

Richard Meier

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Westbeth Oral History Project

By
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ABSTRACT

Richard Meier is an American architect and teacher. In 1967, he was commissioned to renovate the former Bell Laboratories in Greenwich Village to affordable artist's housing, later named Westbeth. His most notable work is considered to be the Getty Center museum in Los Angeles, California. In 1984 he was the recipient of the prestigious Pritzker Prize.

Meier begins the interview by recalling the beginning of his firm in 1963 and his projects prior to Westbeth in the late 60s. He then explains how Richard Kaplan, son of Jack Kaplan, president of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, asked him to get involved in the creation of Westbeth. He describes how he, Jack Kaplan, and Roger Stevens, head of the National Endowment of the Arts, wandered through the Bell Telephone Labs brainstorming its conversion into artist housing. He points out that at the time, New York City building code prohibited living and working in the same space. He describes the steps they took in order to overcome the city zoning rules to fit their vision of a livable, workable space for artists.

Meier then describes Joan Davison's role in Westbeth's development. Daughter to Jack Kaplan, Davidson was especially active in the selection of artists who would be living in the building. He talks about her very conscious decision to incorporate a great mix of artists like sculptors, painters, dancers, and musicians into the community. Meier discusses the tremendous effort put into obtaining a Federal Housing Administration loan to support the construction. He then talks about the challenges he faced working with the building's existing configuration, like incorporating new heating, plumbing and electrical systems and his idea for creating duplexes, which would allow the elimination of corridors and increase the space for each unit.

Meier discusses how budgetary concerns held precedent over aesthetic concerns, but points out that one unique aesthetic addition he was able to add, colorfully painted beams and walls, were later painted over. He believes the most innovative process used in the conversion was leaving units without interior walls, so the residents could arrange sleeping and living spaces with working space as they chose, but highlights the difficulties in carrying it out. As a whole, these characteristics created an adaptive reuse project that was one of the first of its kind.

Finally, Meier explains that in his opinion, Westbeth's legacy was the influence it had with subsequent projects of downtown warehouse renovations and their increasing popularity.

Q: This is Jean Houck and it's November 8, 2007, and I'm talking with the architect Richard Meier at his offices located at 475 Tenth Avenue in New York City.

And today we'll be discussing the building of the Westbeth Artist Housing Project in the late 1960s and well be discussing Mr. Meier's role as the architect on that project.

So, again, thank you for your time today. Mr. Meier, before we talk specifically about Westbeth, could you go back to the late 1960s for a moment. Could you describe a little bit, where you were in your career at the time, and where you were working and the kinds of projects you were doing around 1967 and '68?

A: Well, I opened my office in 1963 and moved I guess around 1966 or '67 to a small office space on East 53rd Street, which was like a one, like a loft....a big room, which overlooked the garden of Lever House. And at that time, I worked on a number of houses that were built and number of exhibitions ... mostly.... and a number of competition projects that were sort of on-going at the time.

Q: For this project, I interviewed Todd Williams, who was in your offices in those years during Westbeth. So he described a time where, when he first came into your office, it was a smaller firm and you grew very rapidly.

A: Well, it began with one person then we had a, table in the middle of the space, which I think accommodated six people. So like sitting around this table, everyone had their own area. And Todd was one of the people there in those early days.

Q: Could you describe to me how you first got involved in working on Westbeth? What was the very first . . .

A: Well, Richard Kaplan was a friend of mine, and he had seen some of the things I was working on, and some of the things that had been recently published, and asked me to go with him to meet with his father, Jack Kaplan, and Roger Stevens -- who was head of the National Endowment of the Arts at the time -- and walk through the buildings of the Bell Telephone Laboratory in the West Village.¹ And so the four of us spent a long afternoon, as I remember, walking through those buildings. It was Richards's father [and] Roger Stevens, that had this idea of creating artist housing, and asked

¹ Jacob Merrill Kaplan established The J. M. Kaplan Fund in 1945 and was its president until 1977. Roger Stevens served as the first head of the National Endowment of the Arts, from 1965 to 1969.

Richard to get involved. But, because of his father's involvement, Richard felt he couldn't do it, and so he asked me to get involved.

Q: It sounds like it was quite an afternoon of two or three hours of the four of you walking around imagining what this space could be?

A: Well, trying to figure out what it could be. And, trying to figure out, you know, the Bell Telephone Laboratories were thirteen inter-connected buildings, it wasn't the way it is today with Westbeth which is basically-the building looks like it is continuous. It wasn't in those days and, but, when Bell Telephone Laboratories moved to New Jersey, you know, they just sort of left it the way it was. So we looked at it from the point of view of whether it was substantial enough to convert to housing for artists.

Q: Hmm, hmm. So, from the very beginning, there was the idea that this would be a major conversion . . .

A: That's right.

Q: . . . project.

A: That's right.

Q: And, thinking back . . . how unusual was that, at that time?

A: Well, at that time it was very unusual, because for the most part the idea of living in a loft didn't exist. New York City building code didn't permit living and working in the same space.

Q: What was your sense of the need at that time then for artists?

A: Well, the idea was this would be a place where young artists, struggling artists, coming to New York to work and to live would have a place to live for two years, and then they would move out and make it available for other people to move in.

Q: So, that was the original idea?

A: That was the idea.

Q: ...that you started with? I know in time that there was no written rule, that you had to leave after two years.

A: There were...

Q: So, people often ended up, staying.

A: Well, the people that live there today moved in when we completed the building. So, obviously those rules were made to be broken.

Q: But, it must have a very exciting time with a lot of creative ideas for housing?

A: Well, it was an exciting time, and part of it was first of all, we had to change the zoning to create something that didn't exist before, and that was an artist living and working district. So Westbeth became a sort of no longer a commercial space, but designated specifically for the purpose for which we were converting buildings.

We also then had to go and change the building code to allow for living and working in the same space. And then we had to go further to allow for spaces which, although we had a bathroom and a kitchen, it had no partitions. We had dotted plans to show where partitions could go, but we had to change the building codes to allow us not to build those partitions unless the artist wanted them. Then they could build them themselves.

Q: So you must to have had to approach a lot of city bureaucracies?

A: Well, fortunately, the mayor at the time, John Lindsay, was very keen on this project and very helpful in helping us getting through the myriad of city agencies that had jurisdiction of the various aspects of it.

Q: Who do you remember working with? You worked with many people, but who were the key sort of people working with you? I think Dixon Bain for one?

A: Well, he was, he was hired by Westbeth.

Q: Umm, hmm.

A: To sort of oversee the project. It was very important from the plans point of view to shepherd this through the bureaucratic process.

Q: And, then, you worked with Joan Davidson. . .²

A: Joan Davidson got involved because she was very keen as to the selection of the artist that would be living there, and she kind of shepherded, you know, that so it would ... she didn't want it -- and quite rightly so -- it to be all painters, or all sculptors or all dancers or all musicians. But she wanted

² Joan K. Davidson, daughter Jacob Kaplan, played a central role in the Westbeth project for the J.M. Kaplan Fund. She was named president of the Fund in 1977 and served in that capacity until 1993.

to make sure that it was a mix of all of the artists representing, represented there.

Q: So, we have this moment where, when was it decided that you would come on board? Did it become apparent . . . ?

A: Well it was decided, I think, that day we walked through the building. I didn't know at the time, but part of the project, part of the requirement, from that day we walked through that building, was in order to secure an [FHA]³ loan to support the construction, the construction documents, the working words had to be completed in nine months. And that required just a horrendous effort. Not only on the part of the architect, but all of the engineers that were involved in the project. And that space, that small space that I had where six people could work around that table, was working with three shifts, 24 hours a day.

Q: So, what was your first, beginning design ideas? What were the. . .

A: Well, the design ideas came from the existing building. There were things which were possible and things that weren't possible. And, obviously we were trying to get the most space to each unit that was possible. But we had to work within an existing configuration, and therefore we devised it -- duplex units in a way to eliminate corridors on every other floor and allow that space which would otherwise be corridors to be part of the living-working space.

Q: So, the design in some ways, was driven by preserving the historic structure?

A: Well, it wasn't an historic structure. If it were an historic structure, we wouldn't be able to do what we did.

Q: Right, right.

A: Fortunately this was even before, I think you know many buildings were named as landmarks. I don't think the Landmarks Commission had even begun its work ...

Q: Hmm, hmm, yes.

A: So, this was way before that and it wouldn't have been the landmark anyway, because it was a rather undistinguished building.

Q: Did, the history of it being the Bell Laboratories influence you?

³ Federal Housing Administration.

A: No, no

Q: Was that part of your thinking?

A: No.

Q: So, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced?

A: Well, the challenges were that this was an extremely well-built, concrete building. And the challenges were to get new heating, new plumbing, new electrical. . . all new systems functioning through slabs which were, in some cases, were a foot, more than a foot thick. And, so to try to work within this building wasn't easy.

Q: Hmm, hmm. Sure.

A: I think, caused perhaps more difficulty than one would imagine. And, the other thing of course was, in creating these duplexes, we had to provide a second means of escape, you know. Therefore we had to figure out a way that people could get out without having fire escapes all over the place.

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A: And therefore, we created these balconies where you could go out your window and into your neighbor's window in case of a fire.

Q: They're very stunning, also, visually so. So you were working with the existing building, and that dictated some of what you needed to do because you had to work around that...

A: That's right.

Q: What were some of the...I've read that you were influenced by some of the work being done in Europe. Or, some of the work of Corbusier⁴ at times? Do you feel that was an influence?

A: Well, not at all.

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, actually nothing was ever done like this ever before. And after this I believe there were conversions in Europe. That in Europe that sort of followed and the of course, we created this special district, the sort of lofts

⁴ Le Corbusier (October 6, 1887 – August 27, 1965), was a Swiss-French architect, designer, urbanist, writer, and painter, who is famous for being one of the pioneers of what now is called Modern architecture or the International Style.

came into the world of downtown. And lofts became not just a place to work, but also a place where people could live as well.

Q: I think it's hard for people who know to remember a time when loft living wasn't the idea.

A: It wasn't legal.

Q: It wasn't even legal.

A: No, so we changed all that.

Q: It's an amazing project. Did the Unité de Habitation influence you?

A: No, no.

Q: This is important because sometimes people refer to it when they refer to that work . . .

A: Well, I mean the thing about the well . . . well, perhaps it did in that the idea existed in Le Corbusier's housing in Marseille at Unité was one corridor, and then you kind of go up and down.

Q: Hmm. Hmm.

A: So, I guess that was, in some ways, a precedent.

Q: Or, something that people just refer to when they're describing some of your work.

A: Uh huh.

Q: So to what extent did you have to balance aesthetic concerns with budgetary concerns?

A: Well unfortunately I think budgetary concerns were always a primary. And somehow the aesthetics kept getting pushed aside.

Q: Ha, ha. What are there things that you would have like to have done more of? If you had. . .

A: Well, I think that, obviously, you know if we had created more budget, there are things we would have done without question. When you look back at it.

Q: Sure.

A: And you say, "What were they?", and I don't even remember. One of the things, we did to give to try to give it some sort of uniqueness was I went through every public space - all the corridors, all the elevator lobbies in every space -- and sort of painted beams, columns, walls all different colors. I think we had something like ...I don't remember. . .

Q: People often refer to that as. . .

A: Yeah ... and, and it really enlivened it and made spaces that didn't get natural light-unique, and quite stunning. Unfortunately, at some point when I guess the tenants organization took over running of the building...

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A: ...they hired, I guess, some building manager that just, who would, I guess the tenants or some of the tenants agreement just painted everything out. And, they came to me, years later, and said would I re-create ...

Q: Hmm. Hmm.

A: What I had done, you know, at that time? Well, I didn't make drawings of this. I did, you know, by walking through and marking it on the walls.

Q: Right, right.

A: So I had no record what was painted what. And I wasn't about to spend three or four weeks of my life redoing it. Because it been had painted-out. It was done.

Q: Right. And, they hadn't made a record of it.

A: It's not my fault that they. . .

Q: . . . that they painted it. . .

A: that they destroyed it. It's like asking a painter to repaint a painting, a picture that someone had painted over. It's ridiculous.

Q: So the projects, it was built for diverse artists, so in accommodating the diversity of artists such as visual, performing artists, writers and film makers, did the diversity of the types of artists influence the different types of spaces?

A: No, because I had no idea of who would live where.

Q: Yes.

A: You know, I was designing the spaces. Who would move into them, I had no idea until it was finished.

A: I do know there is this story, I know it was this story about the zoning board required that you had a certain number of rooms?

Q: Yes, yeah.

Q: What was your solution?

A: And well we did that by drawing dotted lines on our drawings . . .

Q: But you didn't actually put up walls? To make the little rooms?

A: No, not really.

Q: Did you. And, that went through okay.

A: Yes. Of course we had to go through all kinds of changing of the code in order to do that.

Q: What do you see as some of the most innovative processes and designs that you came up with for the?

A: We came up with many. One was first making it possible to create artists' living and working in lofts. The second was the creation of the sort of dotted lines that we put on the plans in order to meet the requirements of the building department for a certain room count. One bedroom, do this: two-bedroom, do this; three bedroom, do this. But they didn't do it exactly that way.

Q: Yes.

A: And I think the whole sort of just re-doing, the re-making of existing structures never been done before. You know, didn't exist. People, you know, renovated brownstones, but that was the largest conversion of buildings that had existed anywhere in the world, at that time.

Q: What was Greenwich Village like at that time?

A: Well, this whole West Village sort of stopped pretty much at Greenwich Street. It didn't extend to the water.

Q: Yes.

A: The way it does today. So, this was really the first building that sort of bridged Greenwich Street, and it also it was at a time when there was a big controversy about the West Side Highway, whether it should go-- be elevated? Go underground? West Way was a big issue. It was before the park on West Side existed which is absolutely magnificent which. . .

Q: Yes.

A: ... is just superb. I think it is just a great, one of the great assets to Manhattan in terms of public space. There really has been no creation of public space, in the last fifty or more years like the development of the West Side.

Q: And then setting the scene a little bit um, what was the role of architecture in the late sixties in New York City?

A: Well, in New York, in New York it didn't have a very strong history of having good architecture at the time. Today it's very different. But the idea of having something that was a work of architecture again, at this scale, once again was--didn't happen.

Q: The working process....I'm interested in the working process that so, so did the Mr. Kaplan and Mr. Stevens get involved in the design process

A: No.

Q: Once they brought...you on?

A: Once, right, they, they

Q: They said, "Please do your work", ha, ha ha

A: Well, I think they were concerned. If there was a concern it was how many units...

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A:can we get into the building? Yeah, and therefore, some of the units are very large and some are small. But, it was determined, it was made that way because of the existing building. And I don't know if, in the beginning, if we had an exact goal in terms of the numbers of units. But if there was a concern, I think it was basically that. And, of course, what it would cost.

Q: Hmm. Hmm.

A: They were both concerned about that.

Q: I, um, the number of units ended up being 380-?

A: Eighty-four.

Q: Four. And, um that's a lot of units.

A: I don't remember, they might have wanted 400.

Q: Right, ha, ha.

A: Ha.

Q: And, with Joan Davidson, how much did you work with her?

A: Well, Joan got very involved in the process once it got under construction. Richard sort of said, "It's your project, you take care of it." But Joan got very involved, especially as it was nearing completion. From then on, she was extremely involved.

Q: My impression is that the project was built in an extremely rapid pace.

A: Yeah, well, that was part of the mandate.

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A: It had to be.

Q: How could it have gotten built so fast? Ha, ha. To what do you owe that success to?

A: That was, you know, that's what had to happen.

Q: Yeah, so it, yeah. So it was made to happen. I think the first people moved in, in 1969.

A: Right, that's right.

Q: And it was still being built to some extent?

A: Some, yeah. And especially well, one of the things which kept being discussed, and I know that Joan had strong feelings about was what happened on the ground level, because, because it couldn't be made residential working units. And Joan had hoped it would have gallery spaces for the artists and spaces that would be related to the building but also be income-producing for the building at the same time. And at that time no one

was really willing to go venture into spaces where there was no community around it at that time.

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A: They felt that only traffic was the people that lived in the building, and they weren't going to sustain the galleries or the restaurants or whatever might be there. So there was a lot of discussion, and Joan was very involved in trying to interest people to occupy those spaces, but those spaces were empty for awhile.

Q: I, for this project I interviewed Merce Cunningham.

A: Yeah. No, no. Merce. I think Joan was responsible for that.

Q: Hmm, hmm. I think it was very difficult to get people in there as tenants, but..

A: But, he's still there.

Q: Yeah. It's still fortunate that he's still there.

A: Yeah.

Q: And he's still there in the studios working. So, it was great, to go up and interview him in his space. And the light.

A: Oh, yeah. One of the great spaces.

Q: ... in there.

A: But it was built for Merce.

Q: Yes, well he, he's very appreciative of it. And what, how do you feel the Westbeth project played a pioneering role in the preservation movements?

A: Well, I think so. I think so. I think it showed people that you no longer had to think in terms of the scale of the townhouse, you know, for renovation buildings, and so many wonderful warehouse buildings downtown. You know, we're two blocks from Westbeth, it's now been renovated for housing. I've not been in it but it looks wonderful. I mean so many really terrific buildings are now being renovated.

Q: Yes, absolutely.

A: The term 'adaptive re-use' didn't exist before. Before Westbeth.

Q: And, then it was really the beginning of ... this is usually toward the end of my interview but I'm going to do it early.

A: Uh hm.

Q: What would you say is the legacy of Westbeth then, when you. . .

A: Well, the legacy of Westbeth, it was the first. It really was the pioneering project in every sense of the term and it enabled so much else to be, happen. Both large and small.

Q: And, so from that project where would you place in how you were influenced to where you went next?

A: Where I went next was never to do another renovation.

Q: Ha, ha, ha.

A: Ha, ha, ha.

Q: So it influenced you that way?

A: Ha, ha. I said, "I've done it, I don't need to do this again."

Q: And, it was a ground-breaking renovation that changed people's minds so, you did that.

A: I did that.

Q: Ha, ha, ha.

A: On to the next thing. Ha, ha.

Q: Ha, ha. Well with, let's see do you recall that at the time, did people come to interview you about the project? Did architect. . .

A: Not, not at the time, no.

Q: Did professors come?

A: Actually, I was very disappointed, because you know all of these things were about to start, and no one asked my advice.

Q: Hmm. Hmm.

A: So, I kept it to myself.