

**NCSU Creative Services
Centennial Campus Interviews — Harris**

Q: Interviewer
Harris: Abie Harris

Q: Could you just tell your name and spell it for the transcribers before we start?

Harris: My name is Edwin F. Harris Jr. I'm known as Abie. A B I E. That is all the names that I know that I have.

Q: If we were going to superimpose your name on a screen how would you like it to appear?

Harris: Abie Harris would probably be... I mean, for the people who would see this, that is what everybody knows me as.

Q: Spell that last name please.

Harris: H A R R I S.

Q: Actually, spell Abie too.

Harris: A B I E.

Q: Okay. We are ready to begin. I just wanted to thank you for agreeing to do the interview for us today. The first thing that I wanted to talk about is just if you could give a brief history of your career before you came to NC State. I know you spent a long time at NC State, but maybe your undergraduate education or graduate education—that sort of thing.

Harris: I came to NC State in 1952 as an undergraduate. I finished in '57. I had several architectural jobs. I spent a year studying architecture in Europe after winning the Paris Prize. I worked for an architect in Raleigh, Leaf Ballen, for 40 years. I

came back to NC State in 1967. I had a joint appointment in the College of Design---the School of Design then. I was working in the facilities planning division. I became the University Architect in 1970 and retired in 1998.

Q: Can you tell me anything about the origins of Centennial Campus? Anything you know about the major players or the people involved?

Harris: I think that the... When Bruce Polten was chancellor in the early '80s—he asked me, I was the University Architect, to do a study of the space potential of the existing campus. I did a study and that study revealed something that most people had realized: we were very crowded; we didn't have many opportunities for growth on the existing North Campus. With that understanding, and intuitively, I guess Bruce Polten knew all along that it was a very crowded campus. Coincidentally, the Dix property became available. I know that the city of Raleigh had done some studies earlier showing the potential of getting different scenarios of how that property may be used. That is kind of... It is the same thing that is going on now with the remainder of the Dix property, but that was the land that we ultimately inherited. Bruce Polten was having meetings downtown with the governor. I think it was Jim Graham and others who had a stake in that land. I was back making sketches of how we might use that land. I was making very quick, master plan scenarios of showing how the university could expand into that. One of the recommendations that came out of that 1983 study that Bruce Polten asked for was a recommendation to build a research campus, which a lot of campuses across the country were doing at that time. And the rest is history, as we say. But the land in '84 and '85 was appropriated to the

university. We immediately started planning studies. Concurrently there was a development team put in place—the Carly Capler Wood. They brought land design with them. Brad Davis is a landscape architect and he certainly was a principal player. They also brought in an early design consultant, Arthur Erickson from Canada. And Ryner Fasler was the principal participant in that process. I think that he certainly gave a lot of direction to the master plan. About that time Bruce Polten made a very... May I call it courageous or strong decision to build no more new footage on the main campus and we already several projects underway. One of those was the College of Textiles. He just simply said that that would be moved to the Centennial Campus. It was that kind of bold decision that I think really got Centennial Campus underway. So we immediately started planning, that is, the architects and my staff and others that the campus started planning for moving the College of Textiles to Centennial Campus. Concurrently, the master plan was being developed and it really kind of grew from that first initiative.

Q: So once the preliminary work had been done in 1983—the studies, and the land had been acquired and you began to develop the master plan. What other kinds of things were a part of your job as the University Architect in those early stages once Centennial got rolling?

Harris: I think, as University Architect, I was in somewhat of a management role. That included advising the University Trustees Buildings and Property Committee about building locations. We managed the architect selection process. I think one of the successes of Centennial Campus and the original campus as well is that I

think the university has made an effort, and our trustees have responded in selecting the very best architects we could. I think that has been a hallmark of Centennial Campus. There was a very high design standard with the architects and the landscape architects. I think as the master plan evolved, it was based on several principles. One principle which we had adopted for the main campus was that the campus would really be broken into smaller clusters, or as we call it in the master plan, the academic neighborhood or the campus neighborhood concept. That was an idea of taking a smaller unit of campus buildings that is based on the two minute walking radius. It is based on having a collection of activities that supported the vitality and supported communication between the participants and buildings on campus. We built this around open spaces. That was sort of the principal organizing concept of Centennial Campus as it was on the original campus. And I think another major principle of the master plan was that it was based on the natural systems: the streams, the valleys, the contours. This became kind of a network of open spaces through the streams. The transportation network was overlaid over that and I think this really has served the campus well in terms of preserving open space to preserve the natural characteristics of the site. Another important principle of the master plan was that it was to be a very urban environment. The reason for that was that we felt that the underlying goal of Centennial Campus was to create a place for communication. I think communication depends so much on encounter—not only just organized encounter in classrooms and labs, but those spontaneous encounters that take place out in the open spaces which is a principle of the Centennial Campus. And

those encounters depend on having activities that support people getting together: coffee shops, food service, a mixture of activities. So these were principles that I think we very important in the foundation of the Centennial Campus planning.

Q: I just want to make sure that I understand. The principles that support the master plan are different from the design guidelines or standards?

Harris: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about your role in developing the design standards and guidelines?

Harris: Yes. I think we developed design guidelines to make sure those principles were realized. Those design guidelines have to do with the amount of building, the density of the campus, how much parking there should be, the creation of open spaces, the character of the buildings, the scale of the courtyards and these kinds of things. But the design guidelines were exactly that. They made sure that the objectives of Centennial Campus, the concepts, were reinforced.

Q: Okay. This is something that is just probably an opinion, but I'm curious and I'm asking everyone about their ideas about the Research Triangle Park versus Centennial Campus because I think people are confused often times. Outsiders may think that Centennial Campus is a mini-RTP or competing with RTP. What distinguishes them from one another?

Harris: I think the main... There are several distinguishing characteristics. One is sort of density. It is obvious that when you drive through Research Triangle Park that I think by their design standards, they—each individual project or each individual entity there can only occupy 15% of their land. With Centennial Campus it is just the opposite. I mean, ours, as I said, is a very urban, compact campus. It is done

that way, one, to save land, two to make sure there was interaction and communication taking place there. So I think there is a fundamental difference in Centennial Campus and any campus in Research Triangle Park. Research Triangle Park is definitely suburban. It is built with enormous open spaces and a campus or certainly Centennial Campus is just the opposite. It is very compact for those reasons of land conservation and to make sure that we have the encounter that provided the communication among the participants there. I think that the Research Triangle Park, there is a lot of work that one researcher doesn't necessarily want another researcher from another company to know about. I think that the attitude of Centennial Campus in most cases is one of collaboration with the university. Maybe not with all the other corporate partners there but I think that is a fundamental difference.

Q: What do you think some of the strengths of Centennial Campus are?

Harris: I think now it is certainly emerging as a model throughout the world of a new kind of research park. This is one that in your interviews you'll hear a lot about the uniqueness of the collaboration of academics and corporate government partners. I think this is unique bringing academic portion is. I think that has been—really a great, unique success for North Carolina State University. I think it has, as I go through there now, as I drive through there—I don't walk through there too much. I think that addresses one of the weaknesses of it, but certainly it has been built, I think, to a high design standard. I think there is preservation of the open spaces. I think the respect for the natural environment is one that we've worked hard—and I think that, in most part, has been successful with storm water

management. Protecting the wildlife corridors, I think that has been successful.

Architecturally, I think that there are some very good buildings there. I think that I'm personally very proud of the spaces in between the buildings. I think a good job has been done there in creating courtyards to foster the urban environment, to foster the potential for communication. I think these are the strengths that I see there now. The weaknesses.

Q: I said I was going to ask you that. You just mentioned one about pedestrians.

Harris: I think the weaknesses are that we have not realized our vision of mixed use. I mean, the notion of mixed use, which is one of the basic concepts that I hope I mentioned earlier in the conceptual part... But I think that it has been difficult to get housing there. I think there was, from the beginning, that there was a notion that we not have students living there, but there would be more researchers and other people who would be living there. I think there is a certain downside to having a student enclave on Centennial Campus. I think that has been one of the major disappointments. We haven't been able to completely realize the notion of mixed use. Originally the notion was that each of these clusters that I described—there was to be a portion of housing in those. That apparently is very difficult to achieve now. Housing is being set off in a kind of a separate enclave. I think that is one of the weaknesses. I think the other weakness is that it hasn't really yet developed the collegial atmosphere that I think it will. It just needs more time, more spontaneous or haphazard development—maybe more graffiti, but those things that make it a little less sanitized. It needs to just be a little more organic. It is very planned and overwhelming in that regard now. A phenomenon—I don't

know if it is a weakness or a strength is that there is an enormous amount of parking. That is a major difference between Centennial Campus and any other campus. There we have almost a square foot for parking for every square foot of building area. So if you've got a building this big for research then you are going to have a building that big for parking. That leads to some enormous design challenges, but I think they've been well handled. I think that this phenomenon, whether it is a weakness or a strength, one would have to say. I think that the streets there now were intended to have cars parked on them and they do not. So it makes it still look a little suburban. It is not as intense and urban as I would like to see it or as I think as we imagined it early on.

Q: You mentioned Bruce Polten before hand and how he had made some courageous moves and been sort of aggressive in the development of Centennial Campus. I know that the university faced some opposition about Centennial being built. I was wondering of your office ever encountered anything or you did in giving presentations? People on the university faculty, students, people in neighborhoods or the press. Were there any experiences you had with people really being very against Centennial?

Harris: I don't remember people being against it. Before Claude McKinney came on, I was sort of the person making presentations to the faculty and to other people. I think that we combed the campus and the faculty and everyone there to generate how people would use the campus I think there was great enthusiasm and optimism about Centennial Campus and the opportunities that it had. I think that... I don't encounter any negative criticism at all from anyone. I know that

within the campus, I think as we started developing it, people were critical of maybe some of the design directions, but I think we expected that. That was business as usual. I don't remember any significant negatives. I think that there was some controversy and very important input from people who supported more environmental preservation than we did particularly on the Southwest portion of Lake Raleigh. There was a group who identified that as a very delicate environment and still wants that preserved. I think that was a very healthy input from that group. I think there was always a group who were not enthusiastic about the golf courses as they consumed 250 acres of land. These were some of the sort of ongoing criticisms that I recall. They mainly came from within the campus.

Q: Speaking of the golf course and the hotel and the executive conference center, why do you think they remain unbuilt? Why have they been postponed? I know they were part of the original plan but to this day they have not been built. Do you have an opinion about that?

Harris: I have some opinions. They are probably not grounded in facts. I think that we could maybe use Bruce Poulten's aggressive leadership in some of that. But I think my view is that the golf course has not enjoyed an overwhelming support from the campus. The hotel conference center is another matter but there are those who think that those are not separate—that you can't have one without the other. I'm not really sure about that. I don't know the full story of that. It is ironic because when the University in the late '60s was building the McKimmon Center, there was opposition from the people in building a motel as a part of that

as in many education centers across the country sponsored in large part by the Kellogg Foundation all have a living component, but we were not able to build ours. We actually had to change the design because I guess the same group or the same spirit rose up against that and we didn't build that. So who knows? Maybe there is an ongoing spirit that is going to always oppose that. I'm not sure.

Q: It remains to be seen?

Harris: It remains to be seen.

Q: You talked about Centennial being a model for other places. The idea of the industry, university and government partnership. Have you seen evidence of that being influential on other campuses around the United States or internationally? How do you think it has influenced other places?

Harris: I don't know. I presented myself to conferences. I presented it to a conference in Ottawa. I think years ago, and I think that it certainly was reinforced for me, the notion that we were unique—I have not specifically seen any other examples but I'm sure there are some. Chapel Hill is trying to gear up and do something of the same notion. I think that even in our own College of Veterinary Medicine, the Centennial Campus model is being applied there. I'm sure it is happening on other campuses, but I can't give you specific examples except UNC at Chapel Hill.

Q: Okay. I'm not sure but I want you to clarify this for me. Had you left the University Architect's Office when the middle school started to be built and conceived? Were you a part of that?

Harris: I was a part of that initial planning, yes.

Q: Was there anything different about that because it is a special type of middle school? I don't know if you have any experience with Wake County Public Schools, but were there things different about that project because it was connected to Centennial building-wise?

Harris: Yes. It started off as a wonderful project. We were really quite excited about the potential of that. The school was going to be devoted to working with the environment. The College of Education was going to be involved and other departments. And then after the architects started working with Wake County School Planning—whatever that division is, it just got molded into another typical, cookie cutter, Wake County School unfortunately. It was a very, very sad occasion personally for me, because I had been involved in the sort of conceptual design of that to realize it had a great potential. But after it went through all the bureaucratic filters it had to go through, it came out not being so unique. I do understand they are now building the education portion which is going to be named for the Fridays I think. That may be under construction. I'm not sure. That will be unique. The school has not been physically integrated into Centennial Campus yet. Maybe it will someday the way that our sort of planning concepts thought it would be.

Q: Okay. Can you think of a specific event that might have marked when Centennial could come to be thought of as a successful project? There is no doubt that today there are lots of companies who want to locate there. They don't have to do as much marketing as they once had to do in the past. Was there something that sort of signified it becoming a successful institution during your time there?

Harris: I don't recall any one sort of individual date that a critical mass was reached, but I do know that it started to move slowly. I certainly think having the College of Education building there and the research buildings. I think that Craig Davis and his work with the partner's building certainly gave a push. I think that was a significant initial investment from the private sector. Maybe it was when all that cluster was finished that we reached some sort of critical mass that the momentum started going. Now I certainly think, with the bond issue, the projects have given it increased momentum. It is going gangbusters right now.

Q: How do you think Centennial has improved NC State as a university?

Harris: Well I think just from the dimension that we've talked about this new dimension of integrating government and private business into the campus, I would assume that would be an improvement. Maybe someone would argue with that, but I think that it is... I think it certainly has given the campus colleges more opportunities. I can't specifically speak to what improvements have been made.

Q: What do you think it is going to look like in 50 years—NC State University. What do you hope it will look like? What do you hope Centennial will achieve?

Harris: I would hope that the way I think we originally envisioned it—it would be a dense, urban and most importantly, a very vital place that would have the village core to it. People would go over for lunch. They would get off of the TTA, take our fixed guide way over for lunch and hang around the lake and have a glass of wine. There would be the exchange between graduate students and the corporate researcher and all the things that we imagined in the beginning. But I would hope

that it would be dense, it would be vital. It would not be so pristine as it now. It would be a little... What is the word I'm looking for?

Q: User friendly?

Harris: Well, user friendly, organic, but a little more funky. More of an urban place where ideas are exchanged. I think that is what I would envision.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered about your experiences or thoughts that you'd like to leave us with about Centennial?

Harris: No, it is just that I really, really enjoyed working on it from a design point of view. It is sort of a university architect's dream to start a new campus while certainly working on the older campus. It was a great experience. We were able to take things that we learned from the original campus and apply it to Centennial Campus. A good example of that is North Creek which is one of the main streams that runs between the College of Education building by the Engineering building and how that became a kind of organizing design feature. We have a storm water system. We have a pedestrian bridge going over that and that became a unique feature. And if you compare that to how we've treated Rocky Branch, up until recently, on the main campus, I think that is really a neat story because it reflects, I think, the learning part on all of us who have been involved in both campuses in gaining a respect for the natural environment. I think Centennial Campus, in spite of its urbanity and its dense urban design, it will reflect well on the preservation of that environment. It has really been a pleasure working on it. It is a great pleasure to see it growing now. There are a lot of things that maybe we'd do differently, but I think by in large it is turning out to be quite successful.

Q: Well, you answered your questions so succinctly...

[END OF INTERVIEW]