

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Jerry Mitchell Turner (compiled November 12, 2008)

Interviewee: JERRY MITCHELL (“JERRY”) TURNER

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

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Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Length: Approximately 37 minutes

This interview for the Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project was conducted at the Jerry Turner & Associates, Inc. offices. Turner, a North Carolina native, graduated from the North Carolina State University School (now College) of Design in 1959 in landscape architecture. His classmates in the five year program were Charlie Burkhead and Lindsay Cox. At first headed toward architecture, Turner was attracted to the design component of landscape architecture as it was being taught by Lewis Clarke. After graduation, Turner worked for Godwin and Bell, followed by a position with the N.C. Department of Conservation and Development. He opened his own practice in 1967. He has been in continuous operation since that date making it one of the oldest active landscape architecture firms in the state. In 1997, Turner was accepted as a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA).

YO: This is an oral history interview with Jerry Turner on November the sixth, 2008 at his office in Raleigh, North Carolina, and I'd like to start off with our standard first question. Tell me a little bit about where you're from and how you got interested in landscape architecture?

JT: Well, that's interesting. When I registered in the School of Design—well, then it was not a college—the School of Design, I registered as an architect at first and went through the first two years, which they were—back then they were exactly the same, the architects and the landscape architects. They didn't have product design at that time. The two courses were similar and then after two years and being around all the students and the teachers and professors and stuff, I switched over to landscape architecture.

YO: So, you started out in architecture then?

JT: Started out in architecture, yeah, and had a friend that was in landscape architecture and I just decided I would like that a lot better.

YO: Was your friend in school at State?

JT: Uh, huh, yeah, he was in School of Design.

YO: Well, who was that?

JT: That was a guy named ah, Jim Ellis and he graduated two years before I did I think, yeah.

JT: And back then, see our class, my graduating class of 1959 was three people. So, we I think one might have graduated in '58, two in '57, three in '59. It may not be exact, but there just weren't many people in the school at that time.

YO: Well, who were some other people that you can remember?

JT: Well, Charlie Burkhead, I don't know whether you know Charlie.

YO: Yes.

JT: He graduated with me and he's still around here but practicing landscape architecture and art. I think he's a full time artist that does a little landscape architecture. I'm not positive of that. And then Lindsay Cox, he was the third one that graduated in '59 and Lindsay went into more of the planning side. He ended up as, not the chairman, but the lead person in the Triad Council of Governments as their chief and he did that for a number of years. And he just retired a few years ago and he's still in Greensboro. And ah, there were lots of others younger and before me.

YO: Well, the only way we're finding that we can get a good list of graduates is to ask the graduates themselves to remember who they were in class with.

JT: Really?

YO: Because we don't have a roster for the School and so the other way that we're getting information is going through each of the annuals, but it turns out some of the landscape architect folks didn't have their pictures taken so they're not in the annuals. So Lindsay Cox, I thought he was in your class, but I wasn't sure.

JT: He was.

YO: Well, it's good to know that.

JT: Yeah, and let's see—two years and I'm not sure one year or two year here but well, Ken Coulter who I'm sure you know of was either a year or two before me. I think a year. Ah, Jimmy Ellis—my gosh, my memory is awful.

YO: Well, we'll think of some more as we go along probably.

JT: Bradshaw, I'm trying to think of what's Bradshaw's first name. He's in Florida.

YO: Taft?

JT: Taft Bradshaw, yeah and he was, I think, two years before. God, I don't think of her last name, Dot. Do you know who I'm talking about there? There was of the few females at State.

YO: Yes, Dot Morton.

JT: Dot Morton that's exactly right, Dot Morton.

YO: Do you know what happened to her?

JT: Never had seen her since the day she graduated, at all. You probably—just in general, Jim Ellis is around here. He lives in Raleigh and not practicing, but he's kept up with a lot of those people.

YO: Well, I'll check that out.

JT: —a lot more than I have and both in architecture and in landscape architecture.

YO: Oh, I'll be sure to follow that up.

JT: Yeah, Dot Morton, but I have not seen her since—

YO: We'll find her someday.

JT: Yeah, and after me I'm trying to think, Jim Klutz, do you know him? I think he's in Atlanta. Um, Bob Phillips—

YO: No, I'm not familiar with that name.

JT: He was either a year or two after me and I'm not sure, I think he went to High Point and I don't whether he's still there or not.

YO: Well, that's quite a few.

JT: Yeah.

YO: But still small classes of people.

JT: Yeah, but they were getting bigger and bigger each year. They were getting bigger.

YO: Well, let me ask you some more about school. What kind of projects did you work on when you were in school?

JT: Oh, it was a wide variety of projects you. It wasn't a big staff. Gil Thurlow and Lewis [Clarke] were the two professors of landscape architecture, and so you had them every year, and they were a good thing. They brought in a lot of guest people, very good guest people.

YO: Do you remember some of the people who came in?

JT: Bob Royston and Roberto Burle Marx came there.

YO: Wow.

JT: Jose de Rivera, the sculptor. Do you know who I'm talking about?

YO: Yes.

JT: Yeah, most people don't remember. You know there were a few other really great teachers or professors I guess that were in art. I mean Roy Gussow, Cox—

YO: Joe Cox?

JT: Joe Cox one of the great, great teachers of art. I mean he really was. George Bireline—

YO: And you took classes with these people right?

JT: Uh, huh, yeah.

YO: Does that seem to be one of the things that differentiates this landscape architecture program from others is that you took actually what would be called, design classes?

JT: Yeah, you took five years of art.

YO: Really?

JT: Painting, sculpture, drawing, you had to, I mean not electives or anything. You took that all through the entire five years. It was gradually getting away from that I think right after I graduated where you became more of an elective thing, which I don't necessarily agree with, but I was happy to have had all that—not forced on me—but I had to go through all that.

YO: What was Lewis Clarke teaching at the time?

JT: Just the basic landscape architecture class. Thurlow taught all the planting design courses, but Lewis and Thurlow just taught the general landscape architecture, which was everything from say, planting, through construction drawings and stuff.

YO: Goodness gracious. Was there a particular philosophy that they were putting out at that time?

JT: Well, not—well, you know McHarg came there, too—that was another one and you know his sort of design with nature was as close to a philosophy as any, but our courses had a wide variety of everything from residential design to campus planning. I know one time Dick Bell came and taught a course that we did—an NCO Club down in Fort Bragg. I remember that one. And my thesis—you had to have a thesis in your fifth year then—and it was a master planning of Bald Head Island as a resort development, which was sort of interesting.

YO: That sounds very interesting.

JT: Yeah, it was a good one.

JT: And it hadn't been developed quite like my plan. [Laughs] It never would be.

YO: Well, that's quite a size project for a degree program, isn't it?

JT: Yeah.

YO: Wow.

JT: But there was all the grading, everything that you would do generally as a landscape architect in various degrees of detail.

YO: Do you recall any of the specific projects, like you said, an NCO Club. Do you remember any other projects that you worked on as a student?

JT: Joe Cox's house, [Laughs] that's just one that pops up.

YO: Really?

JT: He built a new, somewhere out here in west Raleigh, a contemporary house, and we took on that as a project to do landscape plans and gardenscape plans for. But others, I'm drawing a sort of a blank.

YO: Well, that was a good time ago. What year did you graduate?

JT: 1959.

YO: Fifty-nine. And after graduation what did you do?

JT: My last two years in school I worked as a part time draftsman, I guess you'd call it back then, with Godwin and Bell. It was Dick Bell and a partner, Jim Godwin. I don't know, I guess you know them.

YO: Yes.

JT: Yeah, and I worked with them and when I graduated, I worked with them for a year and then after a year I went to work with the state in community planning work. So I worked with the Division of Community Planning under the Department of Conservation and Development for about seven years. And during the last part of that I started doing some moonlighting on residences and even some subdivisions and stuff. And then I opened my office in '67.

YO: That was a good year to open, wasn't it?

JT: Well, it was. There weren't many landscape architects, in fact I think Godwin and Bell were still together at that office and there was one other office an older guy and I cannot think of who he was. We were talking at the convention a couple of weeks ago. I can't remember who he was, and that was it here. John Townsend was in Greensboro, but there weren't many offices at all.

And there was very little land development activities with landscape architects and I guess I got to be one of the first ones that got doing a lot of land development.

YO: What was your first job that put you on the map?

JT: Oh, God, on the map, we did a lot of work, but Kildaire Farms down in Cary was a thousand acres that we did, and that was back in the early '70s and that was a fun project. It was a first, one of the first PUDs in North Carolina. And, it was a very interesting project. We had to educate the town council on what a PUD was, and develop a PUD ordinance, and worked with them, and that was back when there, there wasn't a staff. During that process of Kildaire, they hired their first planner full time. So, that was pretty interesting.

YO: I remember that project being discussed and then coming to the public eye. In other words, from the public's view point that was quite a project.

JT: Yeah, it really was. I was honored to be a part of it. Tom Adams, a Raleigh attorney, had a partner Doug Brown, I think [he] was like sort of an accountant, but they formed a company and they were the developers of that. Unfortunately, that project hit one of the down turns like right now after it had been going for about two years, and they lost it. And somebody else bought it, but we kept on through it with three different owners.

YO: Is the golf course included in that project?

JT: No, there was no golf course with Kildaire. Well, the first golf course in Cary, we weren't involved in that project, was at MacGregor Downs and Willard Byrd out of Atlanta did that course and the land planning for MacGregor. And then Lochmere was the second golf course and we were involved in a lot of the planning in Lochmere but after the golf course. And then we did the master plans for Preston and laid out two of the three golf courses out there. Yeah, we've done a lot of work in Cary over the years. We really have.

YO: In your office who were some of the other people working for you?

JT: We've had some great people here at the office. Larry Vaughn, do you know Larry?

YO: I know the name.

JT: He worked at the office for a good little while. Ken Sangster, do you know of Ken?

YO: Yes.

JT: Ken has died.

YO: Yes.

JT: But Ken was a wonderful, great, great designer and good landscape architect and he—God, LaMarr Bunn worked here for a good little while. Do you know LaMarr?

YO: Oh, yes.

JT: Okay. Willie Hood who is one of the principals now. Linda Harris is one of the principals now and they're both very exceptional landscape architects. And there have been a lot of others. Our office has done this [motions with hand] with the economic times, we started out with one person and that was me. We got, I guess, about six or eight and then got involved pretty heavily in land development and got up to twenty-eight people.

YO: Wow.

JT: And then one of the economic down turns hit and we dropped down to fifteen and we hung around fifteen and then dropped to eight one time and then got back up and are now down to seven.

YO: That's a manageable number, right?

JT: Yeah, twenty-eight was way too many. I mean, we were all in a house that we had purchased over on Cox Avenue. Do you know where Player's Retreat is?

YO: Uh, huh.

JT: It's right across from where their parking lot is over there. We were over there for years and you'd open a closet and there would be somebody in there drawing and that was before computers and we had no computers back in that time. But at one time—Bob Moore, I don't know whether you know of Bob. Bob has turned into a very good golf course architect. We got into golf course architecture sort of halfway. I mean, we weren't—you couldn't compete with Arnold Palmer and Nicholas and all those people, but we did three or four golf courses through construction administration, everything, and Bob was a project manager on two of those. And then he went to work for a new, big golf course architect in California and stayed over there for a number of years. He came back to North Carolina, and I don't understand what the complete situation is, but he runs a sort of remote office for them, but he sort of does his own thing, too. So, he's still around and does his golf course.

YO: So, people that worked in your office to begin with they're still practicing then?

JT: Oh, yeah, a lot. In fact, I had Karen go through the other day and we've had a hundred and fifty people in our office over this forty years.

YO: Wow.

JT: And most of them I think are still practicing. Not all of them. Some of them are dead. Some of them have passed on, but quite a few of them are, are still around.

YO: Looking back on the people that you had through here and the projects that you had, does one particular project stand out?

JT: No, not really. I mean we've done all types. We've done big projects for the government. For example, the master plan for B. Everett Jordan Reservoir, we've done some reservoir planning down in Georgia and Alabama. And those are big projects and take two years or so to do, but we sort of zeroed in as liking being involved in land development more so than anything else. I mean, we've done some very nice residential projects, and some very, very nice multi-family projects, just about every kind of projects you can imagine we've been involved with. But we've done land development—projects that I particularly liked, Woodcroft over in Durham, which has a really good integrated greenway system.

YO: Oh, yeah.

JT: We, for a number of years, did a lot of work with Roger Perry and with East West Partners and we did Woodcroft, and we did a big one in Greensboro, and a big one in Charlotte.

YO: What was the one in Charlotte?

JT: How was?

YO: What was the one in Charlotte?

JT: Davis Lake.

YO: Oh, yeah.

JT: I'm trying to think of the one up here in Greensboro, but they were all based on the same philosophy as Woodcroft. A couple of those hit real bad economic times for the developer and Woodcroft was an unbelievable project in that it was—this may not have anything to do with what you're talking about, but—it was designed to be sold out in seven or eight years and it sold completely out in three. So, they made so much money it was unreal.

YO: Yeah.

JT: It didn't help us, but we got good jobs out of it. But they were really started their business basically with that project.

YO: Well, the design is what they were selling so it was a good design right?

JT: Yeah, now that's exactly right, yeah. No, that was a very good design. It was well thought out and people enjoyed it and liked it. Still do.

YO: As students and I'm sure you didn't remember like maybe if they didn't work in your office maybe you'd just know of the students that came through State, what was it about the what we call, the Kamphoefner years, what was it about the School that got these guys to be such good designers? What was different about their design approach?

JT: Well, probably two main things. One, requiring you to do all the art stuff. I mean you had to just about become a reasonable designer going through all that. And the other one and I guess it still has the reputation, I'm not sure, I mean they worked your can off. I mean you know, it was every night up there and very long hours and you worked hard. And, do they still have that? I mean do you still have—

YO: I'm not sure that they still have, I don't, I don't pick up from many people that, that it's as intense as it used to be, but it's still—they still expect a lot.

JT: Yeah. And I think the other thing. Henry Kamphoefner hired the best people he could get. All of the whole professional staff were very good people in architecture and landscape architecture. And I guess product design came on after I left and many of the other ancillary things, but back when I started there, it was before the school was built where it is now. And then we were in what was on barracks. You ever heard of those?

YO: Oh, yeah.

JT: Yeah, okay. Right where the atomic reactor sits, it surrounded the atomic reactor, and then their administrative offices were in Daniels—I'm not sure—but Kamphoefner and all that crowd were there. But no, he hired good people and—

YO: Made a difference?

JT: —and, made you work at it. [Laughs] He didn't want you there if you weren't going to do pretty good. [Laughs]

YO: Yeah.

JT: And I'd love to know this, but well, I know my graduate—my starting class of twenty eight—two finished in five years out of that.

YO: And it was a five year program?

JT: Yeah, but I mean others finished in six years or seven years or something.

YO: Oh.

JT: But they didn't finish it in the five years they intended to when they started out.

YO: Oh. It was that hard?

JT: Yeah, it really was.

YO: Wow. No, I don't think it's quite that hard.

JT: Yeah, it was a very low percentage at that time and the percentage of graduating in the program was pretty high. It just may not be the exact number of years that you intended it to be.

YO: How did what you learned from Lewis affect your practice?

JT: Well, I don't know.

YO: Or did it?

JT: Ah, yeah, I'm sure it did. I mean, I don't know that it did any more than from Gil Thurlow. Lewis was, and I guess still is, a very energetic, enthusiastic person and he would—I think he and Joe Cox—Joe was the most enthusiastic person I'd ever met. He would come up to a painting and go, a piece of mess. And oh, that's wonderful, good start and all that. Lewis wasn't quite that much, but he was very enthusiastic about the school and he was very enthusiastic about his students. His wife, Kit, who I guess she's around, but they've been divorced for a long, long time. They used to have the students over to their house a lot and have rambling conversations over beer and he was more involved. Well, he was not that much older than most of the students back then you know. I don't know how—I don't think he'd come to the school—do you know how old he is?

YO: He's eighty-one now.

JT: He's eighty-one. Okay, I'm seventy-three so he's eight years older than I am so he just had—

YO: But when you're in your twenties it's not much difference is it?

JT: No, no, there's not much at all. He was very enthusiastic and he was also enthusiastic about getting people like Royston there, and McHarg and all his people, and working with them and you spent times with them in class with the projects, and you spent times with them in his house. And, yeah, he had a big, big affect on my life. I guess you'd say. He had a part time practice all the time he was in teaching and I had a lot of friends—LaMarr worked for him, Sally Schauman worked for him, Ken Coulter worked for him—God, just a big group of people went through his office and got a lot of experience.

But he sort of had the philosophy, which may not be called a philosophy, but he would hire people and they would work there like four years, maybe five years, and all of them would start making too much money and he'd let them all go and start all over again. [Laughs] And I really disagreed with that, but as I've gotten older, that's probably not a bad way to do it, you know? [Laughs]

We tend to keep people around a long, long time which I think is better. But yeah, all those people—LaMarr and Sally, and I'm trying to think of who was the other person there at that time. But then he had not done—when I started out with the land development stuff, he hadn't done much and then he started doing that predominantly with the resorts. He did Palmetto Dunes. I think it is one of the first big ones that they did and they did it very well, and he did a number of them and I'm not sure just sort of plain land development, what I'd called plain with people living there full time like Kildaire or Preston or something, I don't know how much of that he did. But I do remember Palmetto Dunes, a lot.

YO: Yeah, that, I think that's one of their more famous ones.

JT: Yeah, yeah.

YO: What will landscape architecture look like in the future?

JT: Oh, boy, that's interesting. You know I hope it'll become the sort of basis for how development is done normally. You know again, back when I started all of the subdivisions were done by engineers

YO: Done by engineers?

JT: Yeah, not a few of them. Either an engineer or a surveyor did the subdivisions and then we started doing some and then we got more and then we got more and then we got more and as I said, that's sort of how we got involved with land development. The past five years, it may be more maybe a little less, all of the big engineering/architectural firms have a landscape architecture section now and, and it's all involved. But the engineers are leading it and that's why we've tried to stay separate from that, but it's becomes more and more difficult. Big developers come in and they want a one stop shop. And so, they usually get one of the big engineers and they do everything.

YO: That's kind of backwards from what it used to be isn't it?

JT: Yeah, that's exactly right. And now today nobody wants to be involved just in land development because there's not any. [Laughs] You know there's just not much land development at all, but there are, I guess, most of the offices doing land development now other than ourselves and maybe a couple of other small offices, are related to architecture/engineering.

YO: So, keeping the philosophy that you've got, do you see that becoming more prevalent in the future?

JT: What? Just big office with everybody? Yeah, unfortunately and I do think it's unfortunate, but I do think it's very difficult to maintain a practice just in landscape architecture. I mean unless it's a small commercial hardscapes and site plans and residential work. It's hard to do the bigger land development projects without the engineering.

YO: How about the difference between what you use to draw with these days—the computer versus hand drawing? How does that fit into the future of landscape architecture?

JT: Ah, I think there's less design involved now. You know we used to draw by hand everything and all the way through it has made our work more efficient. It's made better looking drawings. But you get a lot of landscape architects out of school now that can't draw. I mean can't do anything by hand. And I don't know whether that's particularly good or bad, but the computer has had just a huge effect on us. And all from business, keeping books—we had our books on computer back before there was a PC. We were one of the first ones around to do that, which is no honor particularly, but it was interesting. We got a Commodore business computer with like

8K of memory and we ran it out and had a program specifically developed for our time billing and it ran out of memory really, really quick.

And, and then we used to—this is interesting to you ah, Kimley Horn who I'm sure you know of, Bob Kimley, they were established in the same year I was. And Ed Vick went to work for them. Do you know Ed, too? Ed Vick is a civil engineer. They were both working civil/transportation engineers and they started doing a lot of work. And Ed is a really smart, aggressive person. So he started going out and getting them work and they opened a Florida office and then they've opened offices all over the world now.

But when there was anything landscape architectural or master planning they got me or us I guess and so we did a lot of work with them over the years until they just kept on getting bigger and bigger and bigger and finally got their own landscape architectural people. But we worked a lot in Florida. We worked a lot here. And it was interesting. In fact, they tried to buy us and integrate us with them and again we probably made a mistake not doing it from a financial standpoint, but we didn't want to be ruled by an engineering company. And so, we didn't. [Laughs] But again that's how most of them have become. There's a lot of engineers have bought landscape architecture practices now.

YO: I really hadn't realized that they bought them out rather, I thought they, I don't know how I thought they had merged, but I just never thought of this being aggressively buyouts.

JT: Oh, yeah. They've got the size and the money and everything, they can do that and so, there's been a tremendous amount of that.

YO: Have you had fun being a landscape architect?

JT: Oh, yeah, wouldn't do anything else, yeah. No, it's been great for me. My daughter is a landscape architect. My son-in-law is a landscape architect. It's ingrained now.

YO: I guess so.

JT: Yeah, it's been great and everybody says, when you going to retire? When you going to retire? As long as I'm having fun and in reasonable health I'll continue on and we have some work you know and that is a problem right now. It will turn. It's just you got to be around when it turns around.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Jerry Turner?

JT: Oh, that's an interesting, I don't know—that he's a fair person and honest person, fortunate to have a good family, good kids, good grandkids, and has been fortunate in the business.

YO: Well, that's one of the reasons we're interviewing you because you have one of the longest standing offices that's around and do you have anything else you'd like to add today?

JT: I don't know off hand.

YO: Well, I think we've had a good interview here and we'll close out with that.

JT: Well, I appreciate it very much.

YO: Well, thank you.

JT: I hope I've helped with some of the things.

YO: Oh, yes.

JT: But Lewis is a very interesting person and he deserves whatever accolades he can get, I think.

YO: Well, thank you.

JT: It's good. He's a great landscape architect.

YO: That's good, good final words there.

JT: Yeah, yeah.

YO: Thank you.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi

Date: August 5, 2009