TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191
Field Notes: Lewis Nigel Clarke (compiled December 15, 2008)
Interviewee: LEWIS NIGEL ("NIGEL") CLARKE
Interviewer: Yona R. Owens
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This interview for the Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project was conducted at Lewis Clarke's studio. Nigel Clarke, Lewis' son, is a native of Raleigh, attended Ravenscroft School, graduated from North Carolina State University in 1980 with a degree in business and in 1988 from the School (now College) of Design with a master's in landscape architecture. He has worked for various firms over the past twenty years, and recently taught as an adjunct professor.

YO: This is an oral history interview with Nigel Clarke on Saturday, December 13, 2008 at Lewis Clarke Studio in Raleigh, North Carolina and I usually start off by asking where you're from, but I know that you are from Raleigh and the reason we're interviewing you today is because you're Lewis Clarke's son. So, what was it like growing up with Lewis Clarke as your father?

NC: Boy, that's an opening question. Can you be more specific?

YO: Well, what were some things that you remember from your childhood?

NC: My very earliest, well apparently the first word I ever said was motor.

YO: Motor?

NC: Yeah, and my first memories of my dad and my mother when I was probably three or four years old on Mordecai Drive and I do vaguely remember that house and the backyard and the neighbor. And I remember him teaching and he really was doing much of the office at that time although I think he had, he like had a spare room in the house. But my first memories of him as working out of his basement was at Mordecai Drive and you've probably heard that. And a bunch of students dug it out and, and poured a slab and in the end it was just a little place that they could have with some drafting tables and a dart board and not much else. I don't think there was even a bathroom downstairs. I guess they went upstairs when they needed to, but I don't remember that. But I do remember those guys coming in and out and then my connection with the office at that point was really severed until I was probably fourteen or fifteen when I was cleaning the place. At that time, he had the old place over on Hillsborough Street and in the summers I'd mow the lawn and generally muck about and make a mess. And whatever I made went into my college fund, which actually I'm not sure where that money went now that I think about it. But anyway, so I did that summers and so I know those guys, that period.

YO: What were the guys' names from that period?

NC: Well, I basically remember John and Henry Pope and John Hoppe, LaMarr Bunn, I'll never forget LaMarr you know—oh, I mean just so many people that I'd probably remember their faces better than their names. I know all the names just from hearing them all the time from dad [who] would come home and discuss the day. But that was my next contact with the office and that was until probably I got a driver's license. Then I started working other places in the summer.

YO: So, did you basically cut your teeth on the office though because it was in the house?

NC: Well, that's probably stretching it a bit. I was there and I was part of the action, but I don't know how much of a positive part of the action I was. I was just there and I do remember—I think I remember. And maybe just dad's recalled it and so that's my memory now. But I do kind of remember the stuff at Rothgeb and I remember very well the stuff that happened on Hillsborough Street, but no recollection before that. So, I don't know if I cut any teeth on it. I probably split a lip on something rolling around in my roller. But from when I was very young that's just kind of where you close the door and he didn't have to watch me too much, I just bounced around.

YO: So, did he spend a lot of time at the office?

NC: Pretty much, yeah.

YO: And he was teaching at the same time, right?

NC: For most of the time, yeah. At some point I think maybe it was '68—he could tell you—he made a break with the—and I don't think he did much more at the school after that.

YO: He designed a house that is on Darien Drive. What was it like living in that house?

NC: It was very big to me. It was very large. I was nine when we moved there and it had a large yard that we mowed. It was a train car design, so I do remember—

YO: What was that?

NC: —a train car design, everything like the Pullman car so you know all the sleepers were on one side and the common rooms were on the other, the furnace room, the bathrooms. And then a funny story that he may have not, not remember to tell you is my sister, Lisa, my youngest sister—she was a surprise in the planning and what was originally the master bedroom and three bedrooms became a master bedroom and four bedrooms. So the rooms were made smaller by I think three feet to accommodate everyone having a twelve foot wide. But it was very nice. We had sleeping lofts on the top and a sliding glass door and ample storage and I think he actually built a desk in mine, in my closet because I didn't need very much stuff. But that was what I remember. A lot of slate, a lot of glass, a lot of woods you know and of course when you're nine years old everything is huge. And so I just remember it being a very large house and being in

some rooms that people didn't use and so I could keep my weights in there or if I was messing around with music I could go close that door. So I remember there was ample room for everyone there.
YO: From an adult standpoint when you look at that design what would you call it? What period?

NC: I wouldn't give it a period or a classification. I think it draws a lot of the basic standard building standards of just the way people have always built. You know—what is it—Christopher –what's his, who's the guy that wrote *Pattern Language*? Christopher Alexander. Anyway the *Pattern Language* talking about things and a lot of things apply to that like rooms you can touch because there was a place where there was a retaining wall and you could actually stand on the retaining wall and touch the roof. You could actually climb on the roof and so it had a lot of the Christopher Alexander things—a place to hide. It just had a lot of the things built into the site that were kind of fun for kids. I don't know if that was by design or just by happenstance and some of the fun stuff was they just ran out of money. So, stuff being half finished was fun too and it was a great place to ride a bicycle. It was big enough I could ride my bicycle in the house is my recollection.

YO: Big house?

NC: Oh, yeah, and I never did break a window, which amazed me because they were huge windows and they were all the way down to the floor, probably 12 inches from the floor. And the fact that nobody fell through them because I can't tell you how many times people bounced off of them and balls hit them. But we never broke a window and I don't know why. And no one broke an arm falling off the back of the sidewalk. But I don't know if you ever, have you visited the home?

YO: Uh, huh.

NC: You know the back there, there's no railing across the back and if you just weren't paying attention and kept walking and didn't make the turn you, you walked off into a five foot drop.

YO: So, that happened?

NC: Well, no, but I went off it in my motorcycle a few times just to do it. But no, that was one of the surprises of the house, you know.

YO: Well, I didn't know that. That's an interesting aspect of the way the back of the house is designed.

NC: Well, no it just, the sidewalk basically was just cantilevered from the building foundation. In fact, we stored the lawn mowers underneath the corner there because it was a good—it was taller than I was, and there was a light there you could turn and you could, when you finished cutting grass, you could put all the stuff under there because it was a long walk to push it all the way to the tin shed way in the back. And so it was quicker just to put it under there. But there was a lot of lawn. I do remember a whole lot of lawn.

YO: Well, it sounds like it was a fun place to live.

NC: Well, you know when you're a kid it's all fun.

YO: Yeah, I guess so. What made you decide to attend the North Carolina State University School of Design?

NC: Well, it was basically a kind of a second career choice for me. I didn't want to be an engineer, which is what Lewis wanted me to be or, or an attorney which I just knew that I was going to be a failure at that. So in the end, basically I started working here [at the office] again, and worked for a few years and, and basically had the notion of going back. And I went and actually talked my way into school. I actually conned them into letting me come to grad school somehow and so I got in.

YO: You conned them? What does that mean?

NC: Well, I think it was Art Sullivan at the time. He said, well, I'm not going to make you take the GRE. You'll probably never pass it, and I probably wouldn't, you know. And so he said, if you'll go over to horticulture for a year, which is where I met you, I'll let you in. And I guess he figured I was going to scrub out because Will Hooker, who was my advisor, loaded me up with like a studio and a plant ID and he just figured, I guess they figured if I, if I cracked up the first year. Then they were trying to basically—either I made it or I didn't and I just somehow made it. And so they took me in. They kept their word, and they let me in, and I somehow graduated in 1988. But it was basically just a renewed interest in the business and the notion that I might actually get a part of the business and because when you see an opportunity sometimes you take it because it's an opportunity. And I had done enough landscape architecture through the years that I knew—I had a pretty good notion about what it was about.

YO: Who were some of your professors at the time?

NC: Oh, wow, well, I mentioned Will [Hooker] and you know some of them. Will, and Tracy Traer, I believe her name is now Traer still, and some of my first design school people were Debra Dalton and Dick Wilkerson, of course, who still comes around the school some. And John Reuer [Sr.] who's since passed. He was an architect. I really enjoyed his architectural history classes because it was pretty much if you had a question you just shouted it out and if you wanted to get a better grade, you just write a paper. It was a pretty free place, but I enjoyed that. And Bob Stipe, of course, who has since passed, and Rodney Swink is now kind of adopted that role as the preservationist kind of guy. But for the longest time that void was not filled because, of course, he had quit coming to the school several years ago. Let's see who else—

YO: What were some of the—oh, sorry.

NC: No, that's about it. Robin Moore who is still there now who is doing a fantastic job as a researcher, he's getting grants left and right and really getting the school involved in a lot of really neat things internationally.

YO: Do you remember some of the projects that you worked on in school?

NC: Most of the projects were centered around the Centennial Campus property because we had just gotten it and so everybody had different notions about what they wanted to do. I think they had had two or three—I think the math department and some other people had just committed to building a building, but they hadn't done anything. So we were the first studio as far as I know, the introductory studio, to do a plan for the Dix property. At the time, we jumped in the back of a guy's pickup truck and just drove all over the place. There wasn't anything built and I knew the roads because I had been all through them on my motorcycle. I knew the area very well. But that was the most—in my first year or first half of the school experience was working on that or something that had something to do with that.

YO: So you had just the land with no buildings on it at all?

NC: Yeah, we were fortunate because it was a blank slate at the time and my argument was in fact, I took a kind of a, I guess counterview of that. I said, we need to do—let's go ahead and fill in the campus we've got here first before we start building infrastructure. And my argument was until we create a way that it's [a] pedestrian friendly way to get back and forth, that essentially we had two campuses. And I think that's what's developed now is because without having a bus, a car or bicycle, it's still very difficult to get across. So my argument was [that] we should infill the rest of the campus first, but that didn't happen obviously. But I think they're still grappling with how to get people there. Of course, I like the Wolf Line, I use it myself and it's open to the public. So if I'm just down there I'll take a ride.

YO: Well, you mentioned that you worked in the office from time to time, what was some of the projects that were going on when you were working here?

NC: Oh, I was here. I was around for the Zoo for some reason.

YO: You mean the North Carolina State Zoo?

NC: Yeah the Zoo. I remember a story about that with LaMarr Bunn. Apparently, LaMarr was going up there and they had a gorilla named Ramar who has since passed too. He just died a couple of years ago actually and apparently LaMarr and Ramar hated each other. And so the minute they saw—and of course you know LaMarr likes the Cadillacs and he had this beautiful red Cadillac Coupe Deville, beautiful, beautiful. I think it was a ragtop and he kept nice cars and kept them up. And whenever the gorilla saw his car coming in, and that was back when it was just a trailer, because they got him, I mean apparently as soon as they became a Zoo other zoo's started dumping animals on them. And so Ramar was one of those. But anyway I remember I was in the office and there was a call from I think it was Mr. Hoffman or someone up in Asheboro telling LaMarr not to come because Ramar had gotten out.

YO: Oh, no.

NC: And Ramar knew that car and so I think the concern was that he, you know that LaMarr of course wouldn't get out of the car, but Ramar [would] probably just wreck the car.

YO: Oh, my gosh.

NC: And so I can't—was it Craig Hoffman? I can't remember his name. But that was just a funny story with that. But I remember that's when I was there, I guess, and that was probably the early seventies and then I came back and I worked as a bookkeeper here from '80, '81 to '84, '85 and then I still came in from time to time just to use the facilities when I was in school. But at that point, I got out of school and there really wasn't anything for me here. At the time there wasn't a whole lot of work anywhere. And that was pretty much my last connection with the office from that point on.

YO: Well, while you were in the seventies and the Zoo was going on what, do you remember some other projects that were going on?

NC: Not really, there was some stuff at the country club in Southern Pines and Pinehurst and I think we were doing some stuff for George Watts Hill, maybe his place there on you know his place at the beach. There were a few things. The perennial staple was of course the stuff at Ford's Colony and then of course Elon, the Town of Elon and Elon University.

YO: What was Ford's Colony?

NC: Well, parts of it were, I think, a gated community but it was basically just a mixed use development and these folks used to do a really good job of it and they were involved from the construction end up. So you know all the construction was good, the lighting was laid out well, the golf courses were good, and so there were successful kinds of upper, not total upper income but upper, middle income people. Of course now you pay the Earth to get one of their properties. But I think they're still—Wayne just got an award from Elon University.

YO: You mean Wayne McBride?

NC: Yeah, for the master plan which I think was done here.

YO: I think David Swanson mentioned he had worked on that as well.

NC: Yeah, he did. He did. And my last memories were of Dave Swanson and a lady named Maureen and I can't remember her last—Maureen Ritchie. I don't know her married name now and they were kind of the last—I'm not sure where Lewis was at the time, but Wayne was in and out and Tim was kind of in, but those are kind of the—

YO: Tim Hess?

NC: —Tim Hess, but those are kind of the last three employees. And then after I left, my sister, Lisa, took over keeping books. And I don't know what happened from that point on. At some point I think they just divvied it up and went on their ways.

YO: When you look back across the spectrum of all the jobs that the office did what one or two projects stands out in the history of the office?

NC: Well, that's a difficult question really because from my standpoint they were all the same. They all had to have prints run or things fixed. I think they never let me get on the drawing board, which is probably the safest thing. So I basically knew the projects from a building point of view. I knew what had been accomplished and what we were going for and I knew what was done because at that time they used to hand write out their time and I would copy it. And every client got a copy of their time in the handwritten—everything handwritten out because at the time Wayne or Lewis refused to use a computer. I think after that they got something that Lisa came in with an Apple or a Macintosh and that was the first computer that was in here in 1984/85. But yeah, I don't remember them from that aspect. I remember the ones that we had to go collect bills from and some of the developer characters that we dealt with.

YO: Well, who were some of the developer characters that you worked with?

NC: Oh, A.B. Hardy was one of them. He was an interesting guy. He was a developer, but he was always running from one end to the other. So, he'd come in early and sleep on the couch because he wouldn't get a hotel. So he'd drive up and he'd come up early and he'd sack on the couch somewhere and sleep until his meeting. And he just like most developers, just very tight with the money and he paid when he had to and I think he has since passed too, but he did some stuff down at the coast. I remember those people more than I do really the [projects]. I wasn't in on the design aspect of those jobs really. I remember Catawba College and I remember they did the sign. They did a full size mock up of the sign on draft paper and then unrolled it at the dedication and it was, Catawaba. They had misspelled it and no one knew. But Joe Lyle told me that one.

YO: Joe Lyle?

NC: Yeah, he was the fellow that—he came in. He was staying at the Y and when I found out he was staying at the Y, I let him come stay at my house because I had that old house off Hillsborough Street. And so he just saved him some money there for a couple of months and when he got enough he could—he'd get an apartment. And he worked for Dad for a long time. In fact, they still I think correspond. He's still around. He's married and got a son now.

YO: Well, changing directions just a little bit, what kind of boss was Lewis Clarke?

NC: I really couldn't tell you because basically I took my day to day instructions from Wayne. And of course I had overriding instructions from Lewis. For example, I remember one time we had a check we were holding and Wayne told me to go deposit it. And I didn't check with Lewis before I did it. And so when I came back there's was trouble because he didn't want to do the deposit and I remember that and he wanted to know why I deposited it. And I really didn't have a good answer because really either way I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

YO: Sure.

NC: So—but I remember that was kind of one thing and sometimes they'd have that kind of, they had kind of an antagonistic relationship I think particularly towards the end. I mean you'd have to ask them. They're both still around so you can ask them, but it was tough being in

between them sometimes. But I really worked basically for Wayne and I basically just kept the money going and kept the bills going out and kept the deposits in and kept the place full of toilet paper and you know kept the lights on and I mean that was my job.

YO: Well, can you tell me what made the associates' designs different from other landscape architects in hindsight?

NC: That's a difficult one too. I remember one time—I think it was probably just that the expectations were fairly high here. I remember one time one of the associates spent a lot of time drawing up several nice perspectives and Lewis came in and he tore them up just because they—and drew them himself. And so I think a lot of the associates—he didn't have to do that that often, but I think many of the associates knew they didn't particularly want him to come in and tear their stuff up and then just do it himself. So I think there was that but as far as was it better, I really don't have a good comparison because at the time what I knew about landscape architecture was basically from this office. So any way, I'd be comparing the hindsight and plus my experience as a landscape architect probably isn't typical anyway either because I ended up going more into the engineering field then. So, I mean my perspective is for better or worse landscape architecture probably is invalid.

YO: Has your experience with your father affected your own practice and teaching methods?

NC: I think to a certain degree. A couple of things that I remember him saying to me is do good work and you don't have to say anything because your work will speak for itself. If the work is good, you don't have to say anything. And so I always kind of try to use that as my motto. And it's served me well in the end of my profession and then as far as teaching I just do it from the hip. I don't know what I'm doing. I walk in there and I do it from the hip. I prepare stuff, but, as you well know being in academia yourself, you never know where things are going to go particularly in the College of Design because your job is to make and think about things and go places they haven't gone. Because, let's face it, when they get out in the world they're not going to get the chance to do that. But no, anyway you can do it I think because if you do too much of a lesson plan—if I'm teaching math, yeah, a lesson plan is a whole lot more useful, but I think sometimes you have to be willing to go where it's going to go and sometimes the kids will make a fool out of you and sometimes it's something good. But no, there's nothing special about what I do and I learned by watching the other people there and they've been very kind. Gene has been very kind and allowed me the opportunity to teach and—

YO: Gene?

NC: —Gene Bressler and the other, the other professors there. Of course with the budgets, adjuncts are fairly a staple at most universities now just because of cost, but my experience teaching there has been very good and very pleasant. Any feedback I've ever gotten was constructive and good and supporting and I could see where it could be different, but it really isn't. It seems to be basically [inaudible].

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

NC: There's, that there's not just one thing to know about Lewis Clarke [Laughs] because he has the ability to very quickly jump from one aspect to another with things. And sometimes it's difficult to follow the connections he does. So really there really isn't one thing that you can point to because obviously he's a sum of his parts, right? I mean, his experiences have been varied and he's now eighty two next birthday so the older he gets probably the more complicated he's going to get, right? So I just let him do his thing.

YO: And what is his thing these days?

NC: I don't know and I just let him do it. I don't ask.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Nigel Clarke?

NC: I'm doing the best I can.

YO: That's good, that's good. And so what is the one important thing to know about landscape architecture today?

NC: Well, I think it's a profession that's expanding and changing and mutating. I mean, I'm basically retired now and I practiced for twenty years. I graduated in '88 and I basically gave it up in 2008. So in twenty years I've seen the practice expand and grow to the point of amazing places where landscape architects I would have never envisioned them to be.

YO: For instance?

NC: Well, I mean, the thing about it is the largest hirer of landscape architects in this country is the park service. And in the old days, it was an engineers game in the park service because let's face it the park service was basically from the Natural Resources Act, which is basically to build roads so you could log the properties, right? And it all turned into parks, and so in the end it's just kind of funny. Landscape architects—they had landscape architects and looking at pictures of Mars trying to figure out, understand the wind forms and I don't know why but there were landscape architects on that team. Most of the municipalities now, they require a landscape plan sealed by a landscape architect for any commercial development. In the old days, it wasn't like that. I mean, you basically got your job through an engineer with an architect or if you were lucky like Lewis and a couple of the others here in town, you had enough reputation that people would come see you first. And then there just weren't the variety of jobs. You were either this, this or this. And now there's all kinds of things that landscape architects can take their degree and do. And some of it perhaps doesn't meet the definition of landscape architecture. But I'd argue that the definition is changing anyway because it's the bridging profession, right, between engineers, architects, planners. They're kind of the—landscape architects are kind of the gooey glue that kind of squeeze around and you know fill the gaps between all that. So I guess they're always going to be different as times and needs change.

YO: Well, that's all the questions I have for today. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

NC: No, not really. You know it's an interesting history that you're doing and it's going to be interesting to hear the collection of people because I'm sure that as I've said, he's had a variety of experiences. The picture painted of him is probably going to vary widely depending on who you talk to and, and their particular experience. And I'd be interested to see when you're done with the project just what the breadth of the experience was, right? But no, that's about it other than asking me questions.

YO: Ok, well, thank you very much.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi
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