TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191
Field Notes: Richard Burke Schnedl (compiled November 21, 2011)
Interviewee: RICHARD BURKE ("DICK") SCHNEDL
Interviewer: Yona R. Owens
Interview date: Monday, August 15, 2011
Location: Charlotte, North Carolina
Length: Approximately 52 minutes

This interview for the Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project was conducted in the Schnedl's living room. Dick Schnedl graduated from the North Carolina State University School (now College) of Design in 1952 with a degree in architecture. Over the course of his distinguished 42-year career, he worked at various times for the Boneys in Wilmington, with his brother Ed in Reidsville, with Hayes Howell in Southern Pines, and on his own at Bald Head Island. His early designs and later designs reflect his passion for modernist principles as influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright.

YO: My name is Yona Owens and I'm interviewing Richard B. Schnedl at his home in Charlotte, North Carolina on August fifteenth, 2011. To get us started tell me a little bit about where you're from and how you got interested in architecture.

RS: Well, I'm from Charlotte, North Carolina, and after the war [WWII] my brother and I both enrolled at State. He enrolled in chemical engineering and I enrolled in anthropology or something. So about the first six months we decided well, why don't we get into something that we could do together? So we decided on architecture [Laughs] for some reason. I guess it still interested us.

YO: Right. Now that was when architecture was still in the School of Engineering, right?

RS: At that time, yes. That was the department of architecture in the School of Engineering, before Kamphoefner came of course. So we did. [Laughs] I just can't remember really exactly what turned us to that.

YO: It just seemed like the right thing to do together, huh?

RS: At the time, yes.

YO: How did you decide on State in the first place? Was there something about it that attracted you to just whatever you were going to major in?

RS: Well, we knew it was engineering. I mean, we didn't want to get into law. That attracted both my brother and I, because we got out of the service about the same time, within a month of each other. So, we decided on State because it seemed to offer more of what we were looking for at the time.

YO: Now what year did you start?

RS: Started in ’46.

YO: And there was a circumstance that caused you not to graduate with your original class. Did you want to tell me about that?

RS: Well, they had given me credit for being in the service for the physical education, PE requirement, and they had done that for four years, which we went five years in a four-year period. We went all summer, fall, winter, spring, just constant, to graduate from a five-year course in four years. But my last report card, they had reduced my hours that they gave me for physical education from forty-eight hours of credit to thirty-six. So I couldn’t graduate in 1950. So I went to work and over a period of two years I took two correspondence courses to give me enough credits to where I graduated in 1952, but not with my classmates.

YO: Well, who were some of your classmates?

RS: Charles Boney, Herb McKim, Frank Ballard.

YO: Was A.C. Hall in your class?

RS: Pardon?

YO: A.C. Hall. Was he in your class?

RS: Hall?

YO: Uh huh, or Charlie Sappenfield.

RS: Sappenfield was, yes, Charlie.

YO: And your brother, of course. [Laughs]

RS: Oh yes, my brother. [Laughs]

YO: Who were some of the professors during this period?

RS: Oh me. [Laughs] I’ll refer to this.

YO: Okay, a list that we made of professors.
04:55

RS: I remember Willie Baumgarten, Jim Fitzgibbon, George Matsumoto, Ed Waugh, Matthew Nowicki was my senior year professor, of course there was Henry Kamphoefner. Let’s see. Catalano was there. I don’t remember if I—and Milton Small and Caminos.

YO: What was Willie Baumgarten like?

RS: I was just going to say, he was a German. And I remember my brother and I were both in his class at the same time and my brother was a little overweight, about the build I am now. [Laughs] Calling the roll, Willie would say, Schnedl Thick and Schnedl Thin. He'd call us "Thick" and "Thin." [Laughs]

YO: [Laughs]

RS: But that's all I remember. [Laughs]

YO: How about Nowicki [Pronounced no-wick-ee]—?

RS: Nowicki. [Pronounced no-vit-ski]

YO: My mouth didn't work on that one. What was he like as a teacher?

RS: He was great. My memory's not that good anymore, but he was just a very interesting person. I've got a stack of pictures back there of his works and everything. He was an excellent teacher, fifth year. Unfortunately, he was killed in a plane accident in Egypt. He had gone to—where was it—India, I guess. He was designing the capital city of Punjab [Chandigarh], something like that. He was on his way back from a trip over there and the plane crashed in Egypt.

YO: What was the students' reaction to that?

RS: Well, we all went back to State to the memorial for him, from all over, I mean his students living all over. We all went back to State for his memorial.

YO: It was a pretty sad time then, wasn't it?

RS: Yeah, very much so.

YO: Well, let me ask you this. In addition to the faculty there was a lot of visiting crits and I know one in particular caught your attention. Would you like to tell me about that one particular crit? The visiting crits? Frank Lloyd Wright?

RS: Oh my goodness, yes. [Laughs] He was invited to State and Kamphoefner got him to come to talk to the graduating class. We had a session over at Kamphoefner's house, and of course we were all sitting on the floor and he was sitting up in this chair and we all just agog. He gave a public talk in Reynolds Coliseum, I believe it was. I believe it was built then. So it was quite a to-do for us, and in fact for the people of Raleigh, to have such a famous person. I guess I told you before maybe the thing—[Laughs] I don't know why, but the thing I remember the most about his speech that he had given, the public speech, was he was talking about the masses and he said, take the "m" off of mass and put it on "the" and what do you have? [Laughs]

YO: [Laughs] A bit caustic remark, huh? [Laughs] That's good.

RS: [Laughs] Yeah. I guess because, you know, he didn't believe in a style and people went for a style of architecture and other things and I guess that's the reason he [Laughs] moved the "m" over.
10:10

YO: Yeah. While you were in school and you were influenced by Kamphoefner's theory and some of these other people, did you start designing modern type buildings while you were in school or were you still designing more traditional kinds of things?

RS: Never, never designed traditional.

YO: Even in school?

RS: No, no.

YO: Where did that inspiration come from?

RS: Well, I don't really remember exactly, but it's like I was saying, this style, you know, people just fell for that, and Frank Lloyd didn't believe there was any particular style. You were doing it individually and for the requirements of the owner and your interpretation of it. So each building was unique, it didn't have a style. So that freed you from being tied down to letting style dictate design where it should not. So you were free to express things the way that they should be, not to satisfy a style.

YO: Was that philosophy part of your training in school? In other words when you finished at State what theory and what direction were you headed in at that time?

RS: Well, you just design to satisfy owners' requirements. I don't know that—I can't give a real explanation except just our interpretation to satisfy the clients' needs through design.

YO: So whenever the clients would talk to you, you would hear what they were saying, and you would kind of think about it, and then draw a design that they liked.

RS: Right, yes.

YO: And it was in the modernist, definitely nontraditional style for that time.

RS: Yeah, not copying anybody, Mies van der Rohe or Saarinen or anybody. You do your interpretation. Later on, doing residential architecture, I would have the owners to write out a program so it really got them to thinking deeply into the way that they lived so that I could interpret it more fully. It was easier to satisfy their needs when they had thought about things and put it in writing.

YO: Right. Well, in addition to working a few months with Willie Baumgarten, after you graduated you went to work for Leslie Boney, Sr. in Wilmington.

RS: Yes.

YO: Tell me about that time.

RS: Well, that was interesting. I worked there for two to three years, I've forgotten what, but it was interesting. Leslie, Sr. was the father and Leslie, Jr. was the older son, so he really ran the office and Charlie and I did most—well, we did all the design work.

YO: That's Charlie Boney?
15:00

RS: Charlie Boney, mm hmm, who was the younger son. It was Leslie and Bill and Charlie and all of them were architects and worked twelve-hour days. [Laughs]

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

RS: We did work all over the East, really. I remember a church down at Wrightsville Beach that I did most of the design on it, the Little Church on the Boardwalk, I believe it was called. That was a very small project compared to other big college projects and all that we had, because they were noted for their school work.

YO: The Boneys were noted for their school work?

RS: Oh yes.

YO: We have the Leslie, Sr. and Jr. drawings in the archives in Special Collections. It starts in 1901 and goes to 1988. [Laughs]

RS: [Laughs] Yeah.

YO: So you were there—

RS: Where did I—I guess it was on the computer where I got that list.

YO: Right, right.

RS: Goodness sakes.

YO: That's something, isn't it? That's a long span, and still going strong. In July of 1953 you and your brother set up your practice, Schnedl & Schnedl, and the curious fact to me is that you set up your practice in Reidsville, North Carolina, which at the time had a population of about twelve thousand people and the center of commerce and trade was tobacco.

RS: [Laughs] Uh huh.

YO: So, it doesn't sound like the place where two up-and-coming modernist designers would land. What was the decision behind staying in Reidsville?

RS: Well, my brother had an office that he was running for an architect—I can't think of his name now—in Greensboro. So he was working for this architect.

YO: Was it Loewenstein?

RS: It could have been Loewenstein, yeah. So, he decided to go out on his own and so he called me to come up because he had gotten some school work. He had more than he could handle so he wanted me to come up and join him, so I did. I guess it was '53. So we did that for a little over ten—about eleven years we had our firm up there.

YO: Is this about when you met Lewis Clarke?

RS: Yes.

YO: And you started picking up some clients for the residences, and again we think why were they building in Reidsville? We've got some pretty remarkable examples of your work there. The first one that comes to mind is the Foil residence. Do you remember the Foil residence?

RS: Foil?

YO: Uh huh.

RS: Yes, vaguely. Like I say, my memory's not what it once was.

YO: This is a long time ago.

RS: Yes, I know, but—

YO: It was the one where you decided with Lewis Clarke that something needed to be done beside the carport because the view from the dining room was into the carport.

RS: Yeah, right, okay.

YO: And Les Laskey built a mural.

RS: Right. Lewis suggested doing moveable panels of all these different colors where you could change the look whenever you decided you'd just like to try something and you'd seen the other for so long. So he suggested a moveable panel mural out on the wall that faced the dining room. **20:08**

YO: Did you like what they came up with?

RS: Very much.

YO: I understand that Laskey painted that with auto paints so it could be cleaned and weatherproofed. Do you know if it's still in existence?

RS: [Laughs] No, I do not. I sure do not.

YO: Okay. That was in '52 or '53 so that was a pretty early design. In '57 you did the T.E. Forbes doctor's office in Reidsville and the interesting thing about that is you used skylights instead of windows in the exam rooms and the design was nominated for a NCAIA honor award. What was happening with skylights at that time? This is a new application.

RS: Well, they had come up with a very good skylight. It was not complicated, I mean you buy it all in one piece and you build a curb to set it on, so it was very easy to penetrate the roof and get natural light into all the rooms that you wanted. And of course you want privacy in an examining room so this did both, really. It gave you privacy and plus you got—

YO: Some daylight in there.

RS: —natural light.

YO: It was pretty inventive at the time to use that. Was it because they had changed to a plastic type material for the skylights?

RS: Yes, I guess it was. They had the dome skylight of plastic and a very simple framework to connect to a curb that penetrates the roof and it was very easy to install because they had done such a good job of designing the skylights.

YO: So, it's a situation of materials catching up with the ideas of the architects at that time, right, because I get the feeling that you guys pushed the envelope on what different materials could do, to get your designs like they are. You start seeing this plastic introduction [and] it starts getting a little interesting there. Do you remember anything about the Herbert Mace house in Reidsville?

RS: Herbert Mace, yes. I believe he was a jeweler. We designed that house and Lewis Clarke was our landscape architect. [Laughs] I guess that's one of the things that I remember. There are maybe two things I remember from Lewis Clarke. There should have been a million. In locating an outdoor fireplace where you go out and cook you know, the logic was so marvelous that you want it to be a destination. You don't want to fall out of the house right into a fireplace outdoors. You want to change the environment completely so you want to separate from the house. So it was to be a destination, not just something to happen to fall out of the house into.

YO: [Laughs] Right.

RS: But you had to prepare to go down that far. Another thing on that house—well, I don't know whether it was the Mace house or some other house—but his theory was that the closer you got to the house, the more manicured the landscaping became, which just makes all kind of sense,

you know. So, the logic of these two things was just marvelous. That's all my mind will let me remember. [Laughs]
25:15

YO: Okay. Well, let's see. Let's try another one. We're doing pretty good here. The Henry Pace house in Leaksville, North Carolina, probably about 1956 or '57. Do you remember anything about the Pace house?

RS: Well, I know that I've got the drawings that I'm giving to Todd [Kosmerick, University Archivist]. It's got Lewis Clarke's drawing with it. [Laughs]

YO: No kidding? How nice. [Laughs]

RS: So, I can't remember the floor plan or the setting right now, but I do know that I've got the drawings of it, including Lewis Clarke's.

YO: That is great, that is great. Okay, this next one is just a remarkable use of cast concrete. It's the Holy Infant Catholic Church in Reidsville and it was dedicated in 1962. Tell me about how you came up with the concept for that church.

RS: Well, the concept was an opening flower where the petals separated and it gave you a definite shape of opening in its walls. Now that concept, I'll admit, was my brother's concept, but I carried it through in detailed working drawings and added my touch to it, too. But it was just a unique concept to put a structure to, really. The walls became load bearing with the design of the spread support that held the roof, the concrete beam. So the petals of the open flower set the rhythm of the structure and it was an exposed structure.

YO: By "exposed" what do you mean? "Exposed structure?"

RS: Well, it didn't have a drop ceiling to hide all that. We expressed the—

YO: The underside of the—

RS: Of the structure.

YO: Right.

RS: Yeah, the structure was part of the interior design, really. Let's see.

YO: Now that one was featured in *Progressive Architecture* magazine. That's one of my favorites of your work. Now there was an ice cream parlor or drugstore that you designed for Reidsville that has these kind of very delicate—

RS: Guilford Dairy Bar is what it was.

YO: Guilford Dairy Bar, right. Tell me about the supports that you designed for that one.

RS: Well, primarily it was the canopy for people to walk in inclement weather. It extended out to the parking lot where they could come in and it was a single post with cantilevered spread beams from one post and it had four cantilevered—

YO: Canopies.

RS: —structures and then that carried the flat roof.
30:00

YO: Right, very nice design, very nice design. Let's see, then how about the Henry and Hazel Nave residence in Southern Pines? That was about 1966.

RS: What was the name?

YO: The Nave residence.

RS: Oh, Nave, yeah, Henry Nave. My memory is just not—[Laughs]

YO: I think we have some pictures of that one.

RS: I don't know whether it's medicine or old age or both or something else. [Laughs]

YO: There's just a lot in your head to keep straight. Around '68 you and your brother split and you went and partnered with Dick Mitchell, Tommy Hayes, and Calvin Howell and Hayes-Howell in Southern Pines. Tell me about those guys. They're interesting characters to me.

RS: Well, Tom Hayes was president and he originated the firm. Calvin Howell was more the business person. Dick Mitchell was very good at doing working drawings, the detail and so forth, and I did the design work. I was vice president of design for the firm. So I was there for twenty years doing that.

YO: Do you know how many schools you designed while you were there? [Laughs]

RS: Oh heavens, no, golly Pete, because we were pretty well known for our school work.

YO: What was special about your designs for the schools?

RS: Just efficient, just that our knowledge of relationship of spaces with the students, the knowledge of that made it more simple for the students.

YO: Do you recall one that you especially liked?

RS: Goodness, well, I guess really the Reidsville Senior High School.

YO: The Reidsville Senior High School?

RS: Not Reidsville, Southern Pines.

YO: Oh, Southern Pines.

RS: Excuse me. [Laughs] Dadgonnit.

YO: [Laughs] That's okay.

RS: At the time they were experimenting in education, the way they taught. It was quite a different concept so it was a new experience for us to interpret and design the school with this concept, but it was easy to convert back to a typical school structure.

YO: This was about the time of the federal model schools program. A lot of federal money was coming into the South to build schools that had multipurpose rooms or libraries that had more activities than books going on. So I think you guys were riding on that particular input at that time. When you say change in the teaching method, it was drastic changes going on. So the building had to change a little bit as well.

RS: Mm hmm. Yeah, I don't—where the money came from, that was Calvin Howell's—[Laughs]

YO: Right. [Laughs]

RS: That was his worry. I just did the school, interpreting the needs in the new way of going about teaching that they were experimenting with, but it would still convert back to a standard.

YO: Well, in the 1980s, I'm not sure exactly what year, you left Hayes-Howell, and what did you do next?
34:56

RS: I left there in '84. When I was at Hayes-Howell, we were trying to get a job down on Bald Head Island redoing the clubhouse and all kind of different things. I went down there to talk to the owner of the island.

YO: Who was that?

RS: That was Kent Mitchell and his brother, and of course his father bought the island. In the process, I became interested in going to work for the island. Fifty percent of my time I would be doing work for them and it would leave me fifty percent of my time to do private work, which was interesting because it was different, [Laughs] living on an island.

YO: Getting a little tired of schools, right? [Laughs]

RS: Yeah, out of schools. During the years, my interest really was working with owners in doing residential work. It just had more character to it. It was low key as far as stress. I didn't have

anybody working for me or anything at the time. So I decided to leave Hayes-Howell and go down there and work on my own.

YO: Now you actually moved to Bald Head Island.

RS: Moved to Bald Head.

YO: Moved the family and everybody.

RS: Well, the family was pretty much in school then, college. It was quite an experience, riding carts to work every day, no cars. [Laughs] It sort of set the tone for everything, sort of low key, slow.

YO: Now, in starting to design, and I think you designed thirty or forty houses down at Bald Head Island—

RS: Oh at least, yeah.

YO: —whenever you started looking at how you were going to approach these, like their facial look to them, you went up and down the coast searching for something that you called "coastal vernacular." Tell me about that.

RS: Yeah. Well, the owner wanted to keep sort of a quaintness to the island so he wanted to keep the old coastal vernacular for the island. So I went up and down the whole coast of North Carolina taking photographs of things that gave you the feeling that it was of that vernacular. You had to incorporate them into your residences. Also, the town hall that I did, it had to be that character. It was interesting.

YO: What was something that was typical of coastal vernacular. What kind of a little detail or something would be typical?

RS: Well, the cedar shakes was one, siding, plus other detail work with the cedar shakes. Overhangs, they did have overhangs then, not this developer roofs, and roofs were important. Just little details of finishing off, the cedar shakes, that type of thing is what created it.
40:16

YO: Let's see here. The Marine Science Center, you designed the Marine Science Center?

RS: Yes. I was with Hayes-Howell then. We designed the Marine science facility, which was for the public's use where we had big water tanks for seawater and had sharks and all this kind of thing that you normally see in an aquarium.

YO: And where is that located?

RS: It's out from Morehead City.

YO: Pine Knoll Shores?

RS: There's a string of—a peninsular type thing.

YO: Oh, I see. Emerald Isle?

RS: I think maybe so.

YO: Out that way.

RS: Yeah.

YO: How about Indigo Village. Tell me about Indigo Village.

RS: Indigo Village was done right from the marina on the mainland where the ferries from Bald Head Island would come and dock to pick up passengers and let them off and so forth, so it was part of this whole Bald Head Island-type concept. It was single family—well, I guess they were somewhat condominiums—so we laid that out and designed the coastal vernacular [Laughs] residences or condos.

YO: Very attractive. Now, I'm not sure how to pronounce this next name. It's Berica?

RS: Berica. [Emphasis on first syllable]

YO: Berica house? Where is that located?

RS: It's on Bald Head Island. It's a house that I designed for myself, but they came along and saw the drawings that I had with the gazebo out front towards the ocean where they could sit out there and enjoy the breeze and the views, so that was just pretty much an ocean—

YO: But you designed that for your own use?

RS: Yeah, but I didn't build it for me. [Laughs]

YO: [Laughs] How about the Wesley house?

RS: Wesley was built on the main dune down at Bald Head. I designed it so the roof slope pretty much matched the slope of the dune so it wouldn't fight with the dune for attention or anything. So it blended in as much as possible with the environment, but it still faced up the ocean, of course, because of the great view we had from up there. It was quite nice.

YO: The nickname on that one is the Dune House, right?

RS: Yeah.

YO: How about the Coe house? Do you remember the Coe house, C-o-e, Coe house?

44:35

RS: Coe house, yeah. That was done over at Country Club of North Carolina I believe it was, yeah. They had a nice site overlooking a little pond and the golf course at CCNC. Most of those houses a structural engineer would have to come in, because it was all sandy soil, and do some work on each site, really, to firm up underneath where the house was going, and that was one of them that we had to work on the site to get it to support a house, really.

YO: Do you remember what street it's on?

RS: Golly Pete. It's on—

YO: Or what hole it's off of?

RS: I've got some drawings back there. [Laughs]

YO: Okay. We'll get that, okay.

RS: Oh dear. [Laughs]

YO: Do you have any advice for today's young architects?

RS: Oh boy. I've been out of it so long I just—mm, I don't—Oh, just—[Laughs]

YO: Just tell them to hang in there, right? [Laughs]

RS: Yeah, hang in there right now.

YO: Did you have any particular way that you approached a client? When you had that first meeting with a client was there some strategy that you had that you brought to the table? You already mentioned that you had them write their program. So, did you have questions that you asked them to help them develop their program?

RS: Oh yes. I just tried to get them involved where it really became part of them, the way they lived and their living habits. If they had coffee in the bedroom, well, I'd give them a place to make coffee, or something like that. It was done for them and it should support the way that they are used to living, not give them something that I think is something they ought to have. You just don't force it down them.

YO: That sounds like good advice: Listen to the clients to see what they want to have and just guide the project along.

RS: Yeah.

YO: Good advice, I think. What's the one important thing to know about Dick Schnedl?

RS: Goodness sakes alive, one important thing. Golly Pete, I don't know. [Laughs] That's like trying to fill out that fellowship thing. [Laughs]

YO: [Laughs]

RS: I can't think of anything. [Laughs]

YO: Okay. Well, those are all the questions I have for today. Do you have anything you'd like to add? Wait, I do have one other question. Go ahead. I remembered another one.

RS: That form follows function.

YO: Form follows function?

RS: Yeah. [Laughs]

YO: That's the one.

RS: That's it.

YO: I meant to ask you this. When you were a practicing architect, what were the reasons why you hired a landscape architect? What would be some reasons why?

RS: Well, to enhance the property, make it more appealing. There are all kind of reasons, [Laughs] but it's certainly worthwhile, and you learn, like I learned from Lewis Clarke, so many things I couldn't even think of, except those that I mentioned. The logic that he used just makes all the sense in the world to make a place enjoyable.
50:30

YO: And landscape architects do that then, right?

RS: Yeah, yeah.

YO: [Laughs] That's great.

RS: They're part of the team. [Laughs]

YO: Some years ago *USA Today* asked readers to write a memoir in six words or less and a Richard Schnedl posted this. He said, "Many risky mistakes, very few regrets." Was that you?

RS: I—[Laughs]

YO: Don't remember that one? [Laughs]

RS: Oh law. That sounds like—

YO: That sounds like you?

RS: Yeah.

YO: Well, that's what we'll leave it at then. You take risks and just keep bouncing right back. [Laughs]

RS: Yeah. [Laughs] Well, I can't—[Laughs]

YO: That's okay.

RS: I can't add to that.

YO: Well, we'll just end with that then.

RS: All right.

YO: Thank you very much for answering my questions today.

RS: Yes, ma'am. I hope I did all right—

YO: You did fine.

RS: —with such a poor memory that I have. [Laughs]

YO: You did great. Thank you.

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum
Date: August 31, 2011