Tod Williams

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

by

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Abstract

Architect Tod Williams worked with Richard Meier during the conversion of Westbeth from an industrial building to artist's housing in the late 1960s and early 70s. He, along with this wife and two children, were also original tenants of the building.

Williams begins the interview with a short description of his upbringing and discusses his time at Princeton University studying architecture. He discusses how he started working for Richard Meier, and how his first assignment was to measure the seven buildings that made up Westbeth before the conversion.

He continues, discussing the physical landscape of the buildings' footprint, noting that the elevated rail line "The Highline" went through the building. Williams also describes the industrialized nature of the neighborhood, talking about the Meat Market to the north and the prison to the south.

The interview continues with a description of the interior spaces, and Williams describes the central ramp and the day glow paint colors as important features. He also discusses how as a tenant, he saw how hard all the tenants were on the building, and regrets that there was not a better system for taking care of the property.

Williams also describes some of the buildings early tenants, and how there was an enormous amount of socializing. He also talks about the atmosphere of the late 1960s, and how changing cultural norms that were felt across made an impact on the Westbeth community.

He concludes by commenting on the positive aspects of Westbeth's architecture, including its famous balconies that were designed for the build code's need for a second means of egress and its underutilized flue spaces.

Q: This is Jeanne Houck, and it's April 2, 2007. I'm talking with the architect, Tod Williams, at his apartment at Central Park South. Today we'll be discussing the building of the Westbeth Artists' Community and Mr. Williams' involvement in this project working as an architect in Richard Meier's offices. Before we start talking about Westbeth, it would be good to go over your background before Westbeth. Could you say a little bit about where you're from, where you grew up, and where you went to college and architecture school?

A: I was born in Detroit and raised in Birmingham, Michigan. I went to high school there, but went to college at Princeton University. In the second year at Princeton, I began to take architecture studies, and one of my earliest courses actually was co-taught by Richard Meier and Michael Graves. After I finished Princeton with an undergraduate degree and a major in architecture, I went to Cambridge for a year, and then returned to Princeton with a young wife and shortly after a child, and finished my Masters in Fine Arts and Architecture at Princeton in 1967. That summer, with a wife of eighteen and a child of a few months, I was working for a professor in Princeton, having completed my studies, and it was Tony Vidler. The thesis that I had done for my final project at Princeton was in fact involved in utopian housing communities. I had researched utopian socialism and based my thesis on a varied criticism, or critique rather, of Le Corbusier's[1] Marseilles Block and housing proposals. So at the end of the summer, Tony Vidler was to return to teaching. The projects we were working on were no longer being funded when Michael Graves came to me and said, "You might be interested in working for Richard Meier who has just received this interesting commission for artist housing on Friday." And I don't remember precisely when, but at the end of the summer I went into Richard's office with thesis drawings, rolled them out, and he hired me on the spot. I started on Monday morning. That Monday, I'm saying early fall of 1967, I think one of my very first assignments was to go down and begin to feel the measure of Westbeth. It was really, although I had worked some summers before that, my first permanent, full-time job, and I continued then to work for Richard for the next six and a half years.

Q: And then, to speed ahead just a little bit, after the six and a half years, you started your own practice.

A: That's right. I had worked for some of this period on Westbeth. In fact, although I was shuffling through project to project, actually the moment I

[1] 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.

arrived in Richard's office there were only two other people. But shortly afterwards he began to hire a number of others, many of them senior to me, because he had the size of the Westbeth project. The project we were immediately working on, aside from I think measuring Westbeth, was a Renny Saltzman[2] house, one of the early houses. But it was a great experience.

Q: What was it like to work in those offices then? In the beginning, you say it was small and then it just kept growing?

A: Yes. Well it kept growing. Over the six or so years, Richard received a number of large commissions, essentially as an offshoot of the really significant, enormous project that Westbeth posed for him, and he did a great job on it, and so he began to receive other large commissions. This was the first institutional project I think Richard had. Previously it was just houses. He had begun to make a name for himself designing houses. The studio in 1967 was on 53rd Street, and I think it was the third floor of a brownstone. We would walk up the steps, and it was a tiny brownstone overlooking essentially the edge of the Lever House, between Madison and Park. It was a great experience. And New York was of course in an interesting moment in 1967. The whole world was really changing just exactly at that point. We'd lost Kennedy years before and well certainly at the time I was working in the office; his brother was shot and killed. Then there was Martin Luther King and so on. There was a great deal of change, and a lot of emotional activity that were revolutions regarding social circumstances or simply unrest, and a kind of growth and freedom that was being expressed for all sorts of people.

Q: So let's talk more about what was going on in New York City and what was going on in architecture? Were there different views and camps?

A: Yes.

Q: There was sort of the Jane Jacobs vision that people were talking about, and Robert Moses' impact on the city was still being felt. So, what was the landscape, the professional landscape of architecture?

A: Well, Jeanne, I don't think I can really address that properly. The fact is that we in Richard's office were living in a bubble; kind of an idealized bubble. Richard and several other younger architects had decided that they were the five architects; a book shortly came out sort of stating that position, which was, if I look back on it, a sort of new formalism. That certainly sat in opposition to the thinking and theory of Jane Jacobs. I would say that in

[2] Renny B. Saltzman (1930-2000) was an interior designer and patron of modern architecture.

1967, starting my career, I didn't realize it but New York was about to hit a tremendous decline, although it was still enjoying and continued to enjoy projects that had social values and social impact that had been set up I think, and I really am not absolutely clear about this, from the Moses era, were still being divvied out. And so in the next few years I was working in Richard's office, and other young architects were also taking on commissions in the South Bronx that were, now looking back, actually were inspired work. But by the time I went out on my own in 1972 or '73, there were none of these commissions for a young architect. And frankly, New York was pretty much in chaos. We had this great mayor, John Lindsay, who looked terrific but was not delivering, and there was a tremendous amount of social unrest, even though at some moments it felt like it was great freedom, it also was kind of chaos. And I entered my own career I think in an absolute low, or maybe it was still descending by the time I went out there. But certainly during, but 1967 felt exciting and kind of thrilling place for a young architect to be.

Q: What were some of the names of the architects that joined the offices?

A: Richard Meier's office?

Q: Yes.

A: Well Richard had the most important person in the office when I arrived was an architect named Carl Meinhart, and Carl had gone to Cooper Union and was a disciplined and organized person that gave the great keel to Richard's work that the other youngest architects who were close to my age, now teachers. A young woman who was working the summer, Barbara Littenberg, is Peterson Littenberg Architects today. She was a student of Peter Baldwin, who was also a classmate of mine at Princeton and worked briefly for Richard. But when Richard began to bring in the people with greater maturity, there were people like Gerald Gerland, who you may know and is still active, and he was very much a kind of manager of the office, and I think became Richard's first partner some years later. I'm going to get his name wrong. It's Murray Kempton.

Q: We can look that up.

A: We can get that, yes. There was another architect who was close to my age named Yoki Mantle, a Swiss architect who came to work for Richard. I thought he was extremely skilled. And he also came to live with his young wife, Ruthie, in Westbeth, because he also had worked on the project. Two of us from Richard's office went and were the first residents in Westbeth.

Q: I didn't realize that. That's great.

A: Yes. I've seen Yoki in Switzerland. He and Ruth have divorced. They had two children. He was a really wonderful architect. And Michael Schwarting, who is close to my age, was in the office. The office began to be populated by a number of architects who went on, already were well established, but also went on to interesting things.

Q: So who was the team to work on Westbeth? Was it formal or was it sort of everyone in the office?

A: It was a shifting team. The reality is that the building gave so many constraints to us, at least this is our thought, that the building had so many restraints we first went about measuring the building, and I was one of a couple of people. And I think I was the primary measurer.

Q: Can you describe how you measured the building?

A: Well we had crude plans, or maybe they weren't so crude, but at that time I believed it was important to measure it to the eighth of an inch, which at this point would seem absolutely absurd. But literally you would go down there days at a time with a tape measure and a friend, another person in the office, holding a tape measure and would measure it out, writing these dimensions on sheets, and then come back to the office and we hand drew the building of course. And this is a *huge* building. I don't know, somewhere in the notes it will tell you how many square feet it was. But it was a conglomerate of buildings, and some of them were very, very strong and durable buildings, and others were really falling apart.

There essentially were the four buildings. As I recall the courtyard was covered, which is now open to the sky, and also the courtyard facing south was also covered. And these buildings were in sufficiently poor shape that they needed to be demolished. But you know the train line that is now the High Line still went through the building at that point. Actually the tracks extended north and I think had just been cut off to the south so they actually extended north through the building. We thought this was a marvelous opportunity. But one we never could take advantage of. So at any rate, we fully field measured the building. We then realized that some of the building needed to be the base building from which we would do our work. And it wasn't long before we had an idea of the design which was in effect a poor man's, or I should say or perhaps a poor man's Marseille Block, which had used the idea of a corridor essentially down the mass of the two sides of the buildings, and then apartments that would go up and over, or down and

under. And that produced, and I'm not sure, but I would guess at least fifty percent of the apartments in the building; the rest essentially were simplexes with some more special apartments that were made along the water.

Now the water, of course at that time had piers in front of it, and a great deal of traffic, and a raised highway going by. There was nothing pretty about it except if you were high up you could enjoy views of the water. To the south of Westbeth at that time was a prison, from which after being in that building, it became, and we were on the south side and we could see an occasional escape being made. It was a very different place.

Q: Truly different than today

A: Yes. At that time I also spent enough time down there. In this particular area, the population was extremely low because of course, prior to being a building for Bell Labs, it was industrialized buildings, and this had been the vegetable and actually of course the meat market, which continues to remain slightly there. But at that time was still much more in place than one would ever imagine today.

Q: So you're setting this scene for what kind of building you started out with. And some of the ideas. And then what was Greenwich Village like as a whole?

What kind of neighborhood was it then? Because I know there must have been some preservation movement just beginning perhaps. It was still an artists' enclave.

A: Sure, but filmed very much that way. But because this entire area along West Street, and then Washington Street, was so absolutely industrial at that time, no people were living there, and I think that as I recall the population west of Washington was something like six people per acre. It was a very, very low population. Then of course as one went over to Greenwich, it was increased a little bit. And further of course as you went over to Hudson Street. The Village was actually a lovely place, I thought, to be in. And you know it was kind of the 'flower power' period. I think that the community, at least in my mind, in the Village, seemed extremely gentle and pleasant. And it's just that, beyond Washington Street, there was nothing, absolutely nothing. And there were some curious people that were really living there. And they were the kinds of people that are living in the most remote areas of New York in odd circumstances – sort of squatters that were living in the area which was just to the west of Washington. And there it didn't feel dangerous at all. It just felt pretty, um, pretty industrial and kind

of the beginning of the kind of slightly vacated industrial landscape. Some years later, of course, once we began to get into the building, (actually riots occurred in Detroit in 1967), it was really waves of riots then, that created a great deal of fear and anger. And that led to a New York that was quite different a few years later than the one that was there in 1967.

Q: For just a minute, let's talk about the housing issues for artists especially. Because that's the idea behind Westbeth is that it's artists' housing. So what do you recall about some of the issues during that time for artists? And I believe a lot of people were living in illegal loft space.

A: Yes.

Q: For example?

A: You have to realize I was twenty-four, and I wasn't aware of very much. We're in '67 and in the sixties really at the end of the sort of the Beat Generation, so the Village still has some of that stuff. And there are young artists who are trying to find housing. But as I recall, there was really nothing. There were people that were, as I said, 'squatting' in the Village and below the Village. And later I very well recall, because one of my earliest jobs was in SoHo, where there were absolutely also no people. SoHo was an area which had also been industrial, and the industry had begun to move out in droves. There was still some light industry, but artists were moving in. I think at that time, and I'm sure you can correct me or be corrected, is that there were relatively few artists and there were really no issues, no significant issues of artists moving into industrialized spaces. When it really began to occur en masse then these issues began to occur. But at this time I think there was little enough of that, that it didn't pose a significant problem. This is an interesting question because I'm not sure really, and Joan[3] or someone else can tell us whether the idea of artist housing was more important than housing alone. But I'm going to guess that because this was the Village, and this was an area that historically had many artists, that the task of this particular project was to deal with artists.

Q: That's how it's been explained to me by Joan Davidson. And that her father had a specific interest in it in the sixties, teaming up with Roger Stevens from the NEA.[4] Housing overall is an issue, but they really wanted to zero in on this population of artists.

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[3] 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.
[4] 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.

A: Yes.

Q: needing housing.

A: I don't know why J.M. Kaplan was particularly interested in it; I didn't know. I knew him, met him a few times, but didn't know him well enough to know why he had this particular interest, but I know that Roger Stevens had involvement in the theater. Am I correct?

Q: Yes.

A: He absolutely did, and I also was well aware of the fact that Kaplan's son, Richard Kaplan, was I think a classmate of Richard's at Cornell, and it was Richard who recommended Richard Meier…

Q: Yes.

A: And that's an interesting, a very, very generous thing for him to have done. I think he knew him a little bit, and I don't know whether he's still alive today. Is he?

Q: As far as I know.

A: Well, okay. He was a great, he was himself an artistic personality, but because I had Richard as a teacher, along with Michael Graves, I was very aware that Richard's focus was to have a tremendous drive to take his work, also both an elegance and interest in elegance and clarity, but a drive that would take his work forward. So maybe one saw this drive in Richard Meier and he was then awarded this project. But it was a very large project for Richard at that time.

Q: Do you recall any other project like it happening? It seems unprecedented.

A: No, I certainly didn't. No, but I think that one could look to Europe and see that there were projects, and I see the influence in Westbeth. I knew that Dixon Bain[5] had gone to Europe to look into projects that may have been

[5] Dixon Bain served as the project manager for planning and construction of Westbeth Artist's Residence in the West Village from 1967-1971. An interview with Bain is part of the Westbeth Oral History Collection.

similar. And although I knew Dixon, I'm not aware of that particular research. I myself was taking, I just assumed it was happening because (haha) because we were all very much interested in the work of Le Corbusier and the Marseille Block was the sort of an ideal for a young architectural community, thinking that one could solve social problems and build beautiful buildings in an urban condition with services once, if the population were large enough. But if one went to the Marseille Block at that exact time, it wasn't functioning very well. Today it is, but we had been taught, we had been taught the principles of the Marseilles Block. So that was my real understanding. Not from a resident of the City of New York, because prior to 1967, although I had visited, I was not a resident.

Q: Could you talk a little more about the design ideals? What were you all trying to get out of Wesbeth and what kind of experience?

A: Well,

Q: For the community.

A: Well, we absolutely believed that these first levels would be vibrant community centers with sculpture studios and children and perhaps schools. It was thrilling of course to actually have Merce Cunningham[6] move to the roof. We had imagined previously there might have been a roof garden, which really didn't happen at all. That was shot down early enough. But I would say that even though we absolutely believed that all of the lower levels there, including the basement levels and the ground level and the level above, would be vibrant community places, they actually weren't.

Q: In reality?

A: In reality.

Q: Once you moved in?

A: Once they moved in, I would have said that they immediately failed. I mean, it wasn't the fault of the architecture, although maybe we could look back and critique the architecture at this point, but I think it was just the fact that the building is filled with, I think for the most part, genuine artists, struggling artists, who are trying to find their own way, and they didn't have

[6] Merce Cunningham (1919 -2009) was an American dancer, choreographer and leader of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, located since 1971 at Westbeth in the West Village. An interview with Cunningham is part of the Westbeth Oral History Collection.

enough of a base to actually bring together working collections that could pay the rent and actually succeed in those lowest levels. So and of course you have to realize there was no street life other than Westbeth. I would say absolutely no street life. So essentially you would walk west, west, west, all the way up to Bank Street, and Bethune, and enter the building, but there was nothing supporting that. So there was no community to support that. And you have to realize that community energy comes from needing to, let's say, go to the local bus stop (haha) or shop, go to the grocery store or news store. All of these were you know actually two to three blocks to the east. So essentially nothing was coming over to support this community. The community was there, but they always moved out into the east or north or south, but particularly east and north to go find their daily needs, whether it was work or sustenance of another type.

Q: So the beginning ideal, as you're describing it, and as I've read, is that the ground floors would give vibrancy, hopefully. And also pay for the building itself, and some of the needs of the building so that you can keep the rents low.

A: Yes.

Q: There were the commercial spaces and the open spaces. What were some of the challenges for actually designing the artists' spaces, because there was a diversity of artists? Do you remember, let me back up. First of all do you remember when the decision was made to have diversity of artists in terms of visual artists and performing artists and writers?

A: No, I don't …

Q: Or was that just from the beginning what you understood was the mission?

A: That was, from the beginning, that's what I understood. I was almost certain that I wouldn't be allowed to be in the building. (haha) Because I thought that they really, that it was for a diversity of artists, none of whom had a consistent job that was supporting them. Not that I was being paid very well. I wasn't. And I certainly did need the housing. But I think that in a way we were allowed to be in there because we also supported the architecture that we actually helped to design the space. I mean, Jeanne, I have to say that if we'd look back, the design of this building was, is extremely rudimentary. I mean it was very, very rudimentary. If we carve out the corridors and we make a wall and a door buck and a base detail, and then you come inside. And the concept was pretty simple. You had a

standardized kitchen, which I quite well remember. And you had some rolling closets, which we (haha), that is those of us who thought they should roll, rolled them around, and I built some, and Yoki did a better job than I did, but we both built in our own I think rather sympathetic versions of how one should relate to these furniture pieces. But the kitchen of course was fixed. The kitchen didn't have a fan, so it had to sit close enough to the windows that you could open the windows. There was of course a bathroom. The bathroom as I recall pretty clearly was very, very inexpensive. I think it was a one by one tile, white tile. But it was a five by eight, maybe five by seven and a half. But there was nothing. It was an absolutely simple thing. And then these rolling closets, that when I look back were rather, rather well-made.

The floor was what I'd call a burrowing oak floor, sort of tiled floor. So it was not a costly piece in any way. So once one designed, once one actually did the layout for the spaces and the hallways, and determined that the commercial spaces were at the base, and the apartment layout was a kind of over and under element running along Bank and Bethune, and the others were essentially residual apartments that one would fit in stairs that we of course wanted to make them special. I really believe that a contribution I made was the rather, now I think, gratuitous ramp in the center of the space. If you look at my thesis, I had way too many of these in my thesis in 1967. Thinking that people would love walking up and down them, and that they would of course lead to a fabulous event on the second level, which never happened. But it also took up a lot of room, and it was a kind of thrust and sort of macho thrust to say, "I'm here. This is the architecture." The other architecture element that Richard really added and it may have been with Elaine Cohen, he may admit this, is the sort of day glo colors that were used. And I don't know if they're still there.

Q: They changed them.

A: They actually were pretty neat in retrospect.

Q: They should redo them.

A: They should redo them. I mean, this was, had nothing to do whatsoever with me, and I would say it had everything to do with Richard and Elaine Cohen.

Q: And the day glo colors were where? Just remind me.

A: Well they were in the stairwells and sort of in turn areas where one would target areas. And we thought they were perfunctory, and they probably were for Richard and for Elaine, but in retrospect I think it was a nice thing.

Q: As a tenant, also, you can recall it helped?

A: Yeah, I knew the building very well. And actually as a tenant I think it did help. I'm not sure the artists were appreciative of it. I mean you have to realize this is an absolutely motley group of artists. Everyone, I think no one had, there were very few people who, they had their own individual missions. And so it didn't, I didn't sense, maybe Peter Cott[7] or someone else can say that there was a great sense of community. The community occurred around the children. There were lots and lots of children. And of course the Halloween Parade began there. And it was, I would say it was the children that really created the community, if there was a community. And there weren't that many children, but as it went on there were more and more children. And I think the other thing that of course that I mentioned to you before is that there was a huge amount of socializing because this was a kind of time everyone believed in open relationships. So we were all running around from, (haha) unit to unit. And you know returning home in the middle of the night or the next morning. And kids basically were naked in the halls. It was a very, very open community, with lots of problems because of all of that stuff.

Q: I'd like to talk more about what it was like to live there and some of your memories before you moved on. Before we do that, I want to talk a little bit more about if you recall Joan Kaplan Davidson? And how often did you actually see her through the work process?

A: Well, I would have said I was a very small, a very small part of the process. The fact though that there weren't that many of us that were working on it, and I worked all the time. So I went down to Washington D.C. And I would see her, and would in fact see her in the office, and she did seem to visit the office rather frequently, as did Jack Kaplan. And Roger Stevens. And I think they were deeply involved. I don't think that Joan, I don't recall Joan coming in critiquing plans. I mean really the planning was entirely done working with Richard. That would be my take on it. They may have influenced the plans in meetings when I wasn't there. Largely it felt that they were involved in their own planning and attempting to get this passed

[7] Peter Cott served as the Executive Director of the artist's community Westbeth from 1970 to 1973. An interview with Cott is part of the Westbeth Oral History Collection.

and going through all the regulations that you know about, getting approvals and so on.

Q: You said there were a lot of constraints. There were constraints in terms of what you had to deal with and work with?

A: Right.

Q: The building materials and the building itself. And then do you recall bureaucratic constraints that you had to deal with?

A: No. No. No.

Q: I'm sure some were there.

A: They were there, but I didn't, and I don't recall them very clearly. I mean if I think carefully about the plan, I remember trying to lay out the stairs and, but a lot of, a lot of it the building told you, told us how it needed to be designed. That's my recollection. It wasn't as if the codes were telling us. It wasn't as if Joan was coming in and saying we need more duplex apartments. I think this was entirely decided in the studio, just working the building out. I do, and I'm sorry I'm a little vague on this, it seems to me there was some question as to how much of the buildings which were facing essentially south and to West Street would be retained and whether they would actually be used. But it was, it wasn't a terribly long study before we determined they needed to be demolished and there would be commercial space down there.

Q: So forgive me since I don't work in an architect's office, but you would, you would meet regularly, and your tasks were working on plans, researching, talking through ideas about layout and that was sort of what you were really involved with. You were involved with all aspects.

A: Yeah, absolutely. Now the thing is, I won't say that as a young architect I didn't know much. So it was people like Carl Meinhart who would be, and Richard was the leader and the dream, but it was Carl who did a lot of the work that had to do with how this thing actually should work as a mechanical system, as a functioning system. I would like to think, you know, I certainly know I was dreaming about things like the fabulous ramp (haha) and how we could make double height spaces, but then couldn't. Or hardly could. And then how each layout counted enormously, that we needed to make each one perfect. But I was really drawing simple plans and sections and details at the time obviously with pencil and mylar, or ink and mylar.

Q: I'm interested in you talking about the ramp and you said you were drawing on it from other places, too.

A: Yeah. Well if you look at the plan of the Marseilles Block, and it's, you know this ramp, it's this block, a simple block of a building. It's almost as if you can take – well I remember, what was the original population? I remember being very concerned about the population.

Q: Of Westbeth?

A: Of Westbeth. How many people?

Q: Well it ended up being three hundred and eighty-three units.

A: Three hundred and eighty-four, eighty-three. And each of them had probably an average of two and a half people, right? So we weren't that many. We weren't the fifteen hundred that was necessary for the Marseilles Block as it seemed. So it was relatively under-populated, according to what we were thinking about it. But I certainly was thinking about that. And circulation, in both Richard's work and Corbusier's work, because he was working for Corbusier. And my work at that time, because I was looking at Le Corbusier, was actually trying to describe circulation as a kind of object piece, a sculptural piece. And I think that's as much as anything why we had this ramp in the center because it represented a socialist sculptural element that would talk about the excitement of moving from one level to the next. So it became a kind of symbol of the energy that would be in the building. Of course you know there were asphalt papers, well but, there was a nice toughness to it, although because the walls were made of sheetrock and because we abused them tremendously, although I think we did use an oil-based paint that was quite evil for all of us, but I mean we just tore the hell out of that building very, very rapidly.

Q: The tenants?

A: Yeah. Right. I'm not sure there was any, I can hardly think of any maintenance that was going on. It would be interesting to ask that question. But of course there was some maintenance, but it was extremely reduced. And we were expected to do that, but because somehow the entire building seemed to be ours, I'm sure Richard was horrified instantly the way people took care of it or didn't take care of it.

Q: Well, so people starting moving in. And you were among the first.

A: Yes.

Q: And then I imagine, with such a wide range of artists, they all must have started right away to do different things to their spaces.

A: Absolutely. Yeah.

Q: Do you recall some of their projects?

A: No, there were some magazines which were published that just would show the horrible stuff that everybody was, or great stuff that people were producing. But it was as if you just went out and most of the artists were just going out and bringing scrap in from the streets and building things that appeared to be sort of psychedelic shanty towns inside this building. (haha) And only, I'm going to say only two of us, and particularly Yoki, was the most respectful because he was Swiss, really did something that Richard could have been proud of. We, and some of the people who actually had hardly moved in, were completely anal types. There might have been one or two. But instantly this thing became a rabbit warren of just crap. And, it was, and I recall the people next to us. I don't remember the name, but I think I told you the story about how she had risen, he was an artist, but he wasn't *really* an artist. And they had three children. And he worked as a, I thought he was a, in the military because he wore what appeared to be a uniform, but actually he was a guard at the Playboy Club for his job. This was next door. And his wife was the curator of I think silver or cutlery at the Metropolitan Museum. She was English. And they had children, and the apartment next to us was so filthy it just was unbelievably filthy, really with the children allowed to run in the hall naked and shitty and peeing in the hall. And it was tough because there were no rules. Absolutely no rules. And I remember going in there that there was smoke, they had gone away for I guess a couple of weeks and left thousands of candles burning in this thing to keep the cockroaches down in the thing, so the building became immediately infested with all sorts of stuff, because there was no discipline whatsoever. And it was both wonderful, but it was probably just awful for someone like Joan to have seen and Richard particularly. I mean I'm curious as to what; did she have a reaction to all of this?

Q: I think, I haven't heard quite that story. What I heard is that she early on would visit a lot in the very early months. People were incredibly gracious with her. So people very much would invite her in to tea, and she was, it was very exciting I think.

A: Well it was.

Q: And people continue, when I talk to them today, to be really appreciative of the spaces they had.

A: We had beautiful spaces. And I have to say I had the best of all. (haha) Because I was, I don't know, because I probably was the first, I really literally had the very best space, I thought.

Q: Describe your space a little bit.

A: Well, it was a south-facing, midblock, overlooking the courtyard on the south side of the building, and it was first at the top floor going down, and then later going up. So I had basically two levels of windows facing south in one end of the courtyard. That meant it was one of the very largest. It may not have actually been the largest unit. I think there may have been a couple of odd pieces overlooking the street, because they were irregular. But I immediately in fact did build in lofts for the children. And tried to take as much advantage of the space as possible. They were extremely generous spaces. Those over and under units. At least for us, a family at that time of two. I mean of four – two children, my wife and I. And I built in as much as I could for the kids so that I would have as much of the floor as open space as possible facing south. But I would, you know, they were very, very beautiful spaces for young people. They have generous windows. I think that they, in retrospect, maybe they actually were too small really to be artists' spaces if one were doing significant art and had a family.

Q: Visual artists – sculpture.

A: Visual artists. Yeah. And a lot of the artists as I recall were interested in being given and using space in the lowest level, which I think couldn't be rented, and some space which was intended to be communal space. But I think the problem with that space in the lower level was immediately a few of the visual artists began to sort of take it over, and it no longer, it was used by only a couple of people. It never was really used like a shop and the school, which would have been an ideal situation. It really is too bad in fact that there really wasn't a greater discipline as part of this to not only oversee as Peter Cott did, but actually provide funding and space and organization for the activities that could occur there. But, in that respect it could have been a little closer, just a little closer to something like the American Academy in Rome. And I believe that it was a big mistake that people were not forced to leave these units after five or ten years – some allotted specific period of time. Because that meant that people increasingly believed that this was their privilege and their right, and that the cost of the apartment should remain

absolutely as it had started. And they, I think a lot of people, it didn't give people an incentive to develop their work and in fact to make a stronger stand on their own, because they were given such a great amount of space at lower cost. And it was a very good space, but it was not enough space really to be I think as a visual artist to really carry on. Of course as a poet or a writer, it would be a very different thing.

Q: How many years did you live there?

A: I would say two and a half years. We opened on May 10th, which is interesting, it was for my birthday, and I don't remember that. 1970. Residents began moving in '69. So maybe nearly three years. My wife and children remained a few years after that. They then later moved into the Jane Jacobs Housing that was further to the south; it had started. But if we had started moving in '69, by 1972 I was moved out, and my wife and I were separated.

Q: How old were your children at that time?

A: Well,

Q: During those years?

A: Well, my daughter was born in '67, so would have been two. And my son was born in 1968. So they were very small.

Q: Do you know if they have memories of that?

A: They absolutely do. I talked to them about this interview, and they thought it would be great fun, and probably many people, they have lived there longer, and it would be much more interesting to interview than they would. They have very, very clear memories of it. You know this was their life. And they went to school in the Village. And there are a number of their friends who still remain friends and acquaintances. I think looking at the children of the people in Westbeth and if one can really do that, I think you would find an interesting cross section of artists there, a very, very rich cross section of artists. Because I think for the children it was a better artistic experience and community experience.

Q: I think you were saying that earlier, is that actually that the children were probably the most community oriented people, and brought you as parents together.

A: On the whole, I mean I don't think any child couldn't go anywhere in the building unsupervised. I mean it was just expected that you would run around the hall to visit a friend, or up and down the stairs.

Q: And there was a sense of people would keep an eye out for kids.

A: I think so. Absolutely. I think, yeah. I would have said that we all, we all were interested in the kids. I mean if one, if we were selfish in other ways, I think we had a sense that the children belonged to the building as much as anyone. This was their place. Yeah. It's too bad that there wasn't a greater form, we didn't formalize that. There were some people, and I again would have to look back. There were parents who were there all day long, and fathers as well as mothers, who I think did a lot of storytelling type things with the children.

Q: So for the children, and I've heard this from other people, there's a lot of fond memories, and also I've heard that some people remember there were some really sad moments as well early on with several suicides.

A: Yes. Uh hm.

Q: I don't know if that was something that affected you or your family in any way.

A: No it did. We were aware of, you know, all sorts of things that [were] happening in the building, if it didn't directly affect us, it affected all of us. Yeah, this is why I, in many ways, felt later angry at both my behavior and all of our behavior because I felt that people were constantly acting out. There was always some drama in the building, whether the story of the horse coming into the building, or the cat that fell out and was imprinted on the pavement in the center of the courtyard from the window. There was Diane's death and other people's tragedies.[8] And I think that, you know I think that too many, and I'm sure that's not the case, but too many of the adults who were close to my age were the ones that I think were acting selfishly. And so there was love and tragedy everywhere. It felt like a mess.

Q: I think that might have been happening in many places all over the country. A lot of changes were occurring culturally, and in all these open societies or experiments, there was a lot going on where people in retrospect look back now and wonder about it and think about it. But I want to back up because you just mentioned a horse story?

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[8] [8] Diane Arbus was a New York photographer known for her black and white portraits of eccentrics. She committed suicide in her Westbeth apartment in 1971.

A: Yeah, and I can't remember precisely where the horse was kept, but someone…

Q: Someone owned a horse?

A: Someone owned a horse, and kept the horse on their floor. The ninth floor, in the courtyard, and I visualize this person.

Q: This is the first time I've heard anyone describe this story.

A: The horse was kept, I don't know, but at least a period of six months. I mean it was a long period of time before finally the horse I think had to leave. But yeah, that was the kind of thing that was going on.

Q: I, now I realize that you were probably working very hard at the offices of Richard Meier in the years you lived here.

A: Sure.

Q: Do you recall, was there early momentum to do things as a group? I mean what I know is people very much probably set to work on their own individual art.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you recall any early activities where people said, "Let's get together and have a reading or have a group show."

A: Well there were, I think that there were these, and I think you really need to talk to someone else to find out more about it. But from my perspective the way that worked is that they were largely badly organized and didn't really last very long, and again, in looking back, and maybe the work was fabulous, but in a couple of these situations where people were showing their work, the work was self-involved and not terribly interesting. Maybe it was interesting, but I always expected that Westbeth actually would be, because I thought there really were so many artists that one would see a kind of Westbeth movement emerge, a kind of artistic movement emerge, and that this would actually have its own sort of sense of power and place. But you can ask others, but I'm sure none of that really happened. It all sort of faltered. People were talking about things that could be done communally, but the reality is they had to work somewhere else, they had to really get their work

out somewhere else, and very few people were actually coming down to Westbeth.

Q: It still seemed isolated.

A: Yeah, yeah. I would have said, and far after the time I left, because I would go back. I would be visiting the children, or because we had friends down there and it was still difficult to get these little community centers in operation.

Q: Who were some of the tenants you recall? It would have been nice to have a long list here.

A: Yeah.

Q: We haven't quite been able to get a list together.

A: Oh we've absolutely got to get a list together. That's a terrible thing. Well Moses Gunn,[9] I saw there and suddenly I remember him, them, very well. I mean our, and I think you're going to be talking to Ginny Dajani[10] who was there, and of course there was Diane Arbus. Merce was there. Merce moved in later, of course. And some of the people were involved with the dance company a little bit. I certainly remember that. Later Pana Wilke [spelling uncertain] was living there. I'd have to, I'm sorry; I'd have to go through the list.

Q: Did you, it sounds like….

A: Chris Miley. Yeah, yeah. We did socialize. And let's see the names…. I remember, there were lots, I would say, and again because I was working, my wife and kids tended to be there all day long, but they socialized more than we did, but it is odd in a couple of years that I can look back and say that there are at least twenty, if I look at the list, thirty people that we socialized with, and other people who we got together with when there were these events out in the courtyard that usually involved the kids. And we would know one another and nod to one another and know each others' names, but again I'm sorry. As a person who was really working sort of eight to ten at night….

[9] Moses Gunn (2 October 1929 - 17 December 1993) was an American actor best known for his stage acting. He co-founded the Negro Ensemble Company in the 1960s.

[10] Virginia Dajani is currently Executive Director of the American Academy of Arts and is an original tenant of Westbeth. An interview with Dajani is part of the Westbeth Oral History Collection.

Q: What events in the courtyard?

A: Well there were parties and so on that occurred in the courtyard.

Q: Would people have picnics?

A: Sure. They brought food out. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And I think there are images of that, and you should have images of that. If you don't, you should be able to, I'm sure that Joan has these images. And I think they would be pretty accurate depictions of the sense of energy that was going on there. And that's, I mean, it was an innocent energy, and that's I think all the more reason why you would guess that the Village Parade, really which has become an institution, started there. Really from I would have said the children -- that sort of storytelling aspect of the children, the exuberance, messiness and people simply wanting to walk through the streets and celebrate in a kind of messy way was the energy.

Q: Are you referring to the Halloween Parade?

A: The Halloween Parade, yeah, which originated in Westbeth.

Q: And do you by any chance remember the first one?

A: Well I do, but it was, yeah, absolutely, I remember all the early ones. And they were so slight in a way, but they had a great energy. And that's the kind of thing I felt in fact, again, it revolved around the children; it was a sense of community based more about the children I would have said, the adults as children, than the adults as working artists. And of course it went from Westbeth east, as everything went east.

Q: How long was the original parade?

A: I don't recall.

Q: And did they walk back?

A: Yeah. As I recall it was just a pretty small loop that each year got bigger and bigger, and then it really became, I don't remember, you'd have to look it up; it wasn't terribly long before it became so successful it had to be organized. Otherwise it was quite impromptu.

Q: Now it's a very important New York tradition.

A: Yeah. Yeah. And I think it will be interesting for you in some way for someone to tie this together a little bit more closely, because there's very little I think that Westbeth actually did, but it, well, in looking back it did say, "This is the place for artists, and artists can live here." And pretty soon after, artists found less expensive, nastier places down in SoHo where they could live, but it sort of made a mark for artists … and grew this parade. And I would say I can't think of any other specific institutional aspect that grew out of Westbeth, but as I said earlier I thought, I expected that it would be an artistic movement that might have occurred.

Q: What we have is, from my perspective, this incredibly unusual bold experiment that you were a part of, a very important part of. So where do you think Westbeth fits in? This is a very big question. But where does it fit into sort of the history of what people have been trying to do as far as living in New York City? What's the legacy perhaps of Westbeth? How would you situate it in the context of architectural history in New York City? As I said, these are big questions, but some of your thoughts.

A: Well, I would say that Westbeth, to me, absolutely drew an important weight of population, even though it wasn't supported early on, to that west side of Manhattan. And began to bring energy right along the street and say, "We're going to begin to address the water", the water's edge, and Jane Jacobs housing just below that also did that, began to populate the space. And Westbeth's case actually I admired at least as much because it took these industrial buildings and reused them. I mean they're massive, industrial buildings that had been reused for housing, and although we don't see that occurring today, and it has occurred in other places, well we do see it occurring today. It just was in Williamsburg and the Domino Sugar Factory is going to be reused for housing at a much more upscale version. My son lives right near the Navy Yard in a building that is this kind of building and in fact has a good many artists in it, and it's not institutionalized, they either commercialize it, but they're hardly as institutionalized as Westbeth.

It's too bad there aren't more institutional ways by which housing can be created for a particular area like Westbeth. But if one does it, we really do need to do the things that weren't given great support, which is to support a person like Peter Cott who could have helped to organize the tenants, and probably there would have been other things that would have been fantastic to give, such as support to the community elements that really couldn't support themselves in those early years. But again I'd say it brought energy, an energized population to the edge of the city, down there that began to make a mark. And I think it also may have people, even if these were not the

most satisfactory conditions and a lot of people did complain about them, because Big Brother was in a way controlling the purse strings, it released a great amount of tremendous amount of energy into housing artists in the Village and in SoHo in the years just after that. So I think that's a big light. Architecturally? Um, yeah I'd like to think that it, that it was more significant, but I think it, I think it's not, it's not that it's particularly beautiful. The fact is these buildings are just the existing buildings painted white with some day-glo colors and a ramp in the middle and some pieces removed. But so I don't think it's really going to make an architectural legacy as such. It's a kind of community legacy that I think will be kept. And again, it would be interesting to really look at who the tenants were and who the children were that were living there in those early years.

Q: Virginia Dajani has suggested I talk to her daughters as well.

A: Yes, they were very close friends with my kids. And I remember them being in a play with my son. Who is a movie director and writer, and the kids were wonderful children, and I absolutely think the kids are perfect. It would be good to discuss the legacy of the children of Westbeth. And maybe they know more. And Ginny's still living there. Is she not?

Q: Yes, she is.

A: And she's a well-organized person. She must somewhere in her files, she probably has every person's name who ever went there. But have you talked to her yet?

Q: I've talked to her several times on the phone, and we're scheduled for an interview in a couple weeks. So I'm very happy about your perspective, and then having hers added to it as a tenant.

A: Yeah. She will be much clearer about the texture of the life there.

Q: Just for a second, were you there during the rent controversy?

A: I was, but I wasn't particularly involved in it, because first I always, I mean you have to understand, my side is to support, would have been to support the architecture of the building, and I knew this place from the moment it started, was going to have problems. And I did have a, if it wasn't a big paycheck, it was a constant paycheck. So I believed that the tenants actually should have their rents increased because we were not getting the subsidy that we all thought we needed.

Q: To maintain the building.

A: Yeah, to maintain the building. So I would have been, I didn't speak out, and I wasn't per se on the other side of the argument, but I would have been at least on the fence if not on the other side of the argument. This thing was not supporting itself, and it was sort of in the process of falling apart. And one needed something else. And no one was stepping forward. But I didn't think, I again maybe a little critical by being an architect and not an artist as such, that I felt that we all could have done more actually really to also be responsible as a group, but we needed someone with more power than Peter [Cott] had, and more support than Peter had to actually draw us together and say, "Look we have to actually do something as a group rather than simply I think protest that the rent was being increased unfairly.

Q: It did get rather heated.

A: Yeah. And I don't know what the rents are there today. They were, the moment we moved in they were not as low as we thought they would be. In fact it was a pretty significant rent increase for me to move to Westbeth. And so it was another increase a few years later when the rents needed to be increased. But I also was getting more space than I had ever had before. And it was all brand new space. So I thought this is a great situation. I was, I felt very lucky and fortunate, and I wanted the building to succeed, and I just knew that it needed an infusion of money….

Q: We'll pause and we'll wrap it up in just a minute. There's one little story I wanted to ask you. I read that there were zoning regulations [actually it was HUD requirements] about needing a certain amount of rooms and walls to be built? And I read somewhere that there was some sort of agreement to draw walls in case somebody needed to see them in the plans…

A: Oh, sure.

Q: (haha) But the walls weren't actually built.

A: That's correct.

Q: But the agreement to get the bureaucracy of New York City to approve…

A: Yeah. No that's absolutely true.

Q: I just wanted to confirm that story.

A: No, absolutely. No, the thing is, no, and Richard said, I'm sorry but I looked over, past, remember basically there were these spaces were absolutely open spaces from one end to the other. They had a kitchen with a wall. A counter, a wall and closet. And then they had a bathroom. That was it. Nothing else. But otherwise these would have been, and these then in that case would have been considered studio apartments. Because there was no place for a bedroom. And the reality was that first we believed that every person should make their own, and they did. We did. The rolling closets helped it become the storage, they were the substitute for the storage that would not have been given if you were given a bedroom with a wall, a door and a small closet in it. So the rolling closets became the storage, and the dotted line became the theoretical wall. It would have, one of the problems is because it was an industrial building, and the windows were relatively close together. And if one did that, you would have had an extremely narrow living room and quite an unlivable living room. And that's why, by dotting in the walls, and being given that, it would be interesting to find out how that was given, but we knew from the moment we started drawing that we could never really make nice apartments here, and we shouldn't do it. That the artists should do it themselves. And that's why, even in this relatively low ceiling, I was putting my kids in lofts where they would climb up ladders so that it would keep the space open. Yeah, it's absolutely right.

Q: That's great. I had heard that story so I wanted to make sure.

A: No, totally correct. Absolutely correct.

Q: Okay, I'm going to pause, and then could you tell me about the balconies.

A: Balconies were the second means of egress.

Q: So the round balconies were something that people always loved to photograph. Right?

A: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: So…

A: I thought they were stupid looking. But, and they had nothing to do with me. I think that they might have been Carl Weinhart or Richard's. How would I know at that time that we needed a second means of egress?

Q: Right.

A: That was the rule. When you have a duplex apartment, you went down or up to the second level, and you absolutely had to have a second means of egress. And the way this was passed, and it may have been already in the law that was there, was that you then could go out on this balcony, and in the case of an emergency go into the next apartment and escape through the next apartment, back up to the same floor. But the balconies became of course a place for everyone's plants and cats and benches and so on. They weren't so often used because they were, as you can see, pretty damn small. You've seen they're small and rather contained. I always thought they were kind of ugly, actually. But, but they did give character. And remember there weren't too many character giving things. And the buildings themselves had terrific character. A great smoke, the flues I think I told you earlier unfortunately were not used. I had a key to them and they were wonderful spaces. Really like a small apartment inside the base of those flues, I stored things for a long period there. But the flues gave the buildings character. Obviously the rail that came through the building gave it character. The fact that there was a courtyard and it was planted gave it character. And then the ramp and actually the balconies gave character to that space and of course the fluorescent. So there were, you know, at first I'd said there wasn't that much architecturally. It's a very big building and these are modest elements. But do you have any other story about the clip-on balconies?

Q: No.

A: These escape balconies? But you did understand that they were for the second means of egress.

Q: Yes, yes. Yeah. I, we had that in various histories describing that. I guess it came about since it was a living space that used to be an industrial space.

A: Uh hm.

Q: Now it's more common to think that way. But to think of industrial spaces as living spaces was, must have been a very new idea.

A: Yeah. It was a new idea, but I think, I guess I immediately absorbed it as a sensible idea. The ceilings were beautiful. Remember this has the great undulating character of ceilings that were terracotta stretched between steel and they give this beautiful undulating interior to the spaces. We cleaned them up in a very crude way, but they were relatively, there were many buildings that had that kind of ceiling or structure, and relatively few have survived. That it's still one of the characteristics. But I never gave a

moment's thought to the fact that we were living in an industrial building. It seemed totally natural to me. But Jeanne, it probably was a big deal.

Q: to the rest of the world, and to America

A: Yes, the world. Yeah. It seemed natural.

Q: I'm going to pause and I thank you so much for participating

END OF TAPE