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Oral history interview with Jack Lenor Larsen, 1971 Apr. 26-May 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jack L. Larsen on April 26 through May 3, 1971. The interview took place in Larsen's studio, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Larsen 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

PAUL CUMMINGS: 26th of April 1971. Paul Cummings talking to Jack Larsen in his what do you call this? Studio? Office?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Studio.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: What about the early beginnings? Seattle seems to play a very important role in your ideas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1945 I enrolled in architecture at the University of Washington and was able to start out with sophomore work. So the second year I was doing junior work, and in that was required to do a small amount of weaving, it was just to understand the disciplines we would be specifying. And I liked it immensely. I am not a gifted draftsman. And the whole idea of working on paper on hypothetical projects—abstractions of hypothetical projects. I hadn't realized it, but there was a certain enthusiasm that was lacking. In weaving , working with the actual materials and colors and constructing, working within a discipline, I found enormously appealing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what sent you to architecture in the first place?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: My dad is a builder and all my youth was spent in making structures—underground, above ground, in trees.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In carpentry and the whole thing.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Working mostly in the woods making one kind of house after another. And I'd also done Boy Scout type handcraft and high school art and so forth, and had gotten some encouragement. There were other things I did less well than that. And that was also important, I think, when I began weaving, whereas I was sort of third in our furniture design class, as I was more interested in weaving than anyone. I could soon get the faculty laughing and gain some embryo star status. That was certainly a factor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there an interest in your family in craft or was it just in building?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Not really, of making things, yes, there was that. We seemed to spend our Sundays going on house tours or being on one. That was the more approachable kind of medium than music or art in my family—an admiration for gardens and buildings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What I'm curious about, because in many of the things I read you mentioned Seattle as an important environment. What was the quality of the city, the character?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: There were two things going on: One was the post-war design revolution which was very strong in Seattle and on the West Coast, I think, as much as any place. But there was a real faith in what environmental design could bring about that one could work from there and all sorts of changes would take place. Suddenly people would become sweet and enlightened. There was that fervor certainly among students and the Northwest School of Architecture was developing. At the same time it was regional—the northwest is still regional, but not as much as it was. That climate which is fogged down in various muted colors; also the Oriental influence—that there were a number of Japanese

living in the area and some of our favorite faculty were Chinese or Japanese. And also, particularly in the arts, our professors had studied in the Orient and were much impressed by it. Morris Graves and Mark Tobey and Kenneth Callahan—painters—had all worked over there and ate in Japanese restaurants. There was a very strong influence and it was also sort of available. We students could also afford Japanese restaurants. And even Indian art that we collected and were much impressed by. So my color and texture was particularly organic in those days, and I'd occasionally break out and imagine that I was an East Indian and try to use sari colors, but mostly they were very muted, Shabui colors, as closely as I could come to them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's interesting. One of these days I must go to Seattle and look at it, because it has long tentacles that come out everywhere. Did you have an interest in literature?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I did when I was in school. In the fall of 1945, most of my high school class was in the service, I was not. So I had some instant status on campus and I was able to take only major subjects except for English. I was able to say, "Well, you know, I'll pick up my requirements and electives later, I just want to work on design." And I'd gotten into that too fast and I even dropped out and went to California. When I went back to school, I suddenly wanted a Liberal Arts education. I was terribly curious. I took a lot of philosophy and anthropology and very special kinds of literature and twenty-seven art histories of various sorts, also decided that I liked school and would stay in it as long as possible rather than my original idea which was to get out as quickly as possible. So I did have a smattering of a lot of things, but anthro and philosophy intrigued me more than literature.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What sent you to Los Angeles?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, when I decided that I liked weaving enormously. If one could become a professional weaver then going to California for more training was desirable. Also to be that much further away from home was enormously appealing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't go to school there, did you?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I finally did take two semesters at USC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles] and I also went to art school and part-time at Los Angeles City College. I was also in a weaving school learning weaving and teaching design simultaneously.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What school was that?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It was Dorthea Hulse, who was one of the early California weavers—a small school. But what I think was enormously useful for me—nobody taught me fabric design; I had a pretty good background in home economics type textiles, and I had art and architecture training, and I was learning how to weave. My attitudes and design ideas about fabrics I had to translate from architecture and design into fabrics, so they came out more personally than if I had ever had an influential fabric design teacher at that age with ideas that I could borrow from.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, were there any important instructors at Seattle that—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I had two, three very influential teachers. One was Hope Foote in the Interior Design Department who insisted on exquisiteness and perfection and actually she was teaching taste, and I did a lot of work with her. Being approximate wasn't good enough for her. She'd say, "Now, what color is that going to be?" And I'd say, "Red." And she'd say, "Well there are a thousand reds. Now you have to work on which one and refine that," and for us young rebels, this wasn't what we wanted to do. We wanted to move into the avant garde very ruthlessly and rough-shod and forget about—exquisiteness was the last thing we wanted. But that was very helpful. And then Margaret Hogler came out from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. She was a woman who taught very well, knew a great deal, presented it dramatically, and was more philosophical than anyone I've ever met. She'd keep saying, "Why did they do it in the past? Why should we do this now?" And she still continues to educate me. She's just a fantastic woman, and her ideas of what contemporary living should be and why we needed texture inside our present day houses, and why we didn't need the pattern of the 18th century—she influenced my thinking more than anyone else. I worked—finally they made a special degree for me so I could graduate in textile design and I came back to the University of Washington.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about, the B.A. in weaving?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, they'd never given one. I wanted it, and I had made some faculty friends and they just decided that they would make a special degree and I was to do the research and thesis of a master's degree and then they would give me a B.A., and I didn't need master's credits. So I worked with Professor [Grace] Denny, who was head of textiles in the School of Home Economics and she was deep into Peruvian studies, and I worked with her on translating an enormous tomb into English. I wasn't a specialist in French, but I was a specialist in the weaving technique, and I learned a great deal of the process. And she was also working on her own book and also at the same time a Peruvian at Washington was bringing into the United States the biggest collection ever to come out of Peru—600 pieces that major museums in the east bought. I had access to that collection and did some classification as part of my thesis, and I learned a lot from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that seems to have been a key kind of experience—translating the book and the involvement with those fabrics.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Very much so. I think, for one thing, at the proper time it both broadened my viewpoint away from the straight, narrow modernity which was very much in vogue and also humbled me sufficiently. If I worked my whole life I'd never be as good as a Peruvian, and therefore it kept my ego in check and kept me working harder. But that was quite important and I have continued in one way or another working with Peruvian fabrics all the way through.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there many people studying weaving when you were in school?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I was the only major. When I had graduated I stayed on for a year and was a graduate assistant under Ed Rossbach whom I'm sure is in your Archives. He had just come from Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan] and Columbia [Columbia University, New York] and was the first person that I'd worked with closely that really understood the seriousness of fabric design and exploring and thinking of it more than as fabric to go in architecture but as a scholarly research. And I taught under him and was much influenced by him, and through him got a scholarship to Cranbrook.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in teaching at that point?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes, I decided that school had become so nice that I would like to continue in it and stay out of the commercial world completely. I was sufficiently academic to be able to look on that as being very dirty. And what my plan was was to make a master's in weaving so I could then teach until I had my Doctorate in Philosophy, then I could teach Philosophy. At Cranbrook, Marianne Strengell was there who was very, very active, successful, working with enormous drive. We almost never saw her but her career was going on and that seemed interesting, rather glamorous. And I learned how to work still harder than I had which is hard to believe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you go to Cranbrook?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I had two choices for a Master's in Weaving. One was to go to Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley] which offered one, but an academic in research and which seemed not as interesting as Cranbrook which presented a one-man show for your degree, and that seemed intriguing and then when I did get a scholarship that sort of clinched it. It was also farther away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like Cranbrook?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Very much. It was enormously exciting, and it was a chance to work. At 11:30 they would chase us out of the studios at night and we found out how to get back in. We all worked hard and I think I the hardest. And I had sort of the position of being the most developed of the students and I raced on ahead of them which I liked. But in the process I began to think about designing professionally and the plan of my weaving had gone even more specifically into fabric for architecture. I decided that I wanted to write a book and I though I'd do that after school—fabric design for weavers, and I still thought that I would accept a teaching post—I'm not sure why. And then during the summer I went back to the coast and I began to get offers from Illinois and so on and the idea of going into the middle west—small towns in the middle west—and also signing up back into school until I retired at 70 became very uninteresting. And also I'd come to New York while I was at

Cranbrook and it was the first place I'd ever felt at home in and I suddenly got thinking well, if I could move all my looms and yarns and stuff to Champaign-Urbana I could probably get to New York. I had had a couple of offers to come here, and I did. My idea was to become a consultant designer. One firm had lost the money that they were going to have me use, and the other, the Siamese silk house, Thaibok were afraid that they were going to lose Siam and they needed an American collection, and would I design it. They were amateurs in fabric and very encouraging, and so I did. And then at a certain point I said that I had to talk to their mill, because I had to verify what kind of loom we could use and they said, "We don't know what a mill is." And so they put up the money and I got fabrics produced which was all new to me. But in the process I learned something about small scale power weaving.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was this your first experience with power machines?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: At Cranbrook we did have a power loom and I only learned that you could—at Cranbrook we put on the power loom anything that we put on our hand loom. They weren't so difficult. It wasn't efficient, it wasn't production, but it did make fabric. So having done that and having—I found a New Jersey Italian master weaver who had gone bankrupt. He knew everything and could solve any problem, and I said, "If I rent you a loom will you weave on it?" And he was delighted with that, so we rented one loom in a factory and he went to work and eventually I had sixteen looms, and my own plant. And I did run into a power loom which is faster and more reliable than the hand loom, and I could make hand woven fabrics on it—anything—I could put in half-inch strips of leather. My idea of what could be done on the hand loom versus the power loom, my definition of power woven fabrics kept expanding as I got further into it. Also I was making custom fabrics on a hand loom at one point. I had twenty weavers in and I did have real production looms—that I had never intended to produce. I just got into it. Nobody wanted to buy my designs, for one thing. They said they couldn't be made and they wouldn't sell. But leaders—people like Edward Wormley and Alexander Girard and so forth would say "That's nice," and "If you can make it, I'll buy it." So I had to learn how to make it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was it a great transition from the academic situation of producing fabric to go into a mill and hire people who'd been professional weavers for years and years, and using new equipment and power equipment? You didn't have that much experience.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Not at all. And, you know, I didn't know what an invoice was or a statement or anything about business. But I had to learn, and each day I learned a little bit and I finally got some help—somebody who knew more than I and one lucky day I was able to have a bookkeeper and didn't have to fill out all those tax forms. That part which was hardest. And then I could have a foreman—everybody was dependent on me for everything. But it went along fairly well. I was desperate financially; in addition to having no friends here and of course no experience, I had no money, and on top of making payroll, I had to borrow money for that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, didn't you bring a loom with you?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I brought one—I think I brought two looms from the West Coast, and an awful lot of yarn. I'd gone into debt at Cranbrook just by—every time I saw yarn I wanted to own it. So I did have some of that. And the New York Press was very friendly. I soon found that they happened to look at everything that comes on the market; that they are more accepting, less far behind than architects and designers tend to be, and they were very responsive. When I thought that I was going to die of starvation, I though, well, at least I'll get an obit!

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the problem with being a consulting designer? People wanted fabrics, they wanted to see it and buy it then—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: They wanted it presented commercially, they wanted things that would sell. Usually there'd be someone in the firm who was sort of enthusiastic but then it would be turned down. That one firm—perhaps I was going to work for them one day a week, which would have been enough to keep me in beans, but they said, "Well, we don't put anything in our collection until it's been selling three years." That would have been a good job for me, and I would have accepted it, and probably gotten buried in the process. I was lucky I didn't get it. But I really expected that at some point somebody would come along and want me to do something for them and would be a retainer which would pay for this and then I wouldn't have to make fabric anymore. Just design. I found two things:

nobody came around until I didn't need them anymore, and that once I was sort of above water and had a little business going, then people would ask if I could work for them. And the other thing I found was that the control I had in doing everything under my direction—buying the yarn, approving the color, who it was to be sold to, how the samples were made, and what the photographs should look like, and what was going to be said about it—all of this, and in our own small way we had enormous control. Working as a consultant, I miss that. That people felt that if they bought your time, that that was all that you were supposed to care about, and if they changed the color or didn't make it or did it in rayon instead of wool or anything, that was none of your business. And this I found very, very difficult to cope with because in a sense it spoils the fun. The reason our fabrics are really not commercial is because we labor over them for sometimes two or three years, improving and changing and developing, and it's the craft quality in our fabrics that makes them special. It's not that our checkerboards are so much better than anyone else's. It's really the relationship of the structure of the yarn and so forth. We are more perfectional than most people can afford to be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, why can you do it and other people can't?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: We don't do it very profitably and we do it a lot harder. We have a better, more dedicated team than most commercial houses would have, who are willing to work as individuals for less and for company profit. Our business size is not so bad—it's growing, but we work so close to the breaking point as to be not a business-like thing and that's part of the reason. Also, we try things that we want to do even if there's no particular business for it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, if you have an idea or a designer has an idea, you say it's interesting enough to really do it. [Interruption]

What, for example, were things that you could accomplish that one couldn't do by going to the then standard sources, and would you be commissioned to design things for—?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes, I did an awful lot of custom work, and still do which varies, I think, on it's importance and usefulness. But it's best when it's been useful for me; it's been working with a great designer or architect like [Frank Lloyd] Wright or Ed Barnes or [Louis] Kahn, and someone who I respected and who then had the power of stretching me, of pulling me out of my normal thinking pattern and making me think in terms of another scale or another palette or another material, and trying to come up with a solution. This has been very useful, and I think some of the best things we've done have at least started from this basis. Often we would do other things afterward from what we had learned, and I think that kind of custom work is good. When I finally closed the hand weaving studio in New York, it was because—

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: About twelve years ago I guess, ten or twelve years ago. We were losing money, which we couldn't afford to do. But it was with customizing, that the projects weren't important enough, either in their purpose—either some client or her decorator was flattered by the idea that somebody was making a special fabric that went with the decorator's scheme or the client's eyes or something. They weren't breakthroughs, they were flattering someone else's ego. Then I realized that the things I was designing from the line which were my ideas and which hundreds of thousands of people might have, were really more creative than the custom hand weaving. So I did give that up and instead had a design studio to work on design rather than custom weaving and we did take on more outside accounts. By that time people were saying, "Well, would you design this or that for us?" We've done a fair amount of that. But in all we've pretty much stayed within the fabric deal—we've developed fibers and non-wovens and colors and leathers and wallpapers and rugs—but we have never gotten very far out of fabrics or type-cast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What are the Larsen ties that you developed at one point?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: That is actually one I first wove in school in a craft education class on an Inkle loom, but it means weaving a ribbon and then the possible technique of shaped weaving, of shaping a neck band, and weaving it this way so that it has salvages on it like a ribbon. When I first came to New York, one of the things that a favorite professor said, "My God, Jack, don't wear any of those crazy clothes. In New York, they just won't understand

that." Anyway, the only ties that I arrived with that weren't wrinkled were the few that I had woven, and I went into a Madison Avenue men's shop and they said, "Where did you get that tie? You made it? Can you make more?" And I said, "I supposed so." And they said, "Could you make 600 or so?" Then I said, "I'd try." This is sort of the first of the men's boutique's in New York—a brand new kind of shop. And I wove a lot of ties for them, and I had every little handweaver I could find weaving ties for me. And they were all different. It's been almost since then I've met people like Ben Shawn and Sandy Calder and John Cage and all these people I've admired. This is the only kind of tie (they don't like to wear ties), but when they do wear them they wear one of these terribly worn out ones that I wove years ago. So since I've woven some new additions. I've put them on a power loom and made thousands and I've woven a few in the Andes and a few in India and we're now making them in Ireland. But it's a special kind of tie.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you do a great deal of traveling, and you also have a lot of weaving done in these various places, don't you.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It started when I first came to New York. I'd made a good friend in San Francisco who moved to Florida and started our first agency showroom there. And she found out that in Haiti a French painter had taught them how to weave. They had rolled wild cotton like this to make a wick for their little tin oil lamp and this french painter was there who knew that this could be woven and taught them how to weave and they were making woven fabrics. And she said, "Well, Jack, if you could help them some on colors, I think they could make fabric and you could sell it." And so we did. This was the first time we worked outside the country, and that was the first time I'd ever worked with hand-spun yarn, and I really got to like that. My style at that time, in order to get the effect of hand-spun yarn, was to use a number of yarns together, and to space them randomly to get the barky kind of organic texture. But in Haiti, with ungraded fiber and wide weaving, we got it all with one yarn and I really liked it. Having that, some girls from Columbia came to me and were trying to develop a hand-spun, hand-woven system in Columbia. So I helped them. And so we started working there, and then in Morocco, and then in Mexico, and finally in Swaziland, and in Lichtenstein and all over. We developed a market and some know-how in it. It always means working with someone else who's responsible and understands our sense of time. Europeans or Americans.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, why do you go to all these places?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Usually I don't go looking for them, but somehow people get to us. And then often either I or one of my associates has to go over and check on things, and often we do some work right there. They're very simple fabrics. If one has that grade of material, they're usually very simply woven and solidly colored. There's not an awfully lot of design to do, but we like their things very much. Also we do work a great deal in Europe for two reasons. One is that I personally like most working with techniques that I don't understand, that are new to me. And I'm finding more and more of those abroad. Secondly, the small producers who are delighted to get our order for two-hundred yards tend to be foreign and tend not to be industrialized countries, but sort of underdeveloped countries or to some extent, Switzerland for instance, Joe had a small plant that we can work with and one in Italy. This is part of it. We're just beginning to work more intensely in Asia, more and more. It's without control completely, which means our distributing here. In the late 50's I signed a contract to work with Russell Wright and the State Department as an adviser on a weaving project in Southeast Asia, and as I had not been in the service, I thought that this was at least one thing that I could help with that would be that kind of a commitment. And I did go out there. But again working with two governments and a great distance and the Oriental mind and so forth. And then it was, who was going to buy it and how they were going to sell it? Advising doesn't necessarily get things done, I found. So when we do work abroad in India and Ireland, for instance, we've found that at the invitation of their government, that we feel that the best way we could work would be as capitalists, without trying to make trouble. And the American, Jim Thompson who went to Siam and started the Siamese hand-woven silk tradition warp, is now employing a quarter of a million people and it's their second largest export. He's accomplished more jobs than the billions of dollars in failed craft-development programs usually leading to permanent disillusionment. So this is the way we work and this has been pretty successful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could we talk about some of these particular adventures you had here? There's one thing I see that reappears all the time and that's random weaving or random rhythm or random something. What actually is that? What's the idea of that?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: The philosophy is that as contemporary living spaces become more and more innocuous in design—there isn't distinguished architecture in most of them. A lot of our fabrics tend to get into architect-designed, custom houses that have something, but they're glass, and vinyl floors and plastered walls—and everything is smooth, there are no textures at all in these spaces—work spaces and living spaces—and my theory is that for an urban population used to jangling rhythms of office machines and traffic and hard surfaces and pressure of over-stimulus and so forth that what they really need is a wilderness kind of environment that natural things like grass and sand and fog and things with this kind of variety within them are pleasing to the senses and soothing to the eyes and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's a total contrast from—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Right. And that as we don't have real stucco and Indian stone and wood and so on, that fabric for carpet, wall-to-wall coverings and so on—and that these naturalistic rhythms are in a real sense in the material and the construction—how the cloth was made is important, and this is the undercurrent of my design philosophy—trying to provide that in one way or another. An organic rhythm.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was looking down this list the other day—it's gotten longer and longer. How did many of these things that you designed get taken up and used, or were they just problems you were trying to solve that then became feasible?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Some of them were commissions but most—like in '58 we did the fabrics for the Pan Am Jet which was a commission. The interflight casement which has been quite important started out as a commission and we never solved the problem in time for that job. But out of our development we learned something in warp-knitting which was then new to us. The original lobby draperies for Lever House [New York, NY] which were the first for high-rise were commissioned. But more and more they're not commissioned; they're researches.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I noticed one thing which I found rather extraordinary, and that was printing on velvet. Why did that take so long to happen here?—what you designed in 1961.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It took me about four years because I kept trying it and it didn't work. At least that long. First of all we finally found that we had to develop a special kind of velvet; that ordinary upholstery velvet had too high a pile and we could only print the top of it and when you bent it it showed white underneath. Well, then we finally learned that if we made a very dense low pile, that we could print most of the pile and it worked better. That took a long time—I think we really started before '61, too [1959].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's the year it appeared, I guess.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Right. We introduced it several years earlier and then had to take it off the market. We were having trouble.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is there a great deal of technical communication between weavers and designers in this country and other countries who trade from one country to another country? Or do they all tend to develop something and say it's our secret?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: No, there's not obvious sharing. There's a great deal of "profit fertilization" of various sorts. Some of it completely intentional. One of the things that we've found, particularly in the hand-spun, hand-woven department, is that people come and they say, "We have these facilities and we have these people who might need help, and what sort of things could we do?" And we tell them this is what we did in Mexico or Columbia or wherever and we just think it's beautiful and this is what a hand-spun fabric should look like, and so forth. And then they say, "Could I just have a little swatch to remind me." And, presumably, they're going to try to develop a yarn or something that we could use. They're very good, most of these people, and they actually produce a little swatch, and then they're very unhappy that we liked that fabric so much and now they're making it and we won't buy it. So this is quite international. In one instance, the fabric we developed in Mexico was later woven in Germany and then the German one copied back in Mexico, an so on. Their big industry in India is weaving Haitian cotton, for instance. Which happened that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, since the organization has developed, you've taken in other designers, haven't you?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, two things. I have assistant and associate designers here. And, secondly, neither Win Anderson, my chief associate, nor I are great draftsmen and almost all of our prints are commissioned—the drawing on them. If they're straight lines like this stage curtain I'm working on now, I do them, but if they require great drawing, I either have them done here in the studio, or there are certain people outside that we work with on the drawing. That's worked out fine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Karl Mann Associates—how did you get involved with them?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: When we moved to 55th Street I had a half-story on top of the building for rent. I rented three stories and used two and I met Karl, who was making seed paintings and fish rubbings and commercial art, I talked him into taking our space and setting up a little business, and I helped him when he did. And then at a certain point, he or I or somehow we decided to augment a couple of wall coverings. We would design them. We've been doing that ever since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've been involved with Haystack Mountain School [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine] for a while and the Contemporary Craft Museum [now the Museum of Arts & Design, New York].

JACK LENOR LARSEN: For a long time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you pursue that?—because you've been very active with the Craft Museum.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I'm interested in everything, and in both those areas I know that I can be useful, so then I feel needed and I apply myself on both of them. I started out in my 20's—the greenest hunk they've ever had on their board—and now I'm the grand old man with seniority. But I find that it's interesting in keeping abreast. I'm still very much related to the Craft theme internationally and I travel for that, like in June I'll be at the Tapestry Biennale, you know, the opening in Lausanne. I advise on all sorts of things and I'm doing a major book now on contemporary tapestry. And we do give crafts shows in our showroom rather regularly. But all these things together, one becomes another and I take certain pleasure in being a match-maker. Very often I find that things fit—someone coming from Europe and would like something to do here, I know that Haystack would like a faculty member or that the World Congress [World Crafts Council] would like a lecturer or some gallery would like to exhibit their work and I put these all together, and that does give me pleasure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it must be very interesting to see the amount of activity that goes on around—you can see the focal point like that. [interruption.]

JACK LENOR LARSEN: This fabric I'm most proud of as any, for two reasons—it's the first of the warp-knit that I have done, and it's a beautiful, symbiotic relationship. That knitting is resilient technique, tends not to be used in furnishings because it stretches, and the modern filament, which are my favorite synthetic yarns. We tend not to use synthetic yarns because they're synonymous with natural yarns—we like cotton or wool or such whenever we can. But these plastic straws and mono-filaments do have a brand new aesthetic which I thought quite interesting and no one's expressed it and no one else seems to like it. So that's been interesting. But the combination of the knitting—the yarns are slippery so they couldn't be woven sheerly—but the knitting bound them. At the same time the yarn is resilient and I can heat that because they are plastic, so the two elements together, one counteracts the other and it really works. The other thing is that someone told me about ten years ago that we now have glass architecture, but we've never made a really good window fabric. Either they fade or they rot or they mildew or they sag or they snag or something. And this one sort of tends to solve all those problems—it doesn't burn, it doesn't get dirty, and it can be drip-dry and it doesn't fade, and is absolutely stable and so on. And even the dark ones—where there's a glare it does two things: it cuts the glare and you can also see through it much better than a light colored curtain. So that's been a rather major contribution, and also it's the best selling fabric—single fabric—that I've ever done. But it's become sort of a standard and I think will be more and more influential as a whole way of thinking about things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What are some of the other things: You know, you've mentioned momentarily the leather strip and some of the various things like that—were they difficult problems or were they things that were done rarely?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Leather—I think I got into that—someone was weaving leather for

shoes in Spain and they asked me if I would design things for the Spanish artisans to weave and I did. And then I decided that would make a great upholstery. And so I worked on it, and it was a very spectacular fabric. It had more texture and patterns than leather did, but it was practical and far more interesting than leather, and it got into yard goods which upholsterers like instead of skin shapes. And eventually we put it on the power loom which we didn't think we could do. It was done at the end of my hand-weaving studio, and I hoped that it would—it won a competition, and it was good exhibition fabric, but I hoped not to get involved in production of it as it became quite popular and we had to make it.

[END OF SIDE ONE; SIDE TWO]

JACK LENOR LARSEN: [In response to question not received on tape] Every known and unknown technique of designing. I think that I am prolific for one reason or another, both from demand and my own need. I do a lot of things and I usually am working on one or two-hundred things at a time. I work on them a long time—usually a year or two. I used to design on the loom, and personally do my own prints. And now—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How would you start? I mean by the time you got to the loom, would you have colors or textures or some pattern in mind?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: As much as possible I work—one way I work is dynamically. Maybe I have a color or something that I just think is wonderful and I might put it on the loom in some sort of construction I thought was going to be good for it, and then I would try—how does it look crossed with itself, what color makes it better or what combination of yarn or pattern, and having got that far I think, well, maybe if it was tighter or maybe if the scale was larger or maybe try one thing after another and then looking at them think, well this one seems the most interesting, and carrying it a step further. But that's the most typical way we work and where we're working with a specific mill, which is often the case, then either the techniques they can do, particularly those that are new to us or seem interesting or their existing inventories of yarn—what can we do within that limitation? Other times, I have a technique I want to experiment with—like Boy Scouts making terry towels for the first time—what can be done on a terry loom that hasn't been done on a terry loom—or sometimes it's a look, an effect or a mood that's important. It used to be that I went to Maine every summer, and I invariably came back saying, "We're going to work in green." And then with freedom of choice of yarns and whether they're printed or woven or whatever—how to get the effect that I like, not only in pine trees, but in the green on gray-green mosses, and effects like that. But sometimes we mock-up things, sometimes we do them in scale. We tend least to draw because both my chief associate and I are not drawers. We'd rather work with models or construction, although we have some techniques and ways of going about things that we know will go faster. We also like new things that depend a little on time. Last Friday we started to work on a hotel and we have to have a presentation this Friday. Well, that means that we'll probably use some designing presentation techniques that are tried and true in order to work faster now. On other things we don't have that limitation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what do you do in a case of a commission? Do you have a variety of specifics that someone would bring to you? You know, like Lever Brothers or Pan Am.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: That also varies. Sometimes the architect has some sort of specific idea. He would sort of feel that these kinds of colors and shadings from right to left and that kind of scale would be best for it. The textural end is ours. Other times I could say, "Well, that's an awfully big, empty, gray space. What would you do with it?" So that varies. One of the things I found is that often my best thinking, my most creative thinking, is right when I'm talking with them. Sometimes the best things I ever came up with was within the two hours of our first conversation. While they were talking about realities of life, my mind was thinking out solutions, the most obvious solution of the things. And that often happens.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the other day you got a design for a theatrical curtain you were doing which was done in collage. Is that a way that you use sometime?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I thought that getting, particularly on monumental spaces it's an enormous theater we're working on—a sense of the scale is very important. And we can do that in two ways. Sometimes working full-scale is easiest for me, but sometimes if I'm working with studio assistants we work in miniature use an opaque projector to project it into scale, or sometimes we even decide the scale with the opaque projector—whether we have one repeat in a width or four—it depends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that the sort of thing you would have done with the Metropolitan Opera curtain, if it was a project?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: The Philharmonic was the one big one. The Metropolitan Opera curtain we did was not the theater curtain, but only the lobby curtain; that big space outside facing the court is what we worked on, and then it was a question of scale. We did an enormous spider web made out of plush tubes with a special joining which we did. Children might have been tempted to climb up it like a landing mat, but we thought it was right, and they possibly were frightened by it. On the Philharmonic curtain, which was never executed, the problem was that there was no place for it. There was no loft above, and it had to fall into a pit, and then be pulled up from a wadded up curtain and look lovely without wrinkles or anything. And with a low budget and the maximum effect. That was sort of appliqué technique using knits which would resist wrinkles.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were lots of built-in problems on some—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: We also designed the perimeter curtain for that theater which was going to be two blocks in one direction and two blocks back—ten thousand yards of fabric or something, which is always eaten up out of the acoustical budget. And there in a rather vulgar space and very brutal scale. It was interesting that we'd get something we'd feel was enormous in the studio and we'd get up there while they were still working on the building and hang it up and it looked like a lace handkerchief. We kept having to readjust our thinking as to how big the space actually was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find your architectural training a great help in dealing with these situations?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes. I think if I hadn't had the basic ethics and jargon of architecture that it would have been harder. I think by this time that I would have picked up most of it, but this is rather important and I find many architects, particularly those not used to working with fabrics, are a little skeptical—are they going to get a decorator's approach to things, and there's some sniffing out like strange dogs, "You really know what I'm driving at? Can I trust you?" So that's useful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about in the case of fabrics you just design here—your own collection. Are they designed with specific uses in mind, or do you design a range of things and then find uses for them?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think that almost unconsciously we find limitations. Either that we're going to weave them in Ireland with the limitations of a specific mill situation or that we're going to aim for a certain kind of furniture, such as our stretch fabric group. We almost never sit down in the studio and abstractly design something and then wonder who will make it. That's most apt to come about if there's a new kind of yarn I'm much taken with or a technique I'd like to play with. But usually we're looking for some limit and what can be done within these limits is the name of the game. I think working in a vacuum is very difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In your traveling around you seemed to have developed sort of a series of fabrics, or a line of fabrics for different occasions—there's an African one and things of that nature. Were they beforehand thoughts or kind of after the fact?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: They were primarily marketing umbrellas. It's an easy kind of communication—the craft salesman, even our own people, this is something sort of comprehensible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A way of handling all sorts of—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes, and whether this is Sophism I sometimes wonder. But if I were to bring out a collection, saying that it was a "study in leno double damask", it wouldn't have the same effect. So I think that theses are convenient tools. Usually the strongest influence is not that area at all. It might be a starting point, it might not, it depends. On the Ireland collection, where we did weave everything in Ireland, that had to tie in with the Irish government and so forth. It was more realistic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, it's interesting because in the first part of this you mentioned organic ideas and thinking, and it was all a referral back to nature. Do you sort of go to nature for color and texture ideas and things of that nature? Or is it really the yarns

and fabrics, the materials that dictate it?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It can be anything. Sometimes it comes just listening to music, or in a dream I will see colors. Other times it's very literal, literal inspiration—it might be a flower, it might be following some lady down the street—and I think, what makes that affect me? Why am I so fascinated? I think I made my point.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting, the sources of inspiration. Another thing that I find interesting is that you've had numerous exhibitions in museums around the country. I don't know many other people who have so many and so frequently.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think one reason is that I've never been willing to be chiefly commercial in either the way we go about doing the fabric or in our activity. I think other fabric houses or designers might be, but it's a lot of work making a show, and if you're mostly bread-winning it doesn't make much sense. Also I learned two things. One is that museums often do not show fabrics because they're so difficult to hang well, and if they're used to hanging paintings when you just nail it to the wall and that's it. Bolts of fabric are very difficult, so I've learned how to make shows for museums that they can hang easily. Sometimes this is rather elaborate to mount it and case it and so then the thinking is, in order to make this worth our while, we'll do a traveling show so that several museums can do the same show. So that makes also for more shows. Most museums, or at least in most cities we've had some sort of show and they come in various ways. We really have more requests than we can fill and there are beginning to be more requests for big shows—one that I can spend six months on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a long time.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: One of those a year or every two years is plenty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how do you find an exhibition in a city will reflect on your own business and merchandising in that area? Does it make any difference?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Not so much. A lot people—I even find that museum audiences, who sort of know something about contemporary design and architecture, and keep up on it, and go to the shows, and it's really lovely—that the houses they live in and the things they purchase may have nothing to do with this at all. They're still living with Grandmother's furniture. There's not necessarily any correlation. In some of the cities that we've had the best press in, like Milwaukee and Nashville, every time we do something, their newspapers do a whole color page—we have almost no clients, and this has been going on for years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really!

JACK LENOR LARSEN: There's not necessarily any connection there at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. One would think, you know, normally that would develop some kind of activity. It's amazing it doesn't. You worked on the last Frank Lloyd Wright house and the [Eero] Saarinen houses and things like that. How did they come about? The Wright project for example.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: He was much under the influence and visa versa of Elizabeth Gordon, who was the great editor of *House Beautiful*, noting American versus European design. She was his favorite. And somehow on this house, which is on Long Island Sound on an island, they were working with him on it and promised to publish it and so on. That came through the magazine. It was sort of the entrepreneur between the client and the architect, and myself. And that grew out of—he was using fool's gold [mica] to build with—our fabric was like the stones, with silk and iron-fine, dense metallic yarns. We did the draperies that almost melted into nowhere. One of the first things I did in New York was a fabric that was used in Taliesin West. Several hundred yards for the main social room there. I didn't know Wright very well, but at one point he called on me and said he wouldn't be buying any more because he was now doing his own fabric, which turned out to be rather commercial. But he was a man I much admired.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you have much to do with him on these projects?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Not much. That work was all done through mediators, which is often the case. The way I work today, I use as few people as possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about the Saarinen house?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I never worked very closely with Sarrinen. One partner in his office was the go-between, and also had and has talent of his own. We worked on the Miller House [Columbus, Indiana] which is probably the best residential house we've ever done, and there Alexander Girard did the interior design, and I never saw Saarinen on that. It was a fantastic house—unpolished white marble on the inside and slate on the outside, the living room was 100 x 100 in cross shape, with a sunken conversation pit; everything was in incredible scale, with very exquisite, understated fabrics. Very nice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You worked with Girard a few times, haven't you?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Not so often. He came to me one day and said I was the last of the handweavers, but I had the feeling that when we finished this one he thought I'd had more fun than he and that next time he'd do the fabric himself, because he did. That was ten or twelve years ago and that was the last real collaboration. He didn't add on much to admire; I wish he would do more fabrics. We also did a scheme for Saarinen's Chapel at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA], which is a beautiful spot for the interdenominational happenings—on Friday nights it's Jewish, and on early Sunday morning it's Catholic, and so forth. They each have lockers down below for bringing up all their things. And we did the Protestant - Episcopal thing, and we did get overly elaborate. We wanted them to wear a cope, a least on occasion, and then they decided that that was just for the students awe. They came in looking like army chaplains and had really nothing on the altar, they thought that would be a better attack. And so we were paid, but it was never executed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1964, you were commissioned at the Triennale [Triennale di Milano]. How did that come about and what actually did you do in that capacity?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, I was sort of David against Goliath. I had been going to the Triennales and they were very important for me as a sort of a shrine or a mecca, and prior to that I had been very much a part of a designers meeting ground that we had over in my house—these were architects and designers and some of the last great Europeans—we'd come and talk. Most of them were distressed that design was dying as a movement in America. This was twelve years ago, and we were sort of all happy to realize that everybody else in the group thought so, and it wasn't just our thinking. And we talked about various stimuli, stimuli, to live, and we often talked about America going into the Triennale which we usually tended not to do. We were in '51 with sort of—and the Triennale wrote to the designers' lawyer in town—he knew my interest, and he called me, "Jack, they want us to come in very badly. Can't you get a group to do it?" So we had a series of meetings in my apartment and talked about what we would do and how we would raise the money to do it. We got a brilliant idea—Charles Forberg was the architect of it and I was the design-director or overall chairman. And then we lost the patronage that we had and we were about to cable saying, that we can't swing it. And then Charles and I got together and said, if we really did this on a shoe string and nobody got any fees we could do it for a fourth of what we had wanted. And we got an anonymous angel who gave most of that money, and a few other people came in too to support it. It was a brilliant success. We installed it late, when people were already coming in, and they said we were brilliant. It was just the light—everything was shining—floors, ceilings, walls, with as much light as they do fashion photography with, which was my idea. It was just flooded light—the moon on the beach shining with light. Well, with that they came out of all the dark spaces. Everything we did was sort of one of a kind. We wanted to show the American genius, that the US was not just a push-button industry. And we didn't have our sign up, and they'd say "What could this be? Maybe it's Finland; maybe it's Japan." And we'd say "It's the United States." And they'd say, "That couldn't be. We know what that's like." It was a big step, and well worth doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what—you know it's interesting, the whole argument of design. Where do you think American design ranks now? You know, on an international scale. Is it moving in any obvious direction or is not?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think at present it's been completely re-assimilated into the system. There's almost nothing going on in the area of industrial design or environmental design or even architecture that is not somehow part of the establishment. The avant garde has been gone for a long time and what few hold-outs we have, like Solari, are also being assimilated into it, in that he's giving a lecture every day of the year and has no time to try anything further. These people are so precious who are not designing for the establishment. I have

some hopes as we're training ten times more designers than we can use, that some of those are going to be real hold-outs and rebel and not coalesce. But that's sort of what happened. Post war designers were screaming that society needed change, needed design and so forth, and finally they all got busily employed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you one time say that marvelous line that design was well living in—?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes. That was from a lecture in the Smithsonian. They had a design show. Generally speaking, Europeans are doing much more interesting things, and I think the Japanese soon will be. We've become a consuming kind of thing. If anybody has a new idea anywhere in the world, there's an American there to buy it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And they make 50 million of them right away.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: But we're again like we've often been with sculpture, we expect to import it and not grow it at home.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think there will develop an avant garde in design again? Or is that difficult to forecast?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It depends on our young people as to whether that will happen. Certainly most of the best people, or I think most of the best young people, don't want to become professionals. It varies from area to area and school to school. Some think exactly the way I did when I was in school, and then you go another place and none of them want to be architects or industrial designers—they want to be a craftsman or they want to be a social worker or they want to wander around the world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In other words, you're saying that they tend to become either more conservative or adventuresome?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think they see entering a profession as copping out—like going into General Motors or Westinghouse would be copping out. Well, they think that professions today are just as much captive to the system as the corporation, which is somewhat true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, have you found that over the years the system has imposed more and more demands on you, or have you been able to have a certain space between that and what you wanted to do?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Both. The pace I find dizzying. I used to think New York packed a great furnace that lived on talent; it accepts new talent very readily here and burns it up as fast as one will let it. I think I've very much changed my views in some areas and am even less subservient in others than I was when I started. I think the fact that I get away as much as I do and sort of run my own ship is very important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, that's interesting, because so few designers and craft people ever seem able to build up some kind of solid economy under their activity or merchandise it well. It seems to be a store, you know, for the one-man or two-, three-man operation.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think it's our basic independence; I think it's hard to work with someone else and it's quite difficult having other people work for one, I've found. Social friction is hard; that's the hardest thing I cope with—not only staff, but millions of suppliers that one is dependent upon—disappointments and so on, and the need to be a lot tougher than I wish to be. It would be useful if I had tough people working for me, but then I don't like working with tough people either. It could be hard.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It becomes a circle.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: There are more Europeans who can cope with this than Americans.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that? What is the difference, do you think? You've worked in so many countries that people—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, in Europe I have friends at Orrefors or Arabia and so forth, the fact is that they can work within industry as superstars much like stars do within our Hollywood studios, really having status, and they can say you know, "I think I'm getting a little rusty and I should be away for four months." That's something that working within an American system just doesn't allow. Designers tend to be a necessary evil and they're

suspicious, and I think particularly the captive designers are soon ground into dust. It's hard. Courage—I was thinking this morning,—I really think courage is as important as anything. It's to retain courage; not just to do what you think the boss or the public or the sales manager or production manager is going to accept, but to be willing to keep time to do something better than they'll accept is what's important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've been interested in the exhibition ["Wall Hangings"] at the Museum of Modern Art in 1969—the wall hangings that you did with Mildred Constantine. How did that develop, because I remember many of these were unusual, free-form shapes and things like that. What was your interest in that?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: The museum, I think as much through Mildred Constantine as anyone, decided they'd been remiss in the craft area in general and asked her on their architectural designing advisory board, and I was invited to that, with the explanation that they felt the craft movement was more interesting than design or architecture in America today, and although the museum's in general Bauhaus orientation to the national style, focus wasn't very friendly to a lot of it, that they should be involved in it much more than they are. This movement, which is international, was pretty well along before the museum decided they really should be doing it, and somehow I've been rather central to it, probably because I know a lot of things. Most of the Americans I know very well. And I've been interested in what's been going on in Europe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever feel that they were competing now with the Craft Museum next door? Or is it a different attitude?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Their attitude is that until (it's like the New Yorker's attitude) it doesn't really exist until they do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Which is also New York's' attitude. They really feel that wall-hangings started when they showed them. And they feel competitive. I'm more and more interested in this field. Miss Constantine and I are busy working on an enormous book which will pretty well show what is going on now, and it's an area which is terribly alive, much in ferment. It's protean as much as any other, and I think eventually will be quite important as in the way we look back at Surrealism or Cubism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Another thing that I find very interesting is the house you built in Long Island [Round House, East Hampton, Long Island].

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I'm still building.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're still building? What do you describe it as? A compound? Because it's a series of gardens, buildings, walls.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Well, my trip to Africa was not to look at fabrics—my first long trip—it was to look at architecture, which really did and does fascinate me because it's a classless architecture. The builders make it and their techniques are quite unusual to questioners and the materials are used one year and so forth off another. They are built like baskets or ceramics, one after the other. But the fact that almost all of them are collections—the idea is that Bantu people are polygamous, each wife gets her own house which sounds like good sense, and that adolescent boys after initiation have a house of their own, they don't live with their mothers, means that even a small holder has four or five houses and in a big combined family there might be a hundred. And the compositional quality—with similar forms repeated and repeated—I find that fabulous. Finally we go down to a newer offshoot called the "Endibelli" and who lived like the French do, not being scattered across the land but living in a village and going out to the farm. They had row-houses as a result, with wonderful walls around them—walls out in front for the women and children to play in the evening. And then the man's house was a round space with a horseshoe of storage rooms around the front of it, and the women and children had a rectangular house in the back. But this whole idea of getting more than one room in a round house without dividing it into pie shapes which have nothing to do with circle and are so impossible that even the fact that this is big enough that one begins to get flattish surfaces out here that can take beds and refrigerators and so on that need to be rectangular and that the circular room is exposed on half of it to light—you can have windows—seems so lovely. And so I started making cardboard models of how this could be a country house. The idea started first and I thought,

well I could be away on weekends. Then I found appropriate land and kept developing it. Now I'm busy making a conservatory to fill in the gap, but still let in the light.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there construction reasons why they like circles rather than rectangles or squares or something?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: It's really that it's stronger and simpler and more economical to do a circular structure. It isn't more economical here, but it is for them. And also to build a collection of houses—small ones—is much simpler than a complex house which would take a master builder. Usually in the towns the wealthy merchants and the Emir would have palaces which had many rooms in them, but that an ordinary man couldn't consider. So that set the other reason, I think. But most of Black Africa has that problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you like living in the house now that you've been there for a while?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Fine. It wears very well. The other thing I was interested in doing is trying to build a real country house today. Most people if they want this find a mill or a barn or something and start that way to get a sense of scale and material. And my challenge was to do a house in solid and bulk construction material that was not in any way suburban. Most exurban houses still are full of pre-fab doors and hardwares and convention, and to travel for three hours to that doesn't seem worthwhile.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's like so much architecture today, too. They've all come down—

JACK LENOR LARSEN: There are economic reasons for convention, I found.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: The houses are just as rustic and simple as I can make them with sensible exceptions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there are so few things made for round houses. You've commissioned many, many things from craftsman, didn't you?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes. Quite a few. Most important was the potter, Karen Karnes who did the fireplaces, and who did the finials on top of the roofs, which weigh over a thousand pounds wet, and she also did the switch plates. I found that both she and the stained glass man, Erik Erikson, could read blue prints, they could talk very logically with the architect, who was doing the working drawings, and that although craftsman tend to have a reputation about being so fluttery about time, they were there first, they were the only people that kept coming on time. Working with them directly is very economical. Everything else that went into the house went through ten hands—the dealer, sub-dealer, sub-contractors, and so forth—all these little percentages that go on. If you buy directly from the manufacturer, what you're doing with the craftsman, their prices were very competitive. I would think that if I instead of getting custom designed stained glass for these windows that needed to bow, if I'd gone to a commercial custom glazing house and had just window glass put in it would cost me at least as much to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know one of the things that you just mentioned briefly a couple minutes ago is the fact that some craft people tend to become a little delicate about what they're doing. Do you find that that is a continuing tradition, or developing, or recessive, is it just something that's sort of there?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I was thinking about that this morning. I think that people that I work with tend to be sensitive about what they don't have, whatever that is. It might be status, or whatever. I keep being surprised that the designer types that I work with and other seemingly sensitive people are quite matter of fact about many realities, and that I'm shy about asking what cost is the problem here, or if the client's really in a hurry, or I don't think I can sell it unless we do this, or whatever. And they say, "Natch." They accept this. I have personal qualms about it and I also have qualms about discussing such things with artistic temperament, and I found out that I'm usually wrong, that that's not a hang-up they have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you commission very many things from other people or was it just the building of the house really?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: No. Design-wise we commission. Most of our elaborately drawn prints are done by someone other than Win Anderson or myself. About half are done in the studio and half are done with the few people on the outside that we commission and work very closely with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think there's any area that I haven't brought up that you'd like to discuss, or mention, or anything that might in a way serve as a summation to all this?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I think the thing that I'm missing more than anything else is competition. I wish there—I know great furniture designers that I've work with, and those in Europe who I respect, but I don't see often enough to really be in rapport with. So that I both feel that I'm missing colleagues in some sense and competitors in others. And this is too bad. I think the reason that I'm friendly with some of these artist-weavers, and craftsman, and architects, and people in related fields is I felt I have more in common with them than second-rate fabric designers—I really don't even know them. And that's sort of too bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about something like your relationship between the Museum of Modern Art and the Craft Museum, in the sense that the Craft Museum seems to go on and on and on and every once in a while they'll do a wild kind of an exhibition? Recently they've been extraordinary.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I am not only one of the oldest members on that board, but I have become very conservative in the group, and I would like to temper our media shows of plastic and sound and all these things with some more traditional type of craft shows. And I think we are going to achieve more of a balance there, but I'm afraid we're losing our own audience. The shows, on the other hand, are very—the attendance is quite amazing for such a little museum. But I find that I'm a little like an octopus—I think I have friends in half the cities in the world, and I'm very much involved with a lot of things related to my own work, craft being the chief among them, but all these things are interesting and I think they all contribute to what I do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there is no other institution in this country like the Craft Museum, is there?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: There really isn't. More and more they are working nationally and there are representatives of the craftsman in various national efforts, international efforts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Such as the World Crafts Council.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes, the World Crafts Council. It is sort of amazing how much of an organization it is. We on the Craft Council refused to sponsor it when Mrs. [Aileen Osborn] Webb thought it out. We said we don't think there's any time or money to do anything more. There's still so much that's left to do in America. And so she went off and did it without us. And we're pleased to be part of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She's a phenomenal person.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: I guess I'm involved in that, too, as the American President, and I'm quite amazed how many people are really dedicated. You know, off in Burma or something, you hear news of their local chapters coordinating it. And it's so phenomenally diverse, which is both it's strength and its weakness, that a craftsman is an artisan, and without using—is not allowed to use any great creativity, but have in some instances. In other cases it's contemporary artists working in a craft media in a highly—in London or something. And they don't have a great deal in common, but there is something there. In relation to craftsmanship, I think it's going to do nothing but grow. When I first came to New York and learned that there were two-hundred thousand hand-weavers in America, that was fantastic. But now I expect there are a million people working in some—maybe more—in either weaving or macramé or something of the sort. I think not only more leisure and more market for individual things as manufactured things become more general, but something to believe in and have some personal control over. I think it is related—in many cases—to sort of a personal religion involved which could take all sorts of forms. It might be buying books, it might be going to conferences, or whatever. A lot of the avocational people are more in it. It's not just what they make; it's being with other people. I suspect, in some instances, it's like being a fanatic about golf, or bridge, or something. That the family set-up or religion or hum-drum jobs are not to really be that interested in. The craft movement has a very strong appeal to all sorts of people. I think about half of the people in design schools today really

will end up as craftsman. I don't know how they're going to make a living, but the idea of being not involved in systems, and jobs, and time-clocks, and status-seeking and all those—it's the most obvious occupation of the drop outs, and we will have some sort of a move on that account.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How they can find support?

JACK LENOR LARSEN: Yes. How they're going to do this. A lot of them are going to have a baby and decide they'd better get a job, and a lot of them aren't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, that's right on with the job.

JACK LENOR LARSEN: We'll see what happens.

[END OF SIDE TWO; END OF INTERVIEW]