AIA. There was this beautiful rendering. It's the first thing you saw. But then, one of the things they had to do was draw a section through the buildings. [laughter]

HENDERSON: And ignorance shows.

WILLIAMS: So you'd move away from this rendering, and you'd go over and take a look at this thing, and there was something that looked like about a three-inch pipe that took off from the foundation, it went up about thirty feet, and arched over and down on the other side. Ordinarily you expect that hoop to end up back at the foundation on the other side. But it didn't. It didn't come down to the ground. It came down to about ten feet above the ground and made another swing over and made that same kind of thing. So we had this double arch done with about a three-inch steel pipe that the young man could not defend.

HENDERSON: I think architecture schools are a little too cerebral and don't let students do enough hands-on things. That is, work with two-by-fours and just stack something up or build a little doghouse or project. When you do that, when you actually get involved with some materials, then you figure out, "Oh, this won't work" or "Oh, this won't stand up."

WILLIAMS: That was part of the philosophy, I think, of Frank Lloyd Wright, because if you attend the Frank Lloyd Wright School [of Architecture at Taliesen West, Scottsdale, Arizona] over here outside of Phoenix--

HENDERSON: Taliesen?

WILLIAMS: Taliesen. That's one of the things that they did at one time. I don't know if they're still doing that. But I've known a couple of graduates of his school, and they would actually build a structure from the foundation up, including reinforcing steel and shingles on the roof. This one student happened to be from Ohio. I think he went to Frank Lloyd's school for two years. He said one morning they were out working at six o'clock in the morning. They were up on a roof laying shingles. They were clay tile. He says, "A little while after we were there, we heard this rit-tat-tat, tat-tat [mimicking the

sound of a walking cane] and then up over the ridge came this hat and this cape." Frank Lloyd was up on the roof on the other side.

HENDERSON: Lord have mercy! Goodness!

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. They'd say he was really hard on them in terms of doing things properly, making details work.

HENDERSON: I wonder, how did he get up on that roof?

WILLIAMS: Well, you know some of the structures over there, they come down almost--

HENDERSON: Fairly low.

WILLIAMS: --to meet the earth.

HENDERSON: But he was still fairly elderly at that time, anyway.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Sure he was. Well, he was elderly when he came to my school at-- When did he come to Miami [University]? It must have been about 1948. He came to Miami.

HENDERSON: He would have been about eighty then.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Because he died in '59 at ninety.

WILLIAMS: Right. Ninety.

HENDERSON: Damn. You mentioned some architecture students from the black schools whom you've placed in L.A.-- I'm not saying that you're running an employment agency.

WILLIAMS: No!

HENDERSON: But you've definitely got a sort of mentoring style, and I'd like to maybe ask you about that. That is, you are very concerned about architectural education and how it plugs into the actual real world of architecture. You've demonstrated over the years, at least to me, a concern about making sure that architecture generationally continues. What are your views on that? How do you decide who to mentor? Is it something that you just happen to do on a case-by-case basis? Or have you made a system of it? How do you know which person is going to work out? Who do you decide to be a mentor to?

WILLIAMS: Well, I'll tell you, I have not been a mentor to everybody that's come into my office. I think it comes from a feeling. I have lived a long time. I know something about people. I know something about interacting with people, and I know how to make some assessments of people interacting with me. And so far I've been right.

HENDERSON: Wait. You don't have any failures?

WILLIAMS: I don't take failures. You see, I don't accept the failures. [laughter] That's why I say everybody who comes in my office I do not mentor.

One of the people who came to my office--again, from Southern--a young lady from Cameroon. I'd been so impressed with that girl, I spent almost a whole afternoon with her in the office. She gave me a presentation of her

senior project, and we discussed it, even from the standpoint of how it worked structurally. I found her awfully interesting. She finally ended up getting her master's at USC this last year. But you could tell she was worthwhile. You could really tell she was worthwhile. Another young man is working over at John [D.] Williams's office right now--again, a graduate of Southern--and he was worthwhile. I wished at that particular time that I had the projects so that I could accept him working in my office. But I didn't, and I thought about where he could get the best experience.

I like small offices. When I came to California, that's why I liked working for Paul [R.] Williams. The largest he had ever been was twenty-two people. When I was there, there were only maybe twelve, fourteen people. It was like family. You're not relegated to doing one thing. You can do the whole thing all the way into observing construction. I feel that for young people, that is the kind of office you need. You do not need a six-hundred-man office. You'll be lost. You'll be relegated to doing toilets, toilet stalls, for years, you know. So I think about the kind of office, the kind of individual that runs the office. John Williams has the temperament of a professor at an architectural school.

HENDERSON: He's another person I will interview, by the

way.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Right.

HENDERSON: So you called him and said, "I've got this person."

WILLIAMS: I told John, yes. He asks me some questions about them. I tell him what I feel. He says, "Send them over." Because I just remember sometimes he's looking, and many times he has called and asked me. So that fellow's still there. Very nice.

HENDERSON: Well, tell me about some people who you've turned down. Not so much in detail, but what signals something that turns on a caution light for you?

WILLIAMS: Oh-- I'm not sure exactly what that is. But the attitude of some-- Something that they give off that indicates some insincerity about what they're saying. I remember one student who was sent to me by a friend who teaches at one of the schools. That person didn't show up, but another person from the same school and the same class did. I asked him if he was the individual that was recommended by this teacher, and he said, "Oh, yes. Oh, yes." It was not at all, and it was obvious to me. I talked with the teacher, and he says, "No, I wouldn't have recommended that he show up at your office." I don't even know what his skills might have been. They were not recommended by his professor. He could have at least said

no, he was not the individual and truthfully indicate how he got there. I do not like deceit. I don't like deceit. I like for people to be with me the way that I am with you. What you see is what you get. I hide nothing, and I don't think anybody else needs to.

But I don't know if there's any one particular thing that I could say turns on a red light. I think it's just experience, knowing something about people, and being able to make certain kinds of judgments. As I say, I haven't been wrong yet, in terms of architectural students.

When we had formed MAP here, the Southern California Association of Minority Architects and Planners. We gave scholarships to people at USC. And interviewing even some of those students--

HENDERSON: These were high school students going into USC?

WILLIAMS: These were college students. They were already in architecture school. They were there on small scholarships, and they needed as many scholarships as they could to augment those costs. USC is an expensive school. We didn't have a lot of money--very little money--and we were giving $500 scholarships, which to some students means a whole lot. I was just talking to one the other day who's a student at 'SC. Talking about $500, she said, "Gee whiz, if I could find $500 scholarships--" Because she needs it. That's the student from Houston. So

we made judgments on those students, and I don't think we were wrong at that time.

These were some talented people at USC. In fact, one of the students there--last name was Brown, and I don't remember his first name--but he must have been about a 1982, '83 graduate. He repeated his scholarship the second year. Another young man used to work in my office, Elmer [A.] Jacobs [II]. I got him a minority scholarship through the AIA to go to [California Polytechnic University] Pomona. He's a graduate of that institution and has gone on working. While he was working there, I let his wife work in my office as a secretary to give her some income while he was going to school, and she was very good. He was going to school and working, too. But my judgment again, with Elmer, was right. I tell anybody that today. Elmer's a fantastic guy.

HENDERSON: And you keep up with all these people, I take it.

WILLIAMS: Well, sometimes. I keep up with Elmer. I know that Elmer is back out in the Pomona area, and he's working for the city. It's close to his house. But he's getting more and more experience. Elmer will call me every once in a while and let me know.

HENDERSON: What about with high school?

WILLIAMS: That's the fun part of this business. I haven't

done a lot with high school. One of the reasons, I think-- You know, black architects are-- If we don't do something very drastically, I think we'll run out of black architects. Not enough kids are coming into this field. That's why I'm so concerned about getting a piece of the pie for black architectural businesses, because these kids don't have any role models. I feel high school is late. I think that's probably why I-- We've done little things with high schools, but kids are not exposed to architects and the meaning of architecture soon enough in life. I want to see something done at that much younger age.

HENDERSON: You're aware of the BEEP [Built Environment Exposure] Program, though?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I don't know how effective it is. I still don't see these kids growing up knowing something about what we're talking about. I don't know where they are. But wherever it is, it's not enough.

The black engineers have another system, and they are really beginning to recruit at a young age. I have wanted to talk with Benito Sinclair, a structural engineer who is one of the first or maybe the first president of the Los Angeles Council of Black Engineers. I think he was the founder and first president of that, and I think he is also the national president of that organization. They've been aware of the lack of young people coming into that

business, and they've attempted to do something about it. That's why I've been interested in this group at NOMA really getting serious about what this thing is about and not so much tooting their own horns and this kind of thing. We've got to give a little bit, and I don't see too many people doing that.

HENDERSON: Yeah. Unfortunately, they're in a self-preservation mode. I know that.

WILLIAMS: Yes. You can't afford it. But if we don't get to the young people-- I wanted to, and I would still like to, work with somebody to develop a project whereby young people can recognize good planning of communities, learn about keeping your environment clean. I think you could take kids and do this in almost the fashion of some kind of game, puzzle, but on a much higher level. I am still thinking about that. I think something can be developed whereby young people can learn something about architecture and planning. I think it's very important to their survival.

HENDERSON: Most interesting.

WILLIAMS: You can teach kids anything.

HENDERSON: They're very absorbent.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

HENDERSON: Let me swing the conversation in a slightly different direction--maybe in a major different

direction. On one of the tapes I listened to, you were talking about Jefferson High School and how it impressed you when you first got here. It looked like a fantastic building. Can you give me some more impressions of what L.A. was like for you when you first arrived? Are there any buildings that you can remember that you--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, the thing about the whole California architecture was a big joke to me, being from the Midwest. Because in the the Midwest, you know, we use a lot of wood, wood siding, masonry, stone and brick. To come to California and see all the stucco, all the colors, impressed me quite a bit. The scale of architecture was much lighter.

HENDERSON: Lighter?

WILLIAMS: Yes. It opened up to you, whereas the masonry structures that I'm more accustomed to--the brick apartment buildings in New York and Philadelphia, and brownstones, and all that heavy, heavy, heavy architecture--was just lifted, was just really interesting. The type of architecture here-- There's a lot of post-and-beam panel architecture that was not executed in the same way that I had seen post-and-beam executed in the East because of the materials here. The mechanical systems in buildings could be different because of type and style. And then watching the technology, using areas above ceilings as plenums,

making you capable of lowering your buildings. I would like to see a lot more done in that area. I think there's more to heating and air-conditioning than double-duct systems, and I don't know if a lot of people are giving that a lot of thought. But again, that's part of design in buildings, and architects are going to have to get involved in some of that. I think if they don't, it will remain double-duct systems. [laughter]

HENDERSON: Let me ask you another question in this sort of historical mode. When you were here in the fifties, when you had first arrived, did you go visit any of the Case Study Houses or go on house tours?

WILLIAMS: We did a little bit. And I fell in love with one architect out here, residential.

HENDERSON: Oh, who was that?

WILLIAMS: That was Ed [Edward H.] Fickett.

HENDERSON: I've never heard of him.

WILLIAMS: Ed Fickett had a vocabulary of residential design I thought was rather outstanding.

HENDERSON: Now, was he a very modern designer?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: And you liked to do modern stuff.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: I know Paul Williams was doing traditional stuff.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: [laughter] Was that a real shock to you? The difference between traditional and modern?

WILLIAMS: Let me tell you. When I first came to Paul Williams's office, the first house that he gave me to do was one for a general contractor. It was on the corner of Lexington [Road] and Crescent [Drive] in Beverly Hills.

HENDERSON: Yeah, you told me about that.

WILLIAMS: It was authentic colonial, with the egg and dart [molding]. I was dumbfounded and so disgusted, because I wanted to work on a contemporary structure. But that house turned out to be-- It is so nice. It really is. It's a little jewel. The way the contractor did it with the used-brick exterior, it's a very, very, very nice design. It fits the community. But you go right down the street and there's a very, very well done contemporary structure. It's interesting over in that neighborhood. That's up in back of the Beverly Hills Hotel.

HENDERSON: And you said that house is on the pointed corner?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: I'm going to go look at that one. Now, what I'm really asking about-- I guess my question is that California, in my mind, was like a land of modern houses. And yet here Paul Williams is a famous architect and he's

not doing these modern houses. That was not a problem for you in your mind?

WILLIAMS: No. Oh, no. Everybody has-- He was known for that kind of house. I knew that before I came. There were a couple of books that were-- They were like thin books that were done with sketches of houses that he had done for various people.

HENDERSON: Yeah, he did two of those.

WILLIAMS: I have both of them somewhere. So no, I was just disappointed I was given one of those to do. He was doing some other things at the same time, you see. You stop and think-- You know, he went through his training at the time of beaux arts, and so that didn't bother me. So you still learn. It doesn't matter what the idiom is. You still learn. Paul Williams was a good teacher in terms of teaching how to plan. That was one of his philosophies. He'd say, "You be a planner first. Make it work, and then you worry about the skin." But when you're doing traditional, it's already set for you.

HENDERSON: What? The skin is?

WILLIAMS: The skin is. So whether it's contemporary architecture or whether it is traditional, the philosophy remains the same. Sometimes the thing that made me very proud of Paul Williams was the fact that he was doing that kind of architecture along with others.

HENDERSON: You mean doing the traditional stuff?

WILLIAMS: Doing that same kind of architecture. He was right there with the big boys. I really enjoyed working in Paul Williams's office. I enjoyed working there also because the people who were loyal to him, had been working for him for years. Everybody would seem to want to share information in his office. I learned a lot in his office because of the people working there. There was a young man there by the name of Dykeman--and I don't remember how you spell his name--but Dykeman at that time would have to be almost Paul Williams's age. He'd been there since he was twenty-nine years old. So that's almost ever since Paul Williams started. Dykeman knew a lot. He wasn't really social. He liked to be over in the corner and just work. Get in there early. Time to go home, he puts everything away and just goes on home. Comes back again tomorrow. One of the things about Dykeman was the fact that he was brought up in the field. He worked as a roofer for a long time. He had worked as a plumber in the field as a young man. He knew something about what he was detailing. He and I worked on a couple buildings at UCLA's campus. That was the Botany Building that he and I worked on. Then I got a solo flight on the psychology building [Franz Hall], the first phase, applying a lot of that that I had learned from Dykeman. And then, he had a couple of sketch artists

there. It was just an education to watch them. They were old guys out of the studio.

HENDERSON: What? Like movie studio?

WILLIAMS: Movie studio. They'd been accustomed to detailing French doors, door casings and all this, for the sets. And they applied their knowledge to doing quick sketches of interiors of the hotels that we were doing and all these kinds of very interesting and-- Watching their technique. In fact, Denman, Luke Denman, was one who showed me a quick way to scale a sketch and create your own scale for whatever size you want to make it. And you create another scale and use it on a measuring line to determine heights of objects and things. But it was a method that they used in the studio. I don't think I've forgotten it. I haven't done that for quite a while now. But it was very quick. When I first started my own business, I used it a lot. It's fast and effective. In fact, I used to make all of my layouts and give it to a renderer or somebody in the business to make a rendering from using his method. That was part of it. His office was fun. That's what I'd say about his office. It was fun.

HENDERSON: It had an atelier kind of atmosphere.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Well, have you tried to maintain that in your

office? Your office doesn't quite seem that busy.

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: When I say busy, I mean, the same sort of number of people there.

WILLIAMS: No, no, no. I have learned, in order to stay alive, that you don't carry people on payroll.

HENDERSON: Yeah. Fact of life.

WILLIAMS: When I need people, I bring people in. But there are a lot of things that I can do two or three times as fast as somebody else, and I've been able to do a lot of that to try to keep that overhead down. I am not one who wants to say, "Oh, I've got thirty people, forty people, fifty people." When you tell me that, that tells me you've got a hell of an overhead and you're no longer practicing architecture. You are now in business, and you've got to go out there and maintain that work flow coming in your office to meet your overhead. And I hope that you're making some money on the side. When we were Kinsey, Meeds, and Williams, we had fourteen people. That was too many. When there's more than one principal, it makes it a little better. There's a segment that you have a certain responsibility for, and others-- But when you have a single principal and you have fourteen people, the control is gone. Then you have to begin to delegate. Then, when you begin to delegate, you become the A. C. Martins [Albert C.

Martin Associates]. When you become the A. C. Martins, that means now you've delegated the work. You don't know if the guy was doing it right until that lawsuit hits you, in terms of liability. I don't want to be bothered with that. Stress among black people is enough without having that on top.

But I do keep tabs on people who I know, who have worked for me and that I feel are sincere when they say that they are ready to come to work in my office. I will bring three of these people over when we begin to get deeply involved in the police station.

HENDERSON: Is the police station for which project?

WILLIAMS: Well, we're going to expand the Wilshire Station for LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]. They're going to expand that into a regional facility. We are expanding another police facility for the city down in San Pedro, San Pedro [Police] Station. And again, we're going to do most of the work on CADD. In fact, we've already begun to do the 3-D coodinates for the site plan, because we're going to have to develop perspectives of the site to take before the Public Works Board and the cultural committee. They are now approving all public buildings for design. I think it's good. They needed that. A lot of people need-- I have respect for review boards. I went before one in Santa Barbara. Everything you did up there

had to be--

HENDERSON: Spanish.

WILLIAMS: Spanish. And they checked you closely.

HENDERSON: Even still now? They're still doing that Spanish stuff?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: How literally Spanish do you have to be?

WILLIAMS: Well, as long as you use clay tile roofs, stucco exteriors, big sweeping arches--

HENDERSON: That's enough?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they'll let you go. [laughter] Well, you know, we did a shopping center up there once when I worked with Sheldon Pollack. We had to go before that committee even on the shopping center. We had to have some tile on the exterior, and we had to have-- Although we had a straight coping, they made us put tile on the parapets. It was very interesting.

HENDERSON: Oh, my goodness.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

HENDERSON: There would have been just a few tiles up there. But they wanted that?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Well, maybe we can wind it down. Maybe one last question. If you had to do it again, would you do things differently? By "it," that's sort of open and

loose. Maybe your career, life?

WILLIAMS: I would still be an architect. Yeah. I think that I, no doubt, would have the same feelings in terms of becoming a part of the mainstream. I think my fight tactics might have been a little different. I think my dabble in politics might have been a little different. Politics have played a big part in the success or failure of some people, and I have not used that avenue nearly as much as I probably should have. But in terms of developing a philosophy for living, I don't think I would change that. I still like who I am, and I feel that I have given a bit. Maybe there's more that I can give back to my community. But all in all, there's not a whole lot that I would change about my tenure, my voyage through this life.

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