

William R. Dickson Oral History Project
Interviewers: Susan Crowley and Janet Snover
February 16, 2005

INT: Today is Wednesday, February 16th. And this is the fifth oral history session with William R. Dickson, and he will be speaking with Sue Crowley and Janet Snover.

WD: Well, I thought today we would talk a little about Westgate and McCormick Hall. I think last time we talked about the Green Building, the Whitaker Building and the Bush Building. Westgate was the -- what's the right word? There was a Westgate on the MIT campus that was built during the war and used until the mid-'50s -- the mid to late '50s. And it was basically on the west end of the playing fields that actually usurped what is currently a playing field. And it was made up of two kinds of buildings. One was -- I would call them barracks type buildings that were built during the war on army bases and stuff. And the other was small, individual houses. I think it was called Westgate and Westgate West, with Westgate West being the houses. I actually knew people who lived in those. One of the guys in my class who was here from Sweden or Norway -- I forget which one -- I think it was Sweden -- actually lived in the barracks type units, which were basically single bedroom kind of units. They were illegal because they were all wood --

INT: All wooden --

WD: And it was not permitted in the fire district to have wooden buildings. However, a variance was granted because of a wartime condition, etc. But I think it was also -- and I don't know this absolutely -- but I think there was a time limit before which they had to be taken down. And I think that time expired somewhere in the 1950s. So there was a great demand since those housed many graduate students. There was a great demand for married student housing in the graduate population. After several studies, it was decided to build the Westgate in its current form. As you all know, it consists of a 15-story tower and four or five 3-story, I think, low-rise buildings. The low-rise buildings were basically two-bedroom complexes. And the tower was a combination of one-bedroom and efficiency apartments. The efficiency apartments proved over time to be not very popular even though they were less expensive

because it's tough to do everything you've got to do in basically one room when you're staying up late to study and you got to eat and entertain and everything.

INT: Somehow went so far as to say efficiency apartments have not been popular. The design made it impossible for couples to separate sleeping activities from study or working activities -- often contributing to stressful relationships and occasional divorce.

WD: That's basically true. Now, as I have done before, I'm not going to talk a lot about the building itself in detail because buildings are buildings. So I try and cover the unusual aspects of it. The first unusual aspect of the Westgate project, which at the time was called married student housing project. It is now, I believe, W85. It was designed by Hugh Stubbins & Associates of Cambridge. The first design had basically a multi-story concrete -- reinforced concrete building with vertical lines. In other words, not being an architect, to me when you looked at it, it looked like things were carrying vertically; whereas, the final design is more or less horizontal design. Stubbins went to see Pietro Belluschi who was the Dean of Architecture, and I believe the president's advisor in architecture at the time. Belluschi had just seen the second version of the Green Building. As I said last time, the Green Building was actually designed twice. So he had seen the second version, which was much the same as it was ultimately built. And later on in probably a week or so, Stubbins traipsed in with his design for Westgate and Belluschi said, maybe a little brick to make it look more residential than a laboratory building. And that's obviously where that comment came from. It was quite clear to Bob Simha and I who accompanied Stubbins to see Belluschi.

INT: So more brick and less concrete.

WD: Stubbins went back and redesigned the building. Stubbins -- the way he worked was he had young designers who were very talented, and they didn't stay there long. But they turned out most of the schematic designs rather than he himself, and I think there was a fellow named Hanson who actually turned out the designs for Westgate. The building ultimately took the form that it is now with the high-rise 15-story, I believe, and several low-rise buildings with a sunken area in the middle that acted as sort of a play yard. Some of the interesting attributes of the building are that it -- again, as I

said before, it's not rock -- but the shale, which is a very good foundation material below the Boston Blue Clay, is very deep at that location. So you couldn't really consider driving piles or they would have been 200 plus feet deep; whereas, down at Eastgate the piles are 86 feet before you got to the shale. So it was decided to float the tower. I'm speaking mainly now of the tower since the low-rise buildings were light enough so they could be founded on the sand layer on top of the blue clay. And it was decided to float the building, which meant digging a hole big enough, deep enough, to displace enough earth so that the weight of the building mirrored the weight of the excavated soil and the underlying blue clay which is quite compressible over time. Really didn't recognize there was a big difference. So this method was used to control settlement; however, it did mean that it was deep in the water so there was a lot of pumping that had to take place to keep the water down while the excavation was being completed and the concrete foundation -- mat and foundations were poured. The building was built by Wexler Construction Company and Phil Jackson was the principal from the company involved. He later formed his own company and built two or three other buildings at the Institute. After the tower was constructed, it's basically a concrete frame, it came time to put on the brick work, which as you recognize is sort of in panels. And Hugh Stubbins made another trip to Belluschi's office with some brick samples -- three or four brick samples -- and Pietro pointed to the salmon-textured brick and said, oh, I think, that would be nice. Again, a layman's thing -- it was absolutely the wrong thing to do. It should have been more or less dark red brick just like the rest of the residential areas on the West Campus; nevertheless, that brick was picked, and the building was constructed. The next item that came to be was -- it has fairly large windows -- was what kind of window coverings to use. And the Institute decided that it didn't want to use drapes or anything because of the expense. So they decided to use [Raytox] Shades, which, again, from a layman's point are basically like straw shades or bamboo. And we hung two. One was sort of a natural color. And the other was a darker color. And we met one morning halfway down Vassar Street, about where the ROTC building is now, with Hugh Stubbins who looked at the samples and picked the light colored [Raytox] -- the light natural bamboo. In my opinion, again, the second big mistake

because I think they looked awful. Again, that's only one person's point of view. Gradually over time, they were changed. And, I think, if you go down today, you won't see any natural color [Raytox] Shades there. The building housed a small grocery store on the ground floor and also had a childcare center so that both of those were incorporated into the building from its original start.

INT: That was kind of ahead of its time wasn't it?

WD: Well, I think the childcare center might have come from the holdover from the Westgate Housing Project.

INT: The earlier one.

WD: The earlier one. I think people just got together and sort of made a center. I'm not sure that the Institute sponsored one. But it was clear if you were going to have married students, and you were going to have apartments where you can have kids, particularly in a two-bedroom, that you probably need to do something. The buildings have been fairly successful I would say. I've never heard any real problems with the low-rise building, and the high-rise building was relatively successful except for these efficiency apartments, which were occupied for many years by married students. I'm not sure at the present time that they're not using all of them or some of them for single students. I just don't know what the current situation is. That probably should be looked at and put in the notes whatever it is. Those are probably the unusual characteristics of the building. The bricks, shades, and the fact that they had to dig such a large hole for a relatively small plan building.

INT: Bill, did the student gardens that are near there -- were they put in earlier or was that something much later?

WD: No. I think those came later -- the ones along Amherst Avenue?

INT: Yes.

WD: It wasn't part of the project, and I don't believe they were there, although I must say I could be wrong. They might have been there. The next building I thought we'd talk about -- unless you have other questions -- is McCormick Hall.

INT: Bill, you mentioned something -- back to Westgate for just a minute -- the bricks and that Pietro picked the salmon-colored ones, which you don't think fit in well. It would have been better if it had been a more normal red --

WD: That's my opinion.

INT: But was there anything wrong with the brick itself -- you just didn't care for the color?

WD: I didn't care for the color, and it tends to be a light burned brick. So it is somewhat more porous from the standpoint of entry of moisture than a hard burned dark red brick. Other than on the penthouse, which was basically a masonry structure, no windows, brick facing, that had to be waterproofed, I remember at one point in time, because the moisture was coming right through the penthouse walls -- not in great quantities, but --

INT: That was going to be my question. Was there ever water damage?

WD: I don't believe so. Again, we didn't have responsibility for housing. Housing had that responsibility. But I usually heard about --

INT: Problems.

WD: Everything that happened. McCormick is a different story. There used to be a parking lot where McCormick is and some row houses along the Memorial Drive. As a matter of fact, I used to park in that parking lot for at least two years when I was a student. There weren't many women students over the years. I think there were six in my class out of 900 and something.

INT: Six?

WD: Six. And I don't think many of them finished. Some others may have come in and taken their place, but it was a very small group of people. So the bulk of the female students tended to be graduate students. Even though there weren't a lot, there tended to be more graduate students than undergraduates. And MIT had a facility on Bay State Road in Boston that housed about 25 or so students, female. And Mrs. McCormick, of course, was one of the early graduates of MIT. And she had a little cash, having married one of the heirs to the McCormick-International Harvester & Reaper Company, who took ill shortly after the time they were married. So she basically, I think, lived the life of a spinster even though she was married.

INT: And a wealthy one.

WD: A wealthy one. And I'm not sure that her family didn't have a little cash, too. Her name was Dexter. They were from the Boston area. She used to provide a fund -- a

pool of money so that these women that lived on Bay State Road particularly at night could take taxis, and it was paid for by the Institute. And she provided those funds, I think anonymously, but I think for several years. She finally got sold on the idea that there ought to be a women's residence on the campus, particularly as the number of women started to grow significantly. There still weren't many, but all the dormitories were single sex, male. So she gave some money -- I think a million and a half dollars to construct the first wing on McCormick Hall.

INT: And Jim Killian was instrumental in helping to make that --

WD: I'm sure he was. Jim Killian was instrumental in making most everything -- it was an interesting proposition because she really wanted a nice place. She didn't want some low class dormitory -- I don't mean low class -- but dormitories you try and build as nicely as you can but as inexpensively as you can. She was willing to see that these people sort of lived like young ladies as opposed to some college student. And she had her own decorator -- Mrs. [Oles]. And she probably paid the most attention to the construction of any building of any donor that I've ever been exposed to. She made frequent trips to the building, particularly as it started to take its end state. The building consisted of the West Wing of what is now there -- whatever it is -- seven or eight stories tall. And the ground floor connector to the East Wing -- there was no East Wing. So it stood by itself. And the ground floor housed a big living room -- I mean big; date rooms -- since you couldn't have men up in the dormitory. You entertained them in a date room, and offices for the people who worked at the dormitory. To give you an idea of the costs -- the wool rug that was in almost the whole downstairs, which was a big area, because of this gigantic living room, wasn't in the area that was the dining hall -- I'm sorry. There was also a dining hall -- but the rest of it. At the time, it cost \$54.00 a yard. It was an expensive wool rug.

INT: For then.

WD: I just happened to throw away some papers -- I'm cleaning out -- and I found a wool rug in my living that we just got rid of that cost \$13.00 a yard in 1971. So, you can see, this was an expensive rug. It did wear a long time. But that's what she wanted, and that's what she was willing to pay for, and that's what her decorator and she decided on.

INT: Was that all included in the million and a half?

WD: Well, I don't think the million and a half actually covered all the costs.

INT: So she actually gave even more.

WD: She may have given more, or we may have put the money in it. The date rooms were another matter. They were small rooms, maybe, 10 by 12 or something. And there were six or seven of them if I remember, lined up on the north side of the ground floor off a corridor. And shortly before the building was to open, she came through and found doors in the date rooms. And she said the building could not open if the doors remained on. And there was sort of an argument, but she won. The doors were taken off and stored downstairs and ultimately were put back on but not for a while.

INT: And who designed that one?

WD: Oh, I'm sorry. That was designed by Anderson, Beckwith. Herb Beckwith was the principal designer, and I think his wife who also worked for the firm, Betsy Beckwith, participated.

INT: No kidding. Did they go to the Institute?

WD: He was in the School of Architecture. I don't know whether he went there or not. He was a long-term professor, maybe, even dean for a while.

INT: I pulled his obit because he died in 1997.

WD: He was old.

INT: And he had been a professor of architecture. And it says he had also been acting head of the Department of Architecture in '56 and '57. He retired from MIT in 1968. He was 94 when he died.

[Pause]

WD: The date rooms led to another sort of amusing story, which I will have to tell in --

INT: Sanitized version.

WD: Most sanitized version. Danny Webster was head of housing at the time, and he came into my office one day shortly after McCormick Hall had opened. And he said, do you remember all that fuss about the doors and the date rooms? I said, I certainly do. Well, he said, I walked through the living room last night, and there was a couple making love underneath the grand piano. So, he said, it didn't seem to --

INT: Deter them.

WD: The only other thing I would say about McCormick is that if you notice it, it's made of limestone, which is different than most of the other residences, which are red brick of one sort or another. I think Beckwith had an idea that if he made it of limestone, it would sort of frame one side of Kresge Auditorium and the chapel. It really, again, in my opinion, doesn't work because the bulk of the buildings are set way back on Memorial Drive and the lawn and everything and the low-rise portions are facing Kresge. So if that was the reason that he did it, then I'm not sure it was that successful. On the other hand, they're very nice dormitories, and limestone is a very good material. After McCormick One, as we called it, was done, a short time later they decided to build McCormick Two. And McCormick Two just sort of connected on the end of the living room and the wing that had the date rooms, etc. and was another building of similar height than the high-rise dormitory on the other end. It also incorporated a dance studio on the ground floor, and there was talk at one time about putting in a swimming pool. That wasn't done, however.

INT: Well, Beckwith got to do a pool -- a rather wonderful pool a little later.

WD: Actually, Anderson did the pool.

INT: I thought it was Anderson and Beckwith?

WD: No. Anderson did the pool earlier -- 1938. That was Larry Anderson.

INT: Well, it's interesting because the Beckwith obit that I was looking at attributed the pool to Anderson and Beckwith.

WD: Well, that was the name of the firm.

INT: But it was really Anderson.

WD: Anderson was the designer of the pool. I wouldn't say that Herb Beckwith didn't have anything to do with it. But in the buildings that I worked with Herb Beckwith on -- we never saw Larry Anderson. Beckwith was indeed the designer of the Dorrance Building, the Whitaker Building, and McCormick Hall. There's nothing too unusual about the second edition. We had to get rid of some more row houses. I think it was interesting that in order to build McCormick One, we bought Sancta Maria Hospital, also, and used it eventually as an infirmary when we moved the medical department infirmary basically from Building 11 to that building. And then, of course, now it's a women's residence.

INT: Green Hall.

WD: Green Hall -- with the money being given by Mrs. Green. Eventually, a couple of row houses were connected to the second McCormick Hall. That wasn't too long ago. Remember, when I talk, too long ago may mean 15 or 20 years, and they were used to house more students -- so that that whole complex there of the former Sancta Maria and the McCormick Halls One and Two and a couple more row houses.

INT: Bill, are those row houses still connected to McCormick?

WD: I believe so. And I'm not sure how. I think they just couldn't plow through the middle of it. They may have sort of gone around on the exterior. Take a look when you go over because I think on the ground floor you can get from one to the other. There was also a master suite on the second floor of the first McCormick Hall. As far as I know, it may have been changed, but there is a housemaster that lives in it now.

INT: And there are some lounges with kitchen facilities, aren't there?

WD: Yes. Maybe in the second one. I'm not sure in the first one.

INT: I think the housemaster is Charles Stuart.

WD: He's been the housemaster for a long time. Well, I think that's about what I have to say on Westgate and McCormick. We'll probably stop there. Pretty soon I'm going to give the exposé on Kresge Auditorium.

INT: That's almost a whole section in itself.

WD: That will be.

[End of interview]