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‘Educator, Activist, Politician’

Leslie Kanes Weisman in conversation with Cristina Cerulli and Florian Kossak

Interview conducted by phone on the 8th December 2009

C+K: Cristina Cerulli + Florian Kossak
W : Leslie Kanes Weisman

C+K: We just thought we’d tell you where we’re sitting. We’re sitting in Florian’s house, at the kitchen table, soft lights and a glass of German wine! Obviously it’s already pitch dark outside.

W: That sounds pretty nice!

C+K: Where are you sitting?

W: I’m sitting in my home office. it’s a little second storey cupola that overlooks Long Island Sound and a very beautiful sunset at the moment. I’m not drinking anything but water, but a glass of Long Island wine is waiting for me.

C+K: That sounds pretty good too. You’re making us jealous!

W: It’s a pretty wonderful place to live and work.

C+K: There are three main topics that we wanted to talk to you about in this interview and in relation to our issue on agency and activism. We would like to learn more about Universal Design as one form of ‘applied’ activism. We also want to talk about your most recent involvement in local politics and how this changed your work from an educator activist to a politician. But we would like to start with what you called the feminist experiment of the Women’s School of Planning and Architecture, or WSPA.

Here at the School of Architecture of the University of Sheffield we have a very interesting situation. Our intake of undergraduate students is now more than 50% female

and almost 50% of our staff is female as well. And as you have probably gathered from the Agency conference, some of our approaches to teaching have feminist backgrounds or their roots in feminist theory and praxis. So we have already come a long way in this very male dominated profession. Having a strong group of female teachers within the School certainly changes the atmosphere and also how and what we teach. However, this is certainly still a long way away from what the WSPA stood for, a School of Planning and Architecture for women, run by women. But it was certainly also a very different time. So can we start with asking you how different the general situation in academia was when you set up WSPA in 1974?

W: It was dramatically different. It helps to understand the historical context in the USA in which the School emerged. In the 1970's the percentage of women in architecture, was very small, maybe 8 percent. While women In practice were relatively scarce, in the academic world we numbered only a fraction of one percent. There were very few women students. The Women's School of Planning and Architecture emerged because of the resurgence of the women's movement in the U.S in the 1960's and 1970's. During those decades professional women's groups and organizations were being formed in virtually all the male dominated professions – from women in law and medicine to science and engineering. All of these groups were not only questioning what we could do to increase our numbers, but also how to go about discovering and defining the particular qualities, values and concerns that we as women could bring to our chosen work and professions. WSPA offered women in architecture, planning, and the related environmental design professions and trades – be they students, faculty, or practitioners – a personally supportive and non-judgemental environment in which to explore serious questions about our work. Could our experiences of marginality as women in male-dominated fields help us work more effectively with women and other marginalized groups as potential clients? Could architecture actually serve the greater good? How could we transform traditional architectural education and practice to make it welcoming to women? Did women experience buildings and places differently than men? What did female headed single parents need in the way of supportive housing? How could we synthesize the teaching and practice of architecture as a social art and a formal art?

I began the co-founding of WSPA as a seasoned activist. Having been born and raised in Detroit, a city which has its roots predominantly in African-American culture, I became exposed to social justice issues at a very early age. My activism began with the civil rights movement. I was very fortunate to have progressive parents who not only encouraged me to look at the horrible consequences of racism, but took pride in my participation in anti-racism demonstrations. My father, who was an attorney, bailed me out of jail on more than one occasion! [*laughter*]. And because my family is Jewish, my childhood awareness of anti-Semitism probably fostered an ability to empathize with other victims of discrimination.

In the late 1960's I discovered another 'ism.' The women's movement raised my consciousness about the pervasive sexism that defined and limited women's lives and aspirations. I became

involved in the founding of a local Michigan chapter of NOW - the National Organisation for Women, which was the most important and powerful organized force in the US demanding social justice for women – from reproductive freedom to equal pay for equal work. For me sexism seemed like just another manifestation of the same patriarchal system in which those in power, typically affluent white males, marginalize and segregate those who are not. I never believed that any one group -- be it women, African Americans, those with low incomes, or gay people - had a monopoly on being the victims of oppression. Feminism as I defined it was simply about striving to create a world in which human differences were respected and valued and all people world be treated with human decency and dignity.

During those same years, in fact it was 1968, I got a part-time teaching appointment in the School of Architecture, at the University of Detroit, an all male, Jesuit-run university. The only other woman in the entire architecture and engineering building was the secretary – that included students! Despite the fact that I felt incredibly isolated and lonely, I quickly discovered that I really loved teaching. Thus began my academic career. Fast forward to 1974 when I received a phone call from some women graduate students studying architecture at Washington University in St Louis. They were older students and self-proclaimed feminists who were desperately looking for some women role models. How they tracked me down and found other women academic and practicing architects from around the country I don't know. But they did and they invited us all to participate in a conference that they would put together if we would come. To my knowledge, it was the first conference of women architects ever held in the US. Of course I went and as a result I met three of the women with whom I would co-found the Women's School of Planning and Architecture. At the end of the day when all of the various conference panels and workshops were over (I remember I was on a panel called 'Role Conflicts Experienced by Women in Architecture) four of us went out for a drink at a bar and we started chatting and it was just so comfortable and exhilarating being in a room with women colleagues who understood what it felt like to be a minority. We talked about our experiences with sexist treatment in our respective workplaces. We just couldn't stop talking! I looked around and said 'What we really need is a School of our own, an environment in which we can freely explore how the teaching and practice of architecture can be transformed to embody the political values that we hold as a feminists. They all accused me of being absolutely crazy and I said 'Well yes, that I will admit to, but nevertheless will you participate if I make it happen?' and they said 'Yes,' and probably expected never to hear from me again.

Long story short – the three women I at met in St. Louis contacted a few more women they knew and together seven of us joined forces to co-found WSPA. The logistics of organizing were all the more difficult because of our geographical diversity. One co-founder was from San Francisco, one was from Vermont, two were from New York City, I was in Detroit, and two were living in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[1] The entire group never met face to face until the opening of the very first session in Biddeford Maine.[2] We organized via phone calls and long letters to each other, pre-E Mail era. I flew from city to city to meet with everyone in small groups. My father drafted a simple legal partnership agreement that we all signed. Each of us put up

[1] WSPA co-founders were Katrin Adam, Ellen Perry Berkeley, Noel Phyllis Birkby, Bobbie Sue Hood, Marie I. Kennedy, Joan Forrester Sprague and Leslie Kanes Weisman.

[2] This first session took place in 1975 at St Joseph's College in Biddeford, Maine. Further WSPA sessions were held at Stephenson College at University of California in Santa Cruz, (1976); Roger Williams College in Bristol, Rhode Island (1978); Regis College in Denver, Colorado (1979); and in Washington, DC (1981)

some seed money in accordance with her financial means to handle the publications and advertising, the insurance and rental fees and other costs. WSPA's co-founders held different views about many things, and none of us would have agreed upon a specific definition of feminism. But one thing was clear to all of us; WSPA would not duplicate what was available in a traditional academic setting. I think we each understood -at least I certainly did – that form, content, and context have to have a kind of consistency. You can teach feminist subjects in a traditional university setting where you still have to do grading and adhere to a regular semester schedule. But you can't transform the behaviour and identity of those who are being educated without the personal transformation that can only come from placing academic knowledge within the powerful framework of personally meaningful experience. At least that was my basic premise.

C+K: How did you structure this school and how did you teach in order too achieve this transformation of behaviour?

W: We decided that we needed an environment in which we could be completely free to explore ways of teaching and learning together, without the traditional distance and distinction between 'teacher' and 'student.' We drew upon the experiences and expertise of every 'participant.' In fact the 'faculty' were also participants. We limited enrolment to about fifty so that everyone would get to know everyone else during our two week residential summer programs. We scheduled classes and events so that we didn't form cliques. Participants all enrolled in one of six possible primary or 'core courses,' each of which was team-taught by two co-founders. Every one of the six core course we offered was scheduled to overlap at least once with each of the other core courses in a joint session. And each core course organized an 'all school session' in the evening. That way everyone participated in learning some aspect of the entire curriculum, including the co-founders who we referred to as coordinators. We did a lot of creative things to foster self-direction and personal empowerment, and to avoid the authoritarian teacher-driven learning experience. For instance, we put up a 10 foot long wall calendar for scheduling courses and events. The calendar contained a very large grid noting each day with 24 hour time slots. Core courses were fixed. But everyone was free to go up to the calendar and enter changes and additions anywhere in that grid. For example, if the weather was especially nice, a class might change locations and meet at the beach and just note it on the calendar. If someone wanted to have a discussion on a particular topic at eleven o'clock at night in the dorm lounge, they just entered that information into the calendar without having to ask the 'person in charge.' Whoever wanted to go just showed up. Everyone checked the calendar all the time.

C+K: But what was the actual content of these courses? Did you throw the curriculum of traditional architecture schools completely overboard or did you translate course content from a traditional architectural education into these new frameworks of operation?

W: We offered courses based on the issues or subjects that each of the co-founders, and the other coordinators/'faculty' who joined us after our first summer session, wanted to explore. In that sense our curriculum was very 'self-serving.' It was designed to benefit the co-founders/coordinators as much as the other

participants. That's why we were able to say 'We don't need to be paid or make money on the school because the pay-off is going to be in professional and personal growth.' Our goal was to break even financially so that our out-of-pocket administrative and on-campus residency expenses were reimbursed, which we were able to do for each of the sessions that were held.
For example, co-founder Ellen Perry Berkeley, who was an architectural journalist writing for several well-known professional magazines, investigated and taught architectural criticism and writing to critique high style buildings from the user's perspective, well before the now familiar post-occupancy evaluations were being conducted or discussed. I co-taught a course with Phyllis Birkby called 'Women and the Built Environment,' in which we asked the participants to draw their ideal fantasy environments, after going through a guided meditation exercise that we had scripted. Phyllis was an artist as well as an architect and I had some training in art therapy. After the drawings were done, each participant verbally explained their images and the group responded, pointing out comparisons with their own and other drawings. Through this subjective analytical process, we began to learn about the environmental factors that made women feel safe and comfortable or threatened and fearful. So in a way we were involved in environmental psychology before the field was named and established.

C+K: So the WSPA was a complementary institution or would you rather say that it wasn't an institution at all.

W: It depends on how you define institution. We never wanted to become a full-time degree granting program. Permanence was never a goal either. WSPA was more like an 'intellectual' summer camp. Each session took placed in rented facilities on a different college campus that was chosen very carefully with several criteria in mind. We varied the geographic locations to encourage enrolment from all parts of the US and Canada and to balance the travel costs for participants and coordinators. We picked places that had really beautiful natural landscapes that were tranquil, rich in historic and vernacular architecture, and near local communities with women's organizations and neighbourhood groups that we could involve in our curriculum. For instance when we were on the west coast in California, we studied architectural projects that used alternative energy like solar heating, geo-thermal, even aqua-culture. We also deliberately chose campuses that had very bland architecture because we wanted to be able to transform the neutrality of our surroundings into a space of our own by covering the walls with the photos, writings and drawings we developed during the session. WSPA sessions were designed for both recreation and the 're-creation' of everyone who participated - personally, professionally and spiritually.

C+K: How crucial was it then in that respect that the WSPA was in fact a women's only summer camp, that it was not only the content that came exclusively from women, but that the participants within it or the students were also exclusively women?

W: It was absolutely at the epicentre of the entire creation of the School. During the seventies there was a very different dynamic among women when men were present. That's still true today to a certain extent, though less dramatically so. WSPA offered

the same sort of experience as exclusively women's colleges; an environment in which women could be completely themselves without gender roles playing a part. In these settings women are not competing with men and are not expected to suppress their abilities or thoughts. We wanted WSPA to provide a safe and supportive space in which women were not the minority; where they could discover what they had to say to each other and how to take what they learned and bring it back into their own lives and work. So WSPA offered a welcomed respite. It was temporary separatism directed toward enhancing personal empowerment and professional confidence in the 'real world' we all returned to after each session.

C+K: **How much was this an experiment of its time? Do you feel that it still would have relevance today? Could the Women's School of Planning and Architecture still exist today? Is there still a need for it? And if so, how would it differ today?**

W: There is no question that WSPA resulted from the times in which it existed. It was never really envisioned as a permanent school. In fact we co-founders planned WSPA so that the administration and teaching of summer sessions would be taken over by other women participants so that we would not have to remain the core leadership group indefinitely. And this did happen to some extent. But the fact is that as others came in and replaced us, the school sessions became more and more conventional. But maybe more importantly, after seven years of experiencing what WSPA had to offer, many of us got what we needed from WSPA, -- an enhanced confidence and sense of purpose that enabled us to create personally and professionally relevant and meaningful work for ourselves in the greater world at large. A lot of innovative and exciting spin-offs resulted from WSPA -- from the creation of a women's development corporation and all women's architectural practices, to scholarly work that included research and new courses on women and environments that were taught in traditional university programs, and a number of pioneering books like my own first book *Discrimination by Design*.[3] So when WSPA finally began to peter out, I thought that was exactly what we had always intended for it to do. When it wasn't relevant to those who were prepared to put in the effort it took to run it, at that point, then it wouldn't be. Although the WSPA experience would still have been very valuable and relevant for women in architecture and planning during the 1980's, the co-founders needed to move on and no on else was available to fill the void.[4]

I moved on, with my sister WSPA co-founder Katrin Adam, to create another 'women's school' in the 1980's, *Sheltering Ourselves: A Women's Learning Exchange*. *SOWLE* was a grassroots, Cincinnati, Ohio-based international educational forum on housing and economic development for low-income women and their families. SOWLE's 'learning exchanges' were designed in a variety of accessible formats that included conferences, colloquia, classes in home maintenance and repair, housing and neighbourhood tours, and a computer-based network of women and women's organizations involved in housing, economic development and community organizing throughout North America. Our participants included women of all ages and racial and economic backgrounds --academics, architects, planners, developers, builders, neighbourhood organizers and residents of public housing. SOWLE is now

3 Leslie Kanes Weisman, *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

4 The archives of the Women's School of Planning and Architecture are housed in the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History Manuscripts at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

inactive but lasted well into the late 1990's,

As for today? Yes I think that what WSPA offered would still be relevant and valuable to women, but the need is certainly not as widespread or as urgent as it was almost 40 years ago! Perceptions and expectations have changed. Although the number of woman in architecture schools and practices still varies greatly, it's no longer surprising to find women in these roles and today both young women and men expect each other to have careers and to be wage earners. But I think the most interesting difference is that opportunities for socially responsible architectural education and practice are readily available in many traditional degree granting programs and in innovative educational initiatives like the Global Studio, founded by WSPA alumna Professor Anna Rubbo of the University of Sydney in Australia. Today we live in a global society in which international students in our schools and international collaboration and team work in practice is becoming the norm. And with it, the kind of respect and valuing of human diversity both in the profession and among our 'clients' that WSPA fostered is also increasing. I think that today the notion of multi-cultural, 'human-centered' architectural education and practice is more compelling than a gender-based approach.

C+K: How did you personally operate at that time? Were you still part of an architecture school or in academia or did you form a practice somewhere? How did you run this kind of operation?

W: WSPA was co-founded in 1974 and our first session was held in 1975, the year I moved from Detroit to New York City to become an Associate Professor and founding faculty member at a new School of Architecture at Newark College of Engineering, which then became known as the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Starting up a new accredited degree program as a full-time academic was almost as exciting and challenging as creating and running WSPA. Both were labours of love but my NJIT salary paid the bills! WSPA wasn't meant to be a full-time preoccupation, although it certainly became that for me and a number of other co-founders. Like many activist educators and practitioners, we had two full-time jobs I fell into teaching quite by accident as a young, married woman right out of school, and discovered that I absolutely loved it. And so I never pursued practicing architecture, other than through pro-bono services that my students and I provided through my service-learning courses. I quickly found out that for me, finding ways to use design thinking and processes to foster the unique creative potential in each of my students was as important, or perhaps even more important, than teaching 'architecture.' Educational theory in general and the development of feminist pedagogy specifically became the focus of my teaching and scholarly work as an architectural educator. Over the years I worked very hard at developing methods and opportunities for my students to discover for themselves their own ways of learning, thinking, designing, and contributing as future architects. In essence, I became an educator who used architecture as a vehicle for social justice and for community activism.

C+K: I think many of us, particularly within the Agency group, could completely subscribe to that. I'm just curious that you just said you never practised architecture. I think

[5] Leslie Kanes Weisman 'Diversity by Design: Feminist Reflections on the Future of Architectural Education and Practice' in *The Sex of Architecture*, Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996) pp.273-286.

quite a number of us would actually argue that this is our practice of architecture and that we are practising architecture. Obviously it is not building buildings or designing them, but we nevertheless see what we do as an architectural practice. Could you subscribe to this view or does practising architecture mean building buildings?

W: Of course I share this view! I spent decades trying to expose students to the diverse ways they could use their architectural educations when most educators were focused exclusively on teaching tectonics – the formal art of designing and constructing buildings. I wanted students to understand that serving society and being involved in design practice are not mutually exclusive. Of course being a good designer was considered the highest form of accomplishment in architecture school. Socially meaningful work that did not always require or result in the production of a work of architecture was seen as second-rate I had an enormously difficult time all those years ago, convincing the university and my own colleagues that my sort of teaching was a legitimate form of scholarship and practice. Some of them scoffed at my work as marginal at best and irrelevant at worst; but there were some who praised it as the most important thing that architects and educators could be doing. Few academic architects were writing about the social art of architecture. Today things are quite different. Service learning is generally recognized and respected as a valuable part of an architectural education; and there is a significant body of published literature on the subject. In many architectural schools and programs around the world, including University of Sheffield, it is formalised within the curriculum and recognised within the promotion and tenure process.

C+K: You called yourself an educator first, but you also said earlier that you came from an activist background, and maybe one is never just one or the other. I wondered whether you could give us some kind of clues as to what your understanding is of an activist within architecture or within architectural education. What is your understanding of activism in relation to architecture and its praxis?

W: For me it's almost impossible to separate activism from education because I've spent so many years synthesising them in my work, be it at WSPA or SOWLE or within traditional academe. There are those who would still argue, if they were being honest, that the role of the architect is to produce beautiful formal works of high style architecture and that the client is a means to that end. For these architects and educators, the impact of buildings and spaces on people is not the driving motivation for their work. The activist educator/practitioner finds as much or even greater meaning in using her or his skills to enhance the quality of human life, especially for those who have the least, even if that means a very modest or even no formal architectural solution. But that choice is certainly easier for salaried faculty to make than it is for practitioners who have to make a living through commissions and can 'afford' just so many pro bono projects. I have always viewed architecture as a socially embedded discipline and practice, but I don't see why that needs to be at odds with a love of the formal art of architecture. Perhaps there is a parallel between how I define feminism and how I view activist education and practice. My feminist and activist consciousness may have begun with

my involvement in social change movements, but over the years that consciousness has been transformed into a way of being and behaving in the world; into a set of ethics and values that permeate everything I do, every interaction I have with every person, whether it's a student or a colleague or someone who's bagging groceries in the grocery store. Activism is about attitude made manifest through actions and behaviour. I couldn't actually imagine stepping over a homeless person sleeping on a city street as though they were not there. I couldn't imagine walking on a beach without carrying a bag to put trash in. It just wouldn't occur to me not to stoop down and pick up a piece of litter. One 'wears' a feminist/activist perspective almost like a pair of glasses, like corrective lenses through which one sees and understands the world, and how physical space, social space and built space reflect and rebound upon each other.

C+K: **One would imagine that these corrective lenses led you also to your considerations about Universal Design, which is the second larger topic that we would like to discuss here. You previously mentioned social injustice and inequalities and Universal Design certainly is one form of addressing this. Could we start with summarising the most crucial aspects of universal design?**

W: Sure. I became active in the disability rights movement when I learned that my university campus, like many others in the US, was not compliant with Section 504.[6] As was the case with African Americans and women, demands for civil rights by people with disabilities resulted in a number of laws directed toward the elimination of discriminatory barriers to equal access in the US, Canada, the UK, and elsewhere. The connection between my work in architectural education, the design of buildings and public spaces, and creating social justice for people with disabilities was obvious and immediate.

The disability rights movement evolved into the universal design movement when it became clear that passing and enforcing laws did not produce good design that gracefully integrated people with disabilities into the public realm. It only created compliance with the letter of the law, not the spirit of the law. For example, In 1990, the Americans with Disability Act was passed in the US. Compliance with the resultant building codes produced ugly add-ons like ramps that were stigmatizing and segregating. Universal design goes beyond disability. It strives to create products and places designed to support human diversity by affording equal comfort, access and functionality for people with different levels of abilities to the greatest extent possible.– from tall people to short people, fat people to thin people, people with, cultural differences and different language skills and literacy levels. When universal design criteria are properly applied, they are invisible. For example, a zero threshold entrance to a building that's achieved by using a landscape plan with a slight change in grade instead of entering a building using two systems - a ramp and set of stairs - provides the same entrance for everyone. No one would think it was designed for wheelchair access. Universal design seeks to eliminate segregating people by creating design solutions that can be used by many. Universal designers in all fields see design as a means of achieving and supporting human equity, which of course appeals to me as the penultimate synthesis of my work as an activist architectural educator.

[6] Section 504 of the US Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 is a civil rights law with the purpose to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability in buildings and programs or events that are financially supported by the Federal government.

C+K: Would you say that this is coming from your feminist background, that there is a very strong feminist tradition behind this way of approaching design?

W: Yes, I think there's a definite relationship. Many would define feminism as equality for women. And they would not be wrong. But I have always believed that in a patriarchal system dominated by affluent white males, no one group has a monopoly on being the victim of discrimination! I don't think feminism is about women getting an equal piece of a poisonous pie. I want another recipe. My definition of feminism, which is shared by others, has always been concerned with all forms of oppression – be it based on gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, or disability. I prefer the concept of equity to the concept of equality, which suggests sameness. We don't all need the same things, and our needs change throughout our lives. Equity means that people have what they need when they need it. So yes, universal design is certainly linked to feminism in so far as both incorporate an inclusive approach to achieving human dignity and human equity.

C+K: How much has been achieved through Universal Design up until today? We obviously still encounter a lot of newly built buildings where Universal Design is certainly not put in place. But do you feel that there have already been a few steps made in the right direction?

W: Yes I certainly do. Today universally designed graphics and products are being widely used. For example, it's now common place to find informational and directional signage in public buildings and places that are universally understood, regardless of literacy level, cognitive ability, or culture. Multi-lingual and multi-sensory ATM machines are another example. In people's homes it's common today to find electrical rocker switches and single lever door handles and kitchen and bathroom faucets that work equally well for those who are left or right handed, and those with small, large, or arthritic hands and poor grip. Each year there are a growing number of international and local conferences in countries around the world, dedicated to creating universally designed communities and buildings. New books are coming out all the time on universally designed housing in languages from Japanese and Swedish to English and Spanish. The Centre for Human Centred Design in Boston, formerly known as Adaptive Environments, hosts a terrific website with a growing international collection of UD case studies of buildings and public spaces that document best practices for reference by designers, educators, students and others.[7] But even though one could point to a number of excellent buildings, parks and playgrounds that are universally designed, generally speaking, incorporating universal design principles into architectural practice is still mostly the result of the values and consciousness of the individual architect. Sometimes clients still wrongly associate UD with prosthetic devices like ramps, which are designed to serve people with disabilities, which they assume to be only a small percentage of the population. Sometimes they believe that universal design will cost more. Good design doesn't always cost more. But cost, in my mind, should not be measured solely In terms of the value of the dollar. It should also consider the value it brings to human well-being. I am very encouraged by the ever growing inclusion of universal design concepts and principles in the curricula in

7 See Universal Design Case Studies, http://www.universaldesigncasestudies.org/ [accessed 2009].

schools of architecture and landscape architecture. Students who are exposed to UD and encouraged to apply it in their studio projects, will do the same thing when they become practitioners. So there have certainly been strides in the academy that will increasingly show up in the built environment.[8]

There is another aspect of universal design that I think holds great promise. UD education and practice, with its equal emphasis on human comfort and health, and formal aesthetics, has the potential to elevate the value and importance of good design in the public consciousness. Why shouldn't UD principles be used as a tool to create, rather than respond to building codes and standards, which typically have little or nothing to do with good design outcomes?

I can give you an example of what can happen when innovative design becomes the generator of legislation that creates building codes. In the late 1970's I decided to co-teach a 5th year architectural design studio at NJIT with architect Susanna Torre. We chose to work with real clients - a group of midwives living near Eugene, Oregon on the west coast of the US. These women were trying to establish a free-standing natural childbirth centre there. At the time, the natural childbirth movement had just begun to surface as women sought more control over their own bodies and greater choices in childbearing and childbirth. Then there were only two options – home birth or hospital birth with anaesthesia and surgery. There were no natural childbirth centres or birthing suites in hospitals. With our expert 'clients', our design studio developed a new building type that included pre and post-natal care, educational spaces, and a consumer-controlled, home-like setting in which to give birth naturally. Our students came up with several site-specific prototypes and created a large travelling exhibition to educate the public. One of those students was Jan Bishop, a woman who had returned to school to study architecture after the birth of her son, who was severely disabled as a result of birth trauma from a forceps delivery in a hospital. This studio experience clearly had a profound personal and professional impact on Jan. After graduation at the end of the semester, she went on to get a degree in health care and to work for state government as a health care advocate where she lobbied for and wrote the enabling legislation and building codes that would legally establish free standing birth centres and hospital birthing suites in New Jersey, New York, and other US states. Today Jan is one of the most respected practitioners of health care architecture in North America and beyond.

C+K: A great example how education and activism can be combined. But what made you then go into politics?

W: Well, I never really thought that I wasn't in politics! [*laughter*.]

C+K: But could we call you a politician now?

W: Yes, I suppose so.

C+K: So how did you get from being an activist in education to being a politician? Or is that still all part of the same praxis?

W: Well I'm still an activist and I'm still educating others, though it's taking on a different form for now. One of the things I always

[8] The Universal Design Education Online website, udeducation.org, contains a variety of outstanding courses, projects and teaching materials for educators and students to use and/or adapt to their own curriculum, including a term project titled 'Universal Design: Beyond the ADA' by Leslie Kanes Weisman, and a four part teaching unit with slides and lecture notes titled 'Tools for Introducing Universal Design' by Elaine Ostroff and Leslie Kanes Weisman)

encouraged my students to consider was becoming involved in government so that they could influence policies and practices that relate to the built and planned environment. Around 2002 I started to think seriously about practicing what I had been preaching! I had taught for almost 35 years, more than 27 of them at NJIT, where I had helped to shape the School of Architecture from it's earliest beginnings into a highly respected degree granting institution offering undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees. I had achieved full professorship, served as Associate Dean, recruited and mentored students, supervised faculty, written curricula, and created many new courses of my own over those years. I am proud of all of that; but I realized that if I was going to stay challenged and fresh I would have to re-create myself within that academic setting yet another time. I decided that maybe I should seriously consider early retirement so that I could put my energies into working on the issues facing the community where I had spent summers and weekends since 1976.

Southold Town lies at the east end of Long Island, about 100 miles from the Greenwich Village apartment in New York City that I lived in during the academic year. The North Fork, as it is also called, is still quite rural with lots of farmland, wineries, open space, and a string of small hamlets dating back to the 1640's. Everywhere you look there are beautiful creeks, wetlands, and bays. But like most beautiful places, Southold is trying to stave off over development and preserve and protect its natural and historic resources. The dunes along Long Island Sound are eroding; pollution is threatening the purity of our fragile local aquifer. There is a serious shortage of affordable, workforce housing and jobs, which are mostly to be found in tourism, fishing and farming. The population was around 21,000 when the 2000 census was taken, but the numbers always swell in the summer months causing increased traffic and noise. It's a place worth fighting to save and a place where planning and architectural skills will make all the difference in succeeding.

So in 2002 I submitted my resume to the Town Council, our governing legislative body. The Council appointed me the Chairperson of the Southold Hamlet Stakeholders Committee, a community-based planning group, and as an affordable housing advisory commissioner. Both appointments are without compensation. But I had my retirement benefits and some savings to draw on that made pro-bono service financially possible. I quickly discovered that in a relatively small town like Southold you can have a big impact! Leaving academe was a very hard decision to make, but in 2004 I officially retired from NJIT with Professor Emerita status. Since then I've accepted a few invitations for conference keynote addresses and short term teaching appointments at universities where my work in service learning, feminism and universal design is of particular interest. My work in government has expanded. In 2005 the Southold Town Council appointed me to a paid position as a member of the Zoning Board of Appeals. This year I was promoted from Vice-Chairperson to Chairperson and Department Head of the ZBA. The salary is very modest but the responsibilities are substantial, and I do find the work interesting and worthwhile. I spend a good deal of my time writing legal determinations and code revisions, reviewing surveys, site plans, and architectural drawings, making site inspections, and reading land use case law. My father, who died many years ago, would be very happy about this since he

always wanted me to become a lawyer and join his law practice.

C+K: **One could say politics are always about negotiating, about give and take, about the prioritising of agendas. Is there any part of your work, your beliefs, your ideals that were easier to convey and practice as an educator and activist outside these kinds of formalised politics? How much do you have to compromise now being in these more institutional, political settings?**

W: Yes to the first question. As an educator/activist who was not part of the political system I was able to be an outspoken and uncensored advocate with an idealistic and principled agenda, both inside and outside of the classroom. In school you can deal with theoretical concerns that get 'messy' when they are confronted by pragmatic 'real world' issues. Teaching students how to balance ideology and applied practice was a central goal in my service learning courses. As an appointed public official who chairs the Zoning Board of Appeals, my role in government is a bit different than the legislative role you have just accurately described played by elected officials. The ZBA is a quasi-judicial body that can grant relief to property owners, where justified, from the Town's zoning laws and codes. We don't write laws; we interpret them based on a state mandated balancing test consisting of six state statues or criteria. There is some negotiating involved in discussing the amount of relief the Board is willing to grant, which must be the smallest possible deviation from the code. I have been asked countless times by the Democratic Party and many of my neighbours and colleagues to run for election to the Town Council and/or the position of Town Supervisor, the person who chairs the Council. That's sort of like being the Mayor of a village or city. It's the Council members and Supervisor who decide where our taxes go, which projects get funded, and which laws get changed and passed. They decide if and when a comprehensive master plan for Southold Town is adopted and most importantly, implemented through changes in zoning, building codes and other laws. I'm not sure I'm prepared to campaign for either of those positions at this time. With my very progressive values, not being born here - you are still an 'outsider' even if you have been living here for 35 years - and a poorly organized local Democratic Party with insufficient infrastructure in place, the odds of winning against the local, well-funded Republican and Conservative Party majorities are small. But I'm not ruling it out. Perhaps my next move will be to move to the Planning Board. I will find the next step when the next step presents itself. I'm not going to be doing zoning and planning for the rest of my life, that's for sure! When I was deeply involved in the Women's Movement I learned how to live with disappointment, how to be thick-skinned, and how to live with irreconcilable conflicts. These abilities have been invaluable to me in the political arena. I do believe it's possible to find satisfying compromise in life. I mean, I still listen to opera even though many of them are pretty sexist. But the music is glorious, even if the message isn't!

C+K: **So what is your favourite operatic libretto?**

W: One of them is Mozart's *The Magic Flute* because it's so gender bending and humorous. You have to see the humour in life or you're just going to be a miserable person. Everything is very, very serious when you're younger. But humour is important, even critical, if you're going to be a successful activist for a very

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long time. Without it, you can become totally burned out and bitter. I saw that happen to a number of brilliant and dedicated feminists who were active in the 1960' and 70's I feel lucky to have always had a strong, practical sense of self-preservation that served as a healthy balance to my penchant for risk-taking in the cause of social justice. Somehow I was able to keep one foot in the centre mainstream where I could provide for myself, and simultaneously, the other in an experimental, creative and marginal place. Each nurtured and informed the other. What I learned from the margins I brought in to my teaching and scholarship in a traditional university setting where I was able to have a real and lasting impact. When I think about the thousands of students I've had contact with, if even a small percentage of them were in some way encouraged to use their talents and their educations to benefit this world by ensuring that people have a decent quality of life; if some have chosen to serve clients that typically can't afford to pay for good architectural design as well as those who can; then I feel I've made much more than a living as an activist architectural educator; I've made a meaningful life for myself from my academic career.

C+K: **That is a wonderful final sentence!**

W: And it's not over by the way! [*laughter*].

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