

Harvard Graduate School of Design | Talking Practice Podcast: Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam

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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it. Exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, professor of architecture and chair of the practice platform. Thank you for listening.

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Joining me today are Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin, principals of Mack Scogin Merrill Elam architects, founded in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1984. Mack is the Kajima professor in practice of architecture at the GSD, where he served as chair of the department of architecture from 1990 to '95. Merrill is a visiting professor in architecture programs across the country, including Harvard, Yale, University of Toronto, and UVA, among others. We are lucky to have both of them here with us today.

Their practice is the recipient of numerous design awards, including seven national AIA awards of excellence, the Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize in architecture of the Academy of Arts and Letters, a Chrysler award for innovation and design, the BSA Harleston Parker Medal, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design award for architecture.

Their work is diverse and prolific. Notable projects include Tulsa's gathering place, the US federal courthouse in Austin, Texas, student housing at Syracuse, the Gates Center for computer science at Carnegie Mellon, the Lulu Chow Wang campus center, and Davis garage for Wellesley College, and two of my very favorites, the Knowlton school of architecture for the Ohio State University. And at the other end of the scale spectrum, your own home, 64 Wakefield. Welcome, Merrill and Mack, we're so delighted to have you.

MACK SCOGIN: Thank you, Grace.

MERRILL ELAM: It's a pleasure to be here.

GRACE LA: So I was wondering if we could begin at the beginning. You worked initially at Heery and Heery architects, a large multidisciplinary architectural and construction management firm in Atlanta. And I wonder, Mack, maybe starting with you, please tell us about that start. And you were both there together, Merrill, why did you leave? What were you pursuing? What were some thoughts about that at the very beginning?

MACK SCOGIN: Well, it was really interesting, because we're in Atlanta, which had the distinction of having a number of architects that sort of were pioneers in pushing the kind of discipline of architecture and how new types of practices could evolve out of that.

And George Heery, who was the owner, and actually with his father at the time, had these ideas about the responsibility of the architect extending it further for clients. Basically, what his principle was to guarantee the time and cost of projects, which was really unheard of in terms of architectural practice in, and it parallels, actually with John Portman's work in Atlanta, where he was the developer of his own project.

So you had these two kind of outlaw architects in practices there in Atlanta, during a time when it was really the city itself was prospering. But both of the firms work in Atlanta. But they did also work all over the world, especially in the US, because they had a clientele that needed the sorts of things that they offered. It's not just pioneering, but it might sound limiting, but that wasn't the idea. The idea was that you could do good architecture under those circumstances regardless.

And I could talk forever about it, because it truly transformed every aspect of how you produce drawings, how you did business development work, et cetera, et cetera. So it was a great experience. We were pretty naive, just out of school, we didn't really realize how different it was until, we were there for several years and just grew up in that firm.

MERRILL ELAM: I'd like to just say one thing. You said that we were in a large practice in Atlanta, and at the time when we joined Heery and Heery, which evolved into Heery and then eventually Heery international. But when we first joined there, there were like 20 people.

MACK SCOGIN: Yeah.

MERRILL ELAM: It was not a large firm. And the interesting thing for us. And I think what kept it vibrant for us as the firm grew, as George Heery's ambitions were fulfilled and he went through his practice, it allowed the whole firm to grow and then us to grow along with it, so we didn't have to move all over town or all over the country to get different kinds of experiences. It would all sort of evolved right there in the expansion of that firm.

GRACE LA: And so why did you decide to leave? I mean, so you were both practicing there, gaining a lot of very interesting experience. And so what was it that you wanted to pursue? What it that you were looking for?

MACK SCOGIN: That's a good question, actually. I think that we were there almost 20 years. And I had a title, I was supposed to be the president or something like that. And Merrill was one of the senior designers. And we had done work in the firm, but at that time was doing work all over the world. In fact, George took us to places that other firms just simply weren't interested in. And anyway, it had gotten to the point, I think, that we felt like we could do some design work that might be a little bit more liberated than what we were accustomed to.

So I think that we felt like we had the experience and maybe could use our background in just getting projects done. What maybe with a little bit stronger aspirations around design conditions on a project.

MERRILL ELAM: So let me back up a minute. Mack wasn't very clear about that. But when we left, Mack was the president and director of design of the architecture component of Heery. Heery had two sections or two components. One had become program management, meaning that Heery saw itself managing the whole program with the client from the start of forming a program of helping sort out financial issues around what the project might be. It was a total program management, and he actually wrote a book called *Time Cost Control*. That book, I think, became, in a way, the foundation for a lot of what we see today, which is project management--

MACK SCOGIN: And construction project management.

MERRILL ELAM: Construction management. Yeah. So he was a real pioneer.

MACK SCOGIN: The other thing that I should say about the firm, too, he was a true pioneer in diversity and inclusion. We had every type of person from all over the world there, and it was a deliberate strategy to make the office a worldly place, and it really was. And there are lots of stories about, at the time how odd and strange situations that you would get into because of that. But both he and John Portman, both there in Atlanta, Georgia, somehow were truly progressive architects and looked at the practice of architecture in the broadest of realms.

GRACE LA: Yeah, so I'd love to dig into that a little bit more. So you've then branched out on your own and practicing specifically from the American South. That's quite unique. And you're revealing now here some interesting qualities, because I think Atlanta is a very unusual city in that way. It seems to me to be very progressive every time I've had the chance to visit, which is actually not often, I've always very impressed with the feeling of a really quite international place.

Tell me about that. What is it like to practice from the American South? Because again, your projects are not necessarily in your own backyard. You're working everywhere. You're working in many different cities.

MACK SCOGIN: Well, to begin with, we did very little work in Atlanta, all those years at Heery. Because of the fact that we were not so embedded in the architectural community there and in competition for work there. We spent our time there doing other things for Atlanta. We got very involved, for instance, with the museum and children's education in the arts, where we volunteered our staff and ourselves to design and construct a series of children's exhibits over the years that dealt with, interestingly, issues around space making color, light, all sorts of different issues that have to do with art and architecture.

And that brought us closer to the community and also the firm broadly, in terms of its sort of contribution in monetary terms, was very generous to the city as well. It was a funny dynamic that positioned us, even though we weren't getting that many projects there. We were very involved with the community there, especially in educational institutions, in the arts, and museum, and whatnot. Children's education in the arts.

GRACE LA: This is pretty interesting because it sounds like, though you might have been working outside of Atlanta, your community engagement was intense and tight, and that gives you a different kind of traction.

MACK SCOGIN: Well, one thing it did give us, it gave us basically our first project when we started our own practice, because we had done all this work with the museum, built a satellite museum in downtown. And because of our relationship there at the museum, that was our first project. It was an interior renovation, but it was incredibly important to have a project like that is one of your first projects when you start your own firm.

GRACE LA: Yeah.

MACK SCOGIN: And outside the realm, we've never done a museum. We've never done anything like that other than children's exhibits.

MERRILL ELAM: Interior renovation sounds maybe not so exciting, but this interior space, it was a greenhouse like space at the base of the Georgia-Pacific building, which was a beautiful SOM building there in Atlanta and a gorgeous space. So we had real fabric to work with for this satellite museum. It ended up being on two stories and quite well pointed.

GRACE LA: So as one of the, let's say, early projects for you. And many people don't know this, but Merrill you actually have an MBA. So when did that happen? I'm trying to put together the timeline or the chronology of this, because we know that you were with this other practice, then you started your own. And that's a very unusual thing to pursue.

MERRILL ELAM: This takes us back to Heery. At Heery, not only did they hire girly architects--

[LAUGHTER]

My first project manager was this perfectly elegant Black man, who had studied at Howard. His name was Rayford Newman, and he was such a big influence on me, and it was so wonderful having that kind of--

MACK SCOGIN: This is in the '60s by the way.

MERRILL ELAM: So the firm had grown and grown and it was, what 400 people, 500 people or something. And as a senior person there, I would go to these meetings monthly, weekly, whatever, and I would sit-in the room and not know what they were talking about. And I said to myself, well, you'd better find out what this language is all about.

And the university system of Georgia, has a school in downtown Atlanta called Georgia State. And they were the first people in Atlanta to start what's called an executive MBA program. And I was along with 20 other people, the entering class. And we were terrible students.

[LAUGHTER]

But it gave me the language. I could understand what was going on. But it was only about a year after that, that we left Heery. And interestingly, it was very helpful in trying to get started with our new firm. I wasn't always aware when it was being effective, but then something would happen and some action would be taken. I would think, I couldn't have made that decision. I couldn't have taken that action had I not had some exposure through this little business program to.

GRACE LA: So give us an example of that, because that's a lot of practices that are beginning. There's an anxiety. There's a big question, how do I begin? How do I need to arm myself with education, with knowledge, with-- so what are the things in particular?

MERRILL ELAM: Well, to be clear, there was a lot of practice experience in the group when we first started. There were two other partners, and between Mack and the other two, I was always sort of trying to play catch up. But you have to understand that the MBA was not in preparation of making any firm. That wasn't the thought at the time. It was, how can I participate in this larger business organization and understand what's going on and be helpful or be productive.

GRACE LA: So it wasn't a means to an end, but it ended up being very--

MERRILL ELAM: Very helpful.

MACK SCOGIN: Well, it emphasized the point that when we left Heery, actually Merrill didn't leave at the same time, but we left Ines Parker, who was the president of Heery, I think, at the time we left with him. And it was Parker and Scoggin, and then it became--

MERRILL ELAM: Scoggin Elam and Bray.

MACK SCOGIN: Scoggin Elam and Bray.

MERRILL ELAM: And that was Lloyd Bray.

MACK SCOGIN: And that was Lloyd Bray, who was a project manager there. Wonderful, talented, brilliant young architect. So the firm when we first left, it was top leadership there from the firm. And then it just evolved over time, Merrill came in a couple of years after that, and that's when we gelled into the firm that we have now.

GRACE LA: That's a really important moment, because one of the things that I've appreciated so much about your practice, and especially when I came to know the practice, which was when I was a student at the GSD, I saw collaboration writ large. And in your past lectures, both the Charles and Ray Eames lecture that you did at the University of Michigan, the Cooper Hewitt, you talk about collaboration and the collaboration between the two of you.

I'm going to embarrass you now and quote a little bit from those lectures, which I think is so poignant, because I think you are giving a very clear voice and definition to what it means to collaborate.

And you said that it's about the questioning of origin, a kind of collective open search, that it's completely incomplete, which I loved. You said that you must have comfort in ambiguity and a kind of cultivated confidence, a true fascination about each other's capabilities, interdisciplinary trust in the language of difference. You also said that you need to be open to informal discoveries of the cross conscious. I thought it was just beautiful. You also said collaboration takes more time [LAUGHS] and that it's really at the heart of human architecture.

To a young architect, it was very influential because you were giving a very particular kind of contour and shape to this idea that architecture could be a collaborative endeavor. Tell us about that. Tell us about the mechanics of this. How does it work? Who does what in your practice? Do you come to the same table with your own pens? Give us the nuts and bolts of how it works.

MACK SCOGIN: Going back to Heery. Sorry, I keep referring to it, but it was so important to us. That's what it was all about. It was a firm about collaboration. Every discipline that you can think of come together and create architecture for a very, very complex, sometimes huge projects were in that firm and it was built around the idea of collaboration. So that was the only experience we've ever had. [CHUCKLES] And so it just simply was a way of working for us that we truly enjoy.

GRACE LA: But then as a couple, it must be different too, because your partners in life as well as in practice.

MACK SCOGIN: True. And together we might get maybe a doghouse designed and built, [CHUCKLES] and it'd be damn good doghouse, I'm sure it may even have some skylights and windows and toilets and stuff like that, but we've always depended on other voices to do our work, and it's just been a natural condition for us, and we've been lucky enough to have people that have different interests in architecture than we have around us. Different kinds of aspirations for architecture than we have.

And we find that as a real positive condition, not a negative, something that really makes actually trying to meet very, very strict budgets but never compromising your design aspirations. That's fun to do. That's a real challenge. And we've been so lucky in having that opportunity in those younger years to have that kind of experience, to bring into our own practice.

GRACE LA: In the day-to-day operations. How does that work for you both? What is the design process? How does it unfold for you?

MERRILL ELAM: What makes it interesting is you can't answer that question, because it always happens differently. And that's what's interesting about collaboration in general, is that multiple thought processes and multiple ideas and multiple thinking just make the stew richer and richer and richer. And that's what we enjoy.

And how do you unfold the day? On a good day you're taking all that in and you're participating in that. And that's what sort of makes it all work. On a bad day, I don't know what goes wrong, [CHUCKLES] but how do partnerships last over time, not just hours? And I think it's because-- or maybe I can't speak for anyone else, because you're interested in what the other or others bring to the table and how it complements what you're thinking and how it causes you to rethink and think again and move forward.

I mean, that's exciting. I'm dull as dishwater if you leave me in a room by myself. I'm apt not to get anything done.

GRACE LA: It certainly--

MACK SCOGIN: She's not quite dull as those--

[LAUGHTER]

Maybe colored water or something. I don't know.

GRACE LA: I think that to many who look at your work, that collaborative spirit is very palpable. And so I think that's why it's so interesting to understand, how does it manifest in your practice. I mean, a lot of people talk about it, but you don't always feel that--

MACK SCOGIN: We're not educated enough. We fumble around and discover ideas. I mean, our work is based in wherever we can possibly find something to base it on in terms of design direction. And we're perfectly comfortable with that. The more complex, the more foreign the place, the more foreign the finances of the project, the more complicated the client, the better we get, because we enjoy that kind of complex condition. And when you were brought up in a firm that guaranteed the time and cost and those kinds of projects, it just taught us we could find ideas in architecture almost anywhere in a project.

GRACE LA: Yes, and I think you had said in one of your past lectures that you get lost a lot, and if you don't get lost you won't find anything. Which I thought that was very apt condition.

MACK SCOGIN: When we started, we really had-- can't remember being asked to go in lecture. For some reason, we were very involved by the way, with AIA, really involved with it, committee on design and other parts of the AIA.

So when we started our own firm, we were asked to come in lecture very often by some of those people that we had met, and we didn't have any work to show, but we would go and we would show thousands of slides lot of just things. Maybe not thousands, but hundreds. And it was-- normally it was triptychs. Triptychs and double slides anyway, of just things that we would take pictures of, make whole lectures out of it and never show a single building we did, because that's all we had to show.

And everybody would sit through these things, and sometimes we would not even talk about, we'd just show the slides. It made people like Frank Gehry really, really, really jealous. He really-- you got three carousels full of--

MERRILL ELAM: Times two, six.

MACK SCOGIN: Yeah, times-- yeah, six basically.

MERRILL ELAM: The ones with lots of slots.

GRACE LA: Really, yes, yes. Densely packed carousels. And you were projecting to at the same time. Amazing.

MACK SCOGIN: So we would go to these conventions and things and we'd present nothing but just interesting slides, and everybody else would be incredibly jealous and disturbed by the fact we could get away with it. [LAUGHS]

GRACE LA: Oh, that's also very interesting and unusual, because sometimes we hear that our professional organization, the AIA, I think members of it have been disgruntled in the past because it feels like there's not much community, but it sounds like you were able to find a community, even in that professional organization, which, again, I don't think that everyone has had that kind of experience.

MACK SCOGIN: No, I'm glad you're talking about this because this is really important. We did find a place within the AIA and the people on the committee on design at that time. It wasn't very old then. It was a group that got started, and it was real kind of safe haven for us. It was really the top names in architecture were part of that experience.

And the main thing we did, and it was always a kind of an organization within that organization that was under pressure to try to give relevance to ourselves, because all we did was talk about architecture. We went and looked at architecture. Great trips to all sorts of different cities, and then went and looked at buildings in those places. And again, it just opened up a whole new world to us through the AIA.

GRACE LA: That's actually very surprising, and I'm really glad that you're talking about that, because many people don't have that kind of experience with the professional organization, and maybe they look to other institutions, maybe for example, the academic world or whatever, to find those communities. But I think it's quite amazing that you were able to find that, especially in the early years.

One of my favorite quotes about your work was written by Jason Young, on the occasion of your Charles and Ray Eames lecture in 1999, and Jason wrote, "there is a sort of embraced madness in the practice." Speaking of you, of your practice, "there is no visible anxiety about the production of forms, yet you sense that it does exist." And I think what Jason was getting at is a kind of quality of freshness that transcends stylistic trends. Merrill, tell me about this, because I will also say that both Jason and Eric Owen Moss refer to you both as brave.

[LAUGHTER]

It was interesting because in two different lectures years apart, that's the one word that actually came together.

MERRILL ELAM: I don't know that I would have ever chosen that word for ourselves. I think what may be seen that way is probably something about this observation. For example, we did a little branch library down in Clayton County, Georgia. And it was in the quintessential suburban kind of strip mall, scattered kind of mom and pop little businesses.

And we were looking for a way to participate in that fabric and yet reinvent it in a way, or reformulated, so that you had next to the fried chicken place that was painted bright red with yellow trim and whatever. You had a little building that was equally quirky in a way, but soundly a public library.

So we wouldn't have thought of that as being brave. We would have thought of that as trying to take a place in the community in an important way. That doesn't look like it flew in on a spaceship or something, that it-- well, maybe it did--

MACK SCOGIN: From every other perspective in the world, it looked like it flew in from a spaceship. Not there though.

MERRILL ELAM: Yeah, yeah. Because it had something to do with the way these other buildings were put together tectonically. What they look like just from a graphic standpoint, how they were even spaced apart in the landscape. All those factors came into play in trying to understand how to make that little building. And it maybe looked like you had to be brave to do it, but we weren't thinking of it that way. It was totally this is the work that needs to be done. Let's go about it in this way.

GRACE LA: It's interesting because I've often looked at your work and thought, you're constantly making these silk purses from sow's ears, especially in those early years. It was very surprising. It always felt opportunistic in a great way because it was inventive. And again, over the duration of many projects, just this incredible freshness.

MACK SCOGIN: Well, honestly, one of the aspects of those types of projects always had very, very tight budgets.

GRACE LA: You had to be scrappy.

MACK SCOGIN: But we had a profound background in how you could do buildings that were inexpensive, but that could actually break the norm in terms of design. The little puppet library that Merrill was talking about, one of the first projects, was done out of crinkled tin, but it was painted. What was the pattern?

MERRILL ELAM: I was actually talking about the Morrow Library, but you're talking about the Clayton County headquarters library. And when we went to meet with the head librarian for the system, we met in her office. And like Mack said, this was not a rich community. And she had an office that was pretty much furnished with army surplus, furniture with a fluorescent light above and some kind of shag carpet on the floor.

And we were sitting there talking to her, and I realized that just up on the shelf behind her head was this beautiful gray speckled box. And the gray speckled box was the box that librarians for years before things went digital would through their card catalog. And I looked at this box, and I was in this landscape of the desert, this army surplus office. And here was this beautiful box or notebook. There's a kind of classroom notebook that you used to be. I guess you can still buy that.

GRACE LA: Yeah, the black and white marbled notebook.

MERRILL ELAM: Yeah, it was like that. And so those boxes were so beautiful. And she said, here, take one with you. And we did. And we took it back to the office. And it sat there for a long time. And we were making the plans and trying to make sense out of the site plan and how the building would sit. We took a lot of cues from the big box stores. We put the parking lot in front, the front door in the front, and it was sort of like that. How can you take a big box idea in the same cost range and tweak it just a little bit to turn it into a public library?

And so we were drawing elevations, back then they would have been flat elevations on a piece of mylar. And I thought, wouldn't that be neat to put that texture.

MACK SCOGIN: It's more complex than that, really, because the library system there was really wonderful. They didn't have money, but what they had was they had reached out to the public, really in very, very progressive ways, especially with children, to bring children into the library, because that would then solidify the future of the library.

And so the crazy, funny painted skin was fun. It made the library be something other than a big brick building with small windows that you go in. This was a library to go in that was filled with light, and it had this funny skin on it, and it was just a happy place. And it did. In fact, it was extremely successful right from the very start with increasing their membership, et cetera, and especially with children.

MERRILL ELAM: And so what they did is, you used to have a paper library card, a cardboard library card in your pocket. So they changed the library cards to have the pattern on the library card itself. So it became a whole like little package.

MACK SCOGIN: It's a cultural event. That's the way we like to look at it.

GRACE LA: Well, I think that that's such a perfect example, because the other thing that's about your work, you always see the contrast of two different things. On the one hand, a very sensual quality, let's say the concerns for light, for the environment, for the way in which you might occupy the building.

But then something else that I think is deeply personal and in fact quirky, and only that you would see and that only you would care about. So I find that produces architecture that is absolutely not fixed, and it's always subject to surprise to this kind of heterogeneity. It's very playful and it's also temporal.

And in a way it doesn't see architecture as a fixed grammar, which I think is quite interesting. And maybe that's a certain kind of bravery, because I feel sometimes that the academy does, at moments, try to impose fixed architectural grammar of that day. And it seems to me that both of you, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that you are merging certain other kinds of interests, and your collaborative engagements into this process. And maybe that's why your projects, they never look the same. They're incredibly diverse.

MACK SCOGIN: It's a really good point. There's no doubt that all of that early experience, looking for whatever place to give architecture meaning, where can you find it? Could be just extra light in the building, like a library, and generally would come from our clients at the time, like Herman Miller was a great client, for instance, even though we were doing factories for them.

See, they had a whole culture internal to their business that had to do with not what they were making, but the way in which that environment would empower their employees. I forget the name of it.

MERRILL ELAM: Scanlon.

MACK SCOGIN: Scanlon plan. Yeah. And one of the aspects of it was, regardless of even if it was a factory, that every single person in that factory would have access to daylight. That doesn't sound so challenging. But when it's a factory, it doesn't require that at all.

And so those are the kind of clients that we were attracting, because we had the experience doing those kind of building types. Like I said earlier, that we began to get those clients that had both multifaceted aspirations around what they did with the subject of their buildings.

MERRILL ELAM: One of the important things that Herman Miller believed in was that everybody came through the front door. This was part of the Scanlon how you treat people and how you treat each other in the workplace. And that, of course, is a powerful thing when you start trying to understand what the architecture is going to be.

So it affected the whole site plan. It affected how you entered the site, how you made your way to the front door, and how you made your place to work. Maybe people have caught up with Herman Miller now a little bit. I don't know, but at that time they were really pulling the industry along, I think. And how you make your buildings and how you treat your people.

GRACE LA: May I turn our attention to teaching. Both of you have been teaching. And Mack you are chair of the Department of Architecture in the 1990s. My partner JT, and I feel really lucky to have experienced this school at an in-between moment of leadership, as your predecessor, Rafael Moneo, passed the baton to you. And I'm curious to know how did that experience affect the practice and your thoughts on pedagogy for architecture?

MACK SCOGIN: I think when I was hired there, I didn't know the word pedagogy. I certainly didn't know how to spell it.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, I know I didn't know the word pedagogy. I was at Harvard because of Gerald McHugh. As simple as that. I have no idea where he got my name, anything. Rafael Moneo actually is the person that first invited me there to teach a studio. And I think, well, I know he got my name from a young student that had worked for us in Atlanta at Heery and in our own firm.

And Rafael was searching desperately for somebody from the United States of America to come and teach at the GSD, I guess I'm not sure, but I'd never taught before. So my whole experience in architectural education, when I was appointed, chair was one studio at the GSD.

Anyway, didn't have very much experience, but to give you an idea to be really serious about it. For Gerald McHugh to have the confidence, he only knew us through Heery, because he was a consultant to a lot of corporations, and some of which Heery we had done work for. It's the only reason I could think why Raphael would invite me to the studio, and I'm sure they thought that they were going to get somebody to come in, was years in practice and do a studio that's really grounded in something more on the practical side. But I hesitate to tell you what the name of the studio was, but I'll go ahead and tell you. You could cut this out.

GRACE LA: No, please tell us.

MACK SCOGIN: He was titled "Brother Dick And The Jesus People In The Land Of The Secret Formula."

GRACE LA: Oh my god.

MACK SCOGIN: And the story is that brother Dick and the Jesus people is actually a place in Texas that Merrill spotted as we were driving along outside Dallas or somewhere, Houston, I think, and it was a collective of three buses that were painted white with little extension cords connecting them together.

And inside these buses they were like little chapelesque, and everything inside the bus was white chintz coverings on the seats and little frilly things over the windows. And that was brother Dick and the Jesus people. But to even make the whole thing worse, the program was a truck stop.

So we decided we were going to visit a truck stop to experience and take the students and spend the night in a truck stop. Anyway, we were asked to change the title. I remember Jerry's assistant. I can still see his face. He said that we were wondering if you might consider changing the title of your-- I thought why?

Anyway, long story short, Jerry McCue came to that final review and it lasted something like 10 hours. And I'm not a 10 or 12 hours. It just went on and on and on and on. And people like Michael Sorkin and Chris Risher, and I forget all who was on the review, just would not stop. [CHUCKLES] At the end of the semester. I was appointed chair for the next year. [LAUGHS]

GRACE LA: I think what's so interesting is that do you think that it was partly because the school was searching for-- they wanted to change, a deliberate change. It was obviously a very deliberate move to appoint you chair after Moneo. Maybe there was a search for an American architecture. What is an American architecture? What does it mean to have academic leadership of somebody who is practicing here with very different set of concerns, challenges?

I mean, again, as a student, from my perspective, it was super interesting, because we had a certain kind of disciplinary lineage that we were following, which was a very European model. There's nothing wrong with that. I feel grateful to have incredible--

MACK SCOGIN: Oh, it was fabulous. It was fabulous.

GRACE LA: --incredible knowledge. And then again, JT and we experienced your leadership and you had a very different set of concerns. And I think the fact that the work was really scrappy was incredibly exhilarating for a young person, it was really interesting because you could see, OK, well, there is a way of working here that's quite different and that tries to see things differently and with curious eyes and so there was a lot of qualities to that were fascinating.

MERRILL ELAM: Grace, I think one of the things that happened around in that time and we traveled a little bit anyway, we said, look, this is our landscape. This is the American landscape. This is what we have to work with, and what we can draw from. And I think that informed so much you weren't constantly trying to make it into little Europe or whatever. You were just saying this is the place that we are. Let's see what we can do with it. And I don't know that we said that to ourselves as--

MACK SCOGIN: No we--

MERRILL ELAM: --a theory.

MACK SCOGIN: --weren't smart enough to do it.

[LAUGHS]

MERRILL ELAM: Practically, but we had somehow come to terms with that. And it gave us a lot then of material to work with.

GRACE LA: Yes. I think it's what's tangible somehow when you look at the work. And I'm curious now, given what you're seeing now in contemporary architectural discourse, again, just because both of you have had a relationship with academia and practice for a long time, what do you see are some of the pressing architectural concerns today, either pedagogically or in practice?

MACK SCOGIN: I think the realities of the real world, the real source for making architecture that's call it cutting edge, just facing these realities and engaging them. And I mean all aspects of it. And I think that manifests itself, quite frankly within the community, within education, not just the faculty, but the students as well.

The real resource for making relevant design is embodied in what you might call a worldly source. In that the young people out there that are interested in coming to a place like a school of architecture, where you tackle culture, you tackle reality, you're trying to engage, place, program, and at the same time you're looking to some kind of future. And I think all of those things are really in question now, and there's a real search for how you find sources for the future, the creative future.

And I think you find a lot of the answers to it through the experiences and knowledge base that our students bring to the school. And I also think that's where the real research from the faculty is born. All those things are coming together and I think it's kind of messy. And rightly so, and wonderfully so.

It should be one of the great moments in the history of a place like the GSD right now, where there's so much in the air. And I think trying to find yourself as a faculty practicing architect or student to find yourself in all of that, kind of wonderfully messy situation, trying to find how you pushed our profession that deals with every bit of that, every single bit of it, even in houses, even no matter what the program is, it's there.

So having the resources where you look within our own organization to project the future, I think is really exciting. In order to do that you have to have all the things that people are talking about now diversity. And you have to have a broad look at what defines architecture or planning or all the disciplines that are represented at the GSD. You have to look broadly and you have to look deeply. And that's the hardest part I think.

GRACE LA: Yes.

MACK SCOGIN: It's very complex, wonderfully complex. I mean that just makes the game, the search so much more interesting, I think.

GRACE LA: Yeah, I agree with you. Merrill you thoughts on this? What do you feel are some of the pressing things that we need to be thinking about?

MERRILL ELAM: There's one thing that I appreciate when I am asked to sit on a review with Mack studio, is they're trying to get the students to dig deep, to find what their inclinations are, what their interests are, what they can bring to the table. And this is kind of tied together with this idea of where we are technologically and digitally and computationally, that all those things are great, powerful tools for us.

But going back to my MBA program, we had a computer class, the first day of the course. This wonderful instructor got up and he said, well, you know with computers, trash in, trash out. So if young architects can learn how to use a computer and not put in trash and not get trash out, to make all these issues that Mack spoke to, take advantage of all these new resources now. It's fabulous future.

GRACE LA: Right? What can be done. Yes. As you both know I've been hoping to have a chance to speak with you, to get your perspectives on this. I've admired your practice for so long, and you have been a model for both collaboration and what it means to find an architecture of invention. So I thank you so much for that. Thank you for being with us today.

MACK SCOGIN: Thank you for asking us.

MERRILL ELAM: It's been a pleasure.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

GRACE LA: I'm Grace La and you've been listening to *Talking Practice*, from the practice forum of Harvard University's Graduate School of design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik, Platform research and support was provided by John Wang and Ruben Zeiset. To hear other episodes in this series, and to find out more about programs and events at the GSD, visit us online at gsd.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC PLAYING]