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Oral history interview with James Lawrence, 1978 Mar. 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James Lawrence on March 8, 1978. The interview took place in Boston, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES LAWRENCE: Well, I think the story starts in Stockholm.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: All set. This is an interview with James Lawrence. Robert Brown, the interviewer. The date is March 8, 1978. We wanted to talk in this interview about the genesis of the idea for the Government Center and the new City Hall, particularly, in Boston, particularly the genesis that led to the competition for the new City Hall in the late 1950s and '60s. I think you've told me that this goes back quite a long ways in your career as an architect. In fact, I think when you were just beginning.

JAMES LAWRENCE: Right. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you explain?

JAMES LAWRENCE: It does indeed. It goes back to the very year I got through MIT, '35. I'm sorry. And we were—my wife and I were in Stockholm, and at that time, the City Hall was the mecca of all young architects. It was, and still is, I think, the most beautiful building of our century. And every day, I would go and sketch and sit and study there, and finally I always remember how, one day, a cold summer day—we were all bundled up—there was one man I saw flitting around and [laughs] obviously wanting to talk to somebody. I was very unpleasant. I wanted to sketch, and I paid no attention. Suddenly, I felt this presence standing by me, and I still paid no attention. And a very courteous but timid voice said, "I beg your pardon. [00:02:00] I beg your pardon. Do you speak English?" I said, very gruffly, "Yes." He said, "Please forgive me, but this building is so beautiful, I've got to talk to somebody." I immediately felt like a cad. [They laugh.] Put down my sketchbook, patted the seat behind me, and he came in like a big hawk. Then he proceeded to just bubble over with his wonder and his praise of this building. Suddenly, he turned to me and said, "Where do you come from?" I said, "I come from Boston, Massachusetts," with which he embraced me with a great bear hug, and I said, "Good God, where do you come from?" [Inaudible]. He said, "Boston, Massachusetts. I am the first cello in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and I'm on my way to Finland to play with Sibelius." Well, I almost gave him a bear hug in return. Then the two of us started to talk about our city, Boston, and he, with passion, said, "Imagine if we had a city hall so great that, all over the world, people talked of it, it was praised from here to Tokyo," and we both felt pretty sad about it. This is 1935. We said, "What a thing that would be." Finally, we parted. At the end of a long, wonderful hour together, I grabbed his hand, and with a great deal of feeling, said, "I swear to you, by all that I hold dear, if ever the time comes, I will do anything to see that we have such a hall," never dreaming that the chance would come. I never saw him again. He died a year afterwards. Twenty years passed, with the World War in between. During that time, I had been practicing architecture vigorously, and I had become very depressed by the way important commissions were given out, so often on favoritism. [00:04:01] In the field of public work, particularly, on corruption, I was more and more fed up with the whole scene. I had come to believe, during this time, that the only honorable way to choose architects for great commissions was by competition.

ROBERT BROWN: You were involved with a good many public buildings?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Yes, and I was very much struck that, for 60 years or more, for very profound psychological reasons, this country had abandoned its time-honored instrument, which had been used back for 400 years throughout Europe. I was aware that, all through Europe, particularly Northern Europe, it is still the way by which architects are chosen for great buildings. So that when, one day in 1955, a friend of mine, very much in the political know, called me up and said, "Jim, have you heard? There is a distinct chance we're going to get a new Government Center." When I put down the phone, it was like the bell ringing in the night, which Thomas Jefferson said about the Missouri Compromise. I said, here is the moment. John Hynes was mayor then. We had just turned the corner from the corruption of 50 years, and light was really beginning to shine. Men were going

to cooperate, from the city, with the mayor. I gave my first luncheon—first supper, rather—at the Tavern Club. I had John Hynes, Charlie Coolidge. I also asked down from Canada Eric Arthur, who had guided Toronto in a great worldwide competition for their city hall. I'd like to say at this point that Canada led the world at that time in its vision, enlightenment. [00:06:03] All across Canada, they were holding competitions. They were doing superb work. This particular competition for Toronto was won by a very distinguished Finnish architect, Viljo Revell. Eric Arthur, the professional advisor, who steered this complex game, if you will, through to conclusion, I called him up and asked him if he'd come down, talk to a group. Well, he came down, and he was charming, relaxed, at ease, and very knowledgeable. We, that night—naturally, he was peppered with questions, all of which he answered extremely well, and I could see the tide was running well. Because I first had to buck terrific opposition from every source. So the first thing I did, really, was to get a vote among the architects what they felt about it, and all but two firms in the entire profession were for it.

ROBERT BROWN: They were? So they hadn't been holding up competitions for 50 years?

JAMES LAWRENCE: No. No, no. It was the atmosphere of the times. Prior to the Civil War, we used the competition for our national capital, for the Washington Monument, for our state house. In fact, it was then used here as much as it was through Europe. I can only attribute its neglect to a coarsening of our spiritual fiber. We cared more about speed and efficiency than we did about the beauty. This is the only way I can really explain it. So the program was beginning to gain favor, the concept of competition. [00:08:00] Then John Hynes went out of office, and John Collins came in with a whole new group, so I had to start again. Again, I had to ask Eric Arthur down from Canada, which he gladly came. He'd become my good friend in the interim. And again, he carried the evening. We had skeptics there, and cynics. One of the most interesting brushes I had during this long period—I mean, I'm really telescoping this down from months and months—he appointed a committee. The interim [ph] committee consisted of Robert Morgan, president of the Five Cent Saving Bank, Frank Crimp, an architect, and Joe Deedee [ph], representing labor. This was the inner trio. When I first came before them to speak on this matter, to urge its adoption, I took one look at Joe Deedee, the labor leader, now gone, and thought to myself, what hope have I got of ever persuading that man of what I'm talking about? He was the toughest, cigar-chewing, cursing fellow, and I really thought, this is a hopeless situation. Well, I was only halfway through my spiel. I was talking to Bob Morgan, mostly.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you—what was your spiel at this point?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Well, these were men—in other words, these were men I still had to answer many points. Could it be longer? What would be the cost? Going through all this again and again. Joe Deedee thumped the table and said, "For Christ's sake, why do we waste time? Lawrence is right." [Laughs.] I nearly fell forward. I looked at him, tried to smile, couldn't speak, and sort of went limply on. Thereafter, in increasingly large meetings, at a certain point, Joe Deedee, with blasphemy as usual, would say, "For Christ's sake, stop wasting time. [00:10:01] Lawrence is right. He's been right all along." I was overwhelmed by this support, that when—finally, after three years of campaigning for this thing, the mayor decided to hold the first great national competition for an important public building in 60 years. He had a big gathering at the City Hall, and a lot of drinks, and I was there. I took a drink and walked towards Joe Deedee. As I came up, I saw this sort of grin on his face, and I said, "Joe Deedee, why did you back me?" He was very embarrassed, and he looked two ways. I think he spat on the carpet, and he said, "Well, for Christ's sake, Jim, I saw there was nothing in it for you, and I guessed it was all right." I loved the fellow. That was the most wonderful answer. He saw me working like hell, and he knew he didn't—figured it out. He see [ph] I couldn't do anything about it myself, so it was all right. [They laugh]. I would go on to say that it was a thrilling moment. The next important thing—and this is so important, because among the most interesting things that came up, people who were opposed to it would always say, "Well, what if this happens? What if you don't have a good jury? What of this?" My reply was often rather angry. I said, "How do you carry through any high-level operation? If anything fails, it all fails. You've got to be—right from the start, you've got to carry right through." I pointed out that the first, most important thing was the professional advisor. That if he was not strong and intelligent, respected, that would be your first fatal error. Once you had him, you really were on the high ground, if he was first-class, because the jury—this may be getting a little technical, but I think it's very important to put down on the record. [00:12:00] The jury plays an overwhelmingly important part, and particularly on your big competitions, and this was one of the very biggest. The jury has to be majority of architects, registered architects, and they generally choose seven, four architects and three laymen. The architects have got to be extremely distinguished. If they are, then firms will say, all right, it's worth our time and money. We know we'll be fairly judged. We know these are first-class men. We'll go into it. But also, the laymen have got to be top-notch, and from different backgrounds. Because if the building is important, and even more to the point, if it's controversial, unless the lay members carry the lay city with them, the building won't be built. In this instance, it was the most interesting exercise in diplomacy, because Lawrence Anderson knew that the judging of the first part of a great competition, there are literally thousands of drawings, and even the ableist laymen just quail when they see this. In this instance, there were, I think, approximately over 350 entries. Each entry had 14 great sheets. So you're up in the 4[,000] to 5,000 The judging of it is a physical ordeal. For this, he showed great ingenuity, something I don't think had ever been done before. He had four very good architects. Can you turn this off?

[Audio Break.]

JAMES LAWRENCE: For the first round, in which there are thousands of drawings, he asked only one layman, Harold Hodgkinson, who later became chairman of the jury. [00:14:10] This was a most wise provision, because, even for him, it was an overwhelming physical ordeal. When the final round, the second round, in which there were only five firms competing, he then added two other lay members, Kelley Anderson, who represented the world of banking, insurance, and Sidney Rabb, who represented the food world, markets. This was an extraordinary, well-balanced team. The result, that when the final verdict was rendered, I had to give the opening speech at the Museum of Fine Arts, at this critical moment when the excitement was intense. Before I gave it, I saw Harold Hodgkinson, and I went up to him rather nervously, and holding my hand clenched, like Communist salute, I said, "Were you as one?" He, laughing, held his fist up and he said, "James, we were as one," and I said, "Wonderful." So, then, when they took the sheet off the winning model, I, and everybody else, was astonished by it. It was so different from anybody else's dream. I was fascinated that the jury—and I'm sure that the architects on it were extremely articulate—had been able to come up as one, because that very night, Bob Morgan, who was chairman of the mayor's committee, took the seven men to dinner at La Govas [ph] and did his best to put a knife between them. Because, at first glance, everybody was so shocked by the avant-garde quality of the city hall, that only the inmost group immediately said, "This is great." [00:16:03] But it was wonderful to have had Kelley Anderson, Sidney Rabb, and Harold Hodgkinson right there to praise it to their uncomprehending lay brothers. Of course—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now, Lawrence Anderson was the advisor, as Eric Arthur had been.

JAMES LAWRENCE: Throughout. He not only wrote the most beautiful program, which I think you should have, but he guided that whole operation absolutely flawlessly. He's a cool-blooded Scandinavian, and he certainly keeps his hand on the reins.

ROBERT BROWN: This stood him in good stead throughout. Did he—or did you, at the time the competition began, which was, what, in 1959?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Nineteen sixty.

ROBERT BROWN: Nineteen sixty. This conclusion you spoke of was in '62, I think, was it?

JAMES LAWRENCE: That's correct.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any preferences as to what you had hoped?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Yes. I was in the competition. [Laughs.] I went into it.

ROBERT BROWN: You rather preferred—

JAMES LAWRENCE: I think my building was wretched. I thank God I forget about it. I was so thrilled—I finally was so thrilled. It takes time to purge yourself of your own ideas, and when I finally did—and I can tell you, in 1970, at the dedication, when the symphony orchestra was there playing, the whole crowd, eight years later, I found tears rolling down my face. It was the dream completed. It really was wonderful.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it ever—was it to be the whole Government Center as we know it today, or was it—

JAMES LAWRENCE: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —only for the—

JAMES LAWRENCE: [I.M.] Pei had drawn up the master plan for the Government Center, and had shown great wisdom in stipulating that the City Hall was not to be higher than it now is, and also in providing for this important building this great area, so that although the building is nothing in bulk and volume compared to the surrounding office buildings, it commands tremendous attention by virtue of this great square. [00:18:05] The nice thing is that—there are several extremely nice things that happened subsequently. The same architects who did the City Hall did the design of the whole plaza, which is a beautiful piece of work. They did the fountain. And even more pleasant to relate is the fact that Bob Morgan, who had been the hardest man to persuade as to the merits of competition, when it came time to add to his bank, he said, "Of course. I'll have it by competition." Closed competition, because it was a small thing. He invited three firms, and he invited these two men, Kallmann and McKinnell. I should have mentioned them before. They won it. It's so nice that the Boston Society of Architects voted to award the gold medal to that building, so that they've won two gold medals. That was the most wonderful thing about the competition. Here were two men, McKinnell, a Scotchman, trained in London, practicing in New York, and Kallmann, born in Germany, trained in London, practicing in New York. The two of them had never built a building before. They were brilliant, and this competition gave them the entry into the

world, which is what great competitions have always been meant to do. It was a very satisfying thing. The wonderful thing was that, thanks to Toronto, we were able to answer immediately the charge that what happened if a brilliant young person wins it, but has no office for us to carry it through. We said that before any firm enters the final stage of the competition, we'll ask him, "If you win, who will you ally yourself with?" [00:20:09] So that when he wins, the jury knows that he'll be tied with a firm in whom we have complete confidence. Campbell and Aldrich was the firm that McKinnell chose to work with, and that went very harmoniously.

ROBERT BROWN: This sort of thing usually works fairly well?

JAMES LAWRENCE: No. I think this was the most successful of its kind ever done, because of many factors, but it never hesitated. It never dropped. The most—people would come up to me during the—took seven years to build it—and they'd say, "Isn't the corruption here? Isn't the corruption?" I said, "There is not one trace of corruption." The architects told me that Bob Morgan as chairman—

ROBERT BROWN: He was chairman of—

JAMES LAWRENCE: —of the mayor's committee. The mayor's committee, which governed it. That Bob Morgan never allowed a person near the architects, that they never altered a line of their drawing, which is a miracle. The final the last and only incident of where political pressure came in was when they were trying to design handsome desks for the city council, and the bid got out publicly that it was going to cost $22,000 or something like that. It was the fall election. [Laughs.] It all blew up, so they all moved their old desks in, and there's an awful comedown when you walk into that room, instead of seeing a handsome array of desks. That was the only place where they were stymied.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, this was a long—the competition was first mentioned that they were planning a Government Center in the mid-'50s. Was this for serious reasons, or was it because a certain political regime wanted to have a—

JAMES LAWRENCE: What do you mean?

ROBERT BROWN: —monument behind it?

JAMES LAWRENCE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: The demolishing of the Scollay Square area. [00:22:00]

JAMES LAWRENCE: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: Did everyone agree that that needed to be removed?

JAMES LAWRENCE: It was part of a great movement at that time. It was part of a great movement, and it's certainly—it's very interesting sociologically. My belief is that the upsurge came as a consequence of the healing of the breach between the old Anglo-Saxon and the Irish, and it was symbolized by Kennedy, and by Collins, and by Kevin White. Complete—all the old animosity had gone, and this seemed to let loose a whole torrent of ideas and hope. I really put my finger on that as the cause for this wonderful upsurge. Well, the city planning commission had long wanted to do something about these problems, particularly Scollay Square, and the old City Hall was not adequate, so that it was natural, and at that time, the government was—they were developing the concept of the development commissions, and we were in at the start. That's really it. There was great need bringing together all of the government buildings. But you can see the difference when you look at the staleness of a thing like the State Office Building.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JAMES LAWRENCE: Yeah. They now are a third-rate structure. It could have been the City Hall. It's the sort of thing we would have gotten. But perhaps I've talked enough about that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you think of the difference, perhaps, as attributable to the sort of energy released by the fusion of peoples.

JAMES LAWRENCE: I do. I do.

ROBERT BROWN: It was not a case of the city being desperate, seeing that it was running downhill?

JAMES LAWRENCE: No, and I think it was suddenly they came together. They saw that if they were going to begin to pull themselves together, this was the start. And indeed, that's what it proved to be. We lack one important thing now, and this is, I'm afraid, due to the smallness of Kevin White, who has been fighting Cabot,

Cabot & Forbes over the plaza, and that is there should have been a great, 50-foot-wide, magnificent stairway down from the City Hall, across Congress Street, down onto the plaza by Faneuil Hall, so that people could walk right down to the sea. [00:24:24] I hope that will be done someday, because it's all there. Everything is built right out in the [inaudible] plans.

ROBERT BROWN: That was in the plans?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: It was. Yes, yes.

JAMES LAWRENCE: As you can see, when you do it now, you have to go down and cross six lanes of traffic.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes. It peters out, and then you have to cross a busy street. Do you feel that, beyond design, the things you've discussed, has it acted as a magnet, as a revitalization for a large area?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Oh, this I know. Oh, this I know. I think this—but I think somebody from the BRA could probably talk to you more concretely on that.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. They can give you more statistics and that sort of thing. How do you stack it up against Stockholm?

JAMES LAWRENCE: Well, interestingly enough, I went back there at 17-year intervals. I went back in '51, and I went back in '68, and I went back this year. I broke my rhythm. But on the '68 visit, it was so interesting. Each time, the City Hall stood out above all other buildings. It hadn't suffered a bit. It was just as magnificent and breathtaking. But the rest of the city seemed to me to have grown more hum-drum, less out of the ordinary. I spoke to an architect I knew there, a very distinguished one, and I said, "I hope you'll not think me rude." I was his guest at dinner. I said, "I feel that a certain great quality has gone from work here." [00:26:04] He said, "You couldn't be more right." He said, "We have, as a profession, suffered the most extraordinarily from the Socialist government. They felt that we were too close to the king. The king was very fond of architecture, and the king's brother worked with him, Prince Eugen. Consequently, we have been downgraded in our command on all projects. We've been put under other people, not architects, and it's influenced the work very, very much." But whatever it is, I know that—I feel that very strongly. I went back there this summer and found nothing, nothing, exciting, nothing new, which is a great change. Now, we still have—I think, right here, I think that Pei's Christian Science Center is one of the loveliest creations that any great city has put up for a long, long time. Very impressed with that.

ROBERT BROWN: Are you quite hopeful about this city, generally? That it will continue to attract first-rate design and see it carried out?

JAMES LAWRENCE: I do. I think we've been through a great slump, as part of the whole country's seen, but probably more so, because we gained such a reputation in the '60s that we attracted architects from Europe, from everywhere. They all wanted to come to Harvard [inaudible] and they all wanted to work. And when you get too many architects, it becomes very desperate. And I noticed this last summer when I was in Europe, that the Depression has hit the northern countries and England very badly. So badly that one begins to wonder whether the very high price of manual labor isn't influencing architecture. The demand.

ROBERT BROWN: In our City Hall, this could be overcome at that time. [00:28:01] They could produce quality work. There was—

JAMES LAWRENCE: They did. Kallmann, one of the architects, told me that the cost of reinforced concrete, concrete poured into place, had now risen to such a point that they wouldn't dare use it anymore. They couldn't. Also, unless you design on a tremendously bold scale, such as the City Hall is, the pollution affects the concrete so badly, makes it so dreary—not chemically, but I mean it presents such a sorry appearance, that I think everywhere they're now looking for a cladding of brick or tile. In Tokyo, now, the pollution has, for a long time, been so serious they use black glazed tile and all manner of coverings.

ROBERT BROWN: But here, you're saying, because—

JAMES LAWRENCE: Well, here, we use this when they can afford it. For instance, the First National Bank is the most beautiful thing in the world. They have Minnesota polished granite, probably the handsomest building material imaginable.

ROBERT BROWN: But here, the City Hall was such a bold form that you don't notice the pollution on the surface of the concrete?

JAMES LAWRENCE: It doesn't trouble me. It's really—it's so monumental—

ROBERT BROWN: That's a good point.

JAMES LAWRENCE: I could talk at length—

ROBERT BROWN: But you're, in general, very pleased with it, right?

JAMES LAWRENCE: More and more. It was one of those—I think to have had such a dream come true warms me.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LAWRENCE: Warms me very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]