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**Oral history interview with John Yeon, 1982  
December 14-1983 January 10**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Yeon from December 14, 1982-January 10, 1983. The interview took place in place at the artist's home in Portland, Oregon, and was conducted by Marian Kolisch for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, we can start with your biographical data. Maybe if you would tell me when and where you were born?

JOHN YEON: I was born on October 29, 1910 in a house where I lived till the early 30s. The house was a square, white house, very ordinary house. It wouldn't be exceptional in most other districts in Portland, but it stood out there because, well, for one thing, it was alone and surrounded by fields on three sides.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This was what part of Portland?

JOHN YEON: Oh, it was out on the peninsula. And the peninsula was mostly a working class area where most houses were very small and crowded together.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Was this what was called Mock's Crest by any chance?

JOHN YEON: Well, it wasn't Mock's Crest then. Although it's interesting because Mock was my maternal grandparents' name. Mock's Bottom [is named after them]. But my grandmother lived, oh I suppose a distance of a block or so-- through a field. She lived on Willamette Boulevard. The land around us was a pioneer land grant that my grandfather had taken out. And it existed for about a mile around the bluff of [where we lived in Mock's Bottom] which is a crescent-shaped formation [which is] flat on top and very steep down to the bottom. And this pioneer land grant was still undeveloped when I was young. There was just fields and a great big barn with a painted sign on the gable advertising Studebaker wagons. My grandmother's house stood surrounded by fields; sort of an oasis of a tall, Victorian gingerbread house with sort of a private arboretum around it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Where did she come from, John? Was she a Northwesterner too?

JOHN YEON: Well she was born in Portland, among the first white children born here, I guess. Her parents, of course, came in a covered wagon. And they settled opposite Fort Vancouver, which is an area which is now [by] the Humane Society. They settled opposite the fort to have the protection of the fort. And I guess my grandfather came across in a covered wagon. They built an earlier house which was a log cabin which was burned down during their absence. They always assumed it was burned by the hired man in order to cover up a robbery. And then this Victorian house was built, which is still there, and, much to my surprise, now it's a city landmark. It's a high gingerbread house with lots of [spindle] work, porches around it, turrets. And it had art glass and lots of paneling with bird's eye maple and so forth.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did they build it?

JOHN YEON: Yes. And it had fresco ceilings.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, marvelous.

JOHN YEON: My grandmother lived in the kitchen, and only went into the rest of the house at Thanksgiving or some such time.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What was their name?

JOHN YEON: Mock.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Your grandfather's name is Mock?

JOHN YEON: David Mock. Oh, her name wa-- I don't know, somethin-- before she married. But all these fields belonged in my time to my father because he bought the farm from my grandfather because he couldn't properly farm it any longer or pay the taxes on it. My father bought it [just so they wouldn't be] impoverished in old age. And later my father subdivided it into Mock's Crest.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And so, well, tell m.

[Break in tape]

JOHN YEON: Often happened --became more of a bond between grandparents [than parents] and children. I loved my grandmother more than anybody else in the family. Her name was Baba and she was short and stocky. She loved flowers and we would go over catalogs together picking out things... And she was very indulgent, of course. I remember she let me dig up some of her plants and I would take them back to our house. Our house was separated from her house by a boardwalk through the fields with a gravel driveway on the side. I'd dig up these plants and bring them back to a large doghouse that my father had built for a dog I don't remember; it must have been a very large dog. And I'd have a florist shop and my grandmother would come and buy them and take them back and plant them back in her garden.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It's kind of like little children's lemonade stands on the road.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And she had me design a rose garden for her later, which was my first job.

MARIAN KOLISCH: How old were you then?

JOHN YEON: I don't remember; I was quite young.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you think you were in grade school?

JOHN YEON: I might have been in high school. Now the garden around my family's house was very plain, and I built my own garden in back which was a serpentine river that crossed under the boardwalk. I cemented it and took all the skin off the [ground]. But this river flowed around and under the walk [and all] and I had water running in it from the hose [and it had islands and \_\_\_\_\_ landscaped it]. It lasted until I went away to school, I guess.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You could say then your interest, even before architecture, was gardens and landscape?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I remember in grammar school we had to stand up and give a little talk on what we were going to be when we grow up and I think I said I might be an artist or a florist.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you've done both.

JOHN YEON: Well, my grandmother was, I remember later on when I was in my early twenties and she was bedridden, I was going up to say goodbye to her because I was going on the Mazama trip. And she just urged me to go on the trip-- do all the trips I can and do all the [things I could]. She was very supportive.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Would this have been your maternal grandmother?

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So she was really a pretty great influence on you.

JOHN YEON: Oh yes \_\_\_\_\_.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And she gave you your start in gardening.

JOHN YEON: Yes that's true. Her house was full, not full, but the first floor had many paintings by my mother, who took painting when she went to Portland Academy. She was taught by the nuns there. And this house had these very large oil paintings in very large gilt frames hanging about. Most of them, I suppose, were copies of other paintings, but occasionally there were still lifes and things that she'd done from a fresh object. And there were paintings of old [paintings]: Yellowstone Falls and Rooster Rock. And Indian paintings: Kiss of the Dying Day from the Peak of Mount Hood and Time for the Indian Maiden to Come Down and Wash Her Feet.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I wondered if she was responsible for taking you around to have you exposed to all kinds of painting?

JOHN YEON: No, not at all, [oddly enough]. When she got married and started having children, she seemed to stop everything else in her life. She [gave up] painting and didn't seem to be much interested in it. She was just raising children. And so there was no intellectual nourishment from that source.

MARIAN KOLISCH: There was no education in art.

JOHN YEON: No.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But what about from your father? He was a lumberman, right?

JOHN YEON: Yes, my father had been a lumberman. That's one of those Horatio Alger stories and he was quite often written up as such. But he came from French Canada at some period, and I don't know how he got out to Astoria, but he started working in logging camps and saved his money. He spoke only French, I guess, when he arrived. And eventually he saved enough to be able to buy a little timber and then he introduced donkey engines in a profession where only oxen had been used before. And he had [some invention...]?

MARIAN KOLISCH: When he got to Oregon.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. That's true, I don't know how he became skillful in the logging business. I guess just by experience, because he began work in Horatio Alger fashion, digging ditches for a dollar a day. But by the time I was born he was completely out of the logging business and he invested in Portland real estate.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So he was then a city man, really, except that he had done something about the

Columbia River Highway, right?

JOHN YEON: Yes. He built the Yeon Building, which at the time it was built and for a long time afterwards was the highest building in the state. And he had an office on the 15th floor.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Skyscraper.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And it was hung with large photographs of the Columbia River Highway. I don't remember much about the building of the highway because I was seven years old when it was finished. I did carry the tail of the flag at the dedication of the Vista House, I remember. But building the Columbia River Highway was the big thing in his life. He was very proud of it and it absorbed him. Do you want to talk about that?

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes, because I read what it had been called in some quotation from Harvey Scott, I think, in the Oregonian. He said that it was called "the road from the Garden of Eden"-- which was Portland, of course-- "to the Temple of Nature"-- Mount Hood-- which I thought was kind of a flowery description.

JOHN YEON: Yes, well, you have to realize that before the highway was built, there were no public roads in Oregon to any extent at all. And my father became passionately interested in building a road system for Oregon. I think he got steered into the Columbia River Highway project by Sam Hill, of Seattle, who was a friend of his.

MARIAN KOLISCH: A railroad...

JOHN YEON: Yes, he was connected at that time (although his name was Hill independently). [I don't think he was from] the railroad people. But, as you know, I saw him only once, which was at my father's funeral when I was 17. He had a cape and long flowing white hair, [like God]. And I admired him enormously because he was the only one around with a large-scale romantic imagination. \_\_\_\_\_ . But he was interested in good roads, too. He had bought a property up at Maryhill and constructed a road from the top of the plateau down to the [Columbia--Ed.] river, which was sort of like a Swiss path road. He had a dream of a highway through the Columbia Gorge, and he got my father to put it across along with Amos Benson. The role of my father doesn't seem to be of any significance now because there's no equivalent of it now. He was known as the builder of the Columbia River Highway, but he had to get political support with public funds, and he actually ran the crew that built the road. It wasn't just as it is now where you have a contractor do it. He did the contracting. But it was built by workmen who lived in, like logging camps; they lived out there. And he managed all of that.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And the political funds came from the state or...?

JOHN YEON: From the county. But he had to be influential in getting those funds, [as well as all this...]. He was just out there every day and he was paid a dollar a year.

MARIAN KOLISCH: A dollar a year?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. He did it for nothing but that was just to make it-- he was the County Road Master [in order to do it]. He was in charge of the section \_\_\_\_\_ the county. And as you know, it was a remarkable project, unlike other roads in Oregon. It was a very, very civilized public works project. I think Lancaster was chosen by Sam Hill, who took him to Europe to study roads.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Who was Lancaster?

JOHN YEON: Lancaster was the engineer on the highway. He was a brilliant choice because Lancaster did an excellent job. And at this stage, of course people are interested in Lancaster and not interested in the process which actually brought it about. Which is very understandable.

And they brought many Italian workmen from Italy to do the dry masonry walls. And trees that were injured by blasting, there was tree surgery to save them and the road was located to avoid destroying formations and disturbing things any more than was necessary.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That's quite remarkable in that time. The highway was built at about what time?

JOHN YEON: Oh, 1915 to 1917, I think.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, at any rate, your father was really one of the earliest conservationists we had, and left you with that strong feeling?

JOHN YEON: Well, yes. But I don't think he considered himself a conservationist at all. He was interested in good roads. But he was respectful of landscapes and appreciative. It's interesting that both he and Amos Benson, who made their money in cutting down trees, were both very responsive to landscape because the highway was a promoter, primarily, a way of making the scenery become even more accessible. It was built as a scenic highway and of course, unfortunately, it...

MARIAN KOLISCH: You said something earlier about the Vista House.

JOHN YEON: Oh. Well, yes. The Vista House was built for no reason, actually.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did they do that also?

JOHN YEON: Yes. And it was quite extraordinary that they could talk the body politic into spending that much money on a folly, really. It's like a folly in an 18th-century English garden. It really serves no purpose except-- it was called an observatory and it had toilet facilities in it. I guess it was Oregon's first rest stop in that sense. And the toilet facilities there seem very large now, but \_\_\_\_\_ after the fact. It was just sort of a...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Scenic stop.

JOHN YEON: ...scenic stop and sort of a paying homage to the view in from Crown Point. And curiously enough it does serve the function of an eye-catcher in an English garden because the views which encompass the Vista House are more famous than the views from it. You know, it's kind of a focal point.

MARIAN KOLISCH: As you look up to it from across the river.

JOHN YEON: Yes, or from Installation Point approaching it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I was going to ask you if you feel that some of your major influences-- let's say as a role model-- would one of them be Mr. Hill, do you think?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well I don't...

MARIAN KOLISCH: You just admired him.

JOHN YEON: I admired him and I don't know quite why I admired him so much except, you know... Of course his life was fascinating. He went to Europe and had a penchant for royalty. And I guess

when he knew the King of Belgium, it was rumored that he built Maryhill as a refuge for the King of Belgium. That can't possibly be true because it wouldn't have been ready or it couldn't be built in that much of a hurry. But he had known Queen Marie of Rumania. And I think he probably loaned her some money or gave her some money and she probably said, "If there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know." So when he had this unfinished chateau on the mesa above the Columbia he decided to turn it into a museum and he said, "All right Queenie, there's something you can do for me now. Come over and dedicate it." And she did and she was the first royal personage to visit America, I believe.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh really. America! Not just Oregon.

JOHN YEON: No. And her trip across the continent on the train was ill-fated because it was full of reporters who quarreled among themselves and she endorsed [cold cream and everyone thought that was] kind of \_\_\_\_\_. She dedicated the War Memorial in Kansas City and came out here and went up to Maryhill. The grande dames of Portland went up and tried to tidy up the Meadowlark Inn, which was just a very small wooden building. They put down red carpeting and they scrubbed the place up. I don't think she spend [sic] the night there, but Mrs. Harry Corbett describes the dedication ceremony, saying how grim and really hopeless it all looked, unpromising, until she began speaking. And then she just really became a queen and was very inspirational.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Interesting.

JOHN YEON: She came back to Portland and the horse show at the stockyards was going on. She rode around the ring in an open phaeton-- that's what you call an open carriage-- with her son. The crowds just went wild. She was gesturing like a queen and...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh my. That was...

JOHN YEON: ...really an occasion.

MARIAN KOLISCH: When the queen came over it was sometime before 1920 and after the highway was built.

JOHN YEON: Yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Around then. She wasn't a mistress of Sam Hill. I don't know where I heard that story.

JOHN YEON: No, no. Oh, I don't know about that.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And she gave lots of the...

JOHN YEON: ...lots of things to the museum. And I'm sure that at the time she gave them, she thought this was going to be a worthy enterprise. Her sister, who was Queen of Greece, also gave things. Actually, she gave some very good early Greek pots.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What about some of these things that had been given by the queen-- the two sisters. The quality of them now.

JOHN YEON: Well, it's all very interesting as evidence of American's infatuation with royalty, because Queen Marie's things are just a bunch of mementos. Her throne chair must have been from a summer palace. It looks as though it's a Hollywood concoction. All that is very amusing, and

all these photographs of royal personages, because that's what interested Sam Hill. I remember some of Queen Marie and her veils. And she wrote: "Among My Columbines" and "Marie."

MARIAN KOLISCH: And the drawings by Rodin were given by her, too.

JOHN YEON: No, I don't think so. Queen Marie was a friend of Elma Spreckels in San Francisco, and I think they came over from that connection.

The Greek pots that were given by the Queen of Greece were very good, but she also gave some extremely beautiful [counterfeits] which are just too good to be true. Well, they're not. But they're very pretty.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Are they still there?

JOHN YEON: I think so. Unless they've retired them because of the suspicion.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Suspicion of what?

JOHN YEON: Well, of being, not forgeries, but later.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Not real.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I actually first brought this up. I just said, well, it was just too good to be true. And that turned out to be the case.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Then the basket collection is another much later addition.

JOHN YEON: Yes. I don't know how those were \_\_\_\_\_.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Indian baskets. They were later on, anyway?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I don't know the story.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, should we talk a little bit about...

JOHN YEON: Well, about the museum, which I thought was fascinating, before the recent [bucking up]. It was a folk, art museum. Not a folk-art museum, but a folk, art museum.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I see.

JOHN YEON: Going in, what you would find would be an exhibit of chess sets and early 19th-century sculptures that any other museum in the country would have suppressed. And they were fascinating to see. It's just the kind of museum that a bunch of simple country people-- given rather extraordinary things-- would conjure up. There was an attempt to make it over and sophisticated and scholarly, and I haven't been back since. [I imagine] all that aspect was spoiled. And among all these things were [very] real surprises. Things that were good, just mixed in with the...

MARIAN KOLISCH: ...with some that was not good at all.

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: When did they do that reproduction of Stonehenge?



JOHN YEON: That was done after World War I by Sam Hill. It's supposed to be a reproduction of Stonehenge on a somewhat reduced scale. It's done in reinforced concrete and poured in forms formed by hammering sheet metal into forms to give it a rough surface. And it's as Stonehenge never, never was. It's completely restored and just a full circle and had no relation whatsoever to Stonehenge. But even so it's rather a successful form in that landscape. Looking at the view through these tall, vertical slots frames it in an unexpectedly successful way.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It really is. It's quite remarkable. And in some ways it's very-- I mean the museum itself is kind of corny, but there are some aspects of it that are lovely.

JOHN YEON: It's sort of a Renaissance palazzo. And it's a very [improbable] plateau overlooking the Columbia in a [arid,] Egypt cataract phase, and just a snow-capped mountain-- very dramatic sight.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I don't know that we should go on into the subject of the directorship of that at all, but could you venture any guesses as to how much of the early original contributions are still there?

JOHN YEON: I haven't been back there. I was sorry to say that I thought Bob Campbell would... I didn't know why he wanted to become director, but I wrote a letter that he asked me to write recommending it. I remember distinctly saying that I didn't think he would change things there. Oh, boy, did he ever!

MARIAN KOLISCH: Forever, I think.

JOHN YEON: I just haven't been back since he churned it all up.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It was quite a mess for a while. I don't know what state it's in now.

But maybe we could go on to your education. Can we start talking about school?

JOHN YEON: Well, let me talk a little bit more about my father. Because of his interest in roads, he would take these trips to the various parts of the state. When I was old enough I would go along with him as well as my brother and sisters and my aunt. And so I saw many parts of the state that weren't yet accessible by roads. I remember particularly the coast, [and we] were able to poke in at various spots there. And at the time I saw a lot of the coast, it was, of course, completely undeveloped, and just fantastically beautiful \_\_\_\_\_. And then a flashback of something I remember. I must have been quite young because it was during World War I, and my father was head of the Spruce Division, it was called. He was appointed [an unpaid] job to get spruce out of the coast range because spruce was used for building airplanes. This had to be, obviously, a quick operation and I remember going with him on a train over trestles through the forest and the coast range and then coming through an area that had been logged. And I was just brokenhearted to see the devastation. I remember just being shocked and horrified by it because [I couldn't \_\_\_\_\_]. Well I was around six or seven, I guess. Seven, maybe. But there seemed to be something in that. There was indication that I had...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Your concern...

JOHN YEON: ...agonies I had in store for myself.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because of this concern for nature--is that what you think?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. That's what I mean. And of course I was in the Columbia Gorge with him,

frequently. And then when I was finally able to drive and get there on my own I spent a great deal of time [there \_\_\_\_\_].

MARIAN KOLISCH: As a very small aside here, do you think the lumber companies are doing a better job now as far as cleaning up and not destroying the forest?

JOHN YEON: Oh, yes. When I was young, it seemed that driving, for instance, to the coast-- my first memories of that are going over plank roads and down on the train. But hillsides along the Columbia then were quite ugly because the old growth had been logged and they only took best trees and easiest trees. And there were all these snags all...

[Tape 1; side 2]

JOHN YEON: As a result the logging then left these tall snags that just burned or bleached in the weather. It's odd that Jane Platt once said that Oregon's better looking now than when she was young because you don't see those vast areas of that kind of devastation. When the logging is done now it's clearcut and, anyway, the snags are not left. It greens over quite rapidly.

MARIAN KOLISCH: With deciduous or with new growth?

JOHN YEON: Well, new growth [where] very often there are certainly alders, but you're spared this kind of boneyard stuff, which was on a large scale when old growth trees were involved.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Is it partly because they replant also? That now the lumber companies do some reseeding?

JOHN YEON: There's replanting, natural reforestation. The trees don't have to get very far before they cover the stumps, before they begin logging again.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, you don't see the great, big, wide logging roads, too, through hills.

JOHN YEON: And you don't see old-growth forests any more.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And I find it rather shocking to see some of the messes that are still left, going over the Cascades.

Well, could we talk a little bit about what schools you went to, starting maybe with high school?

JOHN YEON: Let's go back a little behind that. I went to Portsmouth Grammar School down on the peninsula. The big wooden school...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Excuse me, the peninsula where?

JOHN YEON: Between the Columbia and Willamette rivers. Down where I was born. And I want to talk about that because it's a sort of bitterness. I [really] can't say I had a happy childhood, contrary to all the myths and legends about childhood. One reason was that we were sort of socially isolated from the people who lived in that area, with whom I went to school. I was allowed to see just very few kids, and they'd walk home with me sometimes and get within sight of the house and run away. And to make it all the worse, we had all this land, you know, farm land. We had ponies. And, oh, for a while we were driven-- not only me, but my brothers and sisters-- were driven to school in, I guess, a surrey, with a fringe on top and a wicker basket thing.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh. Ponies?

JOHN YEON: Pony cart with seats facing each other and an umbrella with fringes. We were drive down to the school yard [and you know how you go to school with all these] kids observing you. And I just died, oh...

MARIAN KOLISCH: It was embarrassing.

JOHN YEON: ...it was terrible, just awful. God, people just don't realize.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So that you felt totally different than everyone.

JOHN YEON: Oh, yeah. It's really a lousy thing that any kid... Well, anyway, the last year of grammar school I went to school in Washington [state--Ed.] on Bainbridge Island-- [Moran] School. That's quite a few years [on]. I remember being there. I was interested in theater, because I had made little miniature theaters with many changes of sets.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Models?

JOHN YEON: Yes. They were little things out of \_\_\_\_\_ and wood and paper. Those were all burned up when I had scarlet fever so the bugs wouldn't crawl around and affect others...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, no. It's a terrible shame!

JOHN YEON: But that was just one year and didn't have much influence. Then after that I went to Allen Preparatory School, three years, and the last year of that I went to, of all things, Culver Military Academy. I went there voluntarily, but the idea was obviously my father's. He thought it would make a man out of me.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Culver is where?

JOHN YEON: Culver, Indiana. It's south of Chicago a bit. It was a very good military school at the time. And, oh, I was a success there in various ways, and various ways I wasn't. I made the Black Horse Troop, which involves all sorts of acrobatics. You're not supposed to do that in one year.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Acrobatics on horse?

JOHN YEON: Yes. You know, mounting it without saddling and running and jumping over onto another horse. And I did a lot for the literary magazine-- things were published-- and began illustrating articles. I hated it. You had to go there two years in order to graduate, and I was so anxious to get out of there after one year that I took college entrance exams in everything and passed \_\_\_\_\_. I was so desperate to get out I did very well, [could have gone anywhere].

MARIAN KOLISCH: Then you were done in one year.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I didn't have to go back, because I could enter college without graduating. Actually, I didn't graduate from anything. I didn't graduate from grammar school, from high school, or college. I did graduate from Sunday school.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That's all. From Sunday school.

JOHN YEON: Yes. Now at Culver I was appointed to or given the chance to go on a YMCA tour of Europe; it was sort of an honorary appointment. Because the YMCA took charge of the religious

aspect of Culver the way it had in World War I. It was a very, very proper military establishment. And as it turned out there were a few boys who were rather pious, but most went as a chance to get to Europe sans famille. It was a wild, rambunctious tour. That was my first trip to Europe.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you remember being very impressed with what you saw in the way of architecture or art?

JOHN YEON: Yes, I was. I liked Stockholm. And particularly the two cities that looked the way I thought European cities would look were Nuremberg and Prague. Both full of medieval buildings, I guess. I remember the experience very well.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You would probably have been 17 or 18 at that time?

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: How much of Europe did you see?

JOHN YEON: We landed in England and went to Scandinavia, and didn't go into Italy, but came through Germany and France.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Were you particularly turned on by old buildings?

JOHN YEON: Oh, yes. By then I was already getting passionately interested in architecture.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You say already by then. When do you think it started? At Culver or before?

JOHN YEON: Oh, no, but I was interested in houses and architecture. I don't know when it started. But when Mock Crest was developed, of course, there were houses built and I watched very, very carefully. I seemed to know that's what I was interested in because I stopped going to the beach in summer at my own request and stayed in Portland and worked as office boy in the Doyle office. And later an office boy in Brooklyn's office. I didn't learn much architecture then because I always ended up either making models or doing renderings or fancy pictures.

MARIAN KOLISCH: In those times, were you able to work in an architect's office without any training?

JOHN YEON: Oh I was purely an office boy. I wasn't doing any structural...

MARIAN KOLISCH: No drawing.

JOHN YEON: No finish drawings. I was just doing pretty pictures or renderings or models or that kind of thing.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But to go back just for a minute down to the theater. Were you every interested in pursuing the theater as a career?

JOHN YEON: No. I was just interested in [space] design.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That was in the design, stage thing.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. There was a theater at the school I went to which put on a few plays. I suppose that's how I got particularly interested then.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But your trip to Europe was just that one year from Culver.

JOHN YEON: Yes. That must have been in '28 because there was the Olympics in Amsterdam that year, I think it was. And then in 1930, after my father had died, my mother made a trip to Europe with me and my two brothers; my sister was already married. And, of course, I was able to act as guide because I had been there only two years previously. We went to Scandinavia again and attended the 1930 Exposition in Stockholm, which was a very modern exhibition. At the time, I regretted it very much because I was a great admirer of the town hall and the architecture in Sweden that had preceded this international style. It was sort of a renaissance, romantic architecture which I still admire very much. It's been out of fashion in the meantime, and now people are interested in it again. But I saw this exposition as the end of that, as indeed it was.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I don't think I have my dates quite right, but was that just before the new Bauhaus movement?

JOHN YEON: Well, this exposition already was very much the influence of Bauhaus.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So that was the beginning of the end of the romantic style, until very recently.

JOHN YEON: Well, the interest in the romantic style. The romantic style hasn't revived, except post-modernism. But for a long time I think architects were not scornful but disinterested in that Swedish [design]. It had some influence even as far as Portland. The Masonic Temple and the [Neighbors] of Woodcraft Building [were built in that] Swedish romantic renaissance.

[Break in tape]

MARIAN KOLISCH: The trip to Europe with your mother. Could we mention here, just for the family record, the names of your brothers and sister?

JOHN YEON: Yes. My sister's name was Pauline and my brothers were Eugene and Norman.

MARIAN KOLISCH: When you came back from Europe, was that when you went to college?

JOHN YEON: Well, no. I went to college in 1928 or '29. I was only at Stanford one quarter and my father died. He died-- what year was the crash? Was it '29?

MARIAN KOLISCH: '29.

JOHN YEON: Well, then it was in '29, because I came back at the time of his death and never went back to Stanford. Instead I went to New York and worked at an architect's office by prearrangement from Portland, and went to Columbia at night. I got the job in the New York office because [they were] the architects who were remodeling Meier & Frank [Portland department store--Ed.].

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you remember the names?

JOHN YEON: [Young], Moskowitz and Rosenbloom. Julius Meier was a friend of my father's, and I think an executor in my father's will. So he just told them to give me a job and they did. Simple as that. I lived in a little room up by Columbia. However, Columbia was excruciatingly boring. I had to take courses on, you know, how to put water tanks on top of buildings in New York and so on. And I'm afraid I misbehaved very badly. I kept the job but I kept dropping out of classes and New York became very glamorous at night. Instead of night school, I met fascinating people and that

interrupted my formal education.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It was surely not uneducational to do this.

JOHN YEON: Not at the time, no. So that trip-- I don't know how long I was there. Anyway, I wanted to come back and did come back because Julius Meier was running for governor. He ran for governor because a friend of his, George Joseph, had been elected governor. George Joseph was an attorney, interested in public power, I think. But he was elected governor, and then in the interval between the election and the inauguration, during a speech down on the coast near Astoria, he had a heart attack and died. So his friend Julius Meier carried on his [great] campaign and was elected. And then later George Joseph Jr. married my sister.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The son of the governor.

JOHN YEON: The son of the governor-elect. And anyway, I came home. I was impatient, terribly impatient. I had all kinds of things I wanted to accomplish that more formal education wouldn't [allow]. And while I was east, I also saw many parkways around New York City which I was very wildly enthusiastic about.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Was that pre-Moses or Moses time?  
Could use on ed note that this is Robert Moses.

JOHN YEON: Well, actually, I guess pre-Moses. The parkways out at New York City were the earliest of that sort of thing and sort of set the example for others in the East. Now they're just networks out of [the city]. When I came back I was distressed at the destruction going on in Oregon in various ways, but I was also, oddly enough, distressed at the way highways were being built. My father was so anxious to get highways into all corners of the state, and I was very apprehensive of what would result to the face of the land as a result of building highways as they were then being built in Oregon. They built a road and in no time at all it was choked with local traffic because everybody could build a house or a roadside business along it. And pretty soon this road intended to get you cross-country became choked with local traffic. Then they built another one and the same thing happened. So I was for trying to get freeways built, you know-- a curious turn of events. I can't explain how I got into any position of having any influence in all of this, but when I was twenty-one, I was appointed by Governor Meier in the State Park Commission. Well, the State Park Commission was purely advisory. It was appointed because Lesley Scott, who was chairman of the State Highway Commission then, was against any money on state parks. And state parks were under the Highway Commission. So in order to get around this impasse, Governor Meier got together a group of people who he thought would persuade him to change his mind. Other members of the commission were Aubrey Watzek, and J.C. Ainsworth, and Rodney Glisan, and Mrs. Dr. A.E. Rockey. And I was there, too, obviously much younger than the others.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Twenty-one.

JOHN YEON: Yes. I don't know whether Meier knew I was that young or not. I had grown a mustache and tried to look older, and did look older than that.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Still fresh from New York.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. And, I had to go all over the state on that job. It soon became apparent that Lesley Scott was not going to be influenced by anyone and at some crisis, the whole commission resigned. But by then I was in the fray. I had an office in the Yeon Building and I guess anybody

whose name is John Yeon, and his address is John Yeon, Yeon Building, Portland, Oregon, gets put on various committees. The American Civic Association, headquartered in Washington, D.C., nabbed onto me and made me chairman of the Oregon Chapter.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Maybe you could explain what the American Civic Association is?

JOHN YEON: Well, it was interested in planning and national parks, and advancing the planning and...

MARIAN KOLISCH: For national parks?

JOHN YEON: Well, planning generally, and promoting and advocating and defending national parks particularly. And, oh dear, one of our scraps with the Highway Department was over Neahkanie Mountain. Let me explain the attitude of the Highway Department then. Lesley Scott was the chairman. He was the son of Harvey Scott, the founder of The Oregonian. And when I would go and talk to him about things-- try to change his attitudes-- I remember distinctly what he said to me once: "Trees. All they're good for is birds." He said, "I was here when it was all trees and mud and it was terrible." And Baldock, who was even then, I think, the chief highway engineer. He held the job longer probably than any other chief engineer in the country, because it's a job that usually is involved in fraud, or often involved in fraud, and kind of a plum; appointments get changed very frequently. He had it for a very long time and he was honest, and no doubt efficient, and an absolute barbarian. He was going to build roads straight as a crow flies and he wasn't interested in any of this nonsense about freeways or parkways or anything of that sort.

So they were planning a road around Neahkanie Mountain and they had a great, straight line across the base of the mountain which involved blasting great portions of it into the sea. And also, by then, they were planning the new highway through the Columbia Gorge. That was in the early thirties, because the new highway had to be built through the Gorge as a result of planning a dam there for one thing. Anyway, the scenic highway was accommodating all the truck traffic through there. Hard to imagine now. And below Crown Point, Baldock had designed this great gash across there three miles long through the bottomlands. Well, right after the Park Commission resigned without influencing the Highway Department in regard to Neahkanie Mountain, particularly, I guess, I gathered together aerial photographs of Neahkanie Mountain and the Columbia Gorge and other photographs, and took off for Washington, D.C. I don't know whether I made an appointment with the chief of the Bureau of Public Roads before I left or just took a chance when I got there. Anyway, he received me. He was at a desk at the end of a big, long office, [like Mussolini's desk] at the end of an empty space, you know. [I entered this] impressive office with fear and trembling, and he was very, very nice. He looked at all my photographs and they interested him, and he sent out his chief landscape architect, Wilbur Simonson, who had designed the Mount Vernon Parkway between Washington and Mount Vernon. That had been designed as a demonstration highway. Wilbur Simonson came out and consulted with the engineers in the Gorge and persuaded them to put in a very gradual curve through the bottomlands below Crown Point which is there now. It's unnoticeable now, but a straight gash across there would have been a very angry scar. And at Neahkanie Mountain, he persuaded them to give up this straight line and modulate the alignment, so that the pinnacle and the buttresses were not blasted into the sea. But that was just by going right to the source; Scott, or Baldock, wasn't very influenced by me at all.

The Neahkanie project, oddly enough, had other influences in that because there had [been] an exhibition in a museum-- oh, I don't know what it was. I shouldn't even mention it since I can't remember the theme. But whatever it was, it was appropriate, and I had made a model of the road on Neahkanie Mountain, how I thought it should be. I made it in clay, just four or five feet long, and

photographed it. It showed masonry retaining walls holding up the road instead of blasting [out of] concrete. And one picture of this (where the little bridge crosses the chasm alongside that pinnacle-- the picture had the pinnacle and the bridge and the eroded forms of the mountain) was in the Oregonian in a review of the exhibition. And the state bridge engineer, McCulloch, saw this and decided to try and do it. So the masonry retaining walls around Neahkanie Mountain are the result of that model. I never wanted to take credit for it because they didn't build them the way the model showed them. The model showed them sloping with the slope of the mountain, leaning against the mountain. And they built them just vertically. So they look as though they're kind of leaning, actually they're really not. But anyway, they're masonry walls and they have some indication of breaks, rather than smooth surfaces, which my model had. But the breaks in my model were very deep.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Something I've always been curious about, is when there's a retaining wall built vertically, straight up and down; I should think it wouldn't hold nearly as well, the land.

JOHN YEON: No, it shouldn't of course. But I don't know whether when they built it they actually relied upon the stone for support or whether they faced a wall. Anyway, I had my finger in the Neahkanie Mountain project. Years later, there wouldn't have been a raid around Neahkanie Mountain at all. They would have gone inland in order to preserve it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Your interest in Neahkanie, of course, has continued over a long, long period. I don't know if we want to talk yet about the cottage there.

I wanted to ask you if at one time you talked about not being approving of the Bauhaus School of architecture. What was the difference between that and the Beaux Arts School?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, I didn't mean to sound disapproving of Beaux Art except that it put an end to a movement in Stockholm which I admired very much. And it was a death verdict on that. Obviously with no formal architecture training I wasn't involved in Beaux Arts training. While I was in New York working in this office I entered one of their programs...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Maybe you should define what Beaux Arts really means?

JOHN YEON: Well, it can mean most anything, but now it usually means classical architectural training. It's a classical or traditional architecture, versus the Bauhaus which broke with traditional architecture. And the Beaux Arts training for architecture, previously, was making your own elaborate drawings of public buildings in the classical style [\_\_\_\_\_].

MARIAN KOLISCH: And that is opposed to, I think you've said, regional design?

JOHN YEON: Well, yes. Beaux Arts is classical European architectural training. It is not regional because classical [\_\_\_\_\_]. And my one brush with it, I did enter this thing when I was in the office in New York. It didn't get to first base because the program specified a half-inch margin between the various elements-- side views and front views.

[Tape 2; side 1]

My first visit to Neahkanie, I remember very clearly. I had met Harry Wentz in A.E. Doyle's office. He was a good friend of Mr. Doyle-- where I was an office boy-- and we met. And eventually, I wanted to call on him at his house in Neahkanie and I went there on a typical sort of beach day. There was fog shrouding the mountain. But I remember going into the house and it was the first really beautiful piece of architecture, at least in Oregon, that I had experienced.



MARIAN KOLISCH: Excuse me, but I wonder if here maybe we should say who Harry Wentz was?

JOHN YEON: Well, he was head of the art school at the museum and had been I guess, virtually, since the museum was founded.

MARIAN KOLISCH: In Portland.

JOHN YEON: In Portland. And he was an artist who produced very few works, but his work I still admire very, very much.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And he was a good friend of Mr. Doyle.

JOHN YEON: Yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Were they contemporaries in age?

JOHN YEON: I suppose they were.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But a generation older than you.

JOHN YEON: Oh yes. It's hard to remember ages then because everybody seemed so old when you're that young. But he [Harry Wentz] died ten or fifteen years ago at the age of 80.

The house was all wood, of course, and the inside was exposed structure. It wasn't built the way an ordinary house is in Oregon, on two-by-fours with an air space. The structure was built more like a barn, actually, with the timbers exposed and just [sheeting] on the outside. All this was in spruce, which had never been finished and had a very pearly lustre like the inside of a sea shell. Looking out of the big north window you looked right down the side of the mountain-- the mountain coming out of the sea. And the window was surrounded with a spruce tree [\_\_\_\_\_], spruce tree branches, all making a very nice composition. The day I was there, the fog was settled on the mountain but it was silhouetting the pinnacle along the road, which made it stand out, and it made the whole thing seem very vast and mysterious. It never has looked as well since.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did he build that? Or he designed it?

JOHN YEON: Well, he saved up money to go to Europe, I guess, just after World War I. And instead he saw a picture of Neahkanie in a real estate promoter's window downtown and went down there and bought some land and built the house. The architect was A.E. Doyle. But the mystery of all that is that nothing else Doyle did looked anything vaguely like that house. Wentz never claimed that he designed it, but he must have had a very strong influence.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I would think so.

Did you at anytime go to the Portland Art Museum School?

JOHN YEON: Well, the one encouragement that I got from my mother, [I suppose with the consent of my father], was that I went to a children's class on Saturday at the museum art school. And I really didn't like that at all because I wanted to make pretty pictures, and even then they would encourage students to just express themselves in sort of childlike drawings which I thought were indeed very childlike drawings. I'd seen Chu Chin Chow just after World War I and I was full of Arabian Nights fantasies and wanted the slave girls in pantaloons with brass brassieres; and it just didn't go over at all with these children doing their flat dimensional, flat visions. So that didn't last very long.

But later I went to Harry Wentz's composition class and also took life drawing at night.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did he teach that too? The life drawing?

JOHN YEON: No, well, he'd stop in occasionally, but usually not. But the composition class was extremely interesting, because he would assign a subject for composition and then you'd bring it in next week. Then they were all put up on this board in front of the class and you would discuss the compositions. And in the course of discussing the compositions I remember him putting his hands over parts of it and explaining that this didn't work or that did. And in the course of all this he would have examples of works by famous painters. The museum had a large collection of brown photographs of old masters and also there were colored reproductions available. His selection included a very wide range of things from ancient Egyptian to Chinese to modern Impressionists. The museum was a very advanced and courageous place in those days, more so than most museums.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you have any idea why? I've always heard that our museum was rather outstanding in the times, in its beginnings.

JOHN YEON: I don't know exactly why. Of course it was due to individuals. Anna Crocker, who was the curator, was a very courageous spinster, and au courant and concerned with what was going on in the world. My goodness, the museum had shows of modern art before most other museums did.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Rather surprising for a little place out on the west coast at that time.

JOHN YEON: Yes, and the mystery of all that is it was an early start. It's much earlier than Seattle museums. Maybe not earlier than San Francisco museums, but it was a very clean, progressive place. But through the years, it's become a very unsuccessful story in the museum field.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Very sad.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. There was too much democracy.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I think you're right. And the same thing probably with the school. The school has suffered the lack of somebody like Mr. Wentz.

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Tell me some more about Harry Wentz. He saw Neahkanie as a place for this particular style of house?

JOHN YEON: Well, the house seemed appropriate to the place. It certainly did to me, and, of course, it also did to Belluschi. Belluschi and I went down there quite often.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Was it this time you were working in Mr. Doyle's office?

JOHN YEON: I wasn't actually working in Doyle's office then. That came later.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But Belluschi was.

JOHN YEON: Oh yes, indeed. Doyle was then dead and Belluschi was doing all the designing in the office. Belluschi and I were very good friends at that point, I suppose partially through Harry Wentz.

Harry Wentz had a very strong influence on Belluschi, too.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Mr. Doyle and Mr. Wentz were roughly the same age.

JOHN YEON: I think so, yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And Pietro Belluschi came to work for Doyle. Then you had known both of them before you went to work in that office?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, that's another story. It's probably too long for the battery.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, no. Let's have the story.

JOHN YEON: But let me go back, before we get into that, to more with the landscape. I can't explain why I was such a sucker for landscape, but it's been a great interest in my life, in particular the Oregon landscape. I suppose just because I was born here. It's what I knew early on. I early on was interested in architecture which would fit that unique landscape that I liked so much. And I remember going on those trips to Europe-- the things that impressed me most were things that I felt would work in Oregon. Not copied, but would suggest solutions for Oregon. And, of course there are different parts of Oregon. The east and west are very different. Along with all that was my interest in saving the landscape, which was being brutalized at such a rapid stage when I was young. Probably much faster than now, because roads were being built and virgin areas were being opened up and messed up at a great rate. And along about the same early time in my life, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected. All this was during the Depression; my father died just a few days before the crash or a month before the crash. And one of Roosevelt's interests was in planning. The whole Northwest regional planning movement got started because of him. It caught on like a prairie fire then, and I got sucked into that. And it just took all of my time and energies. I think the reason there was such enthusiasm for it is that people saw it as an open sesame for public funds, because early on, there'd be no public works projects except as recommended through the planning process. Roosevelt later discovered that he couldn't quite work it that way, and things had to be done for political reasons. And when that came apparent the whole planning movement collapsed [oh, it was terrible]. But while it was going there were conferences and speeches and [other things]. There used to be conferences in Spokane, Seattle, and Portland...

MARIAN KOLISCH: How many states were involved in this?

JOHN YEON: Well, this was the regional planning commission. I guess there's Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, I think. I don't think Montana was included. The planning wasn't the kind that I was interested in. But it left it up to me to carry all that side of it. What they really were interested in was sort of economic plans: port development; forests, particularly. That's when there was some of the first loud talk about sustained yield. And all this is very good. But as far as actual, physical planning, in other words a good road versus a bad road, it wasn't in there at all. I tried to carry that end of it and it was just an awful burden. I was chairman of the Recreation Committee for the whole state of Oregon, which was nothing less than picking out where all the state parks should be. And, oh, of course, freeways. I was in there pitching freeways.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did you get...?

JOHN YEON: Well, I was chairman of the Committee on Highways that recommended freeways. No. The recommendation went through all the proper channels. There was also state planning. Jamieson Parker was chairman of that. And it got up to the legislature and Baldock refused to

support it. He said, "I think we have enough power already."

MARIAN KOLISCH: Enough power?

JOHN YEON: Yes. So they didn't enact it. I don't know when there was freeway legislation enacted in Oregon. I think during the war. I think it was finally because the federal government said that any state that didn't have freeway legislation wouldn't get federal highway funds.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Second World War.

JOHN YEON: Second World War. But I'm sorry to say that while I no doubt did a lot of propaganda in favor of it, I was not responsible for the actual legislation. But, oh, what other committees? As a subcommittee of the Regional Planning Commission there was a Columbia Gorge Commission.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That was a part as long ago as when?

[Break in Tape]

JOHN YEON: The Columbia Gorge Committee was under the Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission, which was under the National Resources Board in Washington, D.C. And I was made chairman of that.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Probably in 1936?

JOHN YEON: No, earlier than that. Probably 1935-- maybe 1934. Bonneville Dam was authorized and it was under construction. The committee members were from the states involved. But the report covered recommendations for the standards-- wide right of way, control of access, and landscape considerations in the design. A very, very progressive highway-- four lanes, divided road and acquiring a wide right of way through the Gorge. That was all illustrated with examples of what happens to an ordinary highway and the advantages of a freeway.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And that was accepted.

JOHN YEON: Well, yes, the whole report was accepted, but the report also included power policies of Bonneville. It wasn't actually accepted in the form recommended, but in another form accomplishing the same ends. And that recommended the flat rate for power from Bonneville to areas outside of the Gorge, so that there'd be no incentive for industry to crowd into the Gorge in order to get a cheaper rate by being closer to the dam. At that time, of course, that's exactly what the Portland Chamber of Commerce wanted to happen. In these words, they wanted a second Pittsburgh in the Columbia Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: They even said that?

JOHN YEON: They said it in those words. So this was trying to thwart that ambition. Which it, as I say, indirectly did because the final legislation provided that power couldn't be sold for any use that could damage the scenery of the Gorge. But the flat postage rate wasn't the way of doing it. And it recommended, oh, Forest Service not logging in the Gorge, of course, and county converting to parks any land that became tax delinquent. That was never done except in the case of the Beacon Rock State Park, which was a direct result of that recommendation. But the highway report was completely ignored. They went ahead and built the highway through the Gorge-- not to the standards recommended. They built a three-lane highway and before it got to the Dalles, it was such a death trap that the state had to start it all over and rebuild it into a four-lane divided road at

enormous additional expense.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Go back and begin again.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. This was a scandal that has never been aired.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh my.

JOHN YEON: And it's all very curious that the Highway Department was so stupid in concentrating so on the surface of the roadway. Henry Cabell was the chairman of the Highway Commission and he was an educated man, had been around a great deal, and you would think he would've influenced highway policy. But he just worshipped Baldock as an engineer in a field he didn't know anything about. He just worshipped Baldock and thought his job was to defend whatever Baldock said. And, of course, that's a hard job in itself because everybody was after the Highway Commission to build a roadway there.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And Baldock was interested mostly in the surface of the road.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Get it from here to there in the straightest line.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So it was started and then they had to stop and back up and go at it...

JOHN YEON: Well, [they went] over to The Dalles and then they started right over again.

MARIAN KOLISCH: After they finished all the way to The Dalles?

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: At a cost of at least double what it should have...

JOHN YEON: Oh, well [it was enormously \_\_\_\_\_]. It's a fine road now. It could have been an absolutely marvelous road if it had been properly planned. I remember at one point I was trying to get the federal government to design and build it since most of their funds were the funds with which it was built. I wanted to get them to do it as a demonstration freeway such as they'd done in Mount Vernon. But there wasn't any legislator who was willing to go to bat. Well, then the report, once it was finished, that was the end of that committee's work. Of course the war came along not too long afterwards. And the Columbia Gorge committees that are still extant now, they were not a continuation of this committee. They were something quite different.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, you also talk about the State Park Committee. That was very early when you were twenty-one or so, right? And then this one later.

JOHN YEON: Yes. January 1937, '38. I was twenty-six when this was completed. I wrote all of this myself except the letters of transmittal.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you were very, very full of energy. [You got an] early start. Was there another conservation society? That's all I know, that there was something called the Conservation Society, of which you were chairman?

JOHN YEON: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember. There were lots [of things]. I was sounding off on such subjects all along. Here are pamphlets on freeways I had published. [I don't know] if it did much good. And articles in the Commonwealth Review. And then there was a City Club committee on the

Columbia Gorge Highway; I wrote that report and presented it. Then, here's a magazine called American Forests, the June 1936 issue. There's an article on the issue of the Olympics by John B. Yeon.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The Olympics.

JOHN YEON: Olympic National Park. I was a very strong supporter of that movement.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You mean as it was being begun?

JOHN YEON: Well, it was proposed under the Roosevelt Administration and it was very bitterly opposed by the Forest Service and the community all around the peninsula, and the State of Washington.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Why was it opposed?

JOHN YEON: Well, Olympic Park contains a large expanse of old-growth timber-- the biggest expanse left. It's as though you were talking about the Amazon. There's nothing left of any size except in the Olympic Peninsula; this Northwest rainforest type. And the land involved was under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service and, of course, they're set up to produce timber and they're a very powerful bureaucracy. This magazine, American Forests, is essentially a loggers' magazine. Supposedly the Forest Service [knew]-- they had had an article in here previously against the park by a Seattle photographer. Very strong article. And I wanted to rebut it, so I wrote this issue. And oddly enough, they accepted and published it. And it was influential. Richard Neuberger, for instance, read it and went to bat for the park. I was dragged back to Washington to testify at a Senate hearing as an example of local sentiment. Of course that was absolutely the opposite of the way it was. In fact, they had a price on my head out there. There was only one other person in Washington, Irving Clark, that I communicated with in Seattle, who was for it. Anyway, it happened and I'm proud of my part in it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Was Neuberger the one who was able to...

JOHN YEON: He did most to push the park. There were others, too. He was influential as being a western senator.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That's rather remarkable, isn't it, that he was able to do that against the efforts of the rest of them?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I was also interested in the North Cascades National Park. And before the Olympic Park was finished, I was involved in a camping trip through the North Cascades with a woman from Washington who was head of the American Civic Association. I invited her out to get her interested in North Cascades as a national park, because actually I thought that that was an even more remarkable area than the Olympics.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Where do you mean, the North Cascades?

JOHN YEON: Well, at that time it was a large area starting at the Canadian border and running south, not as far as Mount Rainier. This camping trip was organized mostly, actually, by Aubrey Watzek because he was good at that sort of thing. This woman, [Harlene James], was along, and Aubrey Watzek and Harry Wentz. We had this wonderful trip through the North Cascades. Well, she was impressed with the area, indeed, but she said that it was most unwise to promote it at that time because the Olympic Park was not settled and it would be divisive. She said if the Olympics

was not created soon, the forest would be logged, whereas the assets of the North Cascades would last longer because commercial timber was not involved there.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Uh huh. She was from the east?

JOHN YEON: She was from Washington, D.C. She was Executive Secretary of the American Civic Association. Later the name was changed to American Planning Association.

MARIAN KOLISCH: She advised you to wait.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Which I did. And eventually I don't think I had any influence at all in the North Cascades Park project. It came from another bunch of supporters.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But perhaps because of the success of the Olympic Park.

JOHN YEON: Well, I'm afraid the North Cascades was inevitable. Such a marvelous area. I just mention that because it's another national park project I was trying to promote.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Are there any parks in Oregon, [forest parks], that you've had something to do with?

JOHN YEON: National Parks, no. The Columbia Gorge, which is a whole 'nother story...

MARIAN KOLISCH: The freeways, before we leave those completely, is a subject that I think is debatable now. How they're doing with freeways at this point. They're using up so much land, it seems to me, for every entrance and exit.

JOHN YEON: Yes. It's odd that now, probably, I would have been fighting freeways. But that's a whole 'nother question. If you're going to build a road, then it should be a freeway. That was my interest in it. I wasn't promoting the proliferation of highways, but just building them properly so that they don't turn into city streets and become choked and have to build them over, occupying more and more land.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Which is what they seem to be doing now.

JOHN YEON: Well, I think in Oregon, at least, the freeway binge is over. The main ones are built.

MARIAN KOLISCH: In a good way, do you think, mostly?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, they're underbuilt. That's the only trouble. In contrast to the State of Washington I think the Oregon ones have been underbuilt and they've become inadequate much sooner than necessary.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Lack of foresight?

JOHN YEON: Yes. Actually the ones around Seattle, you know, have many lanes and I think do a much better job.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This involvement with the Gorge Commission that we've talked about \_\_\_\_\_ into what is now the struggle of what is going with the present Gorge Commission.

JOHN YEON: Well, yes. It's the same effort and it's revived and still unsolved. A solution doesn't seem imminent to me at the moment or even very hopeful. The present effort is...

[tape ends]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH JOHN YEON  
AT HIS HOME IN PORTLAND, OREGON  
DATE: DECEMBER 16, 1982  
INTERVIEWER: MARIAN W. KOLISCH

JOHN YEON: JOHN YEON  
MARIAN KOLISCH: MARIAN KOLISCH

[Tape 2; Side 2]

MARIAN KOLISCH: This is a continuation of the interview with John Yeon in Portland, Oregon. Today's session is December 16, 1982.

JOHN YEON: Well, let me add a few comments regarding what we talked about last time that occurred to me since then, about my grandmother's house and the pioneer land grant. At one end of the pioneer land grant, they gave the land for the campus for the University of Portland that's there now. At the time they gave it it wasn't a Catholic school. But some religious denomination started the university, and they gave the land for it. Then there's a park between Columbia Park and Willamette Boulevard that was given later by myself, my brother and sister. It stretches from Columbia Park.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, to the university.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Or to Willamette Boulevard. There are a few sequoia trees around this horseshoe crescent that Willamette Boulevard surrounds. I'm responsible for those, because I envisioned a very brave site with giant sequoias around this semi-circular bluff. I wrote to the California Forestry Commission to find out where I could obtain enough to accomplish this. And they wrote back that they had small plants and they would be glad to supply them. So they sent them up and they were heeled in for a year by the city park service, and then planted by the park service; not very well, I'm afraid.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you remember roughly when that was?

JOHN YEON: Oh, yes, it was about 1932, I think. They just dug holes and put them in and went away and left them and didn't water them or fertilize them. Very few of them survived. But there are still some up there.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And they're gigantic now.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And they are relics of an unfulfilled dream. Park Service planted some of the left-over sequoias in other parks, which I recognize occasionally.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do the landscape people when they're doing around freeways and so forth, often plant something and then go away and forget about it?

JOHN YEON: No, well, there's very little planting done now because of budget problems. Ordinarily they take good care of them. But in that case, this wasn't really a park project, and [I just wanted to get it over with]. And Paul Kaiser was appointed the superintendent of Portland Parks. He was an engineer for the Park Department, and a very good park superintendent resigned in a huff, and Kaiser was promoted to park superintendent. And while he was park superintendent nothing



imaginative happened in the Portland park system.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Why did he resign in a huff?

JOHN YEON: Oh, the previous man was Mish. He was a brilliant park superintendent. [ ] Park was created under him, and Laurelhurst Park, I think, and other well-landscaped parks. He had rather grandiose plans for the park system. And, at the time, Bill Brewster, Sr., was a member of the city council in Portland. Brewster objected to some of the projects which he thought were extravagant and Mr. Mish resigned. A great loss to the city, because what happened afterwards was, I think, a very dry, dull period and much would have been accomplished with more imagination and energy. I've always, in the back of my head, held this against Bill Brewster, Sr., who was otherwise quite a fine chap.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But not very foresighted in this respect.

JOHN YEON: No, not in this instance. Well, so much for the sequoias. The old Victorian house of my grandmother's was occupied briefly by my sister after the war. But since then, until my mother died in '55, she maintained it, kept a caretaker there, for no use whatsoever except she couldn't part with what she called her old homeplace. And when she died I thought, of course, that it would be torn down and sold. Instead, the land around the house was sold off, and the garden part was sold off and built upon, and the house was kept and various fountains and other things were added to it. I wish it had been torn down, but it's still there.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Is it a sort of a historical landmark?

JOHN YEON: It's a city historical landmark.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But they've added to it to gild the lily.

JOHN YEON: Well, yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And the development and the land around had been [ ]?

JOHN YEON: Yes, the highway is now choked with houses right up close to it. My sister's husband, Joseph, whom I mentioned before as son of the governor-elect who was never inaugurated-- he was a wonderful influence in the family. When everything got rough he would just start laughing and everyone would pull out of it. But he was also very generous for things that I was interested in. He gave most of the Larch Mountain corridor-- it's a timber corridor going to Larch Mountain-- and the other part was given by the Bridal Veil Limber Company, although that project was the brainchild of Martin Munger, who was a grand old man in the Forest Service. And he also gave George Joseph State Park, which is in addition to the Latourelle Falls Park.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That is where?

JOHN YEON: It's above the Latourelle Falls [ ]. And then he gave the area that's now a lake and meadowland between the freeway and Latourelle, which is part of Rooster Rock State Park.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Which is all land that had belonged to him.

JOHN YEON: To his father. He had inherited it from his father, who had a house, who had relatives in Latourelle. Well, so much for that.

We were talking about the Columbia Gorge last time. And I wanted to explain that the recent, modern Columbia Gorge Commissions had no direct connection at all with the previous commission that I was involved in. In fact, the revival was a result of Gertrude Glutz Jensen's effort, I believe, and the Portland Women's Forum. This was a group of well-intended ladies, and Gertrude Jensen had a pink-and-white complexion and wore enormous garden hats and accomplished quite a bit. In a sense, she was responsible for the exchange effected by BLM [U.S. Bureau of Land Management] next to Benson Park, which contains Willamette Falls, and \_\_\_\_\_ Falls. Next to that was a large area including Mist Falls and Angel's Rest which became tax delinquent after the war and reverted to the county. Instead of the county hanging onto it and making a park out of it, they auctioned it off and shortly thereafter it was to be logged.

MARIAN KOLISCH: When it was auctioned off, it was bought by a lumber company?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Mrs. Jensen worked to get the BLM to exchange it for land outside of the Gorge, which is its present status. She effected a couple of other land exchanges in the Latourelle area. And that was all to the good. She very kindly says that she used my report as her bible. She got into trouble with Governor McCall and she was sacked, when he became governor, because she was opposing the scrap iron mill in Columbia Gorge, at Cascade Locks.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And he was in favor of that?

JOHN YEON: He was in favor of it. This is very surprising because he was an environmentalist.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes it is. It definitely is.

JOHN YEON: He was opposed in it by lots of people, but Mrs. Jensen was on the front lines and got sacked. And he appointed instead, Nani Warren, because she's a large contributor to Republican politicians and also she lived on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge. She had previously been chairman of the Multnomah County Planning Commission, which is indeed hard to understand. But that didn't work out and they got rid of her. So this was another job of, vaguely in that area. And, I think it's true to say-- although he didn't say to me-- Governor McCall has said to others I know that that was the worst mistake of his administration.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do governors frequently fill this kind of a position with political appointments?

JOHN YEON: Well, I suppose they do. But this is no plum, because there's no salary connected. Should be just a lot of work. But Nani Warren-- I remember the conference she had shortly after she was appointed. It was held in the Thunderbird [at Jantzen Beach--Ed.]. It was a large conference because people were interested, and it lasted all day. And it was deadly dull. Just long-winded. Governor McCall was there with Governor Evans [Washington State governor--Ed.], although they were there for other reasons. They looked in briefly at noon and both gave speeches. But the whole program, there wasn't much constructive material offered. But I made two speeches, and one of them was urging that the Columbia Gorge Commission obtain a federal study of the Gorge as a possible national recreation area. This was an entirely reasonable proposal then because such things were being done.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did we say about what time this was? When you originally made the proposal, that was shortly after McCall was elected?

JOHN YEON: Yes. What would it be? 1970?

MARIAN KOLISCH: I don't know.

JOHN YEON: As I say, it was just a request that a study be made. Mrs. Jensen was at the meeting and she got up and made a little speech. She proposed that it be the sense of the conference to pursue this endeavor. And it was voted unanimously. It was the only thing that the audience voted on. So I thought the thing would proceed. And I waited and waited for something to happen and I called the office, where they had a secretary. They didn't seem to know what was being done, and were very cagey about it. And over a year passed, I guess, maybe longer, and I ran into Nani Warren at a party, I think it was at Tommy Kerr's, actually, and she started talking about the Gorge. And I said, "Well, what in the world is happening? Why doesn't something happen on the national recreation area study?" And she says, "I don't want it to happen. I'm determined to keep the feds out of the Gorge." Actually, what she said is, "I'm against parks. All they bring is noise and litter." So that's why nothing happened at a time when indeed such a proposal would have been conducive of positive concrete results. It was still feasible then.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So the proposal just died.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And most anything that you's bring up, well, the timing was wrong, the timing was wrong. Of course she waited until the timing favored her attitude of keeping the feds out of the Gorge, because now it's very difficult to get the feds to do anything in our state. I was unhappy about this to a degree but I had to let off steam in that occasion. And, well, to backtrack a little bit, there was finally a study made by the Park Service that wasn't instigated at all by the Columbia Gorge Commission, which it should have been. Their report was, I thought, a very good one. It was certainly exhaustive, and very favorable to federal protection of the Gorge. It offered four alternatives, ranging from nothing to a little more protection to finally a national recreation area. This was to be voted upon by the Gorge Commission in the middle of the winter. And this was the time that I thought really I had to sound off. I drove up-- with Nancy Russell who was just beginning to get involved in all of this-- and we went to Bonneville and waded through the snow to the meeting. There was by then an organization called the Columbia Gorge Coalition, which was formed to advance the same objectives that I was interested in.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did that include Washington State, too?

JOHN YEON: Yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So before that it had been just Oregon.

JOHN YEON: Well, the Columbia Gorge Coalition was formed, I think, because the Gorge Commissions weren't accomplishing anything. It was prompted by this park study, wanting to support it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because it had been mostly Oregon people on the commission before.

JOHN YEON: Well, there are two commissions. There's an Oregon commission and a Washington commission. And they acted separately, although in recent years they've tried to get their acts together and meet together. So the man who ran the coalition had alerted the press to this meeting and there were television cameras and reporters there. And I got up and others spoke, too, in favor of the Park Service report. But I got up and let go on Nani Warren, and explained her attitude. I also explained that it was rather strange that she was against federal help in the Gorge because from their house at Prindle, the view they looked upon with such pleasure and pride is all under federal protection. And anyway the Washington side would be protected by the same process. I won't go into all that was argued, but it was an impassioned speech. And the television camera got it. The only time there were sparks or friction was when I maybe unwisely mentioned

that a personal philosophy was legitimate, anybody could have one, but when they're in a public job that it shouldn't influence their decisions. But I said this seems to be a family thing and I cited Bob Warren's objections to the Landmark District.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That would be her husband.

JOHN YEON: He had scuttled back, for no other reason than that he didn't want to live under another layer of bureaucracy. So she says, "Don't get personal." And I said, "Well, what I know about that is what I've read in the papers and the papers are full of that." So the result of the meeting was-- it was terribly complicated, this maneuver, as far as the Commission point of view-- the Commission voted, I forget, three to two, in favor of federal help in the Gorge. And against Nani Warren. She tried to scotch it. And then, oh, I forget all the sequence of these events, but Governor Atiyeh, of course, doesn't like the feds either. And the governor of Washington then was Dixy Lee Ray, Dixy Lee Ray, or anyway, Dixy.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Dixy Lee Ray.

JOHN YEON: She wasn't at all interested in the Gorge. And Atiyeh wrote a letter opposing the feds in the Gorge, in opposition to the majority of his Columbia Gorge Commission recommendation. It was signed by Atiyeh and Nani Warren and Dixy Lee and sent to all the delegation in Washington. And Nani Warren signed it even though her Commission had...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Had voted in favor.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. So it got quite sticky. And she still has the job. Now, I think, she has changed her position somewhat. Governor Atiyeh was forced to change his position because there's very prominent people like Bob Wilson and others who wanted to do something to help save the Gorge and persuaded him to change. And then Nani had to change her position. This had one embarrassing consequence. They had a caretaker at the Prindle property and they wanted him to run for county commissioner to keep the feds out of the Gorge. He was just living on their property and didn't have any property of his own in the Gorge, and so they gave him a piece of their property up on the other side of the highway. And he ran for county commissioner and was elected.

MARIAN KOLISCH: In Washington.

JOHN YEON: Yes. Then, after they changed their position because Atiyeh changed his position (and maybe she changed her mind, anyway), they had this man in that position. And he's fought teeth and tongue against any federal involvement in the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And still is?

JOHN YEON: And still is. And I was told-- it may be sheer gossip-- that they tried to get the land back. But I don't know what luck they've had in that respect.

Then, of course, after this movement towards the feds in the Gorge, got going, Nani, who was still opposed to it-- she went to Seattle. Let me backtrack again, because the Garden Club in Seattle had come down and spent two days touring the Gorge with Nancy Russell. And they were very impressed and were going to vote on this as a position of the Seattle Garden Club. And Nani Warren-- someone got wind of this. There was one lady on the Garden Club that was a friend of the Stevensons in Stevenson, Washington. And I think it was she who alerted one of the Stevenson ladies who alerted Nani Warren, and I guess Mrs. Stevenson and Nani Warren went up to [see the] Seattle Garden Club and told them that there was no problem in the Gorge at all. Nani

told them that she knew practically every property owner in the Gorge and they had no intent of selling their land or changing the use of it. And I don't know whether, yes, I think they stopped the Garden Club from taking any action. Although later I think they did anyway. But the Mrs. Stevenson is a member of the Stevenson family. Stevenson is a close-knit family with many investments in lumber and interest in the Gorge. And, well, they don't all agree with the one who went up to testify, I'm sure-- I don't mean to involve the whole clan in this. But the one who went with Nani Warren was sharing Nani Warren's opinion. And the Stevensons owned the land that is right on the river starting at the base opposite Crown Point and extending west. It's an area called (Starterwall) Lake. It was a flood plain with a lake in it all the time until the federal government diked it. Now it no longer floods and it's just agricultural land. The west end of that has been developed by the Port of Washougal into various factories and storage yards and then it stops and this beautiful area of meadows and grazing cows and all goes all the way till opposite Crown Point. So obviously it's the foreground of the famous view from Crown Point. If you look west, you look right down on the [Starterwall] area. And this is zoned by Clark County for heavy industry and owned by the Stevensons.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But if the proposal were to be accepted, they would not be allowed to develop it for heavy industry.

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, that's true-- if they were successful in getting a scenic easement or buying it and leasing it back for farm purposes. I don't think a federal program could automatically change the zone. There would have to be compensation of some sort. But I'm going to length with this because the lady was representing that interest with Nani Warren before the Garden Club in Seattle.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well if the Stevensons at present own that land that is zoned for heavy industry, so they could...

JOHN YEON: Yes. They want it zoned for heavy industry.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And they could sell it, because if they do...

JOHN YEON: Yes, they intend to. And there's no reason they shouldn't if that's what they bought it for and that's what they pay taxes on. Zoning itself isn't the solution to that problem. There has to be a scenic easement or they have to be compensated in some way for the difference between the income from the present use and the income from industrial use. It's a very sticky problem but it's a very strategic area in preservation of the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It certainly is. And what is the present status then?

JOHN YEON: Well, Friends of the Columbia Gorge are trying to get a federal program instituted in the Gorge. It's very complicated legislation. And it's terrible timing.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It has to be federal legislation.

JOHN YEON: Yes. There's absolutely no way of saving it otherwise. The Oregon side is not in such bad shape, but there's no present preserved areas on the Washington side. There are many state parks on the Oregon side and large areas of national forest and there's nothing of that sort on the Washington side.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What's the position of the Washington commission? State of Washington.

JOHN YEON: They're in a bind. The State of Washington commission is even more ineffective than the Oregon one. You see, these commissions are purely advisory. They haven't any teeth at all.

And the Washington commission, of course, is subject to local influences more than the Oregon one is. It's a very different situation from Oregon. In Oregon, much of the Gorge is in Multnomah County and Portland is in Multnomah County. You could make a park of the whole east end of Multnomah County and we wouldn't be devastated as far as tax income. But on the Washington side that isn't the arrangement at all. There's no large city; it's entirely rural. And as far from Seattle as it can get; and the people in Seattle are interested in the San Juan Islands and the North Cascades. Skamania County in Washington is just sort of the Appalachia of the West. It's largely a great number of people on relief and it's not very agricultural. They get a lot on money from the federal government through the sale of forest lands which they can spend on roads and schools. But they are gung ho for subdividing, developing the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: With a change of governor, do the committee members or the commission members change?

JOHN YEON: Not necessarily. They change slowly.

Well, this was the reason that the two sides of the Gorge are an indivisible landscape. If anything is to protect the Washington side, it will not be protected locally. It cannot be. That's just too big a job from that [point]. It should be administered by an agency that can be concerned with both sides.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes.

JOHN YEON: Anyway, it's the worst time in my lifetime for proposing anything of that sort because Reagan is interested in states doing everything, and James Watt is Secretary of the Interior, and there are enormous budget problems. The Gorge will go down the drain unless some miracle happens.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, let's certainly not let that happen.

JOHN YEON: It's being subdivided in Washington from the shore to the skyline. Not everywhere, but that's the tendency. And the only thing that's prevented it in recent years is the high interest rates. And now that the freeway, the new bridge across the river is built, suburbia will flow over that and into the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But is there any hope that since Atiyeh has changed his position on this, that he could influence the Washington commission and something could come of that?

JOHN YEON: Well, Atiyeh has changed his position, but he hasn't been...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Active.

JOHN YEON: ...active. Changed to passive.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Just let it go on.

JOHN YEON: But, however, that was important, and as I say, I think...

[Tape 3; side 1]

MARIAN KOLISCH: Go ahead.

JOHN YEON: Well, as far as I'm concerned, Nani Warren has done a great deal of damage in the

Gorge by preventing the advancement of a program when there was some real hope that it could be fulfilled. I've been known to say that I think she's the worst thing that happened to the Gorge since Bonneville Dam, and that was inevitable. The Friends of the Gorge program is very timid and very conservative compared with what needs to be done in the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So that would just be the minimum [\_\_\_\_\_].

JOHN YEON: That's the minimum. And in my opinion they've placed too much hope on zoning rather than acquisition. But then that's the strategy of the moment and anything else is hopeless.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Was Carter's administration more responsive?

JOHN YEON: Oh, yes. The national Park Service is just really paralyzed at this time. They can't acquire anything and are afraid to stick their neck out.

MARIAN KOLISCH: \_\_\_\_\_. You were talking about Mr. Cushman.

JOHN YEON: Mr. Cushman, yes. He seems to be devoting his considerable talents and life, in fact, to defeating efforts of the National Park Service when they want to expand or protect areas. He's momentarily stopped the Big Sur project and all around the country he's galvanized opposition to federal programs, conservation programs. Skamania County paid him ten thousand dollars to come into the Gorge and get people organized fighting federal help in the Gorge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And he's not a government person; he's just a private citizen.

JOHN YEON: Yes. His organization is called the Inholders Association-- something of that sort. And he's been ultraeffective. He was appointed to the National Park Advisory Committee in Washington D.C. by Reagan. And is a great friend of Watt's.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And lots and lots of money, I imagine, to use.

JOHN YEON: Yes indeed. Inexhaustible. And he appears here whenever there's an important meeting.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And he's able to influence the right people.

JOHN YEON: Oh yes. He can get people so roused up; the feds are going to run them off their land and all kinds of grim scenarios [proposed by him].

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, let's hope for the best. Maybe we can hang on.

JOHN YEON: One thing, I don't know whether I quoted Mr. Scott right the last time. I want to requote it, because it's brief. I was talking to him about saving timber along the proposed Sunset Highway to the beach. And it went through a magnificent forest and I hoped that the Highway Department would acquire a wide enough right-of-way to protect timber on both sides of it, timber corridor. Well, he took a very dim view of anything of that sort and he was also, you remember, head of the state parks because they were under the Highway Department. And that's when he said to me, "Trees. What good are they left standing there? All they're good for is birds. I was here when it was all trees and mud and it was terrible." He wouldn't spend a cent on state parks under his administration-- says it's like dumping money in the ocean.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So they didn't buy the...

JOHN YEON: They didn't buy the trees. And in this case it turned out just as well because before the highway was built, there was the great Tillamook burn that burned all the trees along the highway. They could, of course, have bought a wider right-of-way thereafter for practically nothing. And then it would have been protected. The way it is now, the trees are there just because they aren't large enough to log. There's going to be a great slaughter along that beautiful highway.

[ ]

Let's see, advisor, State Park Commission trying to overcome Lesley Scott. As I mentioned, I traveled around the state a great deal looking at...

MARIAN KOLISCH: I'm sorry to interrupt again. I'd like to get a date in there.

JOHN YEON: That was about 1931, I think. Yes, because when I was appointed to that commission, I was 21 years old. But going around the state, I went with other members of the commission including Aubrey Watzek, and I became well-acquainted with him at that time. He liked to go mountain climbing, so I joined forces with him and we explored. I got to many places I wouldn't have otherwise found. We climbed anything in sight-- Mount Hood and Mount Rainier and Mount Olympus and Mount Shuksan and Garibaldi in Canada. I also went on Mazama trips to these places.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Mazamas were mountain climbing groups?

JOHN YEON: Yes. Also as a result of knowing Watzek I got to go up to the Snowshoe Club on the north side of Mount Hood. And later I joined the ski club that only had maybe ten members on the south side of Mount Hood. It was in an area that was closed to any development. They had built the cabin, but they let the Forest Service have it in the summer as a ranger station and that's how they were able to use it in the winter. It was stocked in summer with provisions-- canned goods-- and they would take off from Government Camp and through trackless snows that would change every week because of the storms and end up in this little cabin, some spot on this big mountain. And it was quite wonderful. Well, as a result of this skiing experience, I got interested in the idea of a winter resort on Mount Hood. It wasn't the first interest. There had been something proposed on Cloud Cap site. In fact, I saw in the paper a rendering of a proposal that was an equilateral cross in plan, and just went up with a square top. It's like the apartment houses that they were then building in the area around [Tilly Jane?, Tillicum?]- a completely urban concept for this beautiful spot. And I thought this would be a pretty grim outcome.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This was to be put on Mount Hood?

JOHN YEON: On the Cloud Cap site. But there's other format about studying the mountain too. At that time, there was talk of an aerial tram to the top of the mountain, I think from the north side, also. There was a lot of opposition to that, of course, they never got off the ground. But I [took to designing] a hotel for the Cloud Cap site. And, my goodness, it was a very ambitious project. I made a great model about six or eight feet long. The hotel was a very modern building and sort of influenced by Mendelssohn, who's a modern German architect who made forms with lots of motion in them. I made the model and it had trees and everything, other features of the site. When it was done, it was exhibited in one of Meier & Frank's windows with placards that such a development would make Mount Hood a very popular and famous ski resort, in winter. And it was lit with a lurid bluish light. Getting it into the window-- it was so big that it had to be sawed in two. It was pretty well battered up by the time it got out of the window. But as far as I know, that was the most substantial effort at the time toward winter resort development on Mount Hood. I later came to hate the design of the hotel. I was just being too-- well, the forms were too soft, too rounded. But it



was an exceptional thing, with a very dramatic lobby and the composition was sort of like a ruined medieval castle. Not imitating that, but that was the effect of it-- as far as asymmetrical forms with one higher tower. And on top of that was a glassed-in observatory, or cafe, and there were big decks for areas for viewing the landscape.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And a capacity of how many?

JOHN YEON: Oh, I forget. Maybe eighty rooms or something like that. With an underground garage. Anyway, I learned from experience with the Snowshoe cabin in contrast to the little ski club on the south side, that the north side was not the area to develop. The south side was infinitely better, both in the slope and the southern exposure. The north side was steep and icy and shadowed. So I started working on a plan for the south side. I chose a ridge on the edge of Salmon River Canyon. It was a ridge that grows up against the general downward slope of the mountain, so you got a perspective of the mountain where you weren't looking up an incline which tended to make the mountain flat. And then the view over the canyon is very dramatic down the canyon to Eastern Oregon. But mainly I chose the site because it stuck up somewhat by itself and the snow blew off of it in winter and blew into the canyon. This project I was much more satisfied with. It was a very modern building but it had more bite and a better character for a dramatic landscape.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Were you doing this on your own?

JOHN YEON: I was doing this on my own. But since I had lavished so much time and care in the other model, I never did the same thing for this project. It existed only in a little plaster model, plus very mechanical drawings, not renderings. In fact, the only drawings I have now were made by Belluschi from the drawings I gave to him, because if the thing went ahead, I hoped to do it in his office. That was the Doyle office (Doyle was long dead). But there were just sort of architect's drawings. They weren't pretty pictures. Then, I don't know how I met E.J. Griffith, but he was interested in a resort on Mount Hood, too, but at Government Camp, down below the Government Camp. And he had a plan that was sort of a French chateau scheme that someone had drawn for him. Maybe I met him through that showing in Meier & Frank's window. I don't know. Anyway, I persuaded him that his project below Government Camp was not at all the place for a resort on Mount Hood-- it wasn't really cold enough there-- and that it should be at Timberline, which was superb skiing there. And he very willingly scrapped all his plans and felt that was a fine idea and wanted to join forces with me. Well, okay, but he didn't have any-- he was just a promoter. But he told me that the Democrats owed him something and he was going to Washington to try and get a job. He would try and promote this hotel at the same time, and would I grubstake him? And I said, "Gosh, I can't do that." Anyway, he went to Washington.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Would you grubstake him? I'm not sure that I understand what that means.

JOHN YEON: Oh, would I pay for his trip, that's all. And I thought, if anybody's going to Washington at my expense, I'd rather go myself. Anyway I didn't, which might have been a fatal error, but it turned out it wasn't. The Democrats apparently did indeed owe him something. He came back as Federal Housing Administrator for Oregon. And he was still interested in the hotel, but he couldn't do anything about it in that capacity. And so in due time he became Works Project Administrator for Oregon and then he could do something about it. But all during this period, which was some time of months or a year or something, he was supporting my plan. I don't think he was particularly interested in architecture and I think any plan might have suited him pretty well. Certainly my plan couldn't be more different than the one that had been cooked up for him at Government Camp. The he seemed a little more hopeful, but there was a long interval, because by then I was pretty well exhausted by all this maneuvering. But when it was about ready to go, the federal government

insisted that some local group raise some token local money for the project and that's when a group was formed, of which Jack Meier might have been chairman, to raise this local money. And as soon as they were formed they didn't like my plan at all and decided that there should be another architect for it. As I say, I wasn't too unhappy about that because it was too many committees and had been blow hot blow cold for so long. Anyway, I was involved in other things. But they wanted more of a national park-type hotel. And it's my impression that they contacted the architect who did the lodge at Sun Valley which was brand new then. I'm not not positive about that because the architects who were eventually involved-- there seemed to be so many of them that I don't know how to distribute the credit of the design. But that was the end of my involvement in Timberline Lodge. I mentioned all that because it isn't really mentioned in the book that I was just reading this morning, an official report on Timberline Lodge.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It isn't?

JOHN YEON: No. I'm mentioned, but not in any sense of having promoted the idea originally. I got the thing rolling. And in the end, it isn't very important because there would inevitably have been a development on Mount Hood.

MARIAN KOLISCH: But the placement of it is very important [for a \_\_\_\_\_].

JOHN YEON: Yeah. What I mean to say is that I just happened to be the first one who proposed the hotel there. And I don't think that's of great historic significance because somebody else would have done it. But it's a little strange that it hasn't...

MARIAN KOLISCH: That it's not mentioned.

JOHN YEON: ...that it's not mentioned. Yes. And others have taken credit for it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Especially as long as you had plans for it.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. But the thing was, you know, well advanced on my plan before the shift was made. Typical of the difficulties that I foresaw was that E.J. Griffith, when he would go up to there in the summertime, would pick out a different place for the hotel every time. My hotel couldn't be moved because it was designed specifically for that ridge and designed so that the snow would blow off of it and land in the canyon and keep itself pretty well dug out. Whether it would have worked that way or not, I don't know. I think it would have. And the places that he picked out for the hotel were ones that were in summer very much more hospitable and friendly, they were open meadows and protected places, and very alluring. Well, the reason they were open meadows and without being covered with trees is that they were pockets for the snow accumulating in winter, too deep for trees to grow. Trees grew on the exposed places where the winter winds blew the snow away from them. When they went to start, he moved the site even after the plans had been drawn, I think. But when they started to build the hotel, they had to have a steam shovel up there excavating the snow from the site, whereas the ridges around with the trees on them were bare. And that's caused, you know, a lot of trouble with...

MARIAN KOLISCH: This us the site where Timberline Lodge is, right?

JOHN YEON: Yes. But my hotel was much smaller than Timberline Lodge. It was to be a private project when it started. It had to be very economical. And also it was a hotel, not a public accommodation. Nobody saw the vast hordes that would be going up there. I'm very glad my hotel wasn't built as a matter of fact. I'm sure there would have been snow problems and leaks and, as

indeed there have been with the [\_\_\_\_\_].

But, I can understand, too, why a group who just moves into a project like that all of a sudden wouldn't care for my design, because it was daring at the time. It would have been a famous modern building, and I think was in collusion with the dramatic forms of the landscape.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It would be very interesting to see what it would look like now.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. But most people would very much prefer the present lodge, which was the art of the oversize, you know.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It's sort of the style of the European chalet.

JOHN YEON: Well, sort of, or national park architecture. It's kind of a hybrid. In fact, one feature of it that is neither here nor there, but the octagonal center part of it with the chimney coming out is actually a motif that Frank Lloyd Wright developed for some of his resort projects. But my hotel couldn't possibly have been built by the WPA, or with everybody carving something. It was a very controlled design. It wouldn't have allowed additions later, unless they were...well, [\_\_\_\_\_]. So a lot of trauma was avoided on my part in this.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Probably just as well.

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you feel like talking about the beginning of your working in Doyle's office?

JOHN YEON: Well, yeah. I mentioned I'd been an office boy there and I met Wentz a long time ago. And I'd become well-acquainted, a friend of Belluschi, so I would stop in there occasionally and visit. Doyle was dead. And, oh, I was familiar with the place. And when Watzek decided to have a house in Portland-- he'd been living at the [\_\_\_\_\_], and his mother was moving out after his father died-- I was naturally interested in designing him a house. But I don't think he was much interested in the house that I designed for him. First he went, I think, to Ernie Tupper who then was doing Colonial houses. And with my interest in more original architecture than that, I found that hard to keep quiet about. So I said, "Oh, at least go to Belluschi and he'll give you something better than that." So he did, and, I don't know why, but on my own, as usual, I had designed him a house. I picked out the site for the house, and he bought it. It was a beautiful site. Then I designed a house for it without being asked to. I made a little model of the house and had it drawn, and the model, and it just seemed, maybe too original and not conventional enough. And that's when he went to Ernie Tucker and then I said go to Belluschi. Well, Belluschi took a crack at it and his scheme didn't seem any less conventional and, in fact made mine seem...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Really, really mild?

JOHN YEON: Yes, mild. And, Belluschi's wasn't wild, but it just wasn't any better than mine. So by then, Watzek had rather gotten more adjusted to the idea of a house of that sort. And, actually, Belluschi wasn't satisfied with his scheme either. So then it was changing architects three times. I was in no position to execute the working drawings without hiring help. And I didn't want to cause the embarrassment of a third switch in architects so I proposed taking the job to the Doyle office and using their technical staff and their space.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You weren't working in that office.

JOHN YEON: No, I wasn't working in that office at all. So, that was fine with Belluschi and it was okay with Watzek. So I moved into the office on the first of the year of 1937. And as I say, the model was already built and the plan was all ready to go. That's why it was possible to make the working drawings and get the house built all within one year. So from the year I went into the office, the house was moved into. But I wasn't in the office very long, just during the period of making the working drawings. And, well, it wasn't working out. When I moved in, Belluschi proposed that I would do the house, domestic work for the office.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Domestic work means residential?

JOHN YEON: Houses. Residential. But it wasn't working out very well and, oh dear, that's a long story. Maybe you shouldn't even get into it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, how many people were there working in the office?

JOHN YEON: It was still during the Depression and they were trying to hang onto as many of their old crew as possible. They wouldn't ordinarily have taken on anybody new. They took me on along with the job. And I was just paid a hundred dollars a month, which wasn't very much. But I wanted to get the house built, so I was in the office what, maybe four or five months. So for designing the Watzek house, I got five hundred dollars. And they had expenses with making the working drawings, certainly, but they got the usual percentage for the house.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because Mr. Watzek paid Belluschi's office.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Anyway, I shouldn't be so hesitant about going into this; it was just a matter of Belluschi having done all the designing in the office for several years and I can understand that it wasn't easy to have somebody else designing in the office. He didn't go up to the Watzek house during construction, at least, never when I was there. And it was just the writing on the wall that I should clear out, which I did. I continued to supervise the house through the rest of construction and designed the garden and designed most of the furniture.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh really?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. After leaving the Doyle office.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you began the whole thing in the five or six months in the office and then during the rest of the time you were out on your own, but supervising...

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Did Mr. Watzek consider it-- certainly it has always been known as a Yeon house.

JOHN YEON: Well, it hasn't, though. That's the story I hesitate to get into.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh? Well, I think you should.

JOHN YEON: It was a very unhappy development. Unhappy for me, unhappy for everybody, I'm sure. But the work that had been done by various designers in the Doyle office throughout its history had all been considered under the term of Doyle. Well, Belluschi had been the designer since before Doyle's death.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Could we clarify, John, the difference between-- you say the designers in the office, and Belluschi was the architect. What does that mean? Who were the designers?

JOHN YEON: Well, under the Doyle firm name through the years there had been different designers responsible for the work that came out of the office. Including Doyle's own designs. But all of it has been credited to the Doyle office. And since Doyle's death, Belluschi had done all the designing and the Doyle name had become a sort of trade name for Belluschi. There was no confusion whatsoever. And they wanted that to continue because there were advantages. If they were remodeling in buildings that the Doyle firm had done they naturally got the job whereas they might not have got it if it was Belluschi's name.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The designer is not an architect? I guess this is what I'm coming to.

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, the designer is responsible for the appearance, obviously in that sense...

[Tape 3; Side 2]

The designer is the one who conceives the building and is responsible for its form and appearance. He could be called the architect. Nowadays architecture's a very complicated business and engineers and plumbers and electricians and-- oh, many, many sciences involved. So I use the term designer as the one who is responsible for the visual conception of the building.

The local architects succeeded in getting a bill passed through the state legislature requiring that if an architect dies, the name of the firm has to be changed to reflect the actual constituency of the firm. That was because of the Doyle situation. And you can already maybe foresee what happened here. Dave Jack was the business manager of the firm, and he was a tough cookie. The first intimations of things happening that I was unhappy about was that he just sent a photographer up to the house to take pictures for publication without mentioning anything to me about it. And I had a run-in with him on this, that having spent so much time on it I was concerned about how photographs would be taken, when they would be taken, and whether things were ready or not. And he ignored all this, and he gave me in no uncertain terms to know that I had nothing to do with the future credit of the house. They would just treat it as office work. Then-- this is what makes the difficulty-- Belluschi's later work, like the Suiter house across the street which was done the next year-- motifs...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Across the street from?

JOHN YEON: From the Watzek house. There were motifs similar to the Watzek house. It had a portico which was actually different from the Watzek house, but the same open portico was the main feature inside the Watzek house and the treatment of the eaves was an [irreverse] angle of the slope of the roof; the [fascia board roof sloped] in reverse so it came out to a triangle. Then other houses he did also had similarities to the Watzek house, and it naturally became the assumption that he was also responsible for the Watzek house. And my only..., he could have cleared it up very early, but it's one of those things that got going until it got pretty sticky to clear up. I remember Henry Russell Hitchcock, who is still alive. He was an architectural critic of great importance in this country, and he'd written a book with [Philip Johnson] on the International Style. And he was out here at the time. He was touring around with Agnus Ringe and came to Portland. He was taken through the Watzek house with Belluschi and other houses that Belluschi had done, and he went back to New York and said, "Why, there's no such thing as John Yeon-- it's all Belluschi." And then things appeared-- the Watzek house appeared in books and so on, one of them mentioning Belluschi's fine Italian hand is evident in the Watzek house.

MARIAN KOLISCH: He literally didn't have anything to do with the design.

JOHN YEON: No. But, it shows what people deduced then, because he was still using the Doyle name and the office wanted the Doyle name attached to the Watzek house. But apart from all this, I don't know how it happened, but the Museum of Modern Art was interested in the Watzek house and included it in an exhibition of Art in our Time. And by then I was insisting my name be connected to it. And Hitchcock went back and said, "Oh, it's all a phony business."

MARIAN KOLISCH: [\_\_\_\_\_]

JOHN YEON: Yeah, an impostor. And through the Watzek house I had met the chairman of the Architecture Department at the Museum of Modern Art, [John McAndrew], and he got in very hot water over this and misattributed lots of facts. In fact, it contributed to his losing his job. Oh, dear, and then the war came and I was in Africa and I would get reports of similar things going down and I [once mentioned] when I was rotated back to this country, I wrote a long, long letter to Belluschi trying to get all this straightened out. And it's long since been straightened out, but it was very...

MARIAN KOLISCH: But it was quite a while there where there was confusion.

JOHN YEON: It was quite a while. And, as I say, not getting credit for the job is one thing, but as a result, being an impostor, was another.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Also, I would think, having your special features incorporated in the later houses of Belluschi's would be somewhat bothersome.

[Break in tape]

JOHN YEON: One thing about my strange career is that I've been anxious not to have an architectural office that I had to keep occupied. The most I've ever had were two draftsmen at one time and that wasn't for a very long period. So, I've been sort of like a cuckoo that had to lay my eggs in other people's nests. I do the designing and then on occasion I had to work with other people in making the working drawings and doing the work that would ordinarily be done in a well-staffed, ongoing office. This has enabled me to do lots of other things that I'm interested in doing, like conservation work, that I couldn't possibly have done if I'd been tied down to a large office and had to keep work coming in and out. Of course, there are penalties for that, such as my experience in the Doyle office, but mostly it's worked out very well.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This is one thing we said between recordings here, that Belluschi has always had an office and I guess a number of draftsmen. But would you say that that was the end of your friendship, when you...?

JOHN YEON: It certainly put a great strain on it, and I haven't seen Belluschi very much since then. When I have seen him he's been extremely nice and very kind to me. I wish very much that things had turned out differently because I really enjoyed his friendship and enjoyed him very much. And it may be my fault that I haven't made more of an effort in recent years, but that was the cause of a break.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I think a single-purpose person or a single-minded person sometimes pays the penalties for that.

JOHN YEON: I'm sure that he probably didn't have any idea of the consequence to me or to somebody like John McAndrew and other supporters of mine. John McAndrew, incidentally, became

a very good friend of mine and I had some nice trips with him in Mexico. He did a great work on Mexico that was widely acclaimed and he did a big work on early Renaissance architecture in Venice which wasn't finished at the time of his death, but his wife published it after he died. He was vice chairman of the International Save Venice Committee. He was a wonderful man.

MARIAN KOLISCH: A Portland architect?

JOHN YEON: No. He was the one who was chairman or head of the Architecture Department of the Museum of Modern Art. And, mentioning the things I could do by not having an office, he was involved in a big Mexican show at the Museum of Modern Art and his job was to collect folk art and records of colonial architecture in Mexico for this show. And he said, "Why don't you come down and join me while I'm down there." He spoke Spanish and I went down and I had an absolutely glorious tour of Mexico traveling to places I never, never would have gotten to on my own. A wonderful experience.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It didn't influence any of your later design?

JOHN YEON: Well, in a sense it did. I was already veering away from exclusive interest in architectures in the Northwest. And being in Mexico was just the other side of the coin. Through McAndrew I also met Eugene Berman, who was a painter in New York. And his work I immediately liked when I saw. He was known as neo-romantic. His main interest was the art of the Mediterranean I suppose--again, the other side of the coin-- and I just took to it with a vengeance. Mexico was part of that same European... Before I went to Mexico I thought surely the thing that I would like would be the pre-Conquest pyramids and monuments. Not at all. Just the Spanish colonial architecture. I just fell flat on my face. I didn't expect to react that way and I just didn't have any time for the pre-Conquest monuments. But the great churches or the exuberance...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Instead you wandered in the colonial houses.

JOHN YEON: Yes. Churches and buildings and palaces and cities. And I enormously enjoyed the villages in Mexico. Those almost invisible villages that climbed up hillsides, and sometimes they were just the color of the earth and almost completely camouflaged. They seemed so beautiful in the landscape.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Is that part of what you say when you're talking about building your houses into the landscape?

JOHN YEON: Well, let's skip that for another time because that's kind of a thing unto itself. Let me talk a little more about my late conversion for the European side of things. Berman, I don't know whether you know his paintings; there's no reason you should. He was a modern painter, born in Russia, but lived [ ] Revolution, but lived in Paris among all the modern artists. And he was in revolt, in a sense-- not militant, but he just had nothing to do with the trend of modern painting in Paris, abstract painting and cubist painting. He was known as a neo-romantic. People confuse him with Dali and Surrealism. Both are realistic in their techniques, but they're two different schools. There're not many in Berman's school. His own brother Leonid was included, and [Tollichef]. But when I first saw some of his paintings, actually it was at the house in Connecticut of James Soby. Berman had designed a dining room for him and painted the murals on the wall, but he had some of Berman's paintings and one particularly of a sort of a moonlight night scene, Souvenir of Ischia, which is an island near Capri. It was very serene and mysterious and it had composition that was acceptable as an abstract composition but the building was recognizable as a building and there was perspective and atmosphere, climate. It was a specific place and reaction to it. And I liked

that. I never was swept off my feet except in the sense of respecting abstract art.

The curious thing of this is that recently someone was referring to what my reaction might be to the new Graves Building in Portland. This was an architect speaking to someone. And he said, "Oh, he probably likes it because he likes Berman." It was a revealing observation because Berman was a post-modern painter. I'm not implying I like the Graves Building, but it was an astute observation on the part of this guy because I've never thought of Berman as a post-modern painter. But that's exactly what he was. He was in defiance of the course of abstract art. You might know Berman through his designs for ballet. He did lots of ballet designs and he's one of the best-- some of his best work is ballet designs in Metropolitan Opera. I have a few of his paintings. I have, maybe the largest Berman painting, that's in my mother's house. You saw the mural in the library? No?

MARIAN KOLISCH: You've given it to the library?

JOHN YEON: No. It was painted for my mother's house on King Street after we moved from where I was born. I remodeled the house, to the extent that it was remodeled, and the library, which had been I guess a billiard room before, was completely redone in paneling and there was a bookcase and a long, blank wall over the low bookcase. I hoped I could persuade my mother to commission Berman to do a mural for it because he was one of the few modern painters who was actually decorating rooms in the sense that whole rooms had been decorated in the past with paintings, not easel paintings, but paintings for a specific place. She went along with it, not knowing what she was getting into, I think. And Berman came there to see the space. He was then a refugee from Europe because of the coming war, and he had landed in Los Angeles. And I asked him why on earth he went to Los Angeles. He said, well he didn't like New York, and Los Angeles was like a European village-- trees and plants and he could walk down to the corner to get fresh vegetables without dressing up, and his friends were there: Thomas Mann, and the Russian ballet, and he was a good friend of Stravinsky. They were all in Los Angeles. Hollywood! Well, he came up from Hollywood and looked at the space. And I remember those days that he went sketching up the Columbia Gorge and he didn't particularly like this end of the Gorge. There were lots of trees and a kind of Chinese feeling. He just was a great admirer of the area around Maryhill-- the arid part that looks like cataracts of the Nile-- great sculptural form. Anyway, it took a long time for him to paint the mural after he decided to do it. It's a great big area-- big as a small billboard. I had seen the sketches he made and liked them. His first idea was for a triptych. The two sides would fold over and painting something in the back so you didn't have to look at it all the time. I thought that was a fine idea. Then he had sketches of misty ruins with sort of clouds drifting through them and people up in various openings in the ruins, typical of his motifs, and I thought that was great. Then he sent me a wire once-- "I have new idea for a mural. Do you trust in me or shall I submit sketches?" And what can you say? You can't say I trust you; you can't say I don't trust you. Well, when finally he said it was ready to come down and see, I went down-- all very glamorous, [because \_\_\_\_\_] was going up in the elevator with me to visit Berman. And I saw this mural and I was kind of appalled at it; it wasn't at all what I expected.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Not like the earlier...

JOHN YEON: No, no. It was vast space with lots of crimson ruins against sunsets. That part was all right, but I was frightened at what my mother's reaction would be to it because he used lots of derelict objects and rags and [things like driftwood and] crumbled stone and pebbles. And she's very tidy, [meticulously involved] in her housekeeping. Well, it arrived and, oh, she was very happy with it. She said, "At last there's some color in the house." And instead of worrying about this symbolism it had, she had it all figured out. It had some older woman in it, where her lover had been killed and was buried in that hole down there, and I don't know. Anyway, all my fears were groundless.



MARIAN KOLISCH: She accepted it gladly,

JOHN YEON: Yes. Then, against her wishes, I sent it back to New York to an exhibition of his, and it suffered a bad damage on the way.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I always thought a mural was attached-- had to stay fixed on the wall.

JOHN YEON: Well, this was on canvas. I just transported it.

But I saw things through Berman's eyes when I was in Mexico with McAndrew. I'm apt to see things through the painter's eyes. That's the wonderful thing about painting is that you can admire your own life, but you can see things as others saw them. And Berman, I corresponded with him all during the war, getting letters in north Africa. He would send me pictures of his work.

MARIAN KOLISCH: He was still in Los Angeles?

JOHN YEON: Yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: When you say you can see through another artist's eyes, I think sometimes it may be confusing if you don't try to assimilate at least, as long as you have your own...

JOHN YEON: Oh yes. It's merely an enlargement; it isn't a replacement. But I don't get that business of contagious revelation from abstract painting. I get it from all kinds of old painting, and painting like Berman, and that's what I expect of painting. Otherwise it was just pattern and design. I get that from all sorts of other [things]. [Wood] blocks or nature...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, after your trip to Mexico you came back and, and you were working again on house designs?

JOHN YEON: Yes. The last thing I had before the war was a house in Eureka, California. That was just being finished at the time of Pearl Harbor. The was a house I liked very much. It was difficult to build it there. I had to make many trips down and finally I just moved down there and stayed in a boarding house to get it finished.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because you do, of course, want to be near the site so you can see the process.

JOHN YEON: Oh yeah. Absolutely essential.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Are there some architects who don't?

JOHN YEON: Well, they have to get somebody else to do it. There's no way of avoiding it. After the Watzek house was built-- the Watzek house was expensive to build. That's the trouble with getting a young architect. It's often apt to be the result. And I was so appalled, actually, when the bids came in, I thought it would all fall through. But it didn't. Of course there were two houses there. There's the caretaker's house and the bog house. Anyway, I was guilt-stricken about the cost and the contractor who built that house, [Willard Smith], wanted me to design small speculative houses for him and so I jumped at the chance. He had a couple of lots out near Lake Oswego, not on the lake, but in that area. And so that resulted in this whole series of houses built as this house is, out of that formula. Called them plywood houses.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It is also called a modular house?

JOHN YEON: Yes.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Which means what, John?

JOHN YEON: Well, there's a rhythm. You could lay it out on a grid, and in the case of plywood houses, the plywood was available then. It was the first time the exterior, or waterproof, plywood was available. The houses were all on either a four-foot or a two-foot module; the module was established by the width of the plywood. They were built on a slab and they were a very straightforward expression of balloon-frame construction: stud framing because the studs were used as the divisions and the windows.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What is balloon framing?

JOHN YEON: Balloon frame is a method of construction. All American houses practically are built that way. They're a frame of two-by-fours and then a skin on the outside and a skin on the inside. The Wentz house was not balloon-framed because that was not a sandwich with an air space in between. All the structure was showing, and the skin was just on the outside and the structure showed. In balloon frame, the structure is concealed between the outside and the inside so there's an air space-- balloon means just an air pocket.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Which is insulation.

JOHN YEON: Insulation, yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Weren't you one of the first to use the wood paneling on the outside?

JOHN YEON: Well, the first to use plywood paneling. The reason in that case is [it was] the first time that it was available. But the thing that made these little houses different was that the balloon framing showed all through the window area. The glass was just set between the studs and there was no window frame per se at all. There's no millwork for the window. And in order to do that, the source of ventilation was separated from the light source. These windows all had louvers underneath them so that you didn't have to-- the windows were fixed.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That was an original concept for you.

JOHN YEON: Well, yes. And it was a great economy at the time. The roofs were made of two-by-six tongue-and-groove laid from the ridge down without any roof framing. And that made a very thin, nice thin eave line.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That's interesting. I thought that that came later with Van Johnson or somebody like that.

JOHN YEON: Oh well, [Daly?] No, he laminated two-by-fours together sideways. It made a thicker width. This made just an inch-and-a-half thick roof-- a continuous slab. We started doing it because these houses were under trees that might lose their branches in winter and this would make it kind of an armour-plated roof. And, well, this little house-- plywood obviously had to be painted and it was in the woods and it started colored houses: the first ones were kind of mossy green and a burnt orange front door and so on. They're all different colors. Each house was just one color but the different houses were different colors. Quite a range. And they all had different plans. The first two sold and then [Bert Smith] wanted to build others and started to build others for special people, who wanted houses for their special requirements. They were all small, and inexpensive, very inexpensive; there were about a dozen of them. This house is the last of that series.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This home that you're in.

JOHN YEON: This one. Now. All the windows here are fixed.

MARIAN KOLISCH: With louvers under them?

JOHN YEON: Louvers underneath. This house is more elaborate than those were. This has added ventilator up through the hall and the louvers up into \_\_\_\_\_ and a clerestory on the roof...and a vent out of each bedroom above the door into this chamber in the hall that took it up into the attic. And that worked, for one reason; this is in the woods and it's terribly hot. But the louvers caught on like a house afire...

[Tape 4, side 1]

[Small loss at beginning of tape--Ed.]

JOHN YEON: ...an exhibition of paintings that had been brought to this country for custody during the war or after the war and that were about to be returned to Germany. And I saw there a small, Italian, early Renaissance painting by Veneziano, I think. It was a building-- all masonry, white, and areas in pink and turquoise, and tile roof and simple walls and it just... All of a sudden, just instantly, I thought, "My god, that's the way to do it." And so I changed the location of the house on the property and started all out, entirely differently. No open planning and the rooms were all finite. And it happened very quickly then. I sent down drawings of the plan-- enormous relief. My spirits went up like an ascension balloon because I was pleased enough. Well, I don't know. I don't think they liked the plans. While I'd been trying to meet what I thought was their somewhat nostalgic place, they were being more and more modern. Anyway, they were terribly nice about it and their answer was they decided to tear down that house I thought so beautiful and build theirs, which they did. Somebody who was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright built their house.

MARIAN KOLISCH: On the site where the old house was built.

JOHN YEON: Up where the old house was. During this period of working on the house, I met them in Denver because he was going to an ecological conference of some sort that was down there. And I met them in San Francisco, too. Always very pleasant. He came up to Portland with a friend of his by the unlikely name of Roberto Parker. So, you know, we were good friends but my struggle went on for [some time]. Then, after the Korean War started-- was that in 1950?-- I then had a very good draftsman here. Wonder draftsman and very reliable [ ] type. My projects fell through because of the expense and I hated to let him go, so I kept him on for actually nearly a year without any work. But he made a model for San Salvador. He did other things for me that were useful. So I made this huge model of the house and all I have of that now are photographs.

MARIAN KOLISCH: [Of the] model.

JOHN YEON: Lovely model. The draftsman that I valued so highly was Jack Gilstrap who has been, lo, these many years, office manager for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. I simply sent pictures of the model to the San Salvador people. I don't know what their feelings were.

MARIAN KOLISCH: They didn't respond?

JOHN YEON: Well, I didn't ask them to. But I gather from mutual friends that they were very impressed with the house. I don't know what's happened to them, of course it was years...

MARIAN KOLISCH: You haven't seen the house they did build.

JOHN YEON: Oh, no. I haven't seen the house they did build and I don't know what's happened to them now in San Salvador. I'm sure they're not there any more. But the house-- the experience of designing the house-- it really retooled my whole thinking about domestic architecture. In the sense that I gave up my, what some call my "barn style," and got interested in "palace style." The Shaw house is the only-- the most visible result of that change.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The Shaw house is the one in Oswego.

JOHN YEON: Yes. It was built for Lawrence Shaw.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That was probably in the forties?

JOHN YEON: No. Fifties. Yes, 1950.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I thought I'd heard that you went for the "barn styles" as opposed to the "palace style." When you started the "palace style" did you leave the "barn style" behind?

JOHN YEON: Well, no, in the same year the Shaw house was built, Dr. Sean's house was built, which is essentially a "barn style" house. But the Shaw house is, in a sense, veering towards post-modernism. But schemes that weren't built were very much post-modernist. I didn't realize this at all until quite recently when I saw the post-modern architectural exhibition at the museum. I had not taken architectural magazines for a long time. I wasn't doing architecture, or at least that kind of architecture, so I was really out of touch with what was happening in the field of architecture. And when I saw the exhibition, I thought, "My god, I wish some of my projects had been built or at least there'd been drawings of them because the direction was certainly going that way." The only house that was built that might be an example of it was a house on Portland Heights built for Nancy Corbett-- Mrs. Alfred Corbett-- who built it, or commissioned it, for her mother. Her mother was the client, but Nancy was the one who did all the negotiations. Nancy's mother was, then, about eighty when the house was built. I didn't know her mother, except that she was a remarkable woman. But I didn't know anything about her taste. I just assumed she was a gentlewoman from Philadelphia who probably had some delicate scale furniture and so on... Not at all! The furniture that came out of storage was rather larger in scale and her chief interest was in the television set which was to go from living room to bedroom [and turn it around]. She was a very modern lady. And so the project never came off. The house was built and then she moved in and that was the end. I couldn't carry it through to make it successful, either outside or inside. But it was I thought a very pretty house and could have been exceptionally pretty [\_\_\_\_\_].

MARIAN KOLISCH: What do you mean you couldn't [\_\_\_\_\_] as far as landscaping... ?

JOHN YEON: As far as the landscaping or furnishing, my usual job of cradle to grave, doing landscaping and furnishing. It just didn't work out because Mrs. Decanezares was her name, was kind of rebellious and Nancy, at that point, just threw up her hands. She just couldn't manage her mother any farther. But the other day I ran into an architect who used to be in Portland who is now in Dallas, and he referred to that house as a post-modernist house. I never thought of it in those terms, but I can see what he meant. There is one thing that is a post-modernist tenet, which I agree with thoroughly, the matter of context. I built that house, which was on Portland Heights in an area not immediately adjacent to rather substantial Colonial Revival houses, but in an area where there is a concentration of them. And I didn't want to do a house that would jump out of its neighborhood. I was very determined, that it be fairly inconspicuous; the distinction is much more on the inside than the outside. There's a very nice living room. I even designed a chandelier, a rather elaborate crystal and wood candle chandelier for the center of the living room. When the house was

sold, the Corbetts took that with them. When the house was built, architectural students or architects, I think, were rather appalled. They didn't know what in the world had happened to me. This wasn't my style; it was in a sense, a period revival house. But Walter Gordon is one who did like it and recommended to an architectural magazine editor that he go look at it and use it. And the editor looked at it, I think, and I never heard a word from him.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Is the house still up?

JOHN YEON: The house is still up but I've never been in it. I really don't know what shape it is [in] or what it looks like.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I'd be curious to know what's in it now.

JOHN YEON: Well I say post-modernist because oddly enough it has these tall double-hung windows, unusually tall. It's a high ceiling living room and the windows go from nearly the ceiling to the floor, with panes of glass, and things which architecture didn't dare do until quite recently. But that's my only post-modernist [move].

MARIAN KOLISCH: I still have trouble understanding the definition of post-modernist.

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, I was surprised at this exhibition I saw. You didn't see it?

MARIAN KOLISCH: No.

JOHN YEON: It had lots of houses in it and they were often Palladium in a sense of formal plans and axes which had been unfashionable for a very long time, and they also used vertical windows rather than walls of glass.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you're going back to [\_\_\_\_\_].

JOHN YEON: Yes. I don't know. I was confused, too. I was baffled by it because-- I'm annoyed by it. They were like versions of Mount Vernon, for instance, with lots of recognizable derivations, and then they put a door off-center or some little quirk that probably made it appear creative-- absolute nonsense. If you're going to do it, do it all the way or do something else.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Are there some other houses in particular that you would like to talk about that are especially dear to you?

JOHN YEON: Oh I don't think so. There are very few houses, indeed, to talk about. I often think I have probably more reputation based on fewer works than anybody I can think of in the history of architecture.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, I don't know, John. There are other things besides houses, of course, but I don't know if you want to talk about the work you've done on the museum, interiors and the gallery installation.

JOHN YEON: Let's talk about that the next time.

I just want to add that as a result of these colored houses that I'm speaking about, eventually I got to painting them. Well, the color of this house is not the mossy greens of the earlier ones, but it's a blue that appeared so often in my architecture that other architects called it John Yeon blue. It's a blue with a greenish tinge to it and a grayish tinge and in its lighter form, it's ice blue-- a very

eighteenth century, favorite color of Louis XIV. That recent publication of something on my work in a Seattle paper referred to the color of this house as, and quoted me as deriving the color from observing grain elevators or silos. Well, I've never, couldn't possibly have said anything like that because I know exactly where the color scheme for this house came from. It's back to a drawing I have of Eugene Berman's for a stage set. And nothing in the stage set is painted, no architectural things are painted this color, but the colors do appear in it: the turquoise blue and a greenish yellow and a mulberry color which is the original color of this room. And it's seldom I can so specifically disprove something I was supposed to have said.

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH JOHN YEON  
AT HIS HOME IN PORTLAND, OREGON  
DATE: JANUARY 10, 1983  
INTERVIEWER: MARIAN W. KOLISCH

JOHN YEON: JOHN YEON  
MARIAN KOLISCH: MARIAN KOLISCH

[Tape 4; side 1]

MARIAN KOLISCH: This is a continuation of the interview with John Yeon, in Portland, January 10, 1983. Let's continue, John, with the idea, we're going back to some of the conservation things you've been involved in. One of the major areas of that was Cannon Beach, Oregon.

JOHN YEON: All right. This started from my days on the ill-fated and short-lived Site Park Commission when I was twenty-one. Ecola Park had been given to the State of Oregon as a state park and Lesly Scott, whom I've already quoted before, was chairman of the Highway Commission. Ecola Park was a mile or so of very beautiful beach frontage that had been owned by three families. Two of the families gave their interest to the state, and the third, the [Lewis] family, were down on their luck and the state had to buy it for fifteen thousand. So the site, Ecola Park, which is one of the crown jewels of the park system.

[break in tape]

Just outside the park was Chapman Point, which is very important in [the] view from Ecola Point. It came up for sale, I think it was five thousand dollars, and the State Park Commission recommended that the state buy it and add it to the park. Lesley Scott refused to buy it. He said the fifteen thousand dollars on that park is like dumping it in the ocean. I knew that after he retired from the commission that the attitude of his successors would be somewhat different and I didn't want Chapman Point to be wrecked. At the time there was talk of building a dance hall on it or other things of that sort. So I went to the bank and borrowed money and bought it, just to grubstake the state for this difficult interim. Well, then the Highway Commission did indeed change, but their attitude after that was, "Oh heck, John Yeon won't do anything to spoil it. Why should we buy it?" So I was left holding the bag.

MARIAN KOLISCH: How much land was involved?

JOHN YEON: Well, not a great deal in acreage, but it's a point that's almost an island connected to a cove--isthmus-- with bird rocks off of it. And the famous view south from Ecola Point, Chapman Point, is in the foreground. Everyone thinks it's part of the park, but it isn't. This was an area that had been subdivided in 1890 and people bought land there just because it was the first really scenic coast south of Seaside, which wasn't scenic in that sense. And they bought it before the

age of automobiles and just hung on to it. They didn't need motor access, but they were not about to give it up. So all these lots were on a grid of the 1890 plat, which was 50' by 100' lots [ ] occupied the cove connecting Chapman Point to the mainland. I started acquiring these lots as I could, as people died, thinking I could get this monstrous subdivision removed from it, because streets criss-crossed the area. Although they plunged over towards the sea, they were there, and nobody could do anything with the land as long as they existed.

Then, to complicate it, there were dunes that had been subdivided by the same process to the south. When they were trampled or graded for development, they broke loose and became a moving desert of sand that was encroaching into the cove. And people just abandoned that end of the beach because it's like living in front of a lava flow. The houses that were there were buried and the land had become tax delinquent and reverted to the county. I bought a great big stretch of barren dunes from the county for a hundred dollars a lot. But this was later. This was after the war. I planted beach grass over them. I had professional help in planting some of it, but most of it, much of it, I did myself. And it, in turn, was buried by sand blowing from beyond the land I own, so I had to keep buying more of this worthless land and planting it until I had a half a mile along the coast. And still I hoped to get rid of the streets which criss-crossed over this.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The streets were there because there were builders who were planning to put houses up?

JOHN YEON: Well, theoretically, yes. Most of the streets could not be built because the terrain was so steep. But neither could you do anything with the land at all as long as they were there, because the streets were at frequent intervals.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And this is what caused the sand to be moving?

JOHN YEON: Yes. So, in the end I ended up with quite a bit of real estate, which was not my original intention at all. Then the trauma of all this was that after acquiring all this land, I could not get the streets vacated. They had become sacred cows and there was a judge in the county who advised the populus to never vacate a street. It was the one thing that he thought was sacred. He didn't care what happened alongside the street or what damage the street caused, it was [just a very important thing]. I made three attempts at street vacations and always there'd be great petitions against the vacations. Part of it was have-not resentment fixations.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What do you mean by that, "have-not fixations"?

JOHN YEON: The people who lived there at that time, I think of them as sort of retired streetcar conductors, but that doesn't mean anything anymore. And, oh, at the hearings I remember the things that were said: "One man shouldn't own all that land," or "Mr. Yeon doesn't want shacks on Chapman Point. I live in a shack. Guess how that makes me feel?" That sort of thing. The ringleader of all this was the wife of a radio evangelist down there, so these old people who were in a seat at the right hand of God just signed all her petitions. She got mad at me originally because after I planted the grass, I had to fence it to keep people off. But she had three small sons who just came tumbling down the bank through the newly planted grass; and I asked them not to. And finally I followed them home to talk to their parents and she was outraged. She said, "Tom, Dick, and Harry, that's not their name, but they're not to be restrained." So she was the leader of it. And she triumphed, because all my life I haven't been able to do anything constructive with the property because of her. She's gone now, but it's pretty late for me to tackle anything that I'd hoped...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because she prevailed in keeping the regulations so that you could do...

JOHN YEON: Yeah. In keeping the streets. These invisible streets; they're just on the map, but people had a right to walk over them if they knew where they were. They mostly didn't. Not knowing where they were, but knowing there were some streets there, they felt they could go anywhere.

Well, she's gone and I finally succeeded only last year in getting the streets vacated, but not by the methods I tried before. This time I petitioned that the whole area be deplatted and that didn't alert people to the fact the streets would be vacated. But in the deplating process, the streets and the lots are all wiped out and you go back to a blank sheet, which is what I wanted originally. And in this case, all the streets-- there are two streets which give access to the beach and I never tried to get those vacated. So nobody had tried to get anything deplatted before in that area. Everybody wanted to break large tracts into smaller ones and this is making a big tract out of little ones. So they didn't know how to fit into what was going on.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What to make of that.

JOHN YEON: Yes. So, of course, after the initial project didn't work out for the state taking it over, then I hoped to build a house down there myself in the cove, not on the point. And that was always where two of these hypothetical streets intercepted, so I was never able to do it. But the beach grass has grown and flourished, and people have come back to the area, and the land all around my project has become valuable. And as a result my taxes have soared until it's catastrophic.

MARIAN KOLISCH: On this worthless land.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And the fact that I preserved that end of the beach attracted, very unfortunate condominium, called [ ] Point. But then that isn't my only folly. I half or partially...

MARIAN KOLISCH: While we're still on that place, could I ask you: did any of that take place during the McCall administration, which would have been sympathetic, I would think, to helping?

JOHN YEON: Well, yes, he was governor. But this was entirely a local Cannon Beach issue.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Because there's a lot of talk about the beaches during the time he was governor.

JOHN YEON: That was the sand, the dry sand area. As a matter of fact, I took an active role in pointing out that that wasn't the way to go about that. The state had the myth that they owned all the beaches. And I, in the course of trying to get the cars off of Cannon Beach (if the state owned the beaches, they let the cars run all over it, and I thought it was just a tragedy) I wrote a long thing trying to get the state to ban cars from at least that end of the beach. I pointed out that the state didn't own all the beach although they allowed cars on the wet sand and cars went all over the beach. Dave Talbot, State Park Superintendent, never realized that the state didn't own all the beaches, and this aroused him so that he started a bill to have the state take all the beaches. And I still think they went about it in a very wrong, and actually illegal, way. They could have done it by zoning to keep buildings off the beaches. But the main tragedy of that was when people were very aroused when they learned that they didn't own all the beaches in Oregon, because they'd been told this myth that [Oz West] had saved the beaches for Oregon. Actually, the conditions of the beaches in Oregon was the same as all around in California, Washington, and on parts of the East Coast. Wasn't exceptional at all in Oregon, but they'd been told that it was.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It's a myth that I think people still believe, that Oz West saved the...

JOHN YEON: Yes. No, he didn't at all. But when they were alerted to the fact that they didn't own



the beaches, they were very upset. And the way to acquire that land would have been to have bought the uplands, because the uplands were connected to the dry sand and they could have saved many miles of beautiful beaches that way. Instead, they removed every incentive for saving the beach landscape, which includes the trees, and cliffs, and the uplands. And there were still large areas, not large areas, but a lot of beautiful, undeveloped beach land that could have been saved at that time.

MARIAN KOLISCH: By zoning.

JOHN YEON: Well, it could have been saved by zoning. But if people were interested in getting this beach land for the public, and were told that the way to do it would be to buy the adjacent scenic uplands, then the public parks could have been expanded with very strong public support. Now there's not much incentive to do that and public beaches, when the land adjacent to them is private, they kind of end up like, well, extreme case is Coney Island-- private land adjacent to public beach. And the beautiful parks, the only really beautiful parts of the Oregon beaches that are preserved are when the uplands as well as the beaches are preserved. Most people think that this [ ] what happened.

Well, half-way through this project there were so many defeats, time after time, at Cannon Beach on the street location business, that I thought I would throw in the sponge, really and buy land that I had long admired on the Columbia River opposite Multnomah Falls. It became available and I did buy it, but then I was unable to face the logical thing to do, which was to sell the beach property. So I hung onto both and sort of fell between two stools. The Columbia River property is a mile long, opposite Multnomah Falls. Oddly enough, when it became for sale, I called up Nani Warren, who was in Europe at the time-- it's adjacent to their property-- and told her she should buy it. But she was away and it was going to be grabbed up too so I bought it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Maybe we could comment right here that at that time she was not chairman of the Columbia Gorge Commission.

JOHN YEON: No.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you bought it...

JOHN YEON: And I protect all her view east from the Columbia River.

[Break in Tape][Tape 4; Side 2]

JOHN YEON: [ ] eventual park lands developed on the Washington side of the Gorge. The property I have would be [merely] to keep peace in the western Gorge. And I don't know what it's future is. The problem was not dedicated streets but the erosion, which was a result of all the dams on the Columbia River. The Corps of Engineers refused to do anything about it, so I had to spend vast amounts, for me vast amounts of money, buying rock to dump into the river, which is very depressing, and expensive.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This was like, what do they call it when they do that at the beach?

JOHN YEON: Embankment. Well, I just had to protect the shore because my land had been built up through ages and ages of river silt from flooding during high water. And, that's through the whole process of erosion below dams. It's something new and there's no legislation protecting landowners; all the legislation protects them above dams. There's never been so many large dams as on the Columbia, and the consequences of it were unknown. The Corps of Engineers did not want to do

anything about it. It would open a whole can of worms.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So what happens is, the soil just keeps getting washed away?

JOHN YEON: Getting washed away, and it's no longer replenished because it settles to the bottom of the reservoir behind the dam. It's a very complicated, interesting thing because the river deposited silt on the sand bars that were exposed in the fall in low water, and that's when the east wind blows. And the east wind blew the sand off the sand bars and onto the land. Made a poultice against these tender banks each year and so when the spring floods came, some washed away, but it brought back more than it took away. And now the whole process is reversed.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So you have more soil than there was before.

JOHN YEON: Well, the land was accreting before the dams were built. But now, no, there's not any deposit on these sand bars, or very little, because it settles behind the dams. And then in the fall, when the east wind blows, that's when the water is low and the dams-- called power peaking-- they hold back the river behind the dams and release it when they need more electricity. You can't store electricity, but you can store water. So this creates annual, or daily, tides, artificial surge of water. And this wets the sand bars so then the east wind cannot lift that sand. It's a whole symbiotic chain. It's very disastrous for anything except river banks that are solid rock.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And the Corps of Engineers doesn't understand that? Do they just refuse to...?

JOHN YEON: I think they understand it. I've had long, much correspondence with them about it. They just don't want to assume responsibility. When they built the second power house at Bonneville, the Stanford Research Institute, who did the environmental impact study, recommended that they consider the cost of erosion control below the dams as a part of a cost of that project. I was very glad to see that. I thought my troubles were over. They simply ignored that recommendation entirely.

Well, one place, it's erosion; at the beach it was legal hassles over vacated streets. But they're two, I think, extremely beautiful pieces of property. I'm lucky to have had them in spite of all the troubles.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes, you certainly are. And I hope you intend to keep them.

JOHN YEON: Well, as long as I possibly can, although the taxes are [impossible].

MARIAN KOLISCH: So it would be your hope, John, that if the federal government came in to assist in the control of the Columbia Gorge that they would do something about that soil erosion, too.

JOHN YEON: Yes, I think they would. But I also hope that my property would be absorbed in a larger part.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I have never seen your house up there, but I understand that it's a subterranean. Is that right? At least it's underground?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, it's not a house. There's a lawn of over two acres around the cove that faces Multnomah Falls directly across the river, and the house is just, well, it's like a bunker. It goes into a bank, not a high bank, but the lawn goes over it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So the front is exposed.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Just the entrance is exposed. It was done that way to make a vandal-proof tool room, and then I thought, "Well, I'd better make it a little larger than that," and it got a little bit bigger and bigger until it had the bathroom and a six-foot kitchen, and a nice room with a high ceiling. Well, it's just one room, but it's usable. The beds are just fold-up and go in a sort of closet, Japanese fashion.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You're not trying to make it solar or...?

JOHN YEON: Oh, no. No. But actually, it's very comfortable. It's cooler in summer that way and it's warmer in winter than it would be if it were exposed. But there's no solar heating; it's electric heat.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And light you just have from what comes in through the front.

JOHN YEON: Lamps. No, there's no daylight at all. Because the intent is to have it burglar-proof and it worked out that...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Not to be seen.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Not to be seen and no windows that could be broken. And it's worked out so far successfully on that score.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, the question of the environment-- I think we talked about the sad state of control over that right now. With Secretary Watt and also with the death of Tom McCall, I think we're going to see some movements die out. I don't know.

JOHN YEON: Well, I don't know either. Being interested in landscape isn't [tough \_\_\_\_\_]. One thing I might-- oh, I don't want to ramble on-- but my interest in landscape, as I said, began early and there was one exhibition I put on at the Portland Art Museum that was interesting. It may be worth mentioning if I can do it briefly. I became so fed up with local artists who had no interest in the landscape. They said it was all right to show tourists, but you can't paint it, you know. And they were interested in styles that were emanating, or existed in New York or Europe. And a friend of mine, Olivia Shepherd, and I put on an exhibition. I don't know that it had a title, but we collected reproductions of paintings of landscapes very much like this: Japanese prints, Chinese paintings, European backgrounds of Renaissance portraits and French seventeenth century landscape painters and early German paintings. And then we matched the geography in the paintings with photographs of Oregon as nearly as we could. Of course, in Chinese paintings and the Columbia Gorge, you can match formation for formation almost in many cases. So we put these up side by side in this one gallery at the museum and for years people told me how much they had enjoyed the exhibition and how much it changed their attitude towards the landscape that they were familiar with. It was no longer something just for tourists, but it had been enjoyed and appreciated by sensitive, creative artists, of many periods and many cultures. And it didn't have to be the conventional subject, it didn't have to be like the landscapes that modern artists painted in the East, but could be something quite different.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Interesting concept to show those side by side. Well, obviously, the landscape has always been very important as far as your architecture's concerned, too. I mean you want it to go together.

JOHN YEON: Well, there's lots of people interested in regional architecture now. I think part of it is just chauvinism. They want this region to have some distinctive architecture that they can boast about. But the people who call up on the telephone for an interview have no idea, no knowledge of

architecture, or regional architecture, or don't know what they're talking about. They just want to confirm that it exists.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Northwest architecture.

JOHN YEON: Yes. And I think I'm supposed to be sort of a kingpin in that they come to me and, oh, dear, I'm not a Northwest regional architect exclusively. I am when I had a chance to build in these landscapes that I love so much, and I have never had that chance. To me, regional architecture only means an architecture related to a specific regional landscape. I don't think it means anything as far as that Portland as a city or...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Or the people who live there.

JOHN YEON: Or the people who live there or suburbia or Portland Heights or anything of that sort.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Depends upon what the landscape is.

JOHN YEON: Yeah, it's a building in the landscape. And this being a new landscape, since as I say I had a passion for it, I felt it should have an architecture of its own. But that was sort of a naive, youthful ambition. And actually the regional architecture in my mind in other countries is often the humble architecture of the place. Like Mexico has the villages that are almost the color of the landscape they exist in and melt into it and change from valley to valley, and the same in Europe. But when anybody got very sophisticated in those communities, they did an international style at the time. It would be a baroque palace or...

MARIAN KOLISCH: It would not be regional.

JOHN YEON: No. What I'm trying to explain, my feeling is that now it's just the opposite. That common architecture is the same the world over pretty much. It's become indistinguishable one place from another by and large [ ] has been regimented. But now it is the sophisticated people who are interested in doing the different thing-- things specific to an area. It's just the opposite from...

MARIAN KOLISCH: I see. You're saying that the sophisticated people now would like to build something that is more fitting to a certain area.

JOHN YEON: Fitting to the landscape, yes. And in past times, the sophisticated people wanted something that echoed a very high style of Europe, or Russia. A palace, like a French palace and...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Or people will go to a high desert area or mountains and build something Moroccan or...

JOHN YEON: Yes. The notion is very clear to me but it's hard to express. It's just the opposite of what happened before. Now if you want something different, to have the difference be different from the international style, it's the sophisticated people that do it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That makes me think of-- and I'm sorry about that other [ ]-- the Oriental art that you seem to be interested in and I think have been for a long time. Is that true? You've collected a lot of Oriental things. Do you think that has a bearing on some of your design ideas or in your relating your design to the outdoors?

JOHN YEON: Well, people sometimes ask me why I got interested in Oriental art. That's quite easy

to explain. It's because I knew the Columbia Gorge very well and when I first saw Chinese painting which had crags and twisted trees and tall, vertical waterfalls, it was not at all strange. I just walked right into the painting. I was completely at home. And from that I got interested in other phases of Oriental art. And, of course, Chinese painting, or Japanese painting for that matter, and prints. Houses are very much absorbed into the landscape. They were almost invisible and, of course, that's what I feel should happen in beautiful landscapes too. Oriental art is the one ancient art that was as interested in wilderness as we're apt to be. Wilderness was considered rather barbaric and frightening and horrible in Europe until well after the Renaissance. But in China, the wilderness was respected and enjoyed from the very beginning. And people, or houses, were very small figures or elements in landscape painting.

Well, then, of course, interest in Oriental art and other art, too, although the European arts, decorative arts particularly, came much later for me. But as a result of that interest, I think that's the reason I got involved in museum work; I was asked to do these installations because I knew perhaps more than most architects about the material that was going to be displayed. And, oh, that's what got me roped into the Brundage, and all that [\_\_\_\_\_].

MARIAN KOLISCH: In San Francisco.

JOHN YEON: Uh huh. I installed the exhibition that was held in 1960, I think, to show San Francisco a sampling of what he was offering to the city if they voted to build, a state bond issue for building a museum. And, at least much to my surprise, the populus voted to spend tax money to build a museum for the Brundage Collection.

MARIAN KOLISCH: A whole museum or was it a wing?

JOHN YEON: Well, it was a wing, but the old wing had to be torn down and this one replaced it. It was a whole museum. But this was paid for by people voting to spend their tax money...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you remember how much it was?

JOHN YEON: No I don't. The exhibition that showed them what they would be getting is the one that I installed. And then I had nothing to do with the museum that was built until it was about ready to open. One of the architects that had hired somebody to install the collection had sent him around Asia-- paid for his trips to get the knowledge and the materials. Brundage didn't like that idea and wanted me to do it again. I didn't want to do it because the building was still dripping wet concrete, and the opening date had been announced, and visitors coming from all over the world. I tried my best to get out of it. Brundage finally threatened to come up here and twist my arm and I had visions of him arriving at the door here and me saying, you know, "Go away, old man. I don't want to touch your pretty things." So I said I'd meet him in San Francisco. I thought it'd be on stronger ground for me. And, of course, he succeeded in twisting my arm and said I would have no interference from the curator he'd hired, whom I didn't like, and well, gave me complete control. And by some miracle it opened on the scheduled date, but just barely. I placed every object that was in the collection in the museum but, as I say, I had nothing to do with the building. I did finally do some cases and, oh, platforms and partitions and that sort of thing, but minor architectural...

MARIAN KOLISCH: But the actual building of the space, you didn't have to do. You designed the way it was to be installed.

JOHN YEON: Well, the cases mostly were these large aquarium-type cases built into the walls. I made the plan for displaying material and placed every object, which is a challenging assignment

because you can make or break an object by the way you show it. It was a pleasure handling all of those things and getting acquainted with them in that sort of sense. Of course the installation didn't last very long because the curator, who I could ignore, then he wanted to take over afterwards.

MARIAN KOLISCH: So it was changed, then?

JOHN YEON: It was changed quite rapidly. And I don't think there's any trace of my original installation.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Oh, really?

JOHN YEON: But that's the way it goes. But then I went on. I did work in Kansas City.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes, tell me about that.

JOHN YEON: Well, the first job there was extremely difficult. It was a gallery for English miniatures, and I can't imagine anything that's much more difficult except maybe a collection of scarabs, or Roman coins, maybe. But consequently, the room could be more interesting than it otherwise could be. And that was considered a success. In fact, the director of the Boston Museum at the time-- I can't think of his name-- said it was the most distinguished installation in America, when he saw it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Really. The first one at Kansas City?

JOHN YEON: Yeah. But then I went on and did other things there. Redid, not totally, but partially, the Gothic gallery, and then eventually the gallery for Chinese furniture, the gallery for Chinese paintings.

MARIAN KOLISCH: This is all in the same museum in Kansas?

JOHN YEON: Same museum. And the modern art gallery and the galleries for Japanese screens. Well, finally there was a whole unfinished wing in the museum that I completed inside. Two levels. All of this I mention because in every case I was familiar with the material to be displayed, except the modern art gallery. And it's very exciting... Oh. There was an Impressionist painting gallery, also, that was done up with, sort of, not really, nineteenth-century flavor. But it had a lot of marble and motifs and so on. But the Japanese screen gallery is the biggest success of all that. I'm very pleased with that gallery.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And that remains as it was.

JOHN YEON: That remains, yes. That's considered as the best Japanese screen gallery in America.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes. Ours, of course, doesn't compare to that. But our Asian Wing in the Portland Art Museum, did that come after?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, yes. Marjorie Smith gave money for that. But that's really-- I think it's all right, but that was sort of a straightjacket.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It was minor, you know, compared to what...

JOHN YEON: Yeah. Because I didn't want to change the room itself. And it's a nicely proportioned room, but it certainly looks different than before.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Yes. But you feel, then, that you're somewhat limited when the room is already. You can't change walls or...?

JOHN YEON: Yes, I do. You can't change the proportions.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, that's a beautiful room, John. I have not seen the one in Kansas City, but I think this room in Portland is an absolutely stunning installation and so does everyone else, of course. It's a little bit to do with the color, I think, as well as spacing of the objects.

JOHN YEON: Well, things look nice in there. It's just too bad there isn't more space. The first gallery I did at Portland Museum was for the Kress Collection. That pleased the Kress Foundation and they gave them more paintings, but that has been...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Changed.

JOHN YEON: ...mutilated since. And then I did a gallery for the Greek pots. There were these recessed cases and so on. And that, when it opened, I thought was very successful. But that's been altered radically since then, too. And used for other things.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Is it satisfying to do the interior, the installations for museums? Would you like to do more of that? It's much more limiting, I should think than...

JOHN YEON: Well, it's a real satisfaction when it's done, but it doesn't last very long, because every director or every curator or, in particular, every installation man feels he has to do it over in order to be worth his salt. The most unfortunate one is in the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. I did over the wing for early French material, mostly tapestries. And that project moved around in the museum and went on for quite a while. But eventually I made a large model, six or eight feet long, that you looked into, with lighting and colors and so on. They decided to do it, and it was done, and I thought it was very successful when it was finished. Then they had a big exhibition called The Splendor of Dresden. They didn't actually use the space, but it was all dismantled. And when that was over they had a new installation man who painted it all a different color and, well...

MARIAN KOLISCH: That would be very difficult to see that happen.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. And that is strange because I think that was unusually high-handed because of the efforts that had gone to please the donors, who've since died, with this elaborate model. And paint is an integral part of architecture in a case like that. They wouldn't think of altering a sculpture or painting to that extent. They feel very free in doing it.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That is strange, isn't it, when you think of the fact that no one would dare touch a painting in any way to alter it, or a sculpture.

JOHN YEON: Yeah. I was very much still alive. They didn't even consult... And Frankenstein, who was art critic for the Chronicle at the time it was built, originally had praised it highly and said it should remain just that way. Nothing should be changed. But it certainly was.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It doesn't guarantee it. Could I ask you here about some of the awards that you had?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, they're not very much. The nicest one was the Brummer Prize from the Institute of Arts and Letters. I think it was the second year that it was awarded. The first year it was split between two architects (actually I found out later I was a candidate the first year) but the

second year they gave it to me. I thought it was very nice, indeed.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Could we identify the Brummer Award? Is it always given for architects?

JOHN YEON: Yes. It's the American Institute of Arts and Letters, I think. It's the one that makes the choice.

MARIAN KOLISCH: What year was that given? Do you know?

JOHN YEON: No. I don't really remember.

MARIAN KOLISCH: It doesn't matter. I do have something noted though, that in 1956, you received something from the National Academy at the Institute of Arts and Letters. Is that it?

JOHN YEON: Yeah.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And then there was an Award for Distinguished Service at the University of Oregon in 1977.

JOHN YEON: Yes, that's true. It was for architecture and conservation, I guess. And since I've never been a registered architect, a member of the AIA, the AIA made me an honorary member in 1976. No, pardon me, that wasn't 1976.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And you'd never been a member just because, any particular reason?

JOHN YEON: Well, no particular reason. I was certainly not against being a member, but when I was being State Park Commissioner at twenty-one and doing the Watzek house at twenty-six... My education was very unconventional and I just never tried to pass the exam. I could do the kind of work that I wanted to do without it. Now I couldn't possibly pass the exam. Anyway, it's unusual for the AIA to give someone who's involved in architecture that award. It usually goes to someone in other fields. But the conservation would have been reason enough, I guess; they made an exception in that case.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You did have an award for the Portland Information Center.

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, there have been various awards.

MARIAN KOLISCH: That's probably rather early.

JOHN YEON: Yeah, and then, they've been included in the Museum of Modern Art exhibitions, things of that sort. Two or three times in the Museum of Modern Art exhibitions. [Art Building U.S.A., Art in Our Time.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Magazines...

JOHN YEON: And magazines, yes. Oh, hyperbole, hyperbole.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Misquoting.

JOHN YEON: Well, misquoting, but also it's hyperbole.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The other thing I remember is the retrospective exhibit of your designs up at the Portland Art Museum.



JOHN YEON: Oh, that was very sweet of the local architects to do that. I was very much against that but they insisted.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, I thought it was a very nice exhibit because it had photographs as well as drawings and text. Do you feel that it was covering...?

JOHN YEON: Well, an architectural exhibit is hard to put on. It costs a lot of money. And this should, you know, it should have big blown-up things and models [\_\_\_\_\_]. This was done very modestly which is ok...

[Tape 5; side 1]

MARIAN KOLISCH: ...we were talking about some of the models, and mentioned models in that exhibit; but I wanted to know before what it means when you talk about an "axial" house.

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, I think what was meant in that case was that I had always defended axes most of my life, and axis was considered a very evil thing. It's called a "despotic axis." And I've always taken a great deal of pleasure in [\_\_\_\_\_] vista [a progression] of ruins. It's a very common thing in traditional architecture. And it's the thing that was completely abolished by modern architects with open planning and asymmetrical designs. Axis was to be avoided at all cost.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And axis is something that is planned?

JOHN YEON: It's just a straight line through a vista, through the balance.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Doesn't have something intercepting?

JOHN YEON: No. It's just common in oh, Beaux Art architecture, or it's the central thing that balances. I was never absorbed with balancing on equal elements on each side, but I very much like vistas through spaces. My axes, oddly enough, this became my diagonal axes. Even in this room it was sort of a direction rather than central. But the curious, amusing thing of all that is that now axes are fashionable again and formal,-- the rediscovery of palladium concepts. I was unaware of what was happening in the so-called post-modern architecture because I haven't taken architecture magazines for many years. Until I saw an exhibition at the museum on post-modern architecture after the Portland Building was built. My goodness, I realized that many of my projects, most of which were never built, would have fallen right in with much of the material in that exhibition. The only one that was built that could be considered in that sense was the house on Portland Heights for Mrs. Decanazares with Nancy Corbett; there are a couple of things that make that a respectable post-modern house. This seems pretty silly, but one is paint. One characteristic that I believe in very strongly is that it belongs in context with the neighborhood. I may have spoken about this before. It's in an area of colonial houses and people were shocked when I did it, around 1954, I think. They thought I'd really gone off my rocker. Now it's considered an early post-modern house. But anyway things that were not built had axes or vistas of that sort and context was a very important thing and I did not shun traditional forms. In fact, I delighted in using them wherever possible. I remember someone from San Francisco, [David Gabriel Bouvry] who was on the board of the Legion of Honor Museum (he was also a correspondent for an English architectural magazine on the West Coast) visited me after the war and saw what I was doing and pleaded with me. He said, "In order to escape the cliches of modern architecture, you're accepting many of the cliches of the past." Because I think he wanted to have an exhibition of my work at the Legion and saw what I was up to and have an exhibition of my work at the Legion and saw what I was up to and changed his mind. Well, that all, you see, is early stirrings of post-modern convictions.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Does that fit in with your having been called an "enemy of easy architecture?"

JOHN YEON: Well, I think where that came was-- I worked very hard on architecture and, as a matter of fact, also, I've done all of the detailing, all of the drawing myself and often making all of the working drawings myself. But the "easy architecture" must have come from criticism of the Bay Region style in San Francisco where [William Wooster] was a terribly nice man and was certainly the leader, one of the leaders, of the Bay Region style. When that started out, I admired his work very much. I liked the Gregory house, particularly. And then it sort of developed into a philosophy-- this is putting words in his mouth that he didn't say: but, "See, I put a window anywhere I want to; this is that humane, unpretentious, emancipated..." And he was such a genial, warm, nice man that everybody went along with this. The architecture just became no style at all. It was just a pride in not having to...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Abide by any...

JOHN YEON: ...by any style, even your own, you know. And I think that conjured up a lot of excruciatingly ugly architecture, all of it under the Bay Region style. The regional style, in my mind, is not just absence of style, which it's considered around here, but it's a very definite, difficult, conscious effort...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Conscious effort to do what?

JOHN YEON: Worry about proportions and worry about what a window does to a wall as much as any previous style.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Do you think we can sort of pull this together with some last few comments? Let me just ask you if you think that some of the styles in architecture are influenced by what's going on in the economy, what's going on in the mores of people?

JOHN YEON: Sure.

MARIAN KOLISCH: The new generation coming along has totally different ideas on modes of living from our generation. Isn't that going to make a difference?

JOHN YEON: Oh, sure. They're all kinds of things make a difference in the architecture from one place to another and one time to another, but there's always been regional differences. Architecture in Denver doesn't look like the architecture in Portland, or Kansas City and so on. That's not what interests me, that isn't what I mean by regional architecture. Those are inevitable changes from living conditions or economy or even climate. But I insist on thinking that it's a deliberate effort to interpret the specific landscape. In that, I may be way out on a limb by myself, but that's what is thrilling to me. And in this case it was a new landscape and one that I like very much. I haven't had a chance to build in the exciting parts of it [it's been very humdrum] so that my theory never really has been able to be...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Demonstrated.

JOHN YEON: ...Demonstrated, yeah. But I don't consider myself just a regional architect. In fact, if I build,-- well I've proven that. If I were to build in different places, I would be very responsive to those regions.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Like that marvelous model for Central America that you had. That was exciting.

JOHN YEON: Oh, yeah. My goodness, if I were to build in an ancient or old village or city, I never, never would do a modern, look-at-me building. This is curious: long ago, I used to say the survival of the street would be much more important than the expression of my own ego. I hated it when modern architecture interrupted the continuity of an old street. And I never thought I would hear Philip Johnson say the same thing; finally he said it. We used to argue about this sort of thing and that's exactly the phrase I used, which has now become his. But I've hated it, [been very critical] when modern architects in an old situation, or a college campus for that matter, like Princeton or I suppose Yale.

MARIAN KOLISCH: I saw one at Cornell, too...

JOHN YEON: Architects, if they didn't do an out-right violent, modern building, they would do some little thing that would show that they respected their-- they'd put a little dormer, maybe or something, just tip their hats slightly to the tradition into which they were intruding. And, it's absolute nonsense to me. If it was really an important environment, with continuity, I would do all-out, every effort, to be as inconspicuous as possible. And that doesn't mean it has to be dull. Actually, people like [Luchins] in England could have done that or [Lindenberg] in New York or, gosh, people in Sweden before 1930, the town hall period. It can be lively and creative and still preserve the continuity of the whole thing. Because I think old cities or old communities have become a museum work of art. They say, "Oh, a city shouldn't become a museum." Well, they're not going to be reproduced in the future and I think they should be treated as you would a painting that's lost flecks of paint. You...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Restore.

JOHN YEON: ...do the repainting so that it's inconspicuous. And I think old cities have to be preserved, like Venice, as a work of art.

MARIAN KOLISCH: You haven't said anything about Frank Lloyd Wright and your...

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, my gosh. When I read his biography, first thing I read of his, I was already gung ho about new architecture for here, but I was thrilled because what I read just vindicated my feelings because he kept talking a different architecture for every region [along that score]. I must say I couldn't always understand the examples that he did, but [I mean, really, I was all for it] and I admired him very much, although his architecture, much of it, looks too scratchy and busy and restless for me.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Sometimes contrived, do you think?

JOHN YEON: Oh well, sure. But a great, great talent.

MARIAN KOLISCH: And Erickson from Vancouver?

JOHN YEON: Oh, well, I don't know enough of his things. I've never actually seen it. But also that is too busy and scratchy for me, strident. Oh, yes, I struggled to make things calm, serene.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, I think that's a super aim because there aren't very many people around, I'm afraid, who are keeping that element, the serene and the quiet. Do you think you'd still like to do residential work, more than commercial?

JOHN YEON: Oh, yes. I've never had any desire to do great big commercial buildings. But residential buildings? Well, if [some of these] that I have done had been built, it would have been very

entertaining. They had axes. The last one that I designed that was never built was for Helen Thompson of Ravensview Drive. It was replacing the carriage house. There's a big house on Ravensview Drive and the site is very constrained. It's on top of a wall that rises right up from the sidewalk and it was, indeed, a post-modern house with tall, tall, vertical, double-hung windows and axes in two directions with one axis going up the bank into the water stair that's a vertical fountain [ ] the other out, oh my. It was...

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, maybe one of her children will build it.

JOHN YEON: No, because it could only be built in that site.

MARIAN KOLISCH: Well, I want to thank you very much.

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