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Oral history interview with Massimo Vignelli, 2011 June 6-7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Massimo Vignelli on 2011 June 6-7. The interview took place at Vignelli's home and office in New York, NY, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Mija Riedel has reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Massimo Vignelli in his New York City office on June 6, 2011, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. Good morning. Let's start with some of the early biographical information. We'll take care of that and move along.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were born in Milan, in Italy, in 1931?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Nineteen thirty-one, a long time ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. What was the date?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Actually, 80 years ago, January 10th. I'm a Capricorn.

MIJA RIEDEL: January 10th. Ah, okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: No, actually, that sort of makes sense. Did you have siblings? Were your parents involved?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. No, I was an only child.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were an only child, okay. Were you interested in art, design, architecture from very early on, as a young, young child? I know when you were a teenager, it became an interest.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, I started very early. I started to be interested in design when I was 14 years old, basically, and before I was just like anybody else, any other kid. I was playing with everything. I loved to do stage sets, by cutting a piece of board and making a cut in three sides, flipping it down, making the stage. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then picking up everything and imagining stories there. It was great. That was one of my favorite games, spending hours and hours and hours.

But then one day I'd seen a mother of a friend, who was fixing her house in the country, and she had some furniture made. And I didn't know that could be done, so I was fascinated, and I liked it. And then she had magazines, and I started to look at magazines and I got involved into the field of architecture, and I loved it, and design.

From the very beginning, it really was always architecture and design, which is easy to understand, because in Italy it was always much closer. But this was still during wartime. And then after the war, of course, things got much more fused between one and the other—between architecture and design—because they were—there was a great need for this. There wasn't enough furniture available, so then the architects designed furniture and designed everything else. That was around, and that started the whole Italian design phenomenon, but it was more or less because of that.

Then, when I was 16 years old, I went to work in the office of the Castiglione architects, very good architects at the time, and they were working the whole field of design. They were designing product design, designing beautiful radios, telephones. They designed furniture; they designed exhibitions; they designed buildings; they designed just about anything—flatware. So when I'm working there as a draftsman, I noticed that, and I learned that an architect should be able to design everything from the spoon to the city, as Adolph Loos predicted. So I always wanted to try myself on every one of these things, and I was looking for every opportunity. And that's what I've been doing ever since, basically.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you draw a lot as a child? It seems that if you were a draftsman, you must have drawn—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not nature, no, not nature things, not figurative things. I was more interested in design, really. So I was designing furniture; I was designing tombs; I was designing anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Tombs, did you say? [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, because they were less complicated. One of the greatest things about a mausoleum, it has no bathrooms. [Laughs.] It has no windows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And what spoils architecture most of the time is windows, as you know. They're the most difficult thing to place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And what did your parents do? Were either of them involved in design?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. My father had a background in pharmacy, and then he set up a little chemical company producing salicylic acid, which is used as a preservative. But I couldn't stand the smell of that, chemicals. And I was not interested; I was really interested in design. My father wanted me to become a chemist, and I wanted to be an architect. So one day, I just picked up everything I had, and I went to sell it to a thrift shop, and I bought a T-square—[laughs]—a triangle, and a board, and then a drafting board, and then—

MIJA RIEDEL: How old were you? Do you remember?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I was 15–yes, 14, 15. And then—so my father realized that that was the end of it—[laughs]—of his dreams. And so my father was already sick—he had heart disease—and dying, when I was 16, so—but just in time to see that, at that point, I am going to art school.

And of course, the month before I went to every other school, I was always flat. I was not interested. The moment I went to the art school, I was the best. [Laughs.] And so my father just had a glimpse of that before dying. But ever since, it was always very rewarding, because I was always the best. [Laughs.] Interesting class, interesting school, and a legend. "That kid is good." My work was hanging on the walls.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he was able to see you succeeding, a glimmer of–[inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not much, no, just in the beginning. But this was a tremendous incentive for me. My passion for architecture was growing, growing, growing. So I was reading everything and meeting every architect, because I knew the names. I was interested to meet them. I became a groupie, an architecture groupie—[inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I was collecting architects, in a sense. And then in '49, I was 18 years old and I had the CIAM [Congrès internationaux d'architecture modern]. The CIAM was the information organization of modern architecture started by Le Corbusier. And they had annual conferences. And in '49, they had one in Italy, in Bergamo. So I went there.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Palermo?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, Bergamo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Bergamo.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Near Milano. And so I had an opportunity of meeting all my gods. That was the Valhalla of the architecture. That really was, in a sense, the Valhalla. All the great architects were there from everywhere in Europe, and in Italy as well. So in one shot I met all of them. I was the young kid, and so everybody would say, "Who's that young kid?" because I was younger than architecture students, still younger. And then, of course, I went to the next conference again, and helping the Italian community to set up whatever they had to do at that time for the conference. So I was very much involved.

So during that time, during all that time, since I was a teen, I was always working—since my father died, basically, I was always working part-time as a draftsman in all the best architects' offices. So my school has been really the architects. They were—best.

So by the time I went to [the] school of architecture, I knew more than anybody else. I knew more than my teachers, as a matter of fact. When you're young, you're like a sponge, and you're so curious, every detail about the life of everyone—all things. I knew the dates when all the architects were born, things like that—where they went to school and so on and so forth. I knew already that, for instance, both Le Corbusier and Mies and others had been working as draftsmen in the office of Behrens, and details like that, and what they were working on and so on. These things I knew from that long time ago. Isn't it amazing? That's passion.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and who, when you were that age, was most significant to you? Who would you say were your major influences?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, Le Corbusier, by far. Le Corbusier was great because he was not only [a] tremendous form-giver, but he also—socially involved—[inaudible]—projects, and so on and so forth. He was a man of vision, courage, and determination, three things which I always like in my life. [Laughs]. And so Le Corbusier was a great mentor. And, of course, Mies was another tremendous mentor that I liked. [Inaudible.]

LELLA VIGNELLI: Hi. I'm sorry to be late.

MIJA RIEDEL: No. Oh, it's so nice to meet you. So nice to meet you.

MS. VIGNELLI: Very good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let me move these things.

MS. VIGNELLI: These things—yes, I have these things full of the—all the things I— [laughs]—[inaudible]. So [inaudible] they go around that way. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Lella Vignelli has just joined us.

So we were just talking about the early days when Massimo was first beginning to experience all the architects in Italy, and he'd been a—would you say that—was it an apprenticeship at Castaglione's?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, Castaglione, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how long did that go on for?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: While it wasn't really an apprenticeship, it was like an apprenticeship, but it was just working on projects. Let's say they would hire me as a draftsman for the length of a project, and then hire again for another project. It was like that; I freelanced. I was a freelance draftsman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. At 16, which is quite extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, well, it's—passion is what—that's what does it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

And what do you think inspired—you were young—you said you didn't draw necessarily especially well, but you made sets. Was that to make models?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, but that was before—but really what inspired me all the time was the work of the great architects, and particularly the European rationalists, and Italian rationalist architects, like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry. What was his name?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Rationalist, like [Giuseppe] Terragni. The whole group of architects from Como. It's a little city north of Milan that, before the war, had a [inaudible] season of architects, many, too many names to mention [inaudible], but I [inaudible] have to tell you. So–but Terragni was the most important one. Terragni, [Pietro] Lingeri, [Cesare] Cattaneo, [Augusto] Magnani, Terragni, and Frigerio and so on. Many, many, many, but the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry, Terragni—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, don't worry, Terragni is the most important one—is the key one.

And then in Milan, before the war, was [Giuseppe] Pagano.

And there was a magazine—there was every magazine—there was a very lively architectural debate all the time. There were three magazines important. *Casabella* that was the one by Pagano, and it was very rationalist. Then there was *Domus*; that was run by Gió Ponti. And then —Gió Ponti first, and then, immediately after the war, by Ernesto Rogers—very pivotal figure in the Gruppo 7. Then there was another magazine, it was called *Stile*, also run by Ponti, Gió Ponti.

So Gió Ponti was also a pivotal figure, but Gió Ponti was older than the other architects, and he was a little more decorative. Very talented, very, very talented, and then great promoter of design and great promoter of architects, too. Italian architecture would, without him, be set back —[laughs]—forever. And so Gió Ponti, I think, great impact as a journalist, as a publicist of architecture and design.

Rogers had a great impact in bringing in issues and basically sort of recovering the lost time, as —[inaudible]—the time that was lost during the fascist era. During fascist era, there was a lot of interesting architecture happening in Italy, but at the same time, it was isolated from the rest of Europe for political reasons. And so after the war, of course, Rogers was a great proponent of the, I will say, recovering the time that was lost. And so he was the one that introduces a lot of the European architects through the pages of *Domus*, and also American as well, [Richard] Neutra and some of [the] people from the West Coast, that period. Then, in the south of Italy, in Rome, there was another magazine that was quite important to me. It was called *Metron*, I think —

MIJA RIEDEL: *Metron*?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: *Metron*, and that was run by [Bruno] Zevi. Quite interesting to see the role of Jewish culture in the [inaudible] of architecture in Italy. In Milan there was Rogers, and in Rome was Zevi, if one can put it that way. Once again, a demonstration of international liveliness, compared to others. Now Zevi, however, during the war, was in the States, while Rogers, during the war, was in Switzerland—being Jewish, he had to come to Switzerland. And Zevi, being Jewish, went to [the] States. So by having grown up in the States, he was very much influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. So he was the one who brought Frank Lloyd Wright to Italy, basically—the knowledge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The organic architecture. So Rome was the organic architecture, and Milan was the rationalist architecture. Having been born and raised in Milano, my background was toward rational architecture. And I'm very happy about that. [They laugh.]

But still, in Rome and—from Florence down, basically, was very much influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. Florence was a separate thing. It was in limbo, by itself, as Venice was in limbo with [Carlo] Scarpa.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm trying to think when Paolo Soleri went to study with Wright.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Soleri is from south of Naples, from Salerno. He wasn't an architect, in a sense, mentally. Well, he was, to a certain extent. Soleri is still alive, but he's a ceramist. He comes from a family of ceramists—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —and became an architect, but ceramics was really his soul. What he was doing was, architecture looked like vases. [They laugh.] So obvious.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Which is not my vision of architecture, but it's another way of doing architecture. There are so many ways. And as a matter of fact, when he went to—he came to the States, married, and so on and so forth, and came to the States, and he started Arcosanti [AZ]. And Arcosanti is nothing but a huge sculpture.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is an interesting place.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's a huge piece of ceramic; it's not a piece of architecture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes, interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Unless one wants to call it architecture, but I'm [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: That's an interesting—have you seen it?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, but I have no desire. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It's an interesting place—interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I have a great desire to go to [inaudible] place, but zero percent to go to Arcosanti.

MIJA RIEDEL: Arcosanti is in—you can't decide if it's going up or coming down. It has both the feeling of something that's in construction and something that's deconstructing.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's—it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, because it's neither up or down. It's part of nature more than anything else.

So, okay, that was the very, very south. Naples had some architects, teachers there. Rome had Zevi and other people. And Rome had some—[Luigi] Piccinato, for instance, [Adalberto] Libera, great architects. And, of course, they had [Marcello] Piacentini, all the architecture built in the fascist time. Then we go up to Florence. [Giovanni] Michelucci was a great Florentine, cultivating the Florentine tradition—modern, but at the same time very sculptural on one side and very crafty on the other one. [Inaudible]–of Italy–[inaudible]. So then we come to Milano, where all the major ones were there. So BBPR, which is Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peresutti, Rogers, that is the firm BBPR. That's Rogers's office. Then there was Franco Albini of course, major figure. Ignazio Gardella, one of my great mentors, I worked a lot with him in his office.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry. What was his name?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Gardella. Great, great, very good architect. Great one. Great gentleman, too. Mentor for me, in the personal lifestyle.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so? What about that was inspiring to you?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Because he had—well, he came from a family of architects. His great-grandfather was a famous architect during the neoclassical period in general. And he married a rich family—Borsalino. He married the heiress of Borsalino hats, so he was pretty well covered from—[laughs]—economics side. He had fabulous connections, and because of the connections, he could build beautiful buildings, of all kinds—some for the Borsalino company and for the workers, a sanatorium, and then offices and then houses for the rich people and so on.

And–[inaudible]–Gardella was a very influential person, and he always said that I would become a very good architect. [Laughs.] So he was very encouraging from that point of view.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there something in particular that you learned from his architecture or his way of working? There was a particular influence?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes, a certain amount of ardor—interesting balance between discipline and happenstance, and how to control the happenstance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that is my interpretation of his architecture; he was definitely a rationalist. But at the same time, it was also the beginning of a new development from rationalist

architecture, so it was interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Castiglione, is there anything in particular that you took away from there?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Castiglione was just the fact that they were working the whole field of design, from furniture to spoons. It was from the spoon to the city from them, so the variety.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the design was really a discipline and, I think, of a consistency, a constant in terms of that.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes. Yes, it was a language.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was a language, and you had to learn this language, and when you learned this language, that was a way of talking. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And the design was a discipline rather than a style. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, it was never a style; that is the key thing. That's the rule number one—and to understand that difference.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where did you learn that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: In Castiglione? Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Before?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Through Rogers and the whole group, the whole climate, Italian climate, or architecture—the Milanese climate. And Mies, of course.

But that is really what we strongly believe in and still talk all the time about. This is really the great, the fundamental diversity from the European kind of a background and American kind of background. In America, modern architecture was just interpreted as another style, you see. And the best proponent, or the best exponent, in a sense, of that interpretation is certainly [Enrico] Frigerio, for whom architecture was just a style, very decorative, lightweight, probing—not stupid. It was intellectually provoking—how do you say? But nothing—

MS. VIGNELLI: He didn't last long. [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —nothing like the rigorousness that the European discipline had.

In Europe, we have thousands of years of history. And that means nothing else but thousand years of thinking—[laughs]. And it means a sequence, continued sequence, of theories, one from the other, and going [inaudible] from one to the other, never ending. And that is what really gave birth to a lot of the manifestation that we have over there, that we had in the past, from architecture to music and from literature, you name it.

And over here, the history of this country is a very particular one. This country has been made by people that had no education whatsoever to begin with, and came over because they were desperate at home—the immigrants, the early migrations, one year after the other, forever. And even today, they still come. Today is the Latinos immigration wave. Turn of the century was the Italians, the Russians, and so on, so forth, the European—history of European migration—the poor countries, and so on. And so of course, this doesn't mean that it stayed that way. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Glad to hear you think so. [They laugh.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: On the contrary, there were also cultured people, and those people which were cultured took upon themselves to bring culture to this country. And some were born here also. The Jeffersons engaged all their life—Jefferson, I mean, and his kind—to raise the standard of culture over here. Endless number of them.

But what I say is, then, because of them, because of the lack of history, everything was always

interpreted as a style. Also because of the attitude—there's this young, generous, looking-forward kind of attitude that American culture has, which is terrific from that point of view. But, of course, it needs also the other. [Laughs.] It's like a rocket propelled into the future. But it never comes back.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what you were describing earlier is learning that balance between discipline and happenstance. It sounds as if it was a very happy meeting for you to come to the U.S. with that sense of history and design, and to come someplace that didn't have that, but did have that enthusiasm and that openness–[inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, definitely. Again, because of my interest in architecture and because of my exposure and knowledge, in a sense—exposure, information, vast information. Let's put it that way to be more humble—I knew a lot about the development of architecture in America, the great school of Chicago, the skyscrapers and so on and so forth, but also the whole Bay Area and California area.

People like—as we have Rogers with [inaudible], there was John Entenza with [inaudible] architecture over here. And John Entenza was extremely influential—was a terrific person to begin with; I personally liked to know him—but he was a person with a tremendous influence, through us and *Arts & Architecture* magazine, which was not so much over here, which was very reluctant to understand and learn, or adopt, the Modern movement, because it was very conservative, not enough culture and so on and so forth.

And therefore, it was only a little intellectual fringe that was embracing modern architecture here. But they were the [Raphael] Soriano; they were the Eames, of course, and other—Craig—and other architects of that period. That is Craig Ellwood, by the way; Craig Ellwood was his name. Craig Ellwood was a terrific architect during that period of—and so there was a climate there that was very different from the one that was in Europe.

In Europe, there was a lot of debate about, modern architecture should be like this, should be like that, should be like this, should we develop, we should move, not move–oh, my God, there was so much theory and so on and so forth, heavy stuff. By comparison, what was happening in California was so lighthearted and joyful, and Eames, so full of life—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. VIGNELLI: And also so new, so—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So new and fresh, and so I was eager to come here. And I took the first—when the opportunity to come with a fellowship came about, of course I grabbed that opportunity.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to get there, but before we move to that, I still want to go back and talk a little bit about school in Italy before you came here, because you actually studied architecture in Milan and then in Venice, yes? That's where you two met, I believe.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you enrolled in school and—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: For me, going to school was more like going to make propaganda for modern architecture than study, because I was so advanced, I was playing assistant to my teachers, to the good ones. Because one of the reasons I moved from Milan to Venice is because the school in Venice had all the best modern architects. They were all teaching there—Albini, Gardella; [Giuseppe] Samonà was the director. Scarpa was there. Piacentini was there. [Giancarlo] De Carlo was there, so all the modern architects, leading modern architects, were teaching in Venice, when in Milan—none of them. Strange enough, at that time in the '50s, none of the—the Milan School of Architecture, the Polytechnic [University of Milan], was very classical, in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were at the Milan Polytechnic from 1950 to '53, correct?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Fifty-one; it was just one year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fifty-one to '53.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then I moved to Venice.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the university of architecture in '53.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were there for two years?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, I was there until '57, on and off, you know, things like that. So I'm going to school, but then I started also to work part-time at Venini Glass, and then—

MIJA RIEDEL: How did that come about?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Because I knew the Venini, and they were looking for—he was looking for someone to develop a line of lighting fixtures. And that was a perfect opportunity for me. Venini was the best glass company, the most modern one, so the combination of this opportunity in that place was irresistible. So, of course, I took it, very, very happily. And that allowed me to live in Venice, by the way, instead of commuting to Venice from Milan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that a connection that happened through Carlo Scarpa, and was he working in glass at the time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. No, Carlo Scarpa had been working before me at Venini, but he had left already. He was a teacher of us—but he had already left. And so I stayed with Venini until '57, basically, doing all kinds of things—

MIJA RIEDEL: So two or three years?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Starting with—again, starting by doing glass lamps and so on and so forth. And then I started redesigning the offices and designing the graphics. [Inaudible] always did the whole room. It was never only one unit, since I knew how to do it [inaudible].

MS. VIGNELLI: He had to do those things, because he couldn't do—he cannot write [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: She's trying to tell you the story of my examinations, that I was bad in examinations.

MS. VIGNELLI: They were so bad, very bad.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this makes—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But on the other side, I was the best in school. For all architectural things, all architectural courses, I was the best. And the art history—I didn't do art history just with a paper. I did it with a movie the first time.

MIJA RIEDEL: You did it with a movie?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I made a little film, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: You made a film for art history.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: At that time that was the first time in Italy that anyone did a university paper, essay, using a camera instead of paper, and that, naturally, was in every newspaper. It was in the news.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, it was that kind of a thing. I was that kind of a young guy. [Laughs.] Then I was coming up, always, with something that—it was different.

MS. VIGNELLI: He was different and he invented for himself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MS. VIGNELLI: And then, if he had to do something for the [inaudible] the thing that he had to go and say something to them, he was unbelievable—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But I was—again, the examination—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that was not the way for you.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —probably like in mathematics and things like that, chemistry or—I couldn't do it.

MS. VIGNELLI: I'd even have to work with him and try to [inaudible] what he had to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, though, because it makes me think of a quote of yours that I really liked, from the books about being against specialization.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: "We think that it brings entropy, and entropy brings creative death."

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Perfect.

MIJA RIEDEL: From the very beginning, you were interested in exploring that wide range of opportunities for design.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Exactly, the whole field of design. Yes, and I was just eager to do it. If I will meet somebody that's doing a chair, I will meet and say, how about doing a new chair? It's always been like that. Immediately I will propose something, all the time. I wasn't waiting for someone to come to me, just like that. That was always—whatever field. So half of the day was with glass, and then the other half of the day was supposed to be with school. And then I started, instead, to do type—graphic design.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. How did that come about?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I started to do catalogues. For the Biennale in Venice. So I started—I met somebody that was a director of a printing, and he was a publisher—of a printing shop. And when he saw my kind of work, he liked it, because there was nobody else around that could do things like that in Venice, and so I started to design everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were some of those early graphics projects that you were designing that he would see?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Catalogues for the Biennale in Venice.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were doing catalogues for the Biennale? As a student?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. A catalogue for a particular kind, like the music, or I did a catalogue for another guy—[inaudible]—a catalogue, brochures, and things like that. I did one for Laurence Olivier when he came with *Titus Andronicus*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Laurence Olivier?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. And I did beautiful books. I just had a few photographs to play with, but I start to move into these photographs, making the spreads and things like that. Make a book out of three photographs. And that was like the best.

That was something that hadn't been seen before, square in a [inaudible]. I didn't invent the square, but books were not square at that time. Books were just books. Books were so horrible at the time. And so in playing with type and size, and contrast of sizes, and things like that—and in doing that, I was developing a kind of language. For instance, I remember maybe just placing something there, and having it be all these pages, or doing covers and then putting the title right there. Fine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Very minimal, asymmetrical.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, that's it.

MIJA RIEDEL: A real contrast between the positive and negative stuff.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I don't see symmetrical and asymmetrical, playing always with these elements—symmetry and asymmetry. So, central here, but then you turn the page, it becomes asymmetrical, and so on. These elements were beginning to creep in as a personal element of a language. And the relationship between an object and a space—the object and the space. The

object would be type, a title, whatever it be, things like that.

And so the guy that had this printing shop was involved with the Socialist Party. He had a paper that was done so poorly, so badly, like a turn-of-the-century kind of thing, and I said, "Let's do it." Let's really do it. So I did this newspaper, like this. Well, this was the masthead of [inaudible], big, red, condensed type, and then type underneath, like that.

You can see, just by looking even now—[laughs]—it was completely different from anything that was run, in terms of newspapers, but again another great experience; every time was a new experience—this now was the experience in doing a newspaper. That means handling news, handling things, and deciding—this was long before computers, naturally; it was all moveable type. And you do it right in the printing shop, moving all the type around, quickly, to get the whole thing done and out and printed, and so there was a lot of these.

And then I met other people, connection, connection—met somebody who came to have some packaging done, so I start to do the packaging. Then they were so happy, so the cousin of this at another company came on. And then a restaurateur from Modena liked the Venini lamps, bought the Venini lamps; then he came to meet me because he liked the lamps. He filled up his restaurants with those lamps. And then, as I listened—but now that you have the lamps, you cannot go have a menu like this. And then he had a whole line of products, packaging. I said, "We've got to do the packaging." And that is Fini. And it's, again, another big line of products that came out at the time. Some are still on the market—that long ago. Excuse me. [Answers telephone.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So that is the way it works.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That is the way I was just growing, really, from one project to the other.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] thinking about what he did, because when he had to go to talk to a professor, because he had [inaudible] to say that he was in business—[inaudible]—[laughs]—he'd know what to do. [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll get to that. This makes me think of a question that was on this list, about where you get your ideas. And it seems as if one aspect of a project would lead to the next.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Well, for instance, this publisher here, the guy actually was a publisher, but was also the director of this printing shop. So any kind of printing project that would come around, he would pass it to me. But also, for instance, he had friends that wanted to do books, so I would design the book. So I'm going into book design all of a sudden, and that is why I still have these books—one of the first books I'd done.

And then, again, always this guy here—well, he was a socialist; he was very good friends with one of the richest families in Italy, as a matter of fact, at that time, the one that owned the beautiful Palladio villa—it's called Maser [Palladio Villa Barbaro at Maser]. So he introduced me to these people. And these people introduced me to the whole nobility of the Venetian area, all the people with Palladian villas. So we were spending all of Christmas vacation going from one to the other to the other. [It's] one thing is to look at Palladian villa. Another thing is to wake up for breakfast in a Palladian villa.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I imagine.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And dine in a Palladian villa.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was that experience like for you, as a young designer?

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, it was fantastic. Fantastic, and imagine—but all this is very formal, if you know. You see, intellectual elegance comes from many sources. It comes from what you read, what you're exposed to, and all this is beginning to form your mind in such a way that rejects vulgarity. And when you grow up in this kind of a situation, you can't stand vulgarity. You fight it

and make it a crusade for the rest of your life to fight vulgarity. That's why I came here.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] To the heart of the beast.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That is something that you have said repeatedly—just that design is a fight against vulgarity. How would you define vulgarity?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Lack of intellectual elegance, to begin with.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how would you define intellectual elegance?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Lack of vulgarity.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But vulgarity is the byproduct of greed, ignorance—mostly greed, uncontrolled greed, and lack of education—ignorance, basically. That is it. Well, it's true when I say that a major reason for me to come over was really to dedicate myself, my life, to fight that, try to raise the standard maybe just one inch in a century, but that would be enough. It'd be better than nothing. Someone has to do it.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine it was a time of great opportunity here

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, but why did you chose to come here rather than stay in Italy?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, I'll tell you. As I said, I was fascinated by the American culture at the time. We're talking about the middle of '70s—middle of '50s—and in '57, I got a fellowship to come to America. So I –

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Silversmiths, right? Towle?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Towle Silversmiths, yes, and to design forks, knives, and spoons.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I don't care. I would have taken, as I say, the sanitation department fellowship, just to—

MIJA RIEDEL: This was in Massachusetts? Boston?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, in Newburyport.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I got that fellowship, so Lella and I, we got married and we came over. Lella continued her study at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and I was doing the—

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes, because I was about to finish my—get my thing for [inaudible]. But then we had to come. So then, they still gave me the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Degree?

MS. VIGNELLI: —the finish. But then I could go [inaudible]—MIT.

MIJA RIEDEL: And finish up at MIT.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: MIT, MIT.

MS. VIGNELLI: And that was a very good option. I loved it.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so we spent one year in Boston, and then we went to [inaudible]. We stopped in Chicago, and we met Jay Doblin—that was the director of the Institute of Design, the

IIT [Illinois Institute of Technology]. And Jay Doblin offered me to go and to be a teacher at the IIT, the Institute of Design, and of course, that was a fabulous opportunity. I couldn't refuse.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I said, "Okay, fine." So we went there in Chicago. We stayed there for two years, and Lella went to work for SOM.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] and I really—they were very happy with me.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

MS. VIGNELLI: And then, after three years [inaudible]—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Two years.

MS. VIGNELLI: —two years, he went to have some time, more time, because he went three—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] to say, we are to go back.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. VIGNELLI: So he went, and they saw—they [inaudible] that I worked. They got really upset, because they said, "We are just ready to [inaudible]."

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were working as an architect?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were teaching at the university, at the Institute?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I was teaching there, and I was also working part-time at Container Corporation. And that's where I met Ralph Eckestrom.

Ralph Eckestrom was the director of design and advertising at Container Corporation. We became very good friends, and so eventually, then, we—the name will come back—so eventually, then, we had to go back to Milan. And so we got back, but at this point, I already had fabulous connections all over in Italy, in Milan in particular, being my city—

MS. VIGNELLI: And we came back [inaudible] to see what was new. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Before we get back to Milan, though, just a little bit more about Illinois. What were you teaching in Chicago? What was the focus?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Graphic design.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were teaching graphic design?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, I was teaching corporate identities, as a matter of fact.

MIJA RIEDEL: And had you made a decision to work in a more full-scale sense of specifically graphic design? Go more 2-D rather than 3-D? Were you pursuing that rather than architecture, or how did your focus come about?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes. I eventually dropped out, in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, I did a building when I was a student, and it was fine. It was nice, was

published in *Domus*, and so on. So it wasn't just a piece of junk. It was a nice little building, very influenced from American architecture of the West Coast.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where is the building?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's near Milan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Okay. Is it still there?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Still there. Yes, and completely [inaudible] and completely transformed. Before, it was a nice little house; today, it's all—we can't find it anymore; it's all built around like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was a home, a single-family home that you designed?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. It was nice. It had a plan, basically, like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you said, influenced by California architecture.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It has a left H-plan. Well, these were the bedrooms, and then here was the kitchen, and this was the whole living room, and this was the patio.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, very modular.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did you make a decision, for one reason or another, to focus more specifically on graphics, and what in particular—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. No, it just—

MIJA RIEDEL: Or corporate ID?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] what I got it [inaudible] was happening. And, of course, why corporate ID? Because when you do a corporate identity, basically, you touch every area, every aspect. So there it was again, from the spoon to the city, in one profession.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Legally, in a sense. Not just a troubadour, but so you go from the logo to the stationeries and forms, and then you get to the packaging, and then you get to the product, and you get to the showrooms, and then you get to the trade shows, and then you get to the building, then you get to the office interiors. You see, that's the whole thing. And you provide it always, the whole service, throughout [inaudible].

And—but again, why we could do that? Because of that initial interest—from the spoon to the city.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That is the thing, this lack of specialization, from the beginning, the fact of not being just focused on one thing, but focused on a whole concept of design. So that is what was unique. And this is why when I was teaching in Chicago, when nobody was teaching corporate identity—but this is exactly like I just mentioned now—I was teaching the whole width and the scope of design—not as designing a logo. I was saying, when you design a logo, you've got nothing. To think that the logo is everything is like thinking that a door is a building. [Laughs.] A door is just a door.

MIJA RIEDEL: So as you were beginning to design these corporate identities, is that when you began to formulate that theory about semantics and syntax and pragmatics?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I would think—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Eventually, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I mean, it didn't crystallize very clearly, like that. It took a long time, really, to come to maturity on that. But that was the semantic; the semiotic [inaudible] was something of my generation. Umberto Eco is a very good friend of mine. We grew up, in a way, in a sense, together—to a certain extent. And we're partners in culture. And I remember, one day I was telling to Umberto, "Umberto, but we never study, really, semiotics. We are semiotics."

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That is a—

MIJA RIEDEL: I can see, though, how your inclination towards that whole corporate identity from, basically, the metaphorical spoon to the city—that mindset of that whole world of design—is very much present, or could lead to, or would have been led to by that focus on semantics and that search for meaning within the object or the corporation, the syntax, how it all connects, and then the pragmatic, because, of course, it has to work.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. Very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But again, it's very important—in a sense, it's also American. It came from the American experience, also.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The importance of that—pragmatic, or pragmatism, was an American invention.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Europeans are not pragmatic. They couldn't care less. They're idealistic. If it goes, it goes; if it doesn't, it's just too bad. Over here, it's that if it doesn't work, something is wrong. [Laughs.] Fix it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, interesting. Interesting, so the pragmatics came from the American experience.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So the opportunity of spending two years in Chicago was very formative. And at the same time, also, the exposure to the other Chicago designers—

MS. VIGNELLI: There were quite a few.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was both ways. It was working both ways, and so then, when we went back to Milan, as I said, we had good connections, and so we got immediately fabulous work, from the best companies—Olivetti and Borelli and Rank Xerox. And that gave us a tremendous amount of super-exposure, but also even more solidity, now, in our contacts, people who—you're young. You go to parties all the time. Everybody was having a party. They were all my age, and people, more or less [inaudible], they were older than me. Xerox was old—Xerox, over there, was a little older than me, perhaps, perhaps the same age. I don't know. The Olivetti people were a little older than me, but not much. We were all part of the same generation, in a sense. And all of the sudden, I was one of them that knew how to do things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So we're having a lot of fun all the time—parties and so—and every time, the connections would be growing, and more work was pouring in. And so it's [inaudible], and everyone [inaudible] more work, more things. And it was incredibly, fantastically a success for the first five years, four years actually. And really glamorous work, like the Piccolo Theatre, for instance. Again, there, my God, Piccolo Theatre in Milan was a fabulous institution. And again, to do all this was—

MIJA RIEDEL: And what exactly were you doing for the Piccolo Theatre?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, the whole thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Again?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] all graphic program—

MIJA RIEDEL: The entire—all the graphics?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, not the whole thing. Just the graphic program, but at the graphic program, they start with graphics and will do exhibitions.

And I also invented a way of doing an exhibition, at that time, with panels, panels in the theater, in the lobby, great exhibit. And then with samples and things—and little masks and costumes as well, but mostly printed stuff. And the whole—panels, pictures and text and drawings. Then I developed this trick of designing everything—about this size, let's say—and then blowing it up to become a panel, and shrinking it down to become a folder—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Again, so that you would go to see the exhibit, and then take the exhibit home.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Fantastic, but you see, again, that is that "spoon to the city" kind of attitude. It doesn't stop to graphics.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It becomes exhibition, design. It becomes an object to take home—[inaudible]. It's that kind of approach that I—[laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: That was an especially interesting project, and correct me if I'm wrong, because it was the first time that I've seen—or I'm familiar with—when you began to develop those information bands that I know so well from the national park brochures.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, of course. And that was an invention, really.

MIJA RIEDEL: But that was really the very first time, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That was the language. You say something because that is the way I write, really—the way I make notes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's the way, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I write with [inaudible], and I'd always done that, all my life. And when I was doing this, of course, it became natural to do that kind of thing. Because you have the name there, and then the first one is where you put the name of the theater and the symbol, whatever it is, and the date and all the—it's a language; it is a handwriting at the same time. And when I discovered that that was my handwriting, that was the greatest day in my life, because I discovered I had my own language. And all of a sudden, all I had to do is just refine it. I didn't have to scout around for something. And I didn't do that by looking for it. It came out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that is why it's so good. It came out as a personal thing. And then the same kind of attitude comes when you apply it to a sofa. This sofa is the same age as this Piccolo Theatre.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, same design, same year, 1964.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was this the Poltrona [Frau] design?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Poltrona—Poltronova.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But this is the same language of the Piccolo Theatre.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You have a bench on which you sit, on which you rest. These are modular elements, like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And it's a way of thinking.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the juxtaposition between the very linear, simple bowls, and then the softer, more organic shapes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And the Gardella, I think, again—rational and happenstance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [In process], yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The control of these two elements.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I hate having it stand by itself.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes, I know it.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And I hate rational by itself; it is the marriage of the two that excites me; that's great. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: The tension that happens there, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and tension is a very important element. One thing is to do these and another thing is to do that, you know? And you see this margin and you see this margin? This margin is tension; this margin is flat tire. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Flat tire. [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That is how these things work. And so I spent four years in growing and being exposed to a tremendous amount of work, and accumulating an incredible amount of experience, in printing particularly.

MIJA RIEDEL: What besides the Piccolo Theater stands out in your memory? Are there other projects that were especially memorable?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Only, essentially, publications, books. In every book from this publishing house, and I've used many, many, many series of books.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the publishing house?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Sansoni.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sansoni

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then very innovative kind of approaches. [Inaudible], compared to a regular book design. There was nothing similar in my time to that in Europe at the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: How extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not to mention in America, which was far behind in the publication business. I mean [in] book design—particularly in large work—in paperbacks or things like that, or of textbooks and things like that. I was very dedicated to designing textbooks, because they go to schools. And it really is important that students, from the very beginning, learn to grow up into an environment—it's like I was saying, growing up in a Palladio house.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's the same kind of—you learn from everything and apply it to everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's an experiential understanding of the experience versus a visual—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Right. And these things, they never leave you for the rest of your life. This is why it's so important—this is why I believe so strongly in the importance of design in the society, the responsibility of designers for the society not giving vulgar design, because vulgar design breeds vulgar people.

A chicken and the egg situation: if you expose young students to well-designed things, their mind becomes more refined. They will not accept vulgarity thereafter; they will just reject that. They won't like it. But until there's a culture that provides that, that this becomes the main choice—and if the other, and there's just so few, disappear—[laughs]—so this is why it's so important for all of us designers to really be engaged in activities as much as possible.

And so then in 1964 we decided, let's go to see our friends in Chicago. So we went to Chicago. And the first friend I called up is Ralph Eckerstrom, at the Container Corporation. And they're telling me he's no longer here and just left last week, Container Corporation. So I called him at home; I said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, I just left Container. I'm considering other alternatives. Hey, let's get together." So we got together. He was considering an alternative at Ford to begin—design director, graphic communication director—at Ford.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] he already did work for Ford.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, that was before. And I said, "Why do you want to go to work for another company? You just left Container Corporation; why do you want to work for Ford?" And saying, "Listen, why don't we set up an international company, where we can put under one umbrella all the best design of existing work? They're all friends of mine. Someone will accept that."

Okay. So I came to New York and took [inaudible], and they said, "Well, Massimo, we like you, but we don't like Ralph." I said, "Okay, fine."

And then I went to London and talked with Alan Fletcher at Pentagram. It wasn't Pentagram yet, but it—what became Pentagram. Alan Fletcher was my great friend, and Colin Forbes. And so I said, "Let's do this. Let's get together. And let's start this company." And they said, again—Fletcher had worked with Eckerstrom before—so he said, "He's your friend; he's not my friend. Why don't you buy it?"

So I went to Milan, talked with Bob Noorda. And Bob and I were thinking already of joining our offices in Milan, because we were very good friends, we were teaching together, and so on and so forth. We had the two best offices—[laughs]—in Italy at the time. So I said, "Why don't we join?" And so I said to Bob about our whole idea. I said, "Okay, let's think."

So I called Chicago and I said, "Okay. Fine, here we got Bob Noorda and I—at least we can start with this unit. Why don't you start to organize something there?" So he organized some other office over there, like Larry Klein and—

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was you and Bob and Ralph to start?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Larry Klein.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, actually, me and Ralph to start. In Milan it was Bob and I.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then Ralph talked to Jay Doblin. Jay liked the idea, and so a fourth [inaudible], the protagonist of this event. So we decided that in January '65; we started Unimark International. And we started the company with an office in Chicago, one in Milan, one in New York, and one in San Francisco. So on day one we already had four offices—day one. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was in San Francisco?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Nobody. [Laughs.] No, it was a guy—there was a guy there. Nobody relevant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So it was more a contact office, but it was good for our contacts there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Chicago, of course, there was Ralph and other people. And Larry Klein as a designer; that's the only one.

Then in New York there was James Fogelman. James Fogelman rented an office—sub-leased an office—in the Seagram Building. And I said, "Are you crazy? How can we—if we start that way, we're—we can't afford it." And he said, "It's the right image," and he was so right. I would have chickened out, but instead I learned the importance of that. So we rented that space, but we were outnumbered because, after all, Jim got sick—Jim Fogelman—and he couldn't run the office there [inaudible]. So he just had a designing of Walter Kacik, which was a good designer. He's the one that designed the sanitation trucks.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, so he's really good.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's his name?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Walter Kacik

MIJA RIEDEL: Walter Kacik, okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then there was the Milan office, where the two of us were. All the best work was done by the two of us in Milan. So that's all we had to show to clients, but Ralph was the greatest salesman in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: He was fabulous. Very handsome man, tall; he came through the [inaudible] Italy.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But anyway, yes, super guy. He would make contacts. And I would fly from New York, from Milano, to Chicago once or twice a month. And we were making presentations everywhere. I'm showing the slides, showing the philosophy, and I'm showing this in slides, the photography that we had. It was incredible operation. And of course, the clients—

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] from here to now to everywhere [inaudible], you were never coming back. And then the kids were small; they were four, something like that.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, there was only one at the time.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: There was only one kid.

MS. VIGNELLI: Only one?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. He was the only—

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] [They laugh.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: He was—

MS. VIGNELLI: And he was coming back, and the kid was—he didn't even know that that was his father. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Traveling so much, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. So just to give an idea, the first client we had was the Ford Motor Company, because Ralph had that contact.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Perfect. Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So we went to Detroit, and Ford said, "Well, but you have to have an office here." Fine, no problem. So we went back to the motel. We rented five rooms at the motel. We went downtown; we got tables and T-squares and drafting equipment and all this— put it in the living room; the next day we had an office. [They laugh.] The Ford people, said, "What – these kids are not kidding."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In the meantime, we started to look for a real office. And we found a beautiful office next to the Ford company. As I said, it was mainly [inaudible]. So we set up with the office there. So now beside the four original offices, we had Detroit. Then Ralph makes a contact in Denver, with a client in Denver, and it was—it was called—a sugar company [Great Western Sugar Company], used to—well, anyhow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Domino?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, it was a Pacific-something. Not Georgia-Pacific—

MIJA RIEDEL: We can come back to it. I'll make a note.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And just a quick question about Ford. Were you designing their corporate ID, or—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Of course, of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that was the job to design the corporate ID. And our—and of course, not only are exciting—I'm talking 1965; our fee for that job was a million dollars. That put us in business.

MIJA RIEDEL: I should say. Nineteen sixty-five?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Nineteen sixty-five. That was a lot of money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Enough. And so all of a sudden we were the talk of the world. The company had just started.

Not only that, but back in Milano, I learned how to use Helvetica from—since day one, when it was just flash for the foundries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So by the time I got to New York, I really knew how to make that typeset, beautifully.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, how were you exposed to Helvetica in Milan, through your printing work?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I sent the printer in Switzerland to buy it and bring it to Milan. So—and then we use this in the meantime. So when we started here, of course, I wanted to have Helvetica. Helvetica was not available anywhere. And I couldn't work without it. [Laughs.] I need it because—Helvetica is a very particular thing that you can—you had to type very close on the autotype—and big shoulders like that. So I needed that type. So I ordered in all the typesetters that used to be around the United States—so in all the five cities—to type the Helvetica.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it wasn't here before that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Amazing.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Automatically that—the using of Helvetica throughout the United States. That's why when I say that I single-handedly imported Helvetica, it's true. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's how it happened. Because of that kind of situation. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So then—well, then I would start to use—we would start to use Helvetica for a [inaudible], which was never heard of kind of a thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Revolutionary?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, no. The advertising agency was using these kind of typefaces. They used [inaudible] was best because they were always used. Advertising agency have no type of graphical sense whatsoever. Basically they are merchants. They are salesmen of space. They're not designers. Some are. [Inaudible] Doyle Dane Bernbach at that time was a fantastic one,, people like George Lois and people like Larry Kroin, but—like flies. So automatically Helvetica was run with five offices around the world.

Then we got clients in Cleveland. And I say, yes, it's close to Detroit, it's close to Chicago, but they need more daily service, and so we decided to open an office in Cleveland. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was this client?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Halles [ph].

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then in the meantime San Francisco opened up in terms of clients. We got Memorex, for instance, and Varian [ph], Memorex, and other clients in that area. And so we started to expand and expand and expand. Then in New York we got Gillette. We had a lot of work for Gillette. In Chicago, they got a lot of other major clients. And here we got J.C. Penney, you know, we got American Airlines; we got Knoll, and so on and so forth. So we had these fabulous companies. And of course, the New York office had the best clients. [Laughs.]

And on top of this, when we started Unimark, I said, "Okay, Ralph, you become the president. I will be in charge of design. You leave design to me; I'll take design throughout the world—the whole world."

MIJA RIEDEL: You'll take design throughout the whole world?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. And I say, "I take design through all the offices because they want all the offices to—"

MIJA RIEDEL: Uniform.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: "—to be uniform."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not only uniform in design, but uniform was included. We all had a white smock.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: All the offices were exactly the same design. This office: white, black—white sofa, black cushions, gray carpets.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was the Saratoga seat? Is that was that was called?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. And so there was this incredible consistency—again, the same principle. Why should it be different for us? Similar degree applies to us. So that's the way it was. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So he was the president and you handled design in all the offices.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I was the vice president in charge of design for the whole company, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you must have been—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I would go to every office, see whatever new clients there are there, listen to what their situation is, and then say, "Okay, we're going to do it like this," because I always think quick. [Laughs.] We're going to do it like this, like this, like that, and of course, I'd always use Helvetica [inaudible], few typefaces. So it was fast for me to leave instructions how to do it, the grades and all—we had our language. We had our grammar. We had all our elements, so it could be applied throughout.

And then designers that we were hiring were all designers that were sharing our—eager to come to work with us, because they were sharing that kind of a philosophy, and so on, and so it was terrific.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a different sense culturally of corporate identity in the U.S.—or in New York versus San Francisco versus Milan?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: You noticed no cultural distinction whatsoever?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not much. No, the needs are the same, basically. There are no cultural differences [inaudible]. An airline is an airline. A J.C. Penney is a J.C. Penney. I mean—[laughs]—all over the world, department stores. And we have everywhere.

So after then, then we were planning an office in London, then an office in Johannesburg, one in Melbourne, one in Copenhagen, which didn't last too long. But in a short time we had 11 offices around the world and became the largest design company in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Isn't that fun?

MIJA RIEDEL: [They laugh.] Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That was a lot of fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: And very early on.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The problem is that none of us was a good businessperson in terms of handling the finances and structuring and so forth. A good company is a pot. We were in a colander. There were more holes than surface.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so? Just nobody to manage the—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: None of them was really good at that. And we [had] never been lucky in finding a good one that could really manage such a large operation.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was huge.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And locally, you see, then—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was before fax. That was before the Internet.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Because everything was centralized. It was Ralph's belief in centralization. That was his approach. I believe in just the opposite, in decentralization. So I want to have every office a profit center by itself, so that the incentive would be on every office. And I want to expand the offices like a franchise all around the world. Every office that is good and is worth it, we will provide the support, and they will operate and just give us a percentage. That was my idea. Ralph wanted to have the whole thing. So it was a working [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: And also very early on, this was when you designed the New York City Subway map, too, isn't it? During this time, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Of course, one of the very first things that we did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sixty-six, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Sixty-six?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, we came at the end of '65 in New York, and all this—I mean, it made [took] time traveling back and forth. We decided to come over here and give Bob—turn it into an office.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So you relocated here in '65?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and Bob was a terrific designer, very honest, and Dutch—very good person. So we decided to leave the office in [inaudible], and we moved in the Seagram Building, which I loved doing. [Laughs.] We moved in the Seagram Building, then when I got the green card, I say, we have to celebrate. So we got a Rolls-Royce. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, for goodness sake.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So between the Seagram Building, the Rolls-Royce, and all of us had great success—you can imagine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But that is also managing your image in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And not that I was too conscious. I was just doing it because I like it. But it's a fact and I knew—and I said, "Okay, it's an image that's okay. It's okay with me." It's not that we're doing it for the image. [Inaudible] interested because I like to have that, and [inaudible] and so on and so on. And so—but it was fun. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It must have been an extraordinary time, and this was before there was much telecommunications, so you had to literally be in all these different places all the time.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes, exactly. Exactly, zero. This was long before the computer, long before—

MIJA RIEDEL: And long before fax, long before anything.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Before anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: The telephone was all you had.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just the telephone, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And writing. And that's it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's amazing when I think about it. That is really pre-history. But as I say all the time, it's B.C.—before computer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.] And what's really extraordinary is how many of those early designs are still in place—still functioning.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it's an interesting time. Every two times in the year there is a B.C. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you had done the New York City Subway map at this point, and the signage—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was '70 and we did—we did—in 1966 we did the subway. Nineteen seventy, we did the—

MIJA RIEDEL: The Stendig Calendar was—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The Stendig Calendar in 1966, too. Actually, at the end of '65, because the first one was 1966, so it was done in December.

MIJA RIEDEL: Modernism was in full flower. It seems it was just a real need for that sense of design.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And New York was exciting in terms—people like [George] Nelson was here, and—well, and a lot of the good architects and the good graphic designers, whole crowd was there. People like Will Burtin, Lou Dockmans [ph], and [inaudible] Mobalin [ph] and, of course, [inaudible] the whole gang of that period. It was terrific.

And then I became president of the AIGA [American Institute of Graphic Arts] and then became—

MIJA RIEDEL: The what?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: AIGA?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then I became president of the AIGA, and so on and so forth. This is in the '80s. But it's all part of that kind of thing.

So I stay with Unimark until 1971. And then in '71 I was tired of that life. I wanted to go to this profit-center situation. I was tired of traveling too much and dah, dah, dah, dah. So I said, I want to have a small job. [Laughs.] I want to [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Just too much, too big.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just a simple [inaudible] and do small jobs. So I kept Knoll. They wanted to stay with us, so we kept Knoll as a client.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you had Knoll that early?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: In the '60s.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And they were [inaudible] in '71. And we had Knoll since 1966. So we had it for a long time. So in 1971 we started Vignelli Associates, and just the two of us, but we were lucky enough to get some very glamorous jobs from the beginning. Knoll gave us an exhibition in the Louvre in Paris, so we did a book for it, the exhibition. And then out of the blue came Bloomingdale['s]. I thought, "What a glamorous job—the exposure is [inaudible] design Bloomingdale, the whole world talks about it." [Inaudible] Bloomingdale? It's enough [laughs].

MS. VIGNELLI: But also they were the [inaudible] stores coming here. It was very, very happy, this kind of thing. And he is the one that really started [inaudible], really good.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the whole corporate identity, again, for Bloomingdale's those fabulous colored bags, the typography—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The whole thing, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The type—everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Bloomingdale's at that point in time was—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And then—that's 1972. We started '72.

MIJA RIEDEL: Seventy-two.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, in '72 [inaudible] was Bloomingdale. And it continued with it. And '72 was also the [inaudible] Louvre, with a fabulous exhibition. We lived there; published all over the world. So again, we were already famous.

But all of a sudden, we were not Unimark anymore. We were Vignelli Associates. And as Vignelli Associates, we had this fabulous start; that is where [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you describe that Louvre exhibition for Knoll, exactly what you did and why?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, what we did there, there were two areas of the Louvre. So this is a huge room, very high, 45 feet high. We designed some cubes, and then I actually—I tell you, we had this plan [inaudible]; here is the part. Lella had the plan on the desk, and we were thinking what to do. And so she says, "What are we going to do?" [Inaudible] and turned around, and on the bookshelf, I had a whole bunch of little cubes, plastic cubes. I pick them and I throw like dice over the plan, like this. And I said, "That's what we're going to do." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Sort of a little John Cage/Merce Cunningham happenstance—just toss those dice and see where they land in happenstance, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I could stand some discipline, right? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And is that really what you did?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it's—exactly, and then I said, we're going to put casters—wheels—underneath, so we can move these things around till they find the right position.

MIJA RIEDEL: Perfect.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And those went—and in these cube—

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible]—they think that you [inaudible] because they are moving.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No. No. I'm—

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible]—like this, you know?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes. No. No. These cubes were—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, very large pieces.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: These cubes—

MS. VIGNELLI: Don't release them.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: These cubes—

MIJA RIEDEL: Think big.

MS. VIGNELLI: —just think yourself [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: These cubes were eight feet by eight feet. And the reason why, I tell you—a chair is only three feet high. This space was 45 feet high. The chair will disappear in that space. So I had to find something that would mediate the relationship between the human scale and [inaudible]. The chair inside here was fine because [inaudible] to—is three feet [inaudible] eight feet high. And these eight-feet cube was fine within the—

MIJA RIEDEL: So these were cubes that one would walk into?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, the—

MS. VIGNELLI: No.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, he just looked through.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But the furniture inside was all there. So some of these cubes were like this. Some other cubes were made of plexi, so there would be chairs [inaudible] displayed inside

there. And it was very effective and beautiful. I have pictures from that. But interesting thing was really this mediation: first, to put the object in his own environment, and then put the mega-object in an exhibition environment.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see. Now then, on this side of the exhibit, we had windows.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a very modular way of—yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. There were windows, like this, all around the—

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes, there is like a big—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible]

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] you have all this opening.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So what we did, we did a wall here. We raised the floor there. So that we [inaudible] into the window, basically, so that the window became a floor-to-ceiling window rather than a window from there. So we [inaudible] a modern window out of a [inaudible] building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Again, perfect. And this was only linen, all these patterns with linen—and here we had the furniture. So you can see the furniture like that. It was terrific.

MS. VIGNELLI: But the [inaudible] was also doing something, no, with the glass. It was not completely straight.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, the glass was straight. Just the wall was [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were altering the space itself to suit the exhibition.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And—so this was a terrific exhibit, naturally. And naturally, the whole world, other than the magazine world, was talking about [it]. And that was giving us [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and that was one of the first Vignelli Associate[s] projects.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. And then just about the same time, maybe a few months after, got a call from Chicago that says, "We decided to close the New York office. Would you be interested in this person?" I said yes. So I—

MIJA RIEDEL: In the Seagram building [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, you moved.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: We had to move from the Seagram a long time before because it was too small. In the Seagram we had 2,000 square feet and we needed then 8,000 square feet thereafter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Eight square feet. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, so much bigger.

MIJA RIEDEL: Much bigger, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But anyhow, they say, "We're closing the New York office. Would you be interested?" I said, "Sure." So I got back to my office. I just changed the name.

MIJA RIEDEL: And—oh, this is where you had meant to start.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I just changed the name to [inaudible] to Vignelli Associates [inaudible]

free.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the address?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Sixty-second Street, 410 62nd Street. And completely free. That was—became my severance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Amazing, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Lucky.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, very.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very lucky. Very generous from Ralph [inaudible] too, because he had a very good reason. Not only was [he] sorry because we were very good friends, but it was a tremendous damage to the company, also. When I left the company [short whistling sound], it fell apart thereafter. But he was really generous and—beyond belief. He gave us the office there. And so we were back in our own place, and we start to [inaudible] new energy again, and we start to—we wanted to be small. We were small for a couple of months. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So this was '71, '72?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Seventy-two, '72.

MIJA RIEDEL: Seventy-two. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: '72, '73, we got already St. Peter's Church project to do, and the Minneapolis Museum [of Fine Arts].

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right—the interior.

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Large projects like that [inaudible]. Lella was busy [inaudible]. And then, on top of it, we had—

MS. VIGNELLI: That museum was something.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then we had Heller [glassware]. We were doing always problems for Heller. Lella was doing a glass bakeware. I was going—keep going doing a plasticware.

MIJA RIEDEL: The melamine that [inaudible]. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And, of course, we were keeping working for Knoll. So all of a sudden, we have plenty of work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did one project feed another, in terms of ideas? Or were they all fairly separate satellites?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Always. That is the idea. That is really why design is so important, because the cross fertilization is what enriches everyone, every design. Instead, if you specialize, you never can benefit from any other experience, but when you do everything, you bring all your dowry to fruition. [Laughs.] You bring everything to fruition, and that's great. And that is why it's so good.

MIJA RIEDEL: When I think of the Bloomindale's project, would that be a good choice to examine in terms of the development as a corporate identity and how—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I think Knoll would be better. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Knoll. Let's talk about that, then. You've talked about the meaning of an object and how that grows your sense of a corporate identify.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, Knoll is a perfect example, starting from the logo to all the applied things, and then all the applied graphics and catalogues were very relevant—catalogue, because nothing was done that way before—the price list, the showrooms, and the whole thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The topography, the packaging, right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —big exhibition, like the Paris exhibit.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then book, the final book on Knoll. And so [inaudible]. The final book was really the closing chapter on that long collaboration.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was 20 years?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. It only lasted about 20 years. Yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: From what?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sixty-six.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: From '66 to '76. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, '76. Ten years, then.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, no. Eighty-six.

MIJA RIEDEL: Eighty-six, yes. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, '86.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how did that corporate identity change or evolve over that time? Or was it really quite consistent?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very consistent, yes. There's no need. [Inaudible] a certain way, there is the need of changes provided by the change of times, to a certain extent. But this doesn't mean that the supporting material has to change necessarily.

Corporate identity is not a chameleon. On the contrary, the purpose of a corporate identity, or a graphic program, as we like to call it better, is consistency. And therefore, there's no need for a change. It's just that there are many things to do, and one is, what do you—we work with the concept of appropriateness. And that provides the need of change without artificial needs, without artificial means. It is the nature of whatever you do and how appropriate is the solution that provides, then, a need to change, in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: How would you determine appropriateness?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Many ways. For instance, we were doing the Knoll brochures—by the way, in doing the Knoll brochure, we were also—I choose a particular painting system that was not available in the States, because [of] my experience in Europe, I know that a lot of gravure was not existing over here, and it's a very particular feeling. So we started to do every brochure in proto-gravure. And automatically, everybody was saying, "No." Also, the graphic designers, everybody—"What is this?" It's not offset—that kind of—and that's magic. And that is the intangible element that you bring in to increase your charisma, in a sense, onto whatever you do. So that was one thing.

And then we went on with that for quite some time. Then, in the '70s, when things were changing in the air, I said, "Enough with the brochure. Let's do a tabloid."

I find out that there was a new machine, a new printing press in Milwaukee, that could print newspaper in four colors—first time in United States, the first one. So I went to see that and then say, "Show me how to do, ta ta ta. Can you do this; can you do that?"

So we sent something to do in—and we printed these newspaper [inaudible] in four colors—terrific for Knoll, but designed our way, not like a newspaper, designed our own way. So all of a sudden, we were bringing a new language of design into an established medium, which is the newspaper. And that was "wha-boom" as a bomb. The unusual into the usual—that's the trick, always to play that, you know. And that is what makes it.

That is, again, another form of bringing change. Sometimes, change comes from technological point of views, and sometimes it comes from the need that you set up yourself. And that is how we develop these things.

People were asking, "How do you determine appropriateness?" You determine by knowing what you're hired to do, and doing such a way that is appropriate. [Laughs.] How can I put it? How is appropriate? Because it fulfills the function. It's not taking foreign things which are not pertinent to prevail. By being very carefully sifting what belongs to it and what doesn't belong to it, looking into the nature of things—semantics—again, look into the nature of things, finding out what it wants to be, and doing it.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you've talked about doing deep research into—yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Well, do it anyway, or more than anything else, it's just I have this kind of a mechanism, mental mechanism, that helps.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] When did the sense of ambiguity become more present in the work that [inaudible]?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In the moment I was born.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You know, ambiguity is an Italian trend.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think American art is, too, a sense of ambiguity.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe increasingly so, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, but Italy has a—ambiguity is a bad problem for Catholic culture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Ambiguity is powered by hypocrisy. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And of course, the Catholic Church has been hypocritical for thousands of years, so they really mastered that thing [inaudible] well by now.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But what it is in Italy, ambiguity is not—is plural—means plurality of meanings. That's why I like it. In the Protestant culture, ambiguity is a bad thing. It means not knowing what—not being reliable [inaudible]. It has a negative aspect. It's not that it doesn't have it in Italy too. But most of it in Italy, in Italian culture, ambiguity is an enrichment of something, rather than a false appearance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right. Varying levels of nuance, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Which are culturally loaded, as I say. I attribute that to the Catholic culture that pervades through centuries—[inaudible]. In Italy, there is a way of saying, "Here I say; here I deny." What that is, ambiguity. You're just born and raised with that, that thing, "Here I say; here I deny." So is it false? No, it's not false? Is it true? No, it's not true. [They laugh.]

MS. VIGNELLI: He's Italian.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Clearly.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see, that's the way it goes. So you're asking where my sense of ambiguity comes; it comes from there. I love to play, that whenever I design something, that it could be read many ways. A classic example I show is that invitation we designed for one of our exhibits where we print it on tissue, and then we crumple. And people do not know if it was a

mistake. Was it meant? Was it real?

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that shipped in an envelope?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was always curious. It was crumpled up and shipped in an envelope.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes. And somebody just understood, and somebody start calling me back and says, "Massimo, I don't know what happened. I got mine all crumpled up."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: "Did you have it so nice that you have a flat?" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And was this for the big traveling retrospective in '80?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] retrospective at Parsons, yes, small one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, at Parsons, okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The big ones came later on, came in the '90s, all over Europe. Start in Moscow; from Moscow, went to St. Petersburg. Then we went to Helsinki, then Copenhagen, London, Barcelona. Then we went to Munich, Prague [inaudible].

MS. VIGNELLI: And another one.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Laughs.] Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: We've got about nine minutes left on this card, so just a couple more questions. Maybe take us up through the late '70s. Couple of projects I wanted to touch on: the St. Peter's Lutheran church, and then also the Ciga hotels. You've described that as a landmark project.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, definitely St. Peter's Church was a landmark project, number one, because the nature of the assignment, a church; number two, because the place, in the heart of the city, New York City. So again, great exposure, and any [inaudible] beautiful building, by good architects—so that everything was fine. And then when we got, in the church [inaudible], as I was saying, the church is a cube split in this direction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Diagonally. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And originally, the architect that had the plan [inaudible], and I said, "Well, that's the wrong orientation. The right orientation is this one."

MIJA RIEDEL: So a square within a square as opposed to two triangles.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, a square within a square, bisected by this cove of light, and which makes it too high—[inaudible]—like a [inaudible], like this, with the church inside and with very free kind of plans, so they can be changed, but with one part fixed and one part movable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because the church was also used for more than just services. It was for concerts and all sorts of things. So it needed to be right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, exactly.

MS. VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so we designed the steps that could—the steps are [inaudible], and you could open these up here. So you can sit here. And these become your backrest—becomes the backrest, but also becomes the vanity—yes [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Place for feet for the next—yes. So this—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: For the person sitting behind, so it covers the legs of the person right here.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the steps could become chairs? Extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So not vanity, modesty panel; it becomes a modesty panel.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] A modesty panel.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very Freudian. [They laugh.] And then—so the steps are releasing. When the steps are closing [inaudible] so it doesn't look like empty chairs. It just looks like a [inaudible].

And then we had the pews—like [inaudible] regular pews, but again, very movable. [Inaudible.] Fabulous concept, because it has a great flexibility in the center, and contained by the steps on the outside; then here it would be [inaudible].

But the altar could be here. Here you put the organ. So, again, it's like that, over here. Here we put the altar, but the altar can be also in the center in—or in any position that you want to. And basically they are here. And it works beautifully. So that is, from my own point of view, really the best work we've ever done.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it—really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Our favorite, yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's your favorite.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And favorite because it's so architectural, but also there again, it's from the spoon to the city. We did everything. We did the objects over the altar, for the service; we did the books; we did the uniforms; we did the dedication plaques; we did the newspaper, the bulletin, and so on and so forth—everything. And then—a total service, total design service throughout. And that is, again, another demonstration of our approach to design. Anybody else would have just done the church, and then maybe call a graphic designer to do the graphics, probably design—maybe [inaudible] the other things—

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm hard-pressed to think of anyone else who would do that level of complete design.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I think we are the only one, basically.

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes, I—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Now, it's becoming more and more [inaudible]. You take Richard Meier, for instance, now. He not only designs architecture, but he designs furniture. He designs objects and silver and watches and everything. But generally speaking, he's [inaudible] many. Now, there are people—a young generation, like Karim Rashid, for instance, he designs everything: interiors and furniture and [inaudible] and graphics and packaging; so he does everything.

MS. VIGNELLI: Who is that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Karim. In a very different way, but [inaudible] he embraces our idea. And it's becoming more and more common. You take Michael Vanderbyl in San Francisco—also very good graphic designer, and also designs exhibitions and furniture and so on [inaudible]. So it's going to [inaudible] more [inaudible]. And that is all really stemming from our example.

MIJA RIEDEL: Your approach. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: To a great extent.

MIJA RIEDEL: So St. Peter's was a project in the mid-'70s—'77?

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Seventy-five—[inaudible].

MS. VIGNELLI: No, '77—[inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Seventy-seven, yes, it was finished, yes.

MS. VIGNELLI: Yes, because also, when they did that other—after [a] few years that you were away, before '75 [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is that—can one go today? And it is as you designed it still?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Immaculate.

MS. VIGNELLI: They keep it fantastic.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Fantastic. They keep changing, moving plans around.

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Massimo Vignelli at the designer's office in New York City on June 6, 2011, for the Smithsonian Archives of America Art, disc number two.

Before we start I wanted to touch on something that we ended with on the last card. You were talking about "rigorous happenstance." And I just want to make sure that we touch on that, because the disc may have ended before you mentioned that. But I just wanted you to mention that again, if you would, and define how that came about and what it meant to you or why it's significant.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: One is that, as part of my training, as part of being raised among those Milanese architects, which, at that time, were probing the values and the assumption of the Modern movement in the '50s in Italy, when I was growing up, again, there was a lot of discussion about the Modern movement: if it were still alive, or what kind of transition, where will we go, and so on and so forth. And the work of some of the best architects, like Gardella, and Albini, et cetera, Scarpa, was really marked by these two entities, in a sense. On one side, great rigorousness throughout all the—today, we will call it extremely "syntactically correct"—[laughs]—on one side, and on the other side, very probing and adjusting and taking away the rigidity of rationalist approach.

So that is why I was mentioning rigorousness and happenstance. Actually, I remember Gardella was—one of the things he was always saying—he's teaching boarding school in the office. It was said that when you drive, you stay straight, with your hands over your wheel, but when you approach the curve, you're adjusting—you're moving according to the kind of curve, sharp or less sharp. You adjust. And that is the happenstance. You just don't keep rigidalist—going straight—otherwise, you will go off the road against the tree. And this is what rigidity brings you, against the tree. *Bang.* [Laughs.]

So that continuous adjustment between the intention and the happenstance, between the rigorousness and the happenstance, between discipline and happenstance, in a sense, between genius and beyond genius, in a sense. That kind of a dialogue between those elements was emerging at that time—when I was growing up. And so that is stuck to me, and I like that. So also I'm very rigorous; at the same time, you keep moving, keep adjusting. You just—you try not to be dogmatic about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it seems, from your story about tossing the plexi cubes on the table, on the diagram of the Louvre, that there you had found a way to incorporate into your process.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Everything—

MIJA RIEDEL: —some manner of bringing in chance, the unexpected.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: St. Peter's [is] like that. Everything we do is like that. Even [though] we work very much with grids, but at the same time, sometimes we might make an exception—stick out of the grid—but this doesn't mean that we deny it. It means we just—we must label it. It is a tool to help you, not to contrive you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sometimes it can be torqued.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. It's very important to use a tool in the proper way and not to contrive [inaudible]. That's really at the essence of our work, if I can put it that way. Yes. That's

why I say, discipline and happenstance, or rigorousness and happenstance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's jump into the '70s. We've been talking about St. Peter's a little earlier, and we wanted to talk about both the National Park Service and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. The '70s were a very dynamic time.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, the '70s were very interesting. While the '60s were my Unimark times, where we approach a great number of subjects in a more corporate way, when we start to work with our own office, we were lucky enough to have terrific projects. St. Peter was one. The Chigoteh [ph] was another one. The national parks was another one. The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, again. There's all—and Knoll, of course, always has a [inaudible]. And so I think we were very, very lucky to have such incredible clients and possibility of doing just the best of [inaudible].

There was no limitation with the Institute. We were doing just—nobody will say it. First, it was a freebie. So Peter felt very guilty from that point of view. But we were doing—I was doing, really, what I thought had to be done, and not only the relation just to solve the particular poster or piece of paper, whatever it might be, but in relation to a general vision of what the Institute should look like later on in the times—so, a complex vision. So if I was insisting on details, [it was] because I knew what was going to happen [inaudible] after.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what specifically were you designing for them?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Everything again, all the graphics?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So posters, catalogues, books, exhibitions, and then the magazines. *Opposition*, that was a very seminal kind of a magazine, even from a graphic point of view. And also *Skyline*. And there was a tabloid. You see, we had already had the experience of the Knoll tabloid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Comes very handy, too. I remember two things were going on at the same time. Always there was this interest in the journal. And at the same time, I was also designing newspaper. So I was very much interested on seeing how our approach, a systematic approach in terms of grids, discipline, and so on, could be applied against the newspapers, which were done so ignorantly, such a low level—zero knowledge of what typography is all about. And that there is no reason—newspaper was nothing but type.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: If they are concerned about the writer or a journalist writing properly, why shouldn't they be concerned about the design—doing a proper job in the typography? So that was my point. When it comes down to the newspaper, instead of using the same discipline that they use for writing, they will abandon that in the hands of workers, unskilled labor. And so I was trying to point out that professional leadership is needed there too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you ever work with any large newspapers?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, [inaudible], but they were not lasting that long—yes, yes, like the *Herald*, for instance, the *Herald.*

MIJA RIEDEL: Pardon?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: *Herald*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, the *Herald*. The *New York Herald*?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. That didn't last too long, but not because of the paper as much as because of distribution problems, which was controlled by the market at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so it couldn't survive. And then we designed another one, another newspaper. That really didn't last also. The major—like, [the] *New York Times*, at that time, was

not even thinking of design. Louis Silverstein was the art director of [the] *New York Times* during that time. And I mentioned many times, "Why don't I come one night, and we do the front page our own way?" [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you suggest that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And he wasn't having any of it.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: There was no way.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: He would [inaudible] on the fire [inaudible] put to the wall. [Laughs.] Shoot and shot. And anyhow, it's interesting to see today how the *New York Times* is quite well designed, and it took a long time. We have been breaking ground, and insisting and talking, the whole spreading.

We started back in the '60s through bringing all those theories about grids, about type, about consistency, about modulation, and explaining—hundreds and hundreds of lectures, why and how a newspaper should be done and how we were doing it with modules, because that was speeding up the whole production process—not for an aesthetic; it's just for the production. It was industrial design approach—designed for industry. What I mean when I say industrial design, it's design for industry.

And at that time, no one was even knowing or doing anything like that, you know, but with the *Herald*, we show it. And the *Herald* became a legendary piece. Historians of graphic design, they keep talking about [inaudible]; Steven Heller has a collection. [Laughs.] Or things like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was it that you brought to the *Herald* that you feel was groundbreaking?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well—to the *Herald*?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, number one, the organization of the structure—modern organization, the grid, basically. So this—let's say this is the first paper. The paper was divided in a certain number of columns. I don't know how many. Six, I say. And this is what every paper was. It was just columns. Columns don't mean anything, really, by themselves. What is important is the cross row, for instance. So here we had a modulation that—I don't remember it now how many models we had, but each one of—this is a module. Let's say that one module was dedicated for headlines, and then the—that kind of a thing, for instance. And then, let's say that one module—just to make an example—let's say one module, every line has 10 words and every module has 10 lines. So you know that this is a hundred words, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: When a newspaperman gets an assignment, he says, "Write me 300 words," "Write me 500 words," "900 words about that thing." By the way, he knew how many. If he's 900 words, let's say, yes, three times three is nine; this is 900 words. So automatically, everybody knows how much space it's going to take. It could be like this or it could be also like that, and so on and so forth.

So bringing modulation speeds it up an incredible—an entire production process, which was manual at that time; this was before computers. So it was linotype setting [inaudible] after, and so on and so forth, so incredible. And that was the purpose of design. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: You're taking it from columns to a grid, basically, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Taking to a grid and inserting the grid.

Then the next step was to choose a typeface for the newspaper, so that they will have an identity; second, to limit the number of sizes. One size for major headlines, one size for text. So you see, already a limiting now—you're dedicating this to headlines. This is for text and [inaudible] columns, whatever it is. By the way, you're beginning to give a discipline that not only speeds up preparation, but also gives you grid identity to paper, which is important for its

own voice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And because of the type, the handling, modulation, and the consistency and the cleanliness of the operations, the absence of vulgarity, the absence of only happenstance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Into fusion.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just looking at your drawing makes me think of—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: If you have happenstance without rigorousness, you have just a plain disaster. If you are rigorous without happenstance, you have rigidity, and that's also a disaster. So that's why the combination of the two, from my point of view, is so important. It's like bone and flesh, if [inaudible] put it that way. So if you have only flesh, it just [inaudible] together. And if you have only bones, you're pretty scary. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of the designs I've seen so many times on the National Park Service brochures—whenever you go to Yosemite or Yellowstone.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, same concept.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a very similar layout, this grid that's in a foldout brochure. But no matter which park you go to, there's a similar design, so it's very easy to access the information; text is—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You recognize it? There's a native—there's an identity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You recognize they are national parks. Before, they were doing nice things, but every piece was different from the other—totally unrelated and so on.

I gave a speech in Washington one time, and I was talking about these kind of issues, all these issues we're talking of. And in the audience, there was a guy, Vincent Gleason. He was the director of publications for the National Park [Service]. He had nobody above him [inaudible]. Just the Ministry of Interior, Secretary of Interior, it's called here. That was the only person that was above him. So at the end of the lecture, he came to me and says, "I'll be interested to come to New York and talk to you about our problems." You know, "I can see that he might – he might help us." So he came to New York. We talked about all this. As a consequence, we designed a whole system of them, which is called the Unigrid [System].

MIJA RIEDEL: The Unigrid?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And basically, again, it was—well, it was whatever it was, like this, but it had—

MIJA RIEDEL: A certain number of columns, a certain number of rows.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. It had the identification over there, and it had the notion of horizontal panes of information, which I developed back [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So, again, you see, you discover something, and you carry it in your luggage forever. [They laugh.]

And so not only we establish a grid, we establish a format; we establish a direction of information; we set up a discipline for images; we set up—we designed a whole new kind of cartography—five different levels of cartography. We specified even a kind of text the way we want to have the text written, and so on. So every detail of that, and then we'll let them loose, so to speak. We leave some samples myself, then, to show how. Not only for the posters, for the folders, but also for books, publications, et cetera.

And I was going down the first day every month to Harpers Ferry, and Washington, and check what the inside designers were going to do by using this. And I would say, "This is fine," "This is

wrong, totally wrong," "This is very good," "Okay, keep going," "No, this is [inaudible]," "Don't do this," "Do that," and so on and so forth. And sometimes I will say, "This is too rigid; loosen it up." And then next time, they were loosening up too much; I said, "Now, it's too much; you bring it back." [Laughs.] It's like an orchestra.

So that's what I've been for most of my life, really, a conductor, basically. That's what I mean. My professional design is really like being a conductor [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's a perfect description. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, because I always design things—well, I was a composer as well. But the most important thing was to instruct a performer how to play it in the most beautiful way, the best way possible. And that is really what a conductor does. And I will say, my aim was really to bring an orchestra to perfect pitch all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it seems you—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And the orchestra are these design officers that we were working with.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's—yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The outside. The clients, like in this case, they had very good designers inside. But they were working individually, everyone in his own direction. And what we did was to bring all that energy to work in a direction so that the best can come out, and that's what they did. That's why it's so good. And that's why I'm so proud, because there are hundreds of those printed pieces there, which are used by—printed in millions. And I haven't done, actually, one by one. They've been done by these people, of course, under—using a language, okay? [Inaudible.]

So I was saying, okay, this is the score, or this is the language. Speak this language as best as you can, or play this chord as best as you can. And I'm not interested in seeing different scores. I'm interested in seeing fabulous performances.

See, that is really the key. See, this is why I deny that I'm an artist, or a designer as an artist. An artist doesn't do this kind of thing. An artist is an individual working on his own issues and problems. I don't work on my own issues, but I have no issues and problem. Without the clients, I have nothing to do. Without a client, I can't write about design.

My job is to see that these things are done, in the best possible way, and that's what I've done with my life. But that's what Unimark was, working 11 offices around the world, for hundreds of different clients. This is what I've done with my own office, working for dozens and dozens of clients. And that is what I like. I retain each client with each project. With each client, there are many different projects. And our job was to coordinate, ourselves, these things. And if we do not do it ourselves, then we will design a manual so the other people can do that. But otherwise the main purpose was always [to] set up the parameters for somebody to follow, so that they can go below a certain level, but they can fly high if they want to. If they have wings, they can fly, but if they don't have wings, at least they can walk. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of two things. The first is one of the questions on this list from the Archives, which is, where do the ideas come from? It seems the ideas really came from the clients and the raw material that you were handed, and what ideas you could take and develop in a certain way.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, no, it doesn't come from the client, the idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: The raw material.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The raw material might come from them. Let's take an example to be more specific. In terms of the National Park [Service], the raw material would be the park. And we would have a meeting, let's say, with the photographers, the writers, the designers, the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Rangers.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The rangers and so on. So the rangers would bring up their issues, and we'd listen; then the historian would bring up his own; the writer would write and so forth. So all that—when you hear all that, you begin to hold the components and you begin to structure the information [inaudible], and that is how it works.

MIJA RIEDEL: The flora, the fauna, the geology, all—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. So collaboration has been—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: An inherent way of how you work.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes. It's very important because it's, again, collaboration like between the conductor and the orchestra. Really, you should never forget that you are the conductor. And if you forget that role—neither have the others—[laughs]—forget that you are the conductor, and therefore there should be that trust. And there has always been—never had any problem, not because they had to; it's just because they recognize the role and the importance of their role to get best results.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you select clients?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I don't—well, yes. But first, lucky—the clients came by themselves. There are two kind of clients that came to our office: those that knew where they were going, and those were fishing around, not knowing. The second category, they were lost at the beginning. They came in; they find that this is not their place and [short whistling sound], and they go. And if they decide to stay, then they become good clients. From day one in my life—and I always tell the young people—from day one, I made a decision of never working for a bad client, because from a bad client, you get a worse client.

MIJA RIEDEL: And by bad client, you mean—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Bad client is a client that tells you what he wants. That's a bad client. A good client, he tells you what he needs. And your task is to find out the needs of the clients and just sift out all the ones,—because [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: —they are extraneous.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. So, and I tell it to the client from the beginning; I say, "You're the patient; I'm the doctor." [They laugh.] So you don't have to like the pills. I'm not selling candies. I'm selling the prescription that is going to be good for you [inaudible]. You have to use any kind of device that comes to your mind to make the position very clear. And usually, after that, clients, they just adore you.

They see—look, this has been given to me by a client. This is given to me by a client. This has been—these are all clients' presents. Can you imagine how much love and passion? And they've already paid their fees on top of it. [Laughs.] It's not that this is a substitute of the fee. So just to say [inaudible] all of our clients that love us, they never really—and the ones that don't, don't exist, really; the one sthat don't, they just go away. That's why we lose them. We don't miss them. You know, get lost. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Move along.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And we've never been expensive. We might have the aura of being expensive because we always have beautiful offices in a sort of a style. But we're not more expensive than the bad designer. And I tell it to the clients. One of the most incredible things about design: a good design, a bad design cost the same. It's amazing. It's not that good design costs more than a bad design. Yes, because if you do good design, you had to get gear for that, too. You cannot sell a good design through bad distribution channels. You have to have the proper distribution. Everything should be at the proper level. Otherwise, it's not balanced. You can't go around with a flat tire and blame it on the engine. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. You've talked about having a consistent design canon from the beginning, and really refining it over time and not changing it, but just refining it. But it's been a consistent canon through multiple decades.

I wanted to touch on some of the things that happened in the '80s—a few things, certainly the Parsons exhibition, but also I'm thinking in particular of the evolution of light in your work and some of the—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Evolution of the—?

MIJA RIEDEL: Of light. And some of the collaborations with Dan Flavin, yes, at the —was it the Hauserman?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, showroom.

MIJA RIEDEL: Offices or showroom, right, in Los Angeles, correct?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] really good job.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did that come about? And how did that differ from what you'd done before?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, it's an interesting story because we had to do a showroom for Hauserman. And the showroom was this kind of shape, basically something like that. That was the space. And what everybody was doing, had always been doing—they always fill up the space with furniture and [inaudible] and things like that; the whole place was—that was the same.

Instead, it just so happened that, maybe a week before having this kind of assignment, I had seen an exhibition of Dan Flavin at Leo Castelli Gallery. And he had some corridors with the lights here and there. And then he had the usual corner with the lights, like that. And he came to —well, Hauserman is a company that makes walls, movable walls. So I had this crazy idea of making a lot of corridors here, using the different kinds of walls that Hauserman was doing. So there is the product, you see.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there is the grid.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And there is the grid; here is the product. [Inaudible] then all I had to do is to call Dan Flavin. Dan Flavin did different kinds of installations here and there.

Here was the entrance, and then we put a mirror all along there, so all [of the] thing was becoming double, and from every point of view, making incredible games. And then here there was a little room with a lot of chairs and a screen. So the products were shown down here; it was a painting, basically something like that.

So you enter here and you don't see anything, and it was magic. And it was a beautiful floor. All you see is this corridor with the Dan Flavin installations. And what is the product? You're looking at it. [Laughs.] No, and the product was just all these things. So it was a sensational thing.

Then here they also had some system offices—there's only two or three pieces, the components; put all the colors into a slot there, and there it was, basically, a showroom.

And Dan Flavin was excited and he had—he never did an installation on this scale before. So after that, he got a space in Bridgehampton, and he made an installation that was similar to that one, and to that space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? So that preceded the Bridgehampton—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So, yes, but this was the idea. Dan Flavin did the lighting installation, but of course, that—well, it was generated by what I've seen before done by him. But we did the plan; we did the lighting. And then an interesting thing is that the following year we changed all the neon lights, and the whole thing changed colors. So it became completely different. It was fantastic. It's just one of the most beautiful jobs we had done, and I never—mindboggling, really.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Nobody's ever seen anything like that, so that was fine. I was very happy with that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That seems to have been some kind of turning point in the work too. It just seems very revolutionary—not that the other work wasn't conceptual—very negative space.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, we always liked to work with artists, by the way. The table which is [in] Lella's office, the one with the four legs like this, in a [inaudible]? And the legs are by—we asked [Arnaldo] Pomodoro to do these legs. Pomodoro is that one. That sphere is by Pomodoro, but I will show you [inaudible]. And that is another example of collaboration between Pomodoro the artist and us. Arnaldo Pomodoro—there are two Pomodoro. This was Arnaldo.

And then, many years before, we worked with another artist, Castellani; that's the one who makes very beautiful—Enrico Castellani, who makes the full abstract canvases with just nails pushing the fabric up, and beautiful things, but, and again, I had remembered that we worked with him, this beautiful stuff, and it was a white painting. I've seen some great canvases by him. And I said, "Jesus, I like that. It's perfect, but I need it right—give me my—I do it." [Laughs.] So this is collaboration again. And—[laughs]—but a lot of these things happened.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there collaboration with artists from the very beginning and throughout?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, this was the beginning. This was back in Milano in 1964, probably. This was in Los Angeles already—

MIJA RIEDEL: The Flavin, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In the '80s—'82, I guess. These were also in the '70s—late '70s or the '80s or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: The table? And the furniture has been designed—it seems like furniture has been designed throughout your career too.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: All the time, continuously. We start with that, with that line—

MIJA RIEDEL: The [inaudible], the Saratoga?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The Saratoga—yes. In the Saratoga we have a sofa; we have a chair; we have a cube with drawers and a light inside there—a cabinet, basically. Then we have tables. They were like this, and the square tables.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was all lacquer, wasn't it?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was all lacquer. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Early '60s?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Then, there was no lacquer—yes, there was no lacquer furniture around.

MIJA RIEDEL: At the time.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Again, the only lacquer furniture existing before was done in the '30s, by Eileen Gray. But between the '30s and the '60s, the only thing that was produced in lacquer were kitchen cabinets by Boffi; he was making kitchen cabinets, and eventually we said, "Let's use the same technique." And that's what happens. We are still—when you think that this is from '64 to today is, what, is about 50 years or something. [Inaudible] still around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So that bring[s] us right away to the notion of timelessness, which is my favorite subject.

MIJA RIEDEL: Please go on.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, no, exactly. From the very beginning of our life we have been very much concerned, all of us, about timelessness, but in relation to that, I would say that they're all—Lella's been extremely important, throughout my life, and there's always been a very critical role.

She's not a person-person; I'm the one with the person [inaudible], as you can see. She's the one that will come and say, "This is no good" or "This is good" or "This is almost good, but I would do this and that," things like that. So it's a critical role. And once you trust that—and that is fundamental in [inaudible],, because that's what collaboration is all about. It's not to handle the pencil with two hands. Collaboration is sharing the same cultural platform, and that is really a key role.

So Lella has always been very, very much against any form of trendiness. Now, I maybe have been more sensitive to whatever was going up in the air and be a little more trendy somehow, and therefore, Lella's help was always to say, "Hey, that is too trendy." So I would just throw it

away and start over and try to solve the problem, and stay away from those traps, and so that was the greatest advantage of working together there.

The reason I like timelessness is because it is the projection of a sense of responsibility. I can't stand the idea of designing something that's obsolete next year. I find it very irresponsible for a designer to design something, a chair or something, that next year is old stuff.

Look at the Breuer chairs. They have been designed a hundred years ago, and we're still buying them now, and they're still very, very, very good. Look at the Mies chairs that have been designed more than 80 years ago. Still the best chair in the world. And look at the Toro chair. They've been designed 200 years ago, and they're still very good. So this chair you're sitting on has been designed back in the '80s, and so that makes it a much—well, it's still pretty good. There's nothing that really says, oh, it's an old chair.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was the chair that was designed for Italian television—the Tg2?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes. Yes. It's called Intervista Chair.

MIJA RIEDEL: Intervista—interview, right? Perfect!

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And it's beautifully made, and I built [inaudible] beautiful leather, perfect craftsmanship, and so on, and so that's—that helps a lot. You see how nice is this detail, or I have a sharp piece on this side and soft on the other. So that's great.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's very sculptural, but it's very comfortable.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, terrific. We had to—it was done for this TV. And I was designing all the settings. So they asked to have a chair that would look like an easy chair, but it would be sitting like a chair. So that's why we designed this one, which is really like a chair height, but it's comfortable like an easy chair.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's true.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So—and I sent the drawing to Italy—*whoosh*—like this. Full-sized. Not much, probably about the size of this—I sent it by fax because we had to speed it up. And I said, "Make a model. I'll be coming next week" or whatever it is. So they made a model. I got there, sit in the chair—

MIJA RIEDEL: This is late '80s, '88 or so, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —and I sit in the chair, and it was not just right the way I wanted. So I said, "Okay, let's correct this." So in the afternoon we correct the whole chair, and then they made it. It was perfect. Two weeks later it was on TV every night.

MIJA RIEDEL: Production was that fast?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And it was a—see, in the month of August everything is closed in Italy, and so this was middle of July, and then September first, the new program was going to be launched. So that's why they did it—*boom*—everything was there in time. [Laughs.] Yes, it's funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wanted to talk about another chair, too, that you designed with Knoll, that Handkerchief Chair.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, the Handkerchief? Let me say, okay, this is interesting, by the way. It brings in another issue as well. They introduced the [Intervista] Chair design really in two weeks, done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then it was perfected thereafter when it got into production. The fact that the chair was on TV every day, of course, was a fabulous promotion.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You can imagine. So people started asking for that chair. Eventually [inaudible] made the mold perfectly. It wasn't done by hand anymore like the first ones. It was done perfectly. And I sold hundreds, hundreds and thousands of them thereafter, but it was done very quickly, as I said.

The Handkerchief Chair is that we started to design that for a company in London, Healy's of London. Healy's of London was the company that was manufacturing some of the Knoll products in England. And they tried to do it; they couldn't do it. They couldn't do it properly, and maybe, I don't know, they were not equipped to do it. So a long time went by, and then finally Knoll started getting the idea of doing it. They tried. Eventually they did it. It took seven years to do. That shows you the difference. From seven days to seven years, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Why so long?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's the American way, you know? [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The Italians are fast. What they don't have is the distribution knowledge. Here they're slow, but they have the distribution knowledge. So when they make it, they make it forever. Over there is that—there's picking; now that's getting better, but generally speaking, they would make it and then you can't find it anymore. The production company will go out of business, or what, here and there, all kinds of things. Flimsy, the whole country—

MIJA RIEDEL: And did you approach Knoll, or did they approach you? I'm just curious how the furniture design works. Do the clients come—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, we designed this chair. And eventually, we show it—while Knoll knew it. And so—and I was like [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure, I remember it well.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then eventually Jeff Osborne became director of design. So he put the chair—and liked the chair—and he put it in production. It took a long time to get done, but eventually it was done, and that was fine, but still it's made, somehow. They could make it better now. They can make it lighter than it is, but again, they're more interested in doing a new one than refining this one. So the culture, this is not a culture of refinement; it's a culture of change.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that's why I keep changing. But look, look at that chair there; it's been there for 80 years. They don't need to change anything from that chair, just making them. So it's a different approach. That's the modernist approach. That's when Florence Knoll was the head of the company. Now they're all different people there.

MIJA RIEDEL: The furniture—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: As I said before, vision, courage, and determination are very important components. Today, companies are not run by this triumvirate of things. Because managers have a fear of failure; therefore they introduce marketing and marketing research, and so and so forth. They want to protect their lives, their salaries, and so on.

We live in the country where the middle class became huge. The entrepreneur leading classes is vanishing out, as a matter of fact, and the working class is almost vanishing out, too, because everything is manufactured abroad. So we're finding ourselves into a huge middle class, which is only afraid of losing their standards. When you don't have billions, you're afraid of losing millions —[laughs]—or even thousands, but if you have billions, or more or less, there's still a lot. And there are still very few of those. There are some great entrepreneurs today. There are very few. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and so on and so forth, the greatest guys of our times, particularly Steve Jobs. Yes, there's nobody better than Steve Jobs in the whole world. He epitomizes really what should be the attitude of the entrepreneur today.

It's the best company. Look at their product, the best design in the world. There's nothing that comes even close to this—to their qualities. And the designer, he is a guy from England; the designer's from England, not from Texas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? The designer behind Mac?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. He's a great designer that Steve Jobs found in his company; he was there working in his company. And he, Steve Jobs, saw the work and he started saying, do this and do that. And this guy was coming up with beautiful things. [Inaudible] on the line, now he's the design director of the company. And there you are, because you need a great entrepreneur, a person with vision, courage, and determination like Steve Jobs, and a person who has talent to cook with it without fear. It's sort of an obvious thing. It's terrific, and the new one is even better looking.

MIJA RIEDEL: The new iTablets [iPads]? Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And particularly in the cover, it's sensational.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wanted to talk a little bit about the collaboration between you and Lella, because you tended to focus more on the 2-D and she on the 3-D, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Well, it's not true in that, because I'm really behind every project that has been done here, with some exceptions. Some exceptions are the—a lot of the showrooms that Lella has done for Poltrona Frau, showrooms and some of the trade shows for Poltrona Frau, some objects here and there, some silver objects, some—

MIJA RIEDEL: Jewelry and—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —and jewelry and things like that, that she has designed, but otherwise, a lot of the three-dimensional work and ideas is against my design. Now, the role of Lella to these kind of things has been to say that it would be done—follow up, and women are very good at that.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I see.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Women are very good to follow up, and men get really easily distracted by new things and so on, so forth. Women are really good to follow up, and Lella is very good at that.

So she was not only follow-up in every three-dimensional project and graphics, then was also on top of all the administration things—so that also another important role that she had during that time. She was not involved in teaching so much. And she was not involved in writing. She was not involved in lecturing. She was not the voice of the office from that point of view. But she was —women are always together, even there.

So I was very much interested also, since we work together in establishing this [inaudible] this brand—they would say today "brand"; I would say "identity"—of the office, the two of us. Never really, in a sense, saying who was doing what, keeping it vague because it wasn't—yes, I was the guy with the pencil, but she was the guy—and she would say, That is not good, as I mentioned before, and I would just throw it away. I would not even discuss it.

But she'd work—the projects that she has done, she has done many. She has done more than 30 showrooms for Poltrona Frau. Then, when we did the GNER [Great North Eastern Railway]—that is the railway—she did all the interiors of all the trains. That means first, second, and third class, whatever, actually two classes, first and tourist class. And I did—well, again, she did a lot of the follow-up on that and decided the livery of the train, the graphics, and the whole thing. She worked a lot in choosing the fabrics and the material, things like that. So—interior part.

Then she worked on all the silver pieces, the jewelry, for San Lorenzo. She worked on glass bakeware for Heller. She worked, of course, on all the interior jobs, major interior jobs like St. Peter's Church and the Minneapolis Museum of [Fine] Arts, the whole thing there. You begin to see that it was quite—it spans all the years, this kind of furniture, of course. Oh, she worked on a lot of furniture for Poltrona Frau: office furniture, executive furniture, different levels. The CEO line, for instance, of Poltrona Frau was done a lot with Lella.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which line was that, sorry?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: CEO.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: We worked together on that, but again she worked a lot on the implementation of that. Then, again, I was the guy with the pencil, but she was the one running there and seeing that things got done properly and so on.

MIJA RIEDEL: With the furniture projects that you worked on over the years, the seating, the modular seating, tables, were those projects that clients would come to you with a request that you would design tables?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or would you design tables and then go speak with various clients?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Both ways, but usually I'll set up a talk with the client asking for designing a sofa. It just so happened that we were thinking of a sofa for our house, and therefore I knew what I wanted. I wanted to have a sofa that would not be against the wall but would be in the space like this. And so we designed that thing that it is front and back, where there is no front and back. It's an object in the round. Again, from that point of view, another innovation at the time. Also sofas at the time had—it would be like that; [inaudible] these would be the arms. When we did the Saratoga, this went from this to this kind of a thickness, see?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. It's very dimensional.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Again this was unheard at the time, to have this kind of thickness. Today you have it even like that; so it changed [inaudible] and so on, but the first breakthrough from tradition—

MIJA RIEDEL: Narrower arms, sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —contemporary revision I did, and the old one. But a modern one like Knoll, certainly [inaudible].

Then the Minneapolis Museum one, again, we did the entire museum, all the display cases, the different rooms, and the different needs. That's all Lella's work, again, together, but a lot of Lella's work, so tremendous amount of work that she has done throughout the ages.

MIJA RIEDEL: How much of an impact did technology and new materials have on your design? I think of your new office space as an opportunity to experiment with all sorts of new materials. Would you talk a little bit about how that affected the work?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, we've always been very much interested in materials and of course, like you said, our office, "new office," we call it, was a perfect opportunity for trying everything else, even from corrugated steel to particle board, high-density particle board, to lead, not very ecological kind of materials today. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. This was in the early '80s you moved to the new space?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, '85.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was the address?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Tenth Avenue and 26th [Street].

MIJA RIEDEL: Tenth Avenue, okay. So you were experimenting with interior construction materials, interior furniture materials, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Also what we were experimenting [with], basically, was using poor materials, in a sense, so that there will be very little, like this, very little work—this table, which is from that time. In fact, it's the only thing left right here of that office. This table is a slab of steel, incredibly heavy. This is a quarter of an inch thick, so you can—and it's five feet by five feet. So it's really heavy, but it's just resting on those cylinders. There is no fastening or anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And you cannot even lift that; there's no way. It takes a huge man to do that. But you see the edges here?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Okay. Now, again, my concept at the time was what I was calling the "zero labor." Zero labor because materials were not expensive, and labor was really what was making everything very expensive, so this is an example of zero labor.

When the steel comes out from the steel mill, it has sort of a coating on top. And when you cut the steel, it breaks the coating there. Now, what you do—usually you buff it off, but if you buff off, you've taken away. So what do you do? You have more labor to apply a protector and so on and so forth; it's an endless kind of operation, and there's still [inaudible]. This is [inaudible]. It's just a saw-cut, throughout as it comes, and you accept it. For me, these are just like wood veneers or marble veneers or things like that. It's just part of the life of the piece itself.

And it was all this theory that we use in building up the office. So for instance, also on the lead panels, we had the first panels made with chipboard—I mean particle board—and then we just laminated that with lead. It was a fabulous finish on top of—then we covered the lead with beeswax. And the beeswax was filtering the air so the lead would not oxidize, and whatever oxidation there was was filtered back by the beeswax so it would not be poisoning. So it was a fantastic process.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did the beeswax hold up over time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes. Yes, no problem.

MIJA RIEDEL: No problem.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes, it wasn't thick. It was just—

MIJA RIEDEL: Just a thin layer?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just a thin layer. That's all that's needed. And so particle board—that whole office was done with particle board just cut and put together, panels, *boom*, and then zero labor. You know, very, very—just cut straight, as a matter of fact, by using ready-made modular sizes so to reduce the number [of] cuts.

And then there were some pieces which needed more work, like the shelves in the library, because there were like boxes, like these. But otherwise, there was a long wall of corrugated steel applied to a metal frame. And you didn't need anything else, and still, it wasn't cheap. But it wasn't as expensive as [the] usual kind of carpentry and furniture.

MIJA RIEDEL: So was there an element of happenstance as the—into the materials?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Visibly in our space. [Laughs.] And then that is again another example of our interest in raw materials. In a sense, it's a very parallel position to, in the art field. In the arts, what you—

[END OF DISC.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [In progress] Arte Povera, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very similar. And Arte Povera exponents are talents of my generation, more or less. Again, they were using materials, like [Michelangelo] Pistoletto, like [Mario] Merz, like [Giulio] Paolini and so on, the whole gang of Italian artists of that period. And then, again, there's parallels. Did I answer that question? I forgot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, well, you were talking about experimenting with new materials in that office. Was that something that you did regularly throughout your work with different clients, continually explore new materials as well?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It depends. No, if we didn't have the opportunity. Of course, we had the opportunity at our office to do that.

I'll show you another example of the incredible maniac flexibility. In our office we had a conference table, which was done like that, and each one of these panels here was a panel like that, folded. So this one was one panel; this was the other panel, but if I opened this up and I put this one up, either way, I get [inaudible]. I get a big table like that; so that kind of flexibility.

Or I can take the table like this, folded, right, with another one here and another—like this. And the base was, again, two panels like this underneath—hinged over here, hinged over there, so [inaudible], you see? Hinged over there, or here, you take the same and you go like that. Again, well, all of these are the bases—the panels—and there's other tops. And you can do all different kinds of things with this. So again, flexibility throughout.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then we have done so many variations of this, for so many different uses, and it just works fantastically well.

MIJA RIEDEL: This reminds me of something else that you said. I'm thinking about your working process now. And it seems that you came up with a specific canon early on, and then, rather than varying that design canon, you've looked for a variety of materials through which to explore that canon.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's possible.

MIJA RIEDEL: Through glass, through metal, through 2-D, through 3-D, but a way of developing your design thought was through the materials rather than variation on the canon itself.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and the other thing is because I've always been interested in materials, starting with glass, the first.

MIJA RIEDEL: With Venini, way back, sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Part of my life, exactly. Then silver, and then plastics, and then furniture, and then metal, and then the leather, like in these things. So it keeps going on and on and on, and wood, et cetera. There's always been this interest to work with materials, and how to work with them—well, marble—my God, marble—dozens of marble pieces like that one. Again, and of all kinds, like the—

MIJA RIEDEL: You just have a very—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] table, or the sphere, the cube, the cylinder, and pyramid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, four basic Euclidean forms.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, again, but they always were these very basic—yes, I can [inaudible] basic shapes.

One of the things that I've done from the beginning in my professional life is to build up my own vocabulary also. My approach to design is very much linked to linguistics, actually part of semantics, a general semantic approach; therefore right there, there's a linguistic relationship.

From the beginning, I've always been interested in building up a vocabulary of elements so that I can use—the moment I have to use it, I have it ready. I don't have to discover many things, and by putting it together, it becomes our stuff. So, for instance, well, we have the lacquer furniture. Then we have the grey carpeting, the grey industrial carpet at the time. White walls, glass panels floor to ceiling, partitions [inaudible], and Breuer chairs, Mies chairs—yes, Breuer, Mies, and different kind of Mies, that Mies chair and the other MR chair, all the Mies chairs. Then, coming to other materials—tablets of colors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So primary, very vibrant, very lively kind of colors. Then, once I found those, I stabilized them. I don't need to look for any other ones. For me, color, to begin with, is not color in the usual sense. Only color is a concept. I use color from the concept – [inaudible]. If I use red, it's red. If I use yellow, it's yellow, right? It says, whatever the color is, it's not that particular PMS color—all the PMSs of red are red; all the PMSs of yellows are yellow. And that is, again, a very different, unique approach about color, because I'm not a painter, so I'm not interested in that particular—well, I am, at the end, interested in a particular shade, of course—

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —in a particular color, when I want to get to that particular one. But beyond that, for me, red is red. Of course, there is a Vignelli red, so-called, which is borderline between orange and red. Of course, there is a preferred Vignelli yellow, which is the school-bus yellow. The reason is that it takes very well both white and black. For lemon yellow, you can't put white—it would disappear. But the school-bus yellow takes white, or the reverse, in other terms, very well. There is a reason for that too.

And then I like the rainbow colors, the way the one merges into the other, and that is my range. I don't have more than that. I'm not esoteric about coming in with pastel colors here and there. Maybe once in a lifetime—once in a lifetime I've done it, when I did the IBM personal computers.

MIJA RIEDEL: The folders for the books, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Manuals, manuals.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But for a very specific reason, too, because color, for me, has a meaning, you see. Again, I just don't choose a color because I like it. It's not a matter of taste only. It might be at one point, sooner or later, perhaps, but it's not my primary concern. My primary concern is to establish a certain message through color, and that is one of the reasons. Isn't that amazing? It's again the same consistency we have throughout everything, the same—I choose color and therefore there are very few, maybe half a dozen—the same way that I use typefaces, just about a half a dozen.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see, for the same reasons.

MIJA RIEDEL: The elements of the language, the building blocks.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly, building blocks of the language. And that's why, throughout my life, I've been [inaudible], but that's why I have it ready. I don't even have to think about it. I will never—you'd never catch me dead using a color like that one on the cover of that book.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, that sort of pink.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, kind of, you know, sick pink.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But a Vignelli red is right on the top there. So that's better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Something you were saying earlier on made me think of something you discussed as a very early experience—I have my note about that—your experience early on about merging the craft experience with industrial design, would you say more about that? You had that Venini background.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, that's why.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's really when it started. You know, the Venini experience was for me the first exposure to the beauty of crafts and craftsmanship, because, you know, when you design something in glass—let's say you design something like that, just to make it a quick example.

MIJA RIEDEL: A simple vase.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You go to the master blower, and in order to get to this final shape, he goes through endless numbers of shapes, where he maybe [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, because this is very full-bellied, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Maybe it's all over there, and so on and so forth. Or maybe then, if you want

this opened like that, you put it in the oven and it opens up, whatever it is.

So what is interesting is that all the transitional shape between your design and the final object, sometimes, are much more interesting than the final [inaudible]. Why? Because those are really what the thing wants to be, and you don't know that if you don't have that kind of experience, even that kind of exposure, more than experience. You don't know it, because you just draw because you're used to the pencil, even worse with a computer.

The great importance of being exposed to crafts is that you begin to understand the nature of materials: wood is one thing; steel is another; glass is another; plastic is another. What you can do with plastic, you cannot do with glass, and vice versa. Things like that. And why? Because of tolerances, because of the way it's manufactured, and so on and so forth.

So the more you get involved into that, the more awareness you begin to acquire about the properties of materials, and you try to stay within, or, on purpose, stretch that. [Inaudible] – but it could be—why not—if you so desire.

However, I'm not for stretching materials, or stretching possibilities, as much as I am for using what is proper and appropriate, because of my strong notion of appropriateness. Therefore, I like to use the most appropriate way for that material, whatever it is. Whenever you can, you can do different things. And what you can do, for instance, with that object there, that box there, you can only do with that material, to a great extent. You cannot do it in glass. You cannot—it would be stupid to do it in silver, or in metal, which would require a lot of process, when instead you do a mold and then blow that material into the mold; then bingo, that object comes out. So you have to know all these processes.

Oh, the other thing which is interesting about design—again, when I say, if you can design one thing, you can design everything, what do I mean? Do I know how to design that box? No, I don't. But I know how to design many other things. So I might know that more or less, and then I will get in touch with the manufacturer for these things, and he will tell me, you cannot do this; you can do that, so on and so forth. Because [inaudible] you listen to that, and you modify it and say, how about doing this? Can you do this? Yes, I can do that. Or you might say, no, I cannot do that. Why? Because I can't get the object out. Okay, fine, that's a good excuse. Or if he says, I cannot do that. Why? Because it's never been done before. Then that's not good enough. [Laughs.] So it's that kind of a relationship.

It's very important to work together with the people that are going to do whatever you design. And unless you learn, unless you know from the beginning certain techniques—and you need to —but otherwise, it always helps—it's always very helpful.

And then even with the Poltrona Frau, it becomes really useful to work together. They will say, we can do this—we can do this, maybe, better. We can do this, maybe, in a more inexpensive way. And you can find a better solution that is more affordable, and that is always something to look for.

See, this is, again, why we are designers and not artists. An artist is not concerned, neither should he be—nothing should be between him and the final work. But in design, there are a lot of considerations that are pertinent to the quality of the object. And to design something in the wrong way just by—I mean, i.e., in the most expensive way rather than the most economical way—it brings down—bad design. Good design is what you achieve with economy of means. That is good design. Bad design is just the opposite: what you achieve without any economy of means. That's why it's not design. It might be art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Two questions, on what you just said—the way you're describing your experience with Venini in the glass, and then I think of the fellowship that you had to work with Towle in silver, it sounds as if your early experience with craft and with material gave you another group of building blocks, or another kind of language, that you incorporated into your overall vocabulary.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was a real understanding of material, from a craft perspective, that you might not have had otherwise. Is that accurate?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Plus also a less rigid approach in the design of objects, too, objects that, how can I say it, a more sensual approach rather than a rational approach, to a certain

extent, for a certain category. Or this glass, a perfect example, you know. Cylindrical glass, one would think that a Vignelli glass would be a cylindrical glass, very geometric, and so on and so forth, and you would say, that's not a Vignelli glass, but that it is, indeed, typical of exactly what I'm talking about.

I'm interested in the properties of glass, which are enhanced by the light. What light does is coming through this and making all those reflections, and that makes glass sing. When this is a cylinder, the glass—the light goes through, comes out the other way with very little disturbance, or very little intercourse with the glass. And I don't want to make this association between disturbance and intercourse—[they laughs]—well, very little intercourse with the glass. Instead, when the light comes through this, look what happens. See, the object starts to take life. And this is because of this corrugation and so on and so forth, the water, et cetera. And it makes it much more interesting.

So as much as we like purity of shapes, when it's appropriate, we like also to investigate the play of light. Why? Because light is important for us, and then we come back to the point. Light is—I'm not interested in the shape by itself, by themselves. I'm interested to see how that light could interact with that, whatever shape it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: In the particular material as well, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and that is really what we—

MIJA RIEDEL: What is reflected, refracted?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —what interests me. And I think that that is what is important, and every good designer does that. Every major designer does that. Tapio Wirkkala has a very good design for—this Finnish designer that designed beautiful glass and so on.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's the name?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Tapio Wirkkala.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Or Kaj Franck, the Swedish one. And then there is also the other side—the beauty of the industrial aspiration, like in the glasses designed by Wagerfeld—[Wilhelm] Wagenfeld, actually—where it's really like a chemical glass, pure, very German, the nobility of the absence of personalism, or the nobility of objectivity, and that is really what German design is about.

And this is what has been always for me a great source of inspiration. I have a tremendous respect for German culture and German design German culture in general, music, literature. Look at that guy: Goethe is right there.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so the purity of the German design, the beautiful work of Dieter Rams, which I consider really the best, by far the best designer of the century, by far.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh yes. Better than Eames, and anybody. But Eames is really, really high [inaudible]. But I think that purity of form, the language, the precision that Dieter Rams has achieved; his work is best. I think he is the greatest, by all means.

And okay, the second greatest is Eames [laughs], or at least they're the same level. And the good—really, what makes Eames better than, to a certain extent sometimes, better than Dieter Rams is that Eames was [a] much more rounded person. He made beautiful films; he made beautiful toys; he did beautiful furniture. Everything he did was beautiful, playful and so on, and that's why I think he's great. And has epitomized really the best of the American spirit. He's just like [inaudible] book. So—and a great, great, great contribution given to mankind from him as well. And you should not forget them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who would you say is, was, your major influences over time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Mies.

MIJA RIEDEL: Number one?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Number one, foremost. Yes, Mies, by all means. More than anything else. It's the Mies attitude, the sparseness, of sifting, of cleanliness, intelligence, and that—I can't stand superficial design. Mies is forever, and it's just the Beethoven of architecture and design.

MIJA RIEDEL: More so even than Le Corbusier?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes, by far. Yes, by far. He's the great, at the end of the day. Le Corbusier was a great artist and a great architect and a great innovator of the language of architecture [inaudible], but this is—you take the personal with the feeling, and take somebody other—that the towers he had made; you take the furniture. You take the smaller houses, which we['ve] never done; they're just done in the [inaudible]. You take the tour in that house. Mies's work is—still no one, no one has come yet—no one. I mean the poetry, the Palladic quality of the space, the stature, the [inaudible] dimension of his contribution. Just the greatest, by all means.

MIJA RIEDEL: Louis Kahn, was he of interest to you?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes. Louis Kahn was great too. Those were the great guys: Corbu, Mies, and Kahn. That's about it. And before, there was Wright, of course. No doubts about that.

But what Mies has done is unbelievable. Taking industrial products and transforming them into the most sublime architecture ever, where the proportion is the whole thing, and where—look at the Seagram Building. The Seagram Building in that square, the relationship with all the details, oh, it's incredible, and the nobility of the material. You know that you cannot—you have only two positions for the venetian blinds: either down or half—well, or high, all the way. But not any kind of position that will—see, a little detail like that. He knows how that could destroy an entire façade of the building, all that mass [inaudible]. God is in the details.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so that's why—Louis Kahn was an incredible architect: strong, beautiful, simple, but very, very good. And Corbu was a great artist. He had such a flair in everything he did. It was just so perfect. But again, proportion, proportion, proportion was what he would—the golden means of the world, the end—that's where we all learn, in that sense. Yes, it was absolutely incredible, but personally, there again, personally: Mies, Mies, Mies.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's definitive.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You've talked about economy of means and you've talked about poetry—poetry of Mies's work. Do you think of your work as having any sort of spiritual quality to it, any sort of spiritual context?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I don't know. It's not that I try to put it in anything. If it comes out by itself, that's terrific. But of course, what we try is almost—very sensitive to proportions. There are many issues that are important for us in proportions, sequence, scale; all the values like that are very, very important to us.

Scale, for instance, is so important. Most of the people still do not know really what scale is about. They still confuse scale with size. Size is measurable; scale is not. Scale is intangible. And you will say, oh, that thing has a fabulous scale, and it might be a little thing like that, or it could be a huge thing. The sense of scale is an intangible quality that is either there or it isn't, you know? It has to do with proportion; it has to do with appropriateness; it has to do with materials; it has to do with sight; it has to do with so many different things. It has to do with what it is. A book could have a sense of scale or not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Strikes me as what you've referred to as the inherent meaning of the object itself is related to the scale, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. Yes. And of course, when we design, we're very aware of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think [of] the Stendig Calendar immediately when I think of scale, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, because it's not the size is where the scale there. It's the scale of—it is the size and the scale and what you do with that in a sense, but it is the scale of the object.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you think of a particular—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: As a matter of fact—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's interesting that it doesn't lose—it's not the size. You take that calendar and you reduce it to this size. I have a page there it used to—this, and it's like the same scale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I wanted to do it that small [inaudible] because really it makes the point so well about the difference between size and scale.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's a perfect example.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think of the work, your work over time, as having any sort of social or political commentary?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I think it has a social concern. I think it's the—because of the sense of responsibility and now a dedication to make design, spread design as much as possible, national parks or things of that kind. I don't think design is a tool for changing—for political means or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did it not feel that there's some sort of indirect social commentary in that commitment to economy of means and appropriateness, indirect?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, indirectly, when we fight vulgarity, yes, it is a social commentary in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It is a reaction against the society in which we live and the waste, when we design things to be kept around and then to be thrown away. When we design something that fights obsolescence, it is a social commentary in a sense, but it's also because we believe in all those values. And it just so happens. It's not political; it's not designed for really political, or I would say, controversial issues.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, I didn't—yes, I would think not.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So it's not so controversial. Not using design, from that point of view, as a tool or a—there are some other design—French firms that do that. I'm not [inaudible] to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed over time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not really. The source of inspiration has always been that economy of means and to sift, sift, sift until there's nothing left to throw away. That has always been the inspiration. It's not something else coming from outside; on the contrary, I try not to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I try to find inspiration right inside whatever we are to do and then proceed from that point, and as we say all the time, the solution is in the problem; it's not outside of the problem. So we like to investigate within the thing, because it's within it; then the solution is there. And we can, and that's where the excitement is also, to find that out. But there are so many issues, this happens that this baggage of this accumulation of things that we have.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, you met Beatriz [Cifuentes-Caballero, vice president of design, Vignelli Associates], right?

MIJA RIEDEL: No, I don't think—I think we've only spoken on the phone. Hi, nice to meet you.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's precious [inaudible.]

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We're almost done for today.

BEATRIZ CIFUENTES-CABALLERO: You see, we went by home too.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I cannot believe it. Do you want that one or do you want this one?

BEATRIZ CIFUENTES-CABALLERO: No, these ones—aren't these—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. These are the [inaudible].

BEATRIZ CIFUENTES-CABALLERO: Can we use them?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. [Laughs].

BEATRIZ CIFUENTES-CABALLERO: You see how we did this [inaudible]?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I can't believe it. I'm getting—becoming manual, oh, my God. You're reversing. [Laughs.]

Yes, we have this baggage, I was saying, of things that—and whenever we design maybe a book, maybe a whatever, let's say it's a book, so the sequence is important. We look into whatever we have—we have a whole bunch of photographs, so we have to select one and look which one for that and for that reason, and so on and so forth, and then we begin to build up the sequence. And then you blow up, so therefore you're inflating the scale. Again, you begin to play with the scale of the images, to bring emotions up, to control the pacing of emotions and things. That's what you do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I say, here's all the tricks. You have it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: A rhythm.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I don't know, is that art? Maybe that's what artists do, I have no idea. Maybe it is, I have no idea, because I don't perceive that, as I said, my work being a work of art. I just consider that design. And design has a destination. Design is utilitarian. Art is not utilitarian. Art is useful—but not utilitarian.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And design is utilitarian and not always useful. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Shall we stop there for today?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Laughs.] That's a good point there.

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Massimo Vignelli in his New York City office on June 7, 2011, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number three.

When we left off yesterday, we were just finishing the work that you completed in the '80s, but we hadn't touched on the work for the United States Postal System. That involved designing a

number of interiors, is that correct?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, that was an interesting and an unusual kind of project. We had received a visit one day from an architectural firm from Memphis, Tennessee, saying that they were doing a project for the post office. They were designing new post office factories—[inaudible] offices—factories, basically, and the factory side was very well established. What they couldn't really get [inaudible] was what kind of a look [they] should have the front part of the post office, the one the people see, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: So these were regular post office buildings where people would come buy stamps and mail packages.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I merely said, while I think the issue of identity is very important, by the same token, however, we're not talking about gas stations. We're talking of a post office that has a monumental role in every community. There's always been a tradition of being an important building, a town hall, post office, so it is part of the American tradition. It goes back to the beginning of the American cities, the post office shack, so to speak—[they laugh]—in the Wild West, you know? It had a front, a false front. It was already established as an important thing; it wasn't just a casual office building, anonymous.

So this architectural firm said, "We can't make up our mind. We cannot make up our mind on what it should look like, and we were wondering, maybe Vignelli has some ideas." So I immediately said, "Yes, I think," just as I mentioned, "that the building is more than a gas station." Not only that, but I think also that in a country as big as a continent, and the land diversity between California and Maine and [the] Midwest, and I think somehow this should be reflected.

So anyhow, as I said, the back part, which is the factory, it was already established. And the front part is the one which is in contact with the public. That means the counters and the boxes, P.O. boxes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mailboxes, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Things like that, and other transactions that happen usually in the post with the public is the front part, and that is the part we had to take care of. So what we decided to do is to make a gallery in the front of the building.

When we took [inaudible] the buildings, the factory building, [inaudible] post offices, they had many different sizes. Some were very small; some were larger; some were even larger. So we said, "There has to be a kind of architecture that is extendable, that is not finished by itself." And so we took this approach—we call it a salami approach [they laugh]—where you can slice it [inaudible]

We made this gallery with an open square porch in front, and a square entrance, an arch, to signify the entrance. We made these all in brick. So we had a big wall above and floor openings on the bottom. It was like a porch in the type of the glass. It was made of glass. And in the front, in the center of this, or usually in the center, there was this arch, "square arch," if I can put it that way, white, as opposed to the brick color, for instance, or the different material for the background, signifying the entrance. And of course, over the top part, it would say United States Post Office, et cetera, so—and the gallery had a glass roof, so it was full of air; it was cheerful, and so on. And the counters and all that. It was quite nice, as a matter of fact. So what it was, it was an architectural intervention from all points of view, because the concept was an architectural concept, was not just a design, interior design or furniture design or product design.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was architectural. And the architectural firm went along with it. They were happy with it. And that is what it became.

Now, the other thing, which was very unique, probably, of identity and diversity, and the identity part was this: the architecture of shape, form. But the diversity part was the one by the different materials according to the regions.

In other terms, in the Midwest, it would be limestone, for instance. In the East, it would be brick. In California or in Florida, it would be stucco. So that the [inaudible] architecture is the same, basically, and the cladding was related to the environment and the vernacular and so on of each

region. So quite interesting because, again, identity was strong, portrayed in a very strong way but in a very dignified way, not gas-station style, but in industrial-design style, architecture with the dignity of architecture in every place, but at the same time, the diversity was provided by [inaudible] materials.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you know how many buildings [inaudible]?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I don't know how many they did. The funny thing is, I went one time and I had completely forgotten where, somewhere—I don't know if it was in Virginia or some state around there—to give a talk to a university, and then the student says, "We have a good surprise for you. Maybe you have never seen it." They said, "We're taking you to see the new post office." [Laughs.] So finally, I managed to see the real thing. And I took some pictures and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. That was the first time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly. And I know that they have done more than one, but I don't know where they have done it, because also when I visited, the architect of that firm died, and so I lost touch with the firm [inaudible], and I don't know what happens.

But I'm very, very proud of that project, really because of that approach, of identity, diversity, and context, which are three very important issues for us, particularly when it comes to architecture of environment.

Context for us is—and I wrote several times about [it]—it is a very important issue. It's an issue which very often is not considered, or [is] overlooked, and this is why a lot of things do not belong. It's incredible. I just came back from Atlanta. Atlanta has a whole new, big, business center, with fabulous buildings here and there, very luxurious, very rich buildings, but no context. Every one is [a] stand-alone kind of a thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And there is no connection, no connectivity. It's amazing, when you look at any European town or village, you'll find—look at Barcelona. Look at Paris. Look, Berlin. Look, you name it [inaudible] Berlin history [inaudible]. You look at the city of Florence; they do have a tremendous connection. Context is very, very, very strong.

Over here, the notion of context has never really been an issue, because it was always a building-and-a-parking-lot—[laughs]—kind of a situation, and there was no context one way or the other. Even in the city of New York, there's very little context. Some places have it. West End [Avenue] has it, and Fifth Avenue might have it to a certain extent.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about Chicago? Do you think it has more context?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Not even Chicago. No, not even Chicago. What it turns out [to be], again, is a collection of fine buildings in there, but without any connection. So the spirit of the cities over here comes out from the energy of the buildings, rather than from the energy of the environment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's very different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that, of course, is a reflection of the history of the country, but also it reflects the nature of the people, compared to other places. Here, the individuals are very strong. The cult of individual freedom is above anything else. They couldn't care less about the others. It's [a] "me-me-me" kind of culture, as opposed to [inaudible] that has been [inaudible] for centuries over around the world. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So it's funny, because when you go in Africa, for instance, and you see some villages in India or China whatever places, and you see these round buildings that are isolated, but the vocabulary of the building is the same. So there's a strong identity, routine things even. And that identity makes a context, you see?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MS. VIGNELLI: They don't have to be attached, but the fact that the language, the architectural language is the same, that gives a good feeling, like you might have in a campus over here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: A campus would be something that has that kind of—RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology], for instance, or [inaudible], or many other campuses around the country. It is an interesting issue, but that is why we really like [inaudible]; that's why we like that particular project of the post office. And really it brings up the issues. What we really like [are] projects that give us the opportunity for demonstrating our beliefs and assert[ing] our theories.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: We have this strong theoretical approach to whatever we do, and strong beliefs and stubbornness—[they laugh]—in achieving it, too, not compromising and so forth. We'd rather give up the whole thing than compromise the concept, because otherwise, it's nothing, waste of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. It goes back to the details. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: The details, all of that matters, the connections.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So it's an attitude.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, because that project reminds me very much of the way you were describing the National Park Service brochure yesterday, the continuity and the diversity in this structure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see how in this [inaudible] throughout our life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And this is why I was teaching corporate identity, when people were not even knowing what corporate identity is. It, to me, was this desire of having identity and diversity together, and consistency throughout, and linking different problems, different things, to a common denominator. And that has always been interesting, extending whatever we were doing to embrace the whole context, not just designing a logo and doing a logo, a stationery, and a catalogue book, to exhibit [inaudible], extending it to give power to the statement.

MIJA RIEDEL: To the whole.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: To the whole and to the statement.

MIJA RIEDEL: So any single element reflects the larger whole.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Right, and it was a double intention. One was the desire of achieving that, but also the desire of extending yourself to do all these different things and [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a perfect entrée to—I wanted to discuss your clothing. You have a line of clothing.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, okay, so, good. I brought these two booklets [inaudible]. And I'm going to show it to you. Unfortunately, the tape cannot see them, but what happens is the following. How did I get to it?

MIJA RIEDEL: It's early '90s, yes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And I went to my closet one morning, and I didn't know what to put on at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: A lot of regular suits there and some—I couldn't put that jacket because the lapels were too narrow. I couldn't put the other one because the lapels were too big. I couldn't put the other one because the shoulders were too tight. The other one was too big in spots.

And I said, "My God, look. These suits are new and am I [a] fashion victim?" [They laugh.] I could not stand that notion, and so I said, "I've got to look around for something that transcends this fashion." And I looked around, couldn't find it.

And since we have this motto "If you can't find it, design it," I went to the office and took some paper, like this, and my pencil, and I start to draw the clothing that I thought that I was looking for. Since I couldn't find it—I knew what I was looking for, and I couldn't find it. So I could design it very easily. You can design when you know what you're looking for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You cannot design if you don't know what you're looking for. Then you're just vague and you meander in the nothingness, and that is what a lot of people do, because they don't know. That is, they might hit something by happenstance [inaudible], so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But by having those two yardsticks, of course, it helps a lot. So I started to draw, and then while I was drawing, I said, "Well, let's see what happened throughout history." And so I just did this thing, and I started to say, at the beginning, clothing was very unisex.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] A little fig leaf, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: There was no distinction. The fig leaf—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —was the same for Adam. Then we got into the Roman times. It was very easy. They would just say—they had a big problem with fashion and tailors. They would just say, "Go and buy me 10 yards of fabric." And then it comes back, and then you wrap it around the body, and there was the suit, more or less.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then it came to Dark Age, which were really dark, like Monty Python—[they laugh]—and search for the Holy Grail. That's a perfect rendition of what Middle Ages must have been, really. And it was nothing very heavy—wool, boiled wool fabrics. When it was raining, it was like tons of concrete that was on your shoulders. It must have been terrible. And then, of course, came the Renaissance, incredible fantasy with beautiful jackets and beautiful tops, great aura and different colors. And stockings—leggings—for men; one leg one color, the other leg another color. That takes a lot of guts to do. [They laugh.] And then things move along, and during the 1600s, men had this incredible—what do you call these things?

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, ruffles?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Ruffles around the neck, and britches this way, and still have leggings—

MIJA RIEDEL: Like pantaloons?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And jewels and [inaudible] beautiful velvet brocades and so on, so that the textile becomes extremely refined. And of course, there is the counter, what I call the counter-reform or counterrevolution, the reform, actually, and you have the pilgrims coming to the States, a very sober kind of line, [inaudible] were all like the great-great-great-great-grandfather [of] Brooks Brothers—[they laugh]—were really nice clothing, and using a big five-gallon hat, which became then the cowboy hat eventually down the line.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And a lot of buttons, like that. Why a lot of buttons. You know why?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: To make undressing more difficult.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Here is this. That is, again, Protestant—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, values.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Protestant values, prudery, not like today.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't know—[laughs]—not like the Romans.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] And then when you get the 18th century—[inaudible]—extreme elegance, in every detail. The jacket becomes longer; it becomes like an overcoat. The breeches become like this–the stock—the leggings are shortened. The britches, they come to under below the knee. And that's basically, the kind of—and a cravat begins to be around—a scarf. And then you have Napoleon times, and again, all the buttons. And you know why all the buttons on the sleeves? To prevent the soldiers from cleaning their noses on the—everything always had a function, by the way. This is amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: They were either practical or religious, like we have seen before. The button always had [a] reason for it. In this case, the button, the military button, they had a lot of buttons because they were [inaudible] buttons, and that was like a decoration. It was like medals.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then of course, when they were at ease, they were opening. And when they open them, they give birth to the lapel, because there was never a lapel before.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see, the lapel comes from this notion of opening [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The britches still below the knees, but the boots, they got up to the knees, and so on. And then you get [inaudible], in time, and the lapel is now established; the jacket is there; the pants are long; the boots are like riding boots [inaudible], because this is the century of the horse.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So men are riding horses [inaudible]. Before horses were—only rich people would have riding horses, and the military would have riding horses. Now the bourgeoisie that is coming up ride the horses, too. So the clothing reflects that kind of [inaudible]. The horse, and have—so the boots; that's why we have that kind of thing.

And then we get into the Victorian era. It becomes a little more bourgeois. So people begin to go to a tailor, and the tailor is beginning to become a person, a tailor or designer that designs things, so gives shapes to what was shapeless before. Now it becomes very shapely, and so the pants go all the way down the floor now, and then it's that kind of thing. Then you have, after the 1860s, turn of the century—it became the Brooks Brothers suit, basically the jacket, and pants, just like we know it today. And for the last 200 years, nothing has changed [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: A hundred years—nothing has changed. It I unbelievable; I can't believe it. Look at all the fashion today—still the same, basically, as a hundred years ago, but we live in a

completely different way.

MIJA RIEDEL: The women's clothing has changed, though, quite a bit.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Women, women's clothing is completely different usually. That's fashion. It is not clothing. That's fashion. This is clothing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The difference between clothing and fashion is that fashion is obsolescence-building. Clothing [inaudible] is covering body with something that lasts longer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] So it's a concept of lasting, and it's different. One is ephemeral, and the other one is long-lasting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then we get into where it was in time. And once again, very much like it's been for a long time. Double-breasted jackets, very shaped. And then this incredible nonsense about the crease, iron that way, the pants side in that way, which is so much more complicated to iron. But there were people ironing; they had servants and [inaudible].

Then we get—however, those things in the '30s stayed there, but in the '30s, the man is much more sporty. He is an athlete; he has big muscles and big shoulders and so on and so forth. And the jacket becomes [a] sporting jacket, tweed, and the pants become [inaudible] twill, so something that is rugged but elegant at the same time. And the shoes become two color tones and things like that [inaudible].

And then we get to the '60s, with the Brooks Brothers basic suit with the—it's the sack, much like 100 years before. No shoulders, no padding in the shoulders. [Inaudible] in the '30s, padding was enormous on the man's shoulders, like you've seen in the old movies, these incredible shoulders. And a lot of silly details, but nevertheless that's the basic suit. And the pants were very short, that's strange. I remember that when pants were short.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. They were not down to the ground. They were always above [inaudible], raised in the '60s, '50s and '60s.

And then, of course, there is, in the '80s, the Armani, that means the unconstructed suit, with the shoulders that are wide, but they're about—because the man underneath is [inaudible] and [inaudible] padding whatsoever. The unconstructed, and no more crease in the pants.

So now, let's examine [inaudible] all-traditional men's suit. You have a belt; once it's fixed, it's not—you eat, you're done. You have to unbelt. This is not elegant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You have these creases, which are so difficult to iron. And you have a fly. You know why there's a fly? It's not for what you think. A fly has been turning around the body of a man for centuries. Sailors and—opening not a front fly, but on the side opening.

MIJA RIEDEL: On the side?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. All right, the flap. Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In the Renaissance, they had it on the back, you know. Men were [inaudible] paintings when you see those—

MIJA RIEDEL: Lacings, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —those, I'd say, strings on the back. So the only reason that finally they decided to have it in front is because you can put the pants on in an easier way. And so while

you are there, you can just—[laughs].

So it took a lot of time, however, and not to mention when first they were bottoms, and then men always forgot to button them. I remember when I was a child, I had buttons and I always had that problem, but I was always an [inaudible] of button [inaudible] friends; they were always unbuttoned and sort of [inaudible]. And old people, we have always unbuttoned pants. And then they invented that incredible torture machine, which is the zipper. So, *zip*, and you caught all the time [inaudible], so that doesn't make much sense.

The crease doesn't make any sense because where—just where you fold your legs, always there is a bag there. So why there should be a crease? Nobody understands.

And then there is this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Cuffs.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Cuffs, which are a great thing for holding dust and ashes and pushpins and whatever. [Laughs.] Anything that falls down—and again, the origin of that is that we are making pants without, and people were rolling them down. So instead of finishing them, only rich people can have tailor-cut; the other people, they were just rolling them up, like they do now with the jeans.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: They still—for that reason.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] So I say that this is the pants. Let's examine the jacket. The jacket has lapels, which change all the time [inaudible], and no one [inaudible] over time. This pocket—

MIJA RIEDEL: The breast pocket, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: What is it there for? They don't know what to do. They put a handkerchief just to justify the presence of it. So if you put the glasses there, every time you bend, they fall off. So it's the most stupid thing. And it's always open. It doesn't have a flap or something to close or a zipper or—it just doesn't make any sense. And then they have the side pockets. And they have a roof. Why, are they afraid it may rain inside, or—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] The flap.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So even seen a pocket, a pocket with a roof? It's nonsense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes, it's odd. It is odd.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then the bottons, and there are two bottons. One is needed, but why the other one? And if you botton this is and not this, you look like a jerk, and then they have these buttons on the side. [Inaudible] all these buttons. Most of the time, they are fake. And if [you] spend a thousand, over a thousand dollars, you can unbutton them. It's just a snob thing. And so the entire thing is nothing but a collection of nonsense, not to mention the shoulders.

So I said, "Well, there must be a better way of approaching the design of clothing." So let's go back to self-design. And so this is the first one I designed: a jacket that has no button on the side [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, like a placket.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Placket, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: They're under a placket.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Another placket, like at an angle. That's perfect. So the same reason, no shoulders, no nothing, totally unconstructed so it's much easier to make them, like a Japanese thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And no crease. And the pants have a—yes, have an elastic band, and no flies. That's it—much easier, much faster for any event. [They laugh.]

And that's design. It's not fashion. Those things, I told them, God forbid, you're in a rush in these, and you have to unbelt, unbuckle. It might be too late. [Laughs.] With this, *zoom*!

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's back to unisex, is it?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And it's back to unisex, like with Adam and Eve. So then you have a shirt, which is also a sweater. It's like this [inaudible], and pants like that. And then variation of a jacket. If somebody wants to have a tie, that's perfect, because men sometimes want to have a tie. And if you're naked otherwise, design a tie, and then the jacket is like that. And [inaudible] with a scarf, and that's about it.

And leggings, let's get back to leggings. So I tried the leggings, but my legs were so bad, I had to give it up. [They laugh.] My knees were cantilever of the body. [They laugh.] So I gave it up, but it's great. Good-looking stuff, and then for the formal wear, a tuxedo, made a beautiful fabric and —

MIJA RIEDEL: You have a tie and your cummerbund.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, exactly, all the details, which are—when they say "black tie," you come in a black tie.

MIJA RIEDEL: There you go.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's it; you don't come with a red tie, try to be smart. You can be smart by coming with a [inaudible] intelligent suits than penguin suits that they wear. And then fancy, for at-home kind of formal. So you have a beautiful—

MIJA RIEDEL: Pleats.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Pleats, like one would have [inaudible] fabric, and velvet, black velvet pants, and black velvet slippers [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Beautiful, absolutely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, you look like a million dollars, and you've got nothing. You've just got the shirt and pants. And then we started to design shirts, shirts with a button there and shirts with a collar [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Very architectural.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then the scarves. And then we design the overcoat, and the coat with a very, very high—

MIJA RIEDEL: I love that overcoat. Collar?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Collar, so in the winter you're covered [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Very elegant.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And it's long, so it covers the—[inaudible]—

MIJA RIEDEL: And a long seam down the back? Is that what I'm seeing here?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Now, this is still in front.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, that's the front as well, okay. With the collar up, I see.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. These are different—this is a raincoat; this is a coat. And then for summer, again, there's short-sleeved, crushed fabric or pleated fabric or whatever. Linen pants.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And boots, and shoes, with this quilting [inaudible], and slippers. That's it; in terms of shoes, [inaudible] that's in a velvet.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's it.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and then we start to do—we did this little booklet to introduce the concept. And again, we went through the history [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Such a lovely little book.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, the Renaissance is terrific, and the different ages of history. And then [inaudible] collection created with the—

MIJA RIEDEL: "Rigorous Discipline of Industrial Design, which aims at solving problems in the simplest, most rational way, manufacturing processes efficient, with fewer components, fewer phases, and fewer materials."

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes? Perfect.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That is the correct, that's the entire concept in one page, one paragraph. And here are the different models, and here is the reality.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: This is the jacket. These are the sweaters. This is a silk and wool suit, and this—and I see they are easy ways to wear.

MIJA RIEDEL: And people who are listening to this interview and want to see this can find it in your book. I think there's a—

[Cross talk.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Sometimes, some of these illustrations are in the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it *A to Z*?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —I think in the *A to Z*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I think so, too.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, I think, and some of these things—actually, this is a Russian designer, very famous today. And there are other designers, which were in our office. This is a famous German designer who was visiting us one day. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And you had him model.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: –-used as a model. This was a designer in the office. This was a Russian designer that was in the office, and now he's back to Russia and is one of the big protagonists of Russian design. And here is the [inaudible]. And then this is the—

MIJA RIEDEL: A little bit of color.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Red, and very simple colors. The raincoat.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] The raincoat, and every coat.

MIJA RIEDEL: So beautiful [inaudible], uh-huh [affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Fifty-four pieces?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, but this is what the—to make a jacket.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, 54 pieces.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It takes 44 pieces, you know, a regular jacket. It takes 10 pieces in our—so

you can see right there, that is design. [Inaudible] have to multiply. And again, two versions—and then one.

[Side conversation.]

And this is another one. This is another one. This is nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I think Lella had this on yesterday. [Inaudible.] And this is another one. So you can see, Lella was doing the woman's side, and I was doing the men's side. Here's another one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Here we see some of the pleated fabric. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And some more color. Purple there.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And actually, I think, yes, [inaudible], and this is the crushed velvet. More evening stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, were these sold?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then, yes, here's another [inaudible]. They are pleated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Excellent, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Very elegant.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The other kind of fabric—and this is business. Yes, we were selling, making it and selling it, in our office as well as at Barney's.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, was it Barney's?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, for a short time. And then it was too difficult. The problem is that we are designers, we're not manufacturers. We're not entrepreneurs. We are designers. So we had—when we were making these things, we also had to keep going with everything else. And we didn't have the right kind of people to follow up the business side either, really, the time to look for it, or the investment to make. And so when we closed the office, we closed that activity and that was it; for the last 10 years, we haven't been making them. We still wear them—[laughs]—and people still asking us all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are they?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes, but it's too complicated.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you produced them for five years, 10 years?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: We produced for five years, and it was fun. It was fun. We had a little showroom in the office. We had a production room. We were making them. It was a room about this size. And so it was a large room where we were making them.

MIJA RIEDEL: All the clothing was actually produced in the office?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, in the office, yes. We had a seamstress and cutters and so on, yes. And then we had a little showroom in the office with one room and mirrors, et cetera, and the racks with all the different styles and different fabrics. And one could choose the fabric and say, "I'd like to have this with that fabric [inaudible]." So we were making them. It was fun. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely and completely.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was a lot of fun, really, but as I said, it was time-consuming, and we didn't have the time to dedicate only to that thing. You can succeed in everything if you dedicate time to it, but I was happy enough to have proven once again that if you can design one thing, you can design another thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right, and you had gone from the Post Office to the clothing within a few years. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Same time, as a matter of fact.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really close, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then—and indeed, a discipline behind those things was the same.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting to me that when you started to design clothing, you didn't look at what was being produced currently?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or what even had happened in the past hundred years. You went back and looked at the entire historical context.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that's just pretty much what we do with everything when we design it. If we have to design a chair, we're not interested in seeing so much what the competition is doing. We're interested to understand what is [inaudible]. If we have to design a folding chair, what has been the development of folding chairs, historically? Think of it even today, these different directions are—but we don't take inspiration support from another existing design. That's not what we are—what we are supposed to do is to come up with something that has its own personality, its own solution. So it's an answer to a problem. [Inaudible.]

And so it was with the clothing, same thing. It was fun, but particularly, it was fun also to show the relationship between the clothing and the rest of our designs. Again, for all of our life, we have been preaching that design is one. And there was a perfect example, because people might understand things, but when it comes to clothing, they really didn't understand. And there's no doubt about [inaudible] everybody has points to that. It was a very good example of the meaning of our theories.

MIJA RIEDEL: So a little bit after the clothing, or maybe right about the same time, you began doing a lot of graphic work for the Guggenheim, is that right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And also in Milan?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The clothing was in the '90s, and so parallel to that was a lot of other work going on in every area: furniture, graphics, books, and so on. I don't remember exactly here now which project was going on at the time. All of them—[laughs]—[inaudible] was going on at the time, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: There was some work you did in Milan that won an award. For the Salon?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes, the Salon de Mobile. Yes, we did a whole corporate identity there, the [inaudible], the graphics, the promotional material. We designed all the promotional material, invented many of them. And then we designed signage for all of the compound and the exhibits—the big one. And we designed exhibits also, some exhibitions. So we were designing everything; books, catalogues, everything. It was a very complex—no, not complex; I would say comprehensive—program.

And then we got the Golden Compass Award, which I was quite happy about. [Laughs.] We already had one with the melamine dishes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. And those were early on, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, '64.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Those were with Heller?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Right, before I let him buy the business and—

[Cross talk.]

Yes. So in '64, and this was—what year? Ninety-seven?

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it that, sometime in the early '90s I have—it might have been '97. And then there was the project with the U.K. railway system. And then it was with the interior and the exterior?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. We did all the graphic—the identification, all the graphics, the logo, delivery of the train, and the timetables and posters and magazines, and printed matter of all kinds. And then Lella worked on all the interiors of the trains. So she would—and the first-class and tourist-class interiors. And that was a lot of work, going to England all the time. [Inaudible.] She still remembers very well from that period, and it was a tough one. That was a good client also; it was interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And also there was signage [that] went from the Guggenheim to the Guggenheim Bilbao.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Uh-huh [affirmative], yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the Houston museum?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, we did—first thing, we did the graphics and the signage for the Guggenheim over here in New York, and a magazine, which was quite nice, *Guggenheim Magazine*. And then we did—when Frank Gerhry did Bilbao, we did the signage for that one, too. That was a glamorous job; we were lucky always to get a glamorous job [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: And were you finding, in these later projects, that there were many similarities to what you had done from the start? Did you see that things had changed in your thinking?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, there was continuity, similarities, definite continuity, but somebody said, a friend of mine said, "Massimo has been doing the same thing for the last 50 years but always different." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that is true; I think it's the best compliment I ever got. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You must [have] known him; he's from San Francisco. He said that, and a nice fellow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Something you said yesterday that stuck in my mind was, "Inserting the uncommon into the common." It sounds very much along those lines.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and if you can find a way to do that consistently.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, but also, the discipline is the same throughout. It's just what changes is also the application, but the hand, the handwriting, is the same.

I guess it's the same in every profession. Writers—Tolstoy is Tolstoy, no matter where he writes. You take Hemingway, and he's Hemingway, no matter where he writes. It's his language; it's his form; it's his grammar; it's his syntaxes; it's his language, basically. And his handwriting is the same basically, and the same is for us.

And then the same—I understand that an artist has the desire of change, because painting is always painting, and he has no clients to bring in different issues. So he has to build up his own different issues to respond to it, and these issues are provided by the society, the events, and the politics [inaudible], the environment, and a dozen things. We don't have that problem because every problem is different, to begin with, in itself. And the solution stems from the problem itself.

So what you do, you apply your discipline to whatever happenstance. Again, happenstance, and

whatever context, and you just apply it; you just do it. So that is what establishes your continuity, but it's not the same. You can say it's an identifiable hand, but it's not the same throughout for every project. It might be sometimes there are some sameness between projects, but projects are in such different fields, it maybe doesn't matter [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] the similarities might be there, but the same is with a—when we design a stationery, we have two or three basic patterns, and some basic grids, so it depends on the grid you use, and the destination and the character of that particular company means one or the other or the other that is the most important for that use. But see, see how many concepts already [inaudible] here are all kind of [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Could a—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Writing one sentence, you'll get our summary of what [inaudible]. And then one could say, "Yes, but this stationery looks like the other one." You say, "No, basically because with there the context of that company is different from the other context." The typeface might be the handling of details, and [inaudible] position where it might be different or something. So there are similarities which are recognizable, but so is Mozart? So what? Do you trash it because it was recognizable? You don't trash Mozart for that reason.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've been, it seems, committed to Modernism from the very start, through many decades, through the whole arrival and arguable departure of Postmodernism and—[laughs].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Postmodernism was an aberration. It was really, you know, it came out of a moment of weakness of Modernism, you know. And it was—it was the bandwagon for all the people that were frustrated because they couldn't do anything good before. And all of a sudden, they found that the permissiveness was giving them their chance. The point is, they had no wings to fly, you know, and like Icarus, you know, they just melted, baking in the sun of times, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anything – is there anything that you feel anything strong or worthwhile that came out of that, Postmodernism?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The only thing that came out was the, I think, attention to history. It was an understanding that wasn't there before. But by the same token, the damages are much bigger. Because of attention to history, without a cultural support to [inaudible], it produces all those mongrels that you see—pastiche, pastiche, pastiche, you know, that you've seen a lot of, and it is beyond belief.

[Inaudible] have some interesting personalities, of course, like Michael Graves, which I think of that period certainly was the most brilliant voice, too. And along with that, you had legions of pastiche, people mixing cultural metaphors, and [inaudible]. That time is when architects discovered the issues of metaphors, allegories, and all those elements, and cultural appropriations and so on, all those typical issues brought in by Postmodernist approaches, and the issue of appropriation, for instance.

And so they [inaudible] providing that you supply enough creativity, then you could do it. One of the problems with Postmodernism is that they lack the discipline to understand the limit of things. For instance, what is appropriate? What is, how can I say—I just had a flash for a second in my mind. [Laughs.] But they just don't [inaudible] come back. They will come back to my memory to say that, what I wanted to say.

But Postmodernism, there is one great thing about Postmodernism. It's the fact that it's gone. [Laughs.] But that was, to me, its predicament. It had no wings, as I said, could not fly for a long time. It was a very short flight.

And confused on top of it by French influences, or deconstructivism, like [Jacques] Derrida and the desire of a lot of people of interpreting Derrida in an architectural-design way. There's no way. There's no way, when it has no relationship with a form of this kind, forms that usually are generated by contents and necessities. And he was—his talk is abstract, and he is intriguing, because he mainly relates to words and language in linguistics, where the games are interesting, but—

Oh, it comes to my mind, what I was saying: the problem with Postmodernism is that they never

had enough discipline to manage the notion of arbitrariness. And that is really where they fall flat on their nose. They became just arbitrary, therefore shallow. And to paraphrase a friend, Postmodernism, down deep, was very shallow. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Before we completely finish with your work, I wanted to address the New York City subway map and signage, because this is something that has been ongoing and something that's repeated in your career over decades. So in 2008, you—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, the first meeting was in 1970.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, the first map.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: When we started to work on the first map; it was published in '72, and it was published until '79, among great controversies by people [inaudible]. People thought it was a map. It's not a map. It's not a city map. It is a diagram.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But people wanted to find out what was up, upstairs, and upstairs has no relationship with what happens downstairs: downstairs, the subway; upstairs, the city.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Two different things. For the upstairs, we had maps, city maps, neighborhood maps; and for downstairs, we had diagrams. That is the function. It wasn't implemented correctly, and so that, of course, [inaudible] was feeding the controversy [inaudible]. So in '79, they discontinued that, also because they changed their whole system by [inaudible] the same color. Previously, every line had a color, with my map.

[END OF DISC.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [In progress.] In '79 they made trunk lines, sort of, so four, five, and six became green, et cetera—other lines became the same color. So what happens is that it was no longer usable, and so it was a good pretext for changing it, and that's what I did. I did a very ugly one, which has been going on ever since.

Because it was so ugly, people continually asked us, "Why don't you do an alternative?" and so on and so forth. So in 2008, we received a call from *Men's World* magazine, and they asked—they said that every year they do a limited edition of something, and they would love to—they had this idea, "How about a Vignelli map?" And I said, "Well, when we did it the first time, it was very, very labor intensive, because it was all done by hand." And so I was saying, "Well, it's too much work."

But Beatrice said, "We know now we can do it with a computer, and it's much easier, and much more accurate than ever it's been done before. Why don't we do this?" So I said, "Okay, fine." So we did it, the 2008 version of it. And it was done for a limited edition only. They did 500, and in three hours, they sold all of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow, and how was the 2008 version similar and different from the earlier one?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was completely different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Completely different?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, completely different, because of the trunk lines and the colors. So as I said, while in our map, the '72 map, four, five, and six, for instance, were three different colors, now four, five, and six were all green.

MIJA RIEDEL: So all the East Side, Upper East Side—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just to give an example.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The 2008 map was reflecting that new situation. So we did a completely new map reflecting the present situation. And that's what we did. And I was sitting there until transit authority came back, and then [inaudible] said the assignment of designing a website for

them, which has to use the diagram. So they said, "We want to use your diagram for 2008." And so we updated that. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It's fantastic that this has come back, full circle, from 40 years before.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And what we hope [is] that now they'll keep it all in—rather than stop it right there, we hope that we'll—

MIJA RIEDEL: Continue to develop.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Continue; we'll see.

MIJA RIEDEL: That must be extremely gratifying.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, it is. [Laughs.] It's the best revenge.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But it's not—I don't see it as revenge, as really—actually, what it turns out is that the new commissioner, the new head of the Transit Authority, he's a very brilliant guy who has spent several years in London, working at the subway there, at the Underground there, London Underground, and therefore, he learned a lot of things, and the advantage of having clear communication instead of a confusion of overlapping things.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's his name? Do you happen to recall?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: He is—

MIJA RIEDEL: We can add it later.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Just a second.

MIJA RIEDEL: It'll come.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, it will come in a second.

MIJA RIEDEL: What else—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] when any name is—

MIJA RIEDEL: What other projects are you working on currently?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Let's see if I can get—his name is Jay Walder.

MIJA RIEDEL: Walter?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Walder, with a D—like Walter, but with a D. Terrific guy, and he loves our design.

MIJA RIEDEL: Perfect.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: He put it up in his office. [Laughs.] So that is a pretty good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any other projects that are as exciting?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, that, and the branching from that will certainly be the most exciting line of projects for this year, and next year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then we have the usual kind of books, just the usual, books of all types. I'm planning to do a book on—years ago we did a series of books where—they were called *Splendors of Italy*, *France*, and *Spain*—and now I want to add other countries. The next one I want to do is the *Splendor of Germany*, because Germany has fabulous buildings, chateaux, and libraries. [Inaudible.] My gosh, I want to show you this [inaudible]. I can show you one or two, if I find it. If I find it, all right, that should be—when I have to look for a name, I panic.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] No rush.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: What's the name? [Pause.] I'd just like to show you—you can turn that off if you want. I'm doing books.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that the sequence is being—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: People think when you do a book—they think you do a cover. I couldn't be less interested in a cover to a certain—I'm interested in the inside, from the beginning to the end—from when you open the book to when you close it. That is really what interests me, not the cover [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of—I want to think of the way you were just talking about sequence and rhythm, and it makes me think of what you were talking about [with] music yesterday, composing as well as conducting. It feels very rhythmic—the creation of a book.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And again, these are the parameters of my interest in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has your working process changed over time? We were talking about the subway and how the first one was drawn, and then how there's the computer and it's much—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, the working process. Well, as I said yesterday, we divide the world and everything we've done since we existed, from BC to DC, before computer, I mean, BC to AC, before the computer and after the computer.

So before the computer, everything was manual. And because it was manual, you had to be as precise as you could in giving the instructions, and this is why I was drawing things in such a way that the copying was perfect. In size, the dimensions, everything was already on a grid, so that that would decrease the amount of mistakes they were going to make. If you have just a blank situation like this, and you put a picture here, you don't know how much is this, is this, and that and that. But if you have a grid, and you place a picture here, and you have a grid, you know exactly where that goes. It doesn't go here. It doesn't go there. It doesn't go here; it doesn't go any other place.

When I pass this to somebody, it's very difficult to get it right. That means you increase the possibility of mistakes tremendously. The more discipline you have into the drawing itself, the more you stick to it, the more everything else that follows thereafter is going to be more accurate. Then, when I would draw a picture, they will look—and that is the cropping, and is not this the cropping? So that is why it was so important to draw, and at that time, drawing was absolutely essential.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: My drawings were so accurate that people were taking them, putting them in the stat machine, and blowing them up, and followed that.

I also always had the habit of drawing the scale. That also helps, because people could measure things somehow and get an indication, pretty accurately. And that was a very, very good habit. Now, none of those things exist anymore with the computer, because the computer is completely different.

The other thing is that, at that time, everything was time-consuming. You had to place the type down. So you had to be very precise when you were specifying the type, because it was very—setting type was very expensive, very expensive, always. So you had to say what typeface it is, what type size it is, what is the leading, what is the composition of [inaudible], and if it's uppercase, lowercase, if it's underlined, whatever it is, all these things. Then it was coming back: you look and you will like it, or if, then, you want a change, you have to make all the changes, send them out, come back again. That's all costing even more, revision costs.

So the process was very expensive, time-consuming, as well as expensive. And it involved a lot of people, therefore increased the possibility of mistakes tremendously.

Now, when the computer came about, all these kind of operations were done directly by a designer over the computer. And he had complete control, through the keyboard, of all these things. So it was much easier to do it, to a certain extent, and much more accurate and precise. Not only that, but if he was a good typesetter, you could get, maybe, good [inaudible] perhaps, in the print-up for sure. But if he's a good type designer, a good graphic designer, it will give you good typography, so the kerning, between letters, the space between words, the space between

lines will be accurate from the beginning. You see, and that is all there is in typography. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Those little things. It's not made of major things; it's made of little things. And so the difference between before and after the computer is tremendous, tremendous in terms of the process, and also in creative terms as well. What the computer gave to a lot of people—a license to kill, because it provides the possibility of doing all these manipulations, and if you don't have the culture, the education, the discipline to use it properly, chances are that you will use it improperly. And by using it improperly, you just increase the visual pollution that is around, big enough. You keep increasing that.

Now, the good thing about that, however, is that today, there's a lot of schools of graphic design in this country; there are literally thousands, thousands of graphic designers coming out from school every year. So they're not all going to become superstars, but they might become decent workers, if you're lucky, because the jobs that were taken by the typesetters doesn't exist anymore. So some of them would go into this, designers that have a little more education than a typesetter ever had, in terms of design. We hope.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so that is how the world has been evolving and is going to evolve. And it's going to become, perhaps, better from that point of view, just like how the previous stage was better from the even previous stage, when everything was done by hand. Mostly people were illiterate, sign-painters, things like that.

This is why when you see pictures of New York in 1800, you see visual pollution all the way, bad signs everywhere. You go out today, it's a paradise by comparison. Every store has beautiful signs, because there has been tremendous progress from the old times.

And so, generally speaking, before the computer, the process of graphic design was very cumbersome, time-consuming, and not accurate enough. The biggest revolution that came with the computer was that it just transformed all this into a very accurate, very precise, and, if you're lucky, never in the history of type you could have—you could do better typography than today. But also it's true of the opposite, that never more than today you can do bad stuff. It's like a gun. It depends where you aim it. If you aim it in front, you're safe. If you aim it toward you, you die. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds as if the main—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And most of the people, they do it this way, with a computer.

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds as if the main change that you've experienced, then, is the ability to do more, more quickly, and more accurately.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, the good thing about it is I've always been an extremely fast designer. I was probably the fastest designer in the world [inaudible]; that's why we have done so much. I was very fast, going directly—*boom*—to the solution, not monkeying around too much, not having too many doubts, always having very determined and quick reactions to what it should be [inaudible]. It was a gift. Thank God. Now, that, along with the process that I was describing, the precision, the methodology of it, helped to achieve a lot of good things. Today, with the computer, that could be done even faster.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But part of—yes, it just eliminates too many steps.

Let's take a book, for instance. In the past, I would design every spread. Let's say this is a full page; this is a picture here, just to say, and then the next one is a big spread, and the next one, maybe, is a picture here and a picture there [inaudible]. Now, let's say I will design something like this. And then there will be captions too. So the caption has to be sent out for typesetting.

The picture has to be photostatted, you know, and scaled photostat in dimensions to be pasted up in here, on the layout, for position only. In the meantime, you will have a transparency, which you're going to put the dimensions on the side so that the engravers can take that, and

whatever the cropping, whatever it is, they can do that. And there are no changes thereafter. You get it? It is done. That's it.

So you had to do these, all these parts here. When you get all these pictures, photostats and so on and so forth, you pasted them—you pasted them, and you get a picture of what it looks like, but it was in black and white. You couldn't afford to have it in color, like you have seen here. Now, here today, what I just showed to you before—

MIJA RIEDEL: For the *Splendors of Germany* book?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. We just had the pictures, and the pictures, we got it on—not even on a disc—directly on the computer. But we got it on the disc, and from the disc it went to my computer, obviously. And then we had that on the computer; we're just selecting them and dropping them. I've done the layout; I did this before.

Then assistant dropped the pictures in position; designer will put those things into position properly and adjust the cropping or whatever I do to the proportion of the book, so on and so forth, and there it is. And you're seeing it in living color, as they say, and you can show it to the client as a finished thing, instead of just sketches.

So it's much faster. And the end result is perfect compared to what it was before—that it needed a lot of interpretation, from the client point of view, to understand what we were doing. Just [inaudible] understand, that's fine, because the client had to do a good homework of interpretation.

But by the same token, if we really see the whole thing, it was not what he interpreted or he didn't like—he had to do it all over, and it was a lot of work and very expensive, and you could lose money on that, for instance. So it was risky. Now today there is no risk. What they see is what they get. And that is a great advantage for that part of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you found any difference in your own working process or thought process—a computer versus a pencil—more happenstance or—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, because the pencil is still trained to the place where you—

[Sirens.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's wait maybe one minute.

[Audio break.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: For me, my computer is the pencil. I still draw everything. Three dimension or two dimension, I can show you sketches. And that is the way it works, but you're taking a younger generations; like [inaudible], she is an excellent designer. And she works directly with the computer. She keeps completely at base phase.

I say to do this; she will have a grid [makes knocking sound], and then she will have the material, the photographs. Let's say she decides to put this picture right here. So just—*whoosh*—drop it there. She decides to put this other picture right here, just over right there automatically. But at least she doesn't have to go through this phase, and then if she doesn't like it, she can change it. She can blow it up and down and so on, so forth.

So she can [inaudible]; she can change the type, put the type; doesn't like that type, try another one, it's fine. Instead in the past, you had to be sure about what typeface. Now, do I like the new situation better than the old one? I'm not so sure. I like the old one because it forces me to make decisions, for instance, about type—a decision that you'll not be able to change because it would be too expensive. Now today, instead, you make a decision, then you don't like it, you change it. Yes, there is an advantage when you do that. But you think less. You're less committed, in a sense. It's not the same intensity, in a sense, not the same—because you know that you can change it. How can I make an example?

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fairly clear.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: You don't have to perhaps mull it over to the same extent that you would have earlier, really—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —focus on it, because you can try it, let it—walk away, come back [in] half an hour, see what you think—or the next day.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And that's how it goes today. So there are advantages. But on the overall, it's the new way of working, and therefore it's what it is. And if you master that, if you have the discipline nevertheless—if you're less casual about it and if you have the discipline that we had before and you apply it to the new situation, then you're far ahead.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Because, again, you don't waste time. You're doing and redoing and trying alternatives you can use to—*whoosh,* bull's-eye every time—train yourself. Yes, exactly.

In the old times, you would train yourself to do that all the time. And what is happening today instead, you aim there and then if you don't like it, you try to change it, but it's not the same kind of discipline; it's not the same kind of concentration. When you train yourself to bull's-eye on everything you do, you reach control of the happenstance, instead of flying around with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: You reach control of the happenstance. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Then you hit that bull's-eye the first time.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Which I think, yes. It all goes back really to that discipline and happenstance —rigorousness and rigor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think of yourself and your work as part of a particular tradition, an international tradition, an Italian tradition, an American tradition?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I would say just international, not Italian, not American, not any other place. I learn from, as I said many times, from everywhere. I learn from the Swiss; I learn from the English; I learn from the Americans. And so that really I'm in debt to everyone.

[Side conversation.]

I learn about white space from Americans. And I learn about witty solutions from the English. Then I learn about typographic discipline from Swiss, then Germans.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry, what from the English?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Witty, wit, being the wit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, the wit. Humor.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Humor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then—

MIJA RIEDEL: And by white space you mean negative space?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then from the Swiss about typography, from the Germans about strength and depth and timelessness. And from the Americans I learned how to stay away from trendiness. [They laugh.] And so on. So really from everywhere; I learn less from the Japanese because I don't understand Oriental cultures. It's just too far—too remote for me, although I do like their sense of spareness that they have.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I would think.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Tremendously, I like the work of Tadao Ando. I have a book on Tadao Ando.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: That sense of materiality, too, that the Japanese have, I would think you would appreciate.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But I can hardly get excited about the glazing drippings over a teacup. [Laughs.] You really have to be Japanese to understand that, and drool about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think it's the happenstance.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it's one of these—it's a language. It's not that I don't recognize that it's there, but I can probably get along with a small percentage of their appreciation from things like that. And then I got 100 percent appreciation of the architectural solution of Tadao Ando; however, I find it extremely difficult to justify, according to our culture, but the end result is terrific. So, wow, you say. This is great stuff. But these, God, what he does would never be accepted by Western standards.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, he's just a typical Japanese; they're just of—how can I say this—stretching, or, I don't know. It's so different that I cannot even define it. [Laughs.] It's just, I'm different, and to me, it's extremely difficult to justify or to find the logic behind a lot of the Japanese design solutions, both in architecture or products.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting because there's such a spareness and an elegance that I would think it would be—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, in the classical—yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, in the classical architecture, yes. I love it. It's the Japanese cream, just to prove the contrary [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But I love it tremendously—have to have that thing repainted down there; somebody will kick it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And there's a beautiful one; it's 400 years old, by [inaudible], a real precious screen.

But otherwise, I certainly would define myself an international modernist, and international because [of] the influences in my education and because [of] the lack of belongingness to any specific one. Definitely there is an influence from the Italian Renaissance, in terms of enrichment of my sensibility. But there's just zero interest in the Italian design of today. Or Italian architecture today, with a few exceptions like Renzo Piano, who I think is a great one, great architect—but you have only one. Well, maybe this country's big; that's why it has so many more. There are many good architects here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any that you would cite as influences?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Over here in particular? Well, again—well, Frank Lloyd Wright to a certain extent, but not as a direct influence either.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I would say no; it's just a panorama of interesting personalities throughout. There are many. You take Steven Holl today; he's a very good one. Tom Phifer is good. Richard Meier, for heaven sake, my favorite. And to think of people like that, these are giants. Richard Meier certainly; he's a giant.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've done some work with him [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Louis Kahn, Louis Kahn. Look at Louis Kahn.

MIJA RIEDEL: You mentioned him, that's right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Great thing from [inaudible], too. It has been a great century for American architecture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there a community that's been important to your development as a designer, other than the people we've already mentioned?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: A community in a sense of—what sense of community? [Inaudible] group?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it seems to me we've almost addressed this in a roundabout way a few different times. I think the people you've collaborated with might be one community; I think very early on the people you studied with as another community; maybe the design community in New York, in Italy?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, well, I was very much involved in the diffusion, propaganda, and defense of design. So that's why I've been president of organizations, and this is why—AIGA.

When I became president of AIGA, it was just a local club in New York. But today—and I said, we have to change AIGA. We need to make AIGA our national professional organization, like AIA [American Institute of Architects] to a certain extent. I took that as a model, and so I started—during my presidency we started to go around to cities: Cleveland and Chicago, down to San Francisco, Los Angles, just campaigning to open local chapters, and which they did every time.

So we expanded AIGA from a little New York thing into a national organization with chapters here and there—Boston, et cetera. And so by the time I left my mandate, the next president took it and enlarged it even more, and then more and more, and everyone that followed made it even more.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were the president in the late '70s, is that right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Eighties—early '80s, I think. And that's what I did. Again, it's a very typical—I'd say a typical demonstration of my interest, to expand. Maybe I already said this—maniacal grandeur, probably, but that is what I thought it was very important at the time to do. And I was so happy that it happens, even too much today. It's a huge organization. It's a really huge organization beyond even imagination at that time, but for a hundred years before it had been just a small club, maybe less than a hundred, but—is that thing getting—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I think that's about it.

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Now, in parallel to—it's going?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In parallel to the AIG[A], or just following that presidency, I became president of the AGI, the Alliance Graphique Internationale, which is a super-club of superstars, as they say [inaudible] in the graphic design [world].

MIJA RIEDEL: And what year was that last one?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I've forgotten. It must have been around the '80s, again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was after '85, so it must have been, maybe, '86, '87, or '88. Something like that, '88, probably, I don't know. I forgot. Anyhow, even there we—what I did there, for instance, I gave an enlarged the scope of the annual conferences by having a day dedicated to the students, which was not there before—by start moving the interest about setting up [a] national archives for design. These are the kind of things that I was interested in doing. Again, the promotion of our profession, and giving depth to it—making it more professional and less clubbish, and giving the perception of being not artists, but professionals, in a sense like doctors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. That design was really a serious discipline, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. That is, and also to—again, or to [inaudible] that AIG[A] was mostly graphic design. It didn't have to be a fixed boundary. Again, I always say, if you can design graphic, you can design everything, to a certain extent, which is not completely true, because it's true in terms of discipline, but one has to keep in consideration, also, the personal attitudes that one individual has. Someone has an intuition for the third dimension, four dimensions, and some have only intuition for two dimensions, and they're strictly, strictly graphics. There is nothing wrong with that. They don't have to design clothing, cars, or furniture, interiors, or whatever. By the way, I designed also a car, one time. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. The car itself?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, but it's really difficult. It's very difficult.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, I didn't know that. Who was that for?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That was for Ghia [ph], a long time—was it Ghia [ph]? Yes, I think it was Ghia [ph]. I'm talking 60 years ago, 50 years ago, but again, there are things which are very specific and require specific knowledge. There are things instead that could be approached with a general knowledge about design, and that's fine. And again, if someone has a particular talent, they can develop better details than other ones,, so that is throughout. So design is an interesting profession because you could extend from a generalist to a specialist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Like everything else. However, the specialist could become very entropic, and the generalist, instead, could become very superficial. But with the proper attitude, the generalist can cover much more ground than the specialist, in a good way, too, so that's what we have tried to do in our life. And when we've been lucky, we succeed.

So, there was something else that I wanted to talk about. Do you have any questions?

MIJA RIEDEL: AIGA? Yes, I have a couple more questions, but I think I'll change the disc before we move on to those.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Okay, because also I think maybe it was something to talk about the early years. I don't remember if we talked enough about the early years.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can take a look and see if there's something we should revisit.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Massimo Vignelli in his New York City office on June 7, 2011, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number four.

We're going to go back and discuss again briefly your very early years in Italy that were so formative, from, say, 16 to 20 [years old], [in] which you said you were not just a sponge but a double sponge.

MR, VIGNELLI: [Laughs.] Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And at that time [inaudible], quote-unquote, apprenticeships were almost more significant [than] university for you.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, the school thing [inaudible] much; I gave much more to the school than the school gave to me, to a certain extent. And the reason is that I was already so prepared when I got to the first year of architecture, because I had all these years between 16 and 20 where I had been working as a draftsman in offices of the leading architects in Milan.

We already talked about Castiglione. Then I worked in the office of [Giulio] Minoletti. Minoletti at that time was designing the *Andrea Doria* interiors. So I had, as an assignment, to design the interiors of the third class and a swimming pool for the third class. And I invented that thing,

which then became a staple in every trans-Atlantic boat, that was to have that board that went across the pool. It's just like a pole, very narrow, so that people can hardly walk, and it's a very playful thing, which I probably saw in a movie, or something like that. And as I hop on, like a pole, something that you can hardly stand up. And it became just a stupid little thing —[laughs]—but it became a very successful device.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so it went across the pool, and people had to walk across it and they'd fall in.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes, yes, they'd fall in. But then I also designed the third-class furniture, and things like that. Then, as was the office of Minoletti—Minoletti was one of the first architects working on industrial design. He worked also on trains and boats and things like that. Anyhow, that's his work.

Then I worked in the office of [Giovanni] Pagani—Pagani with the I at the end. And he was working on the [inaudible] department store. So I'm drafting, just drafting there, but with spirit. And I worked in the office of another architect, which was called [Mario] Tevarotto. And again, anyone that is starting what's happening in Milan between the '50s, early on in '50, between '45 and '60, will come across these names. They were rather well-known names at the time, then they disappeared, because after all, they're not major stars.

Then I worked in the office of De Carlo, very influential, very, very influential mind. He was basically an anarchist, and in a good sense, not a bomb-thrower—[laughs]—but in a sense of freethinker. And a very passionate kind of an architect, and very engaged, socially engaged person.

With him, I worked with several projects. One was a boat again, a passenger ship. And again, there I worked on drafting, cabins and so on and so forth. And then also he was involved in other projects, housing and so on, and I worked on that as well, and that was very useful.

I was also working on an exhibition of the Triennale Milan that was dedicated to vernacular architecture. First time that anybody was [inaudible]; it was actually called *Spontaneous Architecture*. Then—

MIJA RIEDEL: And when was the exhibition again? Sorry.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Forty-eight or '49, something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that was an extremely seminal exhibit, because for the first time, modern architects [inaudible] were looking to vernacular architecture rather than just [inaudible]. And so that was amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was the exhibition? I'm sorry.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: At the Triennale in Milan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And that was, again, very important. It had a lot of impact on my formation.

So I've always been very much interested in the vernacular, in spontaneous architecture, modern vernacular. Here it's called vernacular, but [Robert] Venturi completely tainted that name—[laughs]—not Venturi, but Denise Scott Brown more than anything else. But the spontaneous architecture, I prefer to call it that way, architecture without architects. And architects, architecture—spontaneous, like as it came up through the center [inaudible], basically villages and so on and so forth, but with a precise morphology, from area to area, just like languages change and like dialects, and the relationship between architecture and dialects, even architecture and languages. And all that was extremely formative, you can imagine.

I was also very much interested in ethnography at the time. And really I still have that there. But on ethnography, classical books on ethnography, and just because of that interest of architecture and the natural context and the natural culture. And because of that also, extending that also beyond architecture to crafts and textiles. Again, you see? Expanding beyond architecture [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure. So Venini—the work with Venini made immediate sense.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, that—well, yes, and that came later. And that is not spontaneous. That's more, you know, design kind of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: But craft, very much particular to that place.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] more design related. Instead, the spontaneous architecture was really without—just by tradition, by culture, local cultures. And then I worked with—I told you—a lot with Gardella. And then I worked some time with Albini. And then I worked some time with Rogers's office, and you see, these were all the best.

MIJA RIEDEL: You worked with all of these architects?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: How is it possible for such a young man, at 16, 17, 18, to work with all these different architects? So you must have drawn—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Rumor spread around. Of course, I was very alive, very—as I said, a groupie is a groupie. [They laugh.] So I was very alive, and I knew how to think, and I had done work and was around. I read all the magazines for 20 years before and would spend time in the library recovering all the things I missed, so I knew every name, every architect, what they were doing, why they were doing it [inaudible].

So when I was working on this [inaudible], I wasn't just drafting. Then I would engage in conversation with the architect and maybe say, "Why are you doing this?" And then, "This reminds of"—with the detail that I've seen down by [inaudible] market [inaudible]. And I would tell the [inaudible]; just making an example, making it up. But that is still—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible] engagement, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I was extremely passionate and extremely informed. I wouldn't pretend to say knowledgeable, but I learned more than form, however, because I read everything that was available to read on at that time, and so this is why the rumors [were] spreading around the architects' offices.

When they need something, somebody to move, a [inaudible] or finish a competition or a project to finish, they were asking, like we do now, "You know anybody? I need someone to help; do you know any good guy?" And they would always say, "Call Massimo." And so [inaudible] rumor spread. Then they met me and started talking about [inaudible]—and not only in Italy. I was going also to Switzerland to work for a good architect named [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? I didn't know that. Who was that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] He was one of the masters of Modernism [inaudible], teaching it. And he—it's amazing when I tell these to Swiss architects. They open their eyes, "I can't believe it; you worked with [inaudible]." But again and again, more and more, and always rejected any offer from the bad architects' office; I wasn't interested. And I knew the [inaudible]. If your bad office would call me, I just say, "I can't come." [Inaudible.] They'd say [inaudible]; never work for bad people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Even as a young man, you had such strong [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Ambitions. That's what it is. I was extremely ambitious. I've been out on the top—[laughs]—and I'm not going to stop. That's what it taught me.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's true.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: If we want to put it that way, and really, I'm still ambitious; and therefore, very selective on how I use my time and who I was working with. [Inaudible] such an awareness. But, yes [inaudible].

And then when, as I was mentioning before, when I went to Bergamo to the CIM conference, and I met all the best architects from Europe, I was in heaven; I couldn't believe it. And just all of

them, the Swiss, the Germans, the Dutch, the English, the French. That was such an exposure, and of course, who were my pals.

Now, that's a new part. [Inaudible] other students of architecture; I had a few, much ahead of me—three, four, five years ahead of me—had all become the best Italian architects. People like Vittorio Gregotti, for his [inaudible], many others. [Inaudible], and we were always all together. I was the youngest in the group, not like now when we're the oldest always. [Laughs.]

For many years, I was the youngest, and then as a groupie, I was one of those kids, obnoxious as well. If there was a dinner among architects, I would sneak in. No money, naturally, but when it was the moment to pay, it was embarrassing because maybe I didn't have any money, so somebody was paying for me. And I remember one time I had a red tie, and [inaudible], the architect, says, "Okay, I'll care of it. But you know what? I like that red tie. Give it to me." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But [laughs] that was the guy. I was the kid. This is why I'm so tolerant, open, and amused by young people that have talent and do that. They are always—this is a constant; it's a constant. You always find some young students that aren't all [inaudible], and they want to be wherever you go. And they tell you they know everything about you, and they mention that, that, that, that. Oh, yes, and like the thing you did for—whoever, whatever. They know everything about you. And I say [inaudible] kids, they're great. The kids that have passion and they understand that is the way to come to the forefront, and the ship comes [inaudible], and that's the way it goes.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you look back on all of the different experiences, would you point to those early years as the most rewarding in your educational experiences?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Absolutely, absolutely. Very formative, and like at that time, like always, they had architectural lectures there all the time, and I wasn't missing any one of them. I was always there [inaudible]. And trying to make a point with a voice shaking, like those things are—typical of—as it happens all the time. Hold your—until the whole thing is over, and then you go to this and, "I have a question." And they always say, "Why didn't you ask before?" I say, "I didn't have the guts." [Laughs.] That's it. Then you have courage to overcome the crowd. But it's funny, it takes a long time before you master that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But it was great, and then in Venice, when I moved to Venice again, again I got elected on the student body, and they had a newspaper, and I took the newspaper, transform it completely. I have some copies that are over here. Some xeroxes actually, because I don't have the originals, but someone made copies, someone that had the original, and beautiful. And you know who was writing for me was De Carlo, Rogers, [inaudible]. These were the guys, the contributors to my journal. And get me another kid today that can match this kind of a scenario.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And I tell you, it seems easy; it seems granted then—we are where we are—but it takes that kind of drive from the beginning. It takes that kind of a commitment and passion. And who cares if I was bad in mathematics? I don't need it. I didn't need the degree. I was much more of an architect than anyone that was starting and getting degrees. Finally, I got my degree at [inaudible], from the same school.

MIJA RIEDEL: From which one?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: From Venice, from the—

MIJA RIEDEL: School of—University of Architecture, yes.

What do you think is the place of universities for designers today? Do you think it's—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I think university is important. The way I see it, really there are three levels. One level is the vocational level, and that's for someone, assistant for the work, soft design. And there is tremendous need, the draftsmen, the people, the assistants and so on, that help us,

incredibly important; it's very difficult to find. And the second level is a level of specific knowledge, but limited to the field. And the third one is a luministic background, which colors everything. So that is the role of the university. This is the role of the school of design, and this is the role of vocational school. Right now there is a lot of confusion about all this. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about teaching that you've done.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: They keep training everybody to be a superstar, and that's a big mistake, because this is a superstar culture. I think that a good worker is 1,000 times better than a lousy superstar. Instead, today people are trained to be largely superstars [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. You taught for 10 years or so, a summer course at Harvard Business?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] that was one of the episodes of my teaching life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, let's—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I was teaching in Italy before coming here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, uh-huh [affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And I was teaching [inaudible]. First I was teaching at an occupational school for graphic designers, and out of that came the best graphic designers in Italy still. The best graphic designers in Italy were my students at a vocational school, not the university.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that in Venice or Milan?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In Milan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was called the Humanitarian School, and then I went to teach in Venice at the university. It was a design—school of design, a university level there, and I only got one credible student out of that. Unfortunately, he died, but he was extremely good. Two—one is alive and one died, but the others, it was just nothing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Quick question: Were you teaching while you had your office there?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, uh-huh [affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then when I was in Chicago—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —that was before going back to Milan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And in Chicago I was teaching at the Institute of Design, and I was teaching corporate identity for two years.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was at IIT?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: In '69 and '70.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, '59 and '60.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay. All right, after the silversmith. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: After the silversmith. It was after. Then when I came back here, I was

teaching—I taught for a year at Columbia when I was with Unimark, from '67—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that graduate, undergraduate, design, architecture?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It was architecture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: School of architecture [inaudible]. But it was extremely difficult because of the kind of life I was living, traveling and all the Unimark engagement and worldwide. It was extremely difficult [inaudible]. But nevertheless, for a year I did it, and I helped my students. I am very happy. Then I taught for another year in Philadelphia in the art college in Philadelphia; nothing particularly interesting there.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were commuting down there from New York?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. I was coming back a couple of times a week or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And which school was it?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Art College of Philadelphia.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then what did I do? Then I lectured, every university you can imagine, every one, all the good ones around the United States, lecture, lecture, lecture, all of those years [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there particular content that was—I imagine, knowing you, there was [content] that was continuous through time: design is one, right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Design is one. Yes, basically showing that and explaining that the discipline of design was one, talking about the discipline of design, talking about, the [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Your experiences and—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and also the experiments.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, experiments. Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And sifting, sifting, and sifting, as I say. Keep sifting—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —until there is nothing left. [Laughs.] And things like that, and then eventually, I started to do the summer course in Harvard for 10 years, and then I've done one or two years of [inaudible], here and there [inaudible]. That kind of stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the Harvard course has been over a period of 10 years or so, right? It was a summer course?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it was a summer course.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was the same course year after year?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, basically.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay and was—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It wasn't too much of a thing. It was one week long and it was a series of lectures. So I will have hundreds and hundreds of slides, divided by subjects, and I would be talking about the subjects, basically, but with no direction of what—no workshop with the students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But then we started workshops, and we had two workshops in France, along with that, one in Milan, the Italians. And then—

MIJA RIEDEL: In France or [inaudible]?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Paris?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, in Provence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and what years were those?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The last two years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, the last two years, very recent.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then this year, I had the three-weeks workshop in Atlanta. And then next July, I have a workshop I do at [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, at [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's always been what I want to do and how [inaudible]. What I would like to do, I think, is to have this little school, as I was mentioning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that. How do envision that? What would you like to cover? What would the curriculum be?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, the curriculum would probably be the project of corporate identity, because that covers everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So that's one, again from the spoon to the city, covers just about every aspect, starting and giving a little workshop like that. And I have a little more time so that we can talk specifics about different elements, first going to all the elements and then do a workshop. First talk about logos and grids and type and sequence, all the elements in that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then give an assignment, and have this one to work on then and correct that [inaudible]. But really working to an assignment, not just more or less, really very strict, to get it until it's right, so that really is an experience, and then that's it, and maybe altogether, four weeks or something like that, not much more than that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Four weeks.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Maybe four, five, six weeks or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: One of the books—I can't remember; it's from *A to Z* or *Design is One*—one of them is the collection of essays that's a lot of what you've taught at the Harvard summer course. Is that right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That might be *A to Z*.

MIJA RIEDEL: *A to Z*, okay, and so would the content for this school you're envisioning, the curriculum, be similar to that?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Similar between that, also the [*Vignelli*] *Canon*; that has a lot of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The *Canon* is divided in two parts, intangible and tangible. So in the tangible, there are all kinds of issues not tangible in that context, so to speak [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: And people can find that online, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, well—

MIJA RIEDEL: There's another printed one.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: The first edition is online. The printed edition is a little different. It's more correct, less mistakes, and more editors, so the printed has a [inaudible]. The printed [inaudible] more entries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] And I cannot put it on, for copyright reason I cannot add it to the one online, through the publisher, has to defend himself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So there is this activity. On one side, learning when I was a young kid, and on the other side, almost teaching, or at least making propaganda. [They laugh.] [Inaudible.] Yes, but taking and giving, okay. Taking is the learning, and giving is the—and what we were doing to all those things, like the publications. And of course, in the meantime, I was extending the international connections.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So I knew all the best young architects, future architects or young architects, in different countries. I knew all the best designers, graphic designers, in every country, and so on and so forth. And that was always [a] very important connection.

The other thing funny is that, well, we were not that bad, and so while I was very happy of meeting people from other countries, people from other countries, they are equally happy to meet me. And because of that exchange—both ways. And so I was thinking that that guy was one of the best in his country, and they were thinking I was one of the best. This is how reputation comes about, is by hearsay, by exposure, by [inaudible] from your peers. That's [inaudible], which is amazing.

I've always been really amazed by the fact that success in our profession comes from the people that really should kill you. [They laugh.] But instead, it is your competitors and your colleagues that give you awards, and they spread the rumor around how good you are and things like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds as if the school that you are envisioning that might happen here would be a combination of the lectures that you've given over time and then hands-on workshops.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there would be the back and forth, again, the tension between the practical and the theoretical.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] very important, yes. And direct, not so abstract. And any recommendation with this, with that—are you familiar with the work of this; are you familiar—if they haven't gone through the age of curiosity, to stimulate that and suggest look at this, look at—now, I want you to read 10 years of that magazine, or 20 years of that magazine. I want you to tell me who you like and why; who are they? Who comes on as your favorite? What are the constants? Or how something developed? [Inaudible.]

Or just give an assignment like—like just give a report on newspaper design. Because this is what I go through when I have to do something; that's the way to do it. And we look for the others; we analyze until we find what has been missing. As I say all the time, if you can't find it, design it. So look—and if you can't find, then you know what is missing. Then you can design whatever it is [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: And would that be true when clients came to you as well? Certainly, when I look at your clothing design, I think, okay, that makes sense, but if the client comes with a particular need, is the research and the process similar?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, oh, yes, very much. Well, first, we will get as much information from the client about what the situation needs and what is the competition who he's facing; what is its position in the marketplace, and so on and so forth. We try to find out all these things directly from the client, rather than spending time and looking by yourself, which is just [inaudible]. You

want to know exactly who is on his way, on the client's way to achieving his goals.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And analyze why, and then you get an idea, and then you finally come up with a concept of how [inaudible] that company in the marketplace in a certain way, by design, and usually by more advanced design than the competition plans and [inaudible]. And build up the promotional apparatus or the propaganda machine—[they laugh]—that can support that position.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's funny. There is a little devil in all of us. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry, a little what?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Devils. [They laugh.] A propaganda machine, when you think of it, but it's important. It is [inaudible].

There are several ways. One way is the phony way; it's what the brand agencies usually use, and then there is the one which is more brilliant and relevant, which is related to design or more serious issues. We didn't do it for commercial purposes. We really do it to give leadership and dignity to our clients. And we help them to recreate those values, which have [inaudible]. They have it, and so the only problem is that [inaudible]. We help them to grab that and that is fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can imagine.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it's a lot of fun. Oh, it's a lot of fun. This is why our clients, they love us [inaudible]. This is why they listen to us.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've always, as you've said very clearly, been very specific about only choosing clients that you truly want to work with.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, don't waste time. A waste of time. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We haven't discussed Benetton.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And your work with Benetton in the '90s.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, Benetton is a very interesting story, because have you ever heard of Oliviero Toscani?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oliviero Toscani is an advertising man, and a terrific photographer, a fashion photographer, and I knew him since he was born basically, since he was three years old. He was a very good friend of my sister, and I designed a logo for his father's company that was a photo [inaudible] news reporters, photo reporters.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, photojournalists.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Photojournalists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And it was a very nice kind of logo. So many years went by, da, da, da, da, da, and I knew he was [inaudible]. Then he started to do a campaign for Benetton that was very, very controversial, to a certain extent. But it had some good aspects here and there. Then he was in charge of, at that time, of Benetton communication.

So they decided that they needed a new corporate identity, so he—I asked to do it. So Benetton, he convinced Benetton to hire us, basically. So I got hired by Benetton, and started to work on them. It was great. And I became very, very good friends with Luciano Benetton, the owner. Eventually, he would come every day to there when I was [inaudible], so almost working together in discussing it.

It was great fun, because [inaudible] that in a few years had [inaudible], so you can imagine he was a very interesting kind of person. As I say, we became very good friends.

Now, it turns out that Toscani campaigns all of a sudden got a very controversial kind of a twist. And I thought they were disturbing [inaudible]; everybody was disturbing. He was a very aggressive kind of person, too. I mean, very obnoxious [inaudible]. His photography was sensational, but his advertising was sick, mentally sick, really twisted, but appealing to a lot of people that are attracted by twisted things, but at the same time, rejected by normal people; they are offended by those issues. And so I start to be critical with that. And so we—we had a difficult time. In the meantime—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it racial? Was it pornographic? What was the problem?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Very hard to define. It was really playing against the collective sensitivity, or the collective standards of morals, and so on and so forth. Having a priest kissing a nun. I mean, no one would do things like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's stupid to do that. Or everything was priest and nun, I don't even remember now. It did [inaudible] the advertising, but it was really going overboard at one point. But Benetton had an incredible propaganda machine supporting that thinking as well. So you look even more—if anybody was saying good things, of course, it could be blown up. If everybody was saying it's a wrong thing, a bad thing, kept silent, so on and so forth. The propaganda machine was there to support Benetton [inaudible].

But I became critical about it, this kind of operation. And I told Benetton they were totally wrong to do that, period. It had nothing to do with what we were doing. We were doing corporate identity; we were doing identity projects [inaudible] for the companies. And these are—so I'm able to do propaganda. We were detached from that, but nevertheless, I told them it was a bad move for the company to go in that direction, and of course, we had a confrontation about that.

Then when I finished my project and I came back to New York. It went on for a while until Benetton finally realized that what I said was the right thing and fired him, that agency. And that was a [inaudible].

Now everybody was telling me, because Toscani was also close to Benetton, [inaudible] everybody was saying, because I was open with my criticism, they said, "Massimo, you will lose this battle; you will never win this battle." And I said, "I'm not here to win a battle. I'm doing my job, and that's it, and I go by my standards." And of course, I was very happy when it turned out that I was right and I won that battle. And Benetton fired him and kept me. So that was significant they didn't fire me and kept Toscani, the other way around. So at the end, people already had a great feeling of our work and my position of the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so on. And Toscani just was—vanished out of, went on his own. But instead, we continued our [inaudible]; that's it. And Toscani is a very creative person, there's no doubt. But he is sick. In his mind he is sick. I think something is not right in his mind. And nevertheless, he has an incredible amount of talent. If he will just photograph fashion, and that is what he is good about, he'll be fine. Probably a mistake that he thinks that he's also an advertising man, a designer, so on and so forth. And instead, when he comes to that he just doesn't have the foundation [inaudible], doesn't have the moral depth that is needed to be [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: So that is something that you would consider a clear example of vulgarity versus [inaudible].

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, yes. The other thing is that this vulgarity is not vulgarity in a common sense. It is averse in a sense it is almost like a social crime. It's like in something, standard values of our society. There are many ways of doing it probably, and I never liked when someone takes that position. I can't stand controversy for the sake of controversy, and building up a reputation on that. I think that one should make a contribution to society, not just insulting it. It doesn't move anything. Yes, it's just insulting. That's it. That's what it does, which is not my position.

MIJA RIEDEL: We talked about this yesterday, but there is a social commentary that runs through your work, which is in support of beauty and intellectual elegance. And that, to me, does feel like, in a quiet way, a kind of social commentary, or a social position anyway.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Well, it gives me a sense of the opposite to the glorification of greed and the glorification of vulgarities, the glorification of entertainment, the glorification of trendiness [inaudible], the glorification of anything that is shallow in our culture, but it might be —at the same time, the values of our—the shallowness might be glamorous and then pathetic, you see?

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative], right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then to me, it's important, it's always been important, to be able to make a difference by standing, to take a position. Designers always take a position, and with respect. Even the fact, refusing trendiness under any circumstance [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I think we've done a very thorough job on quite a few things here. I have some final questions, too.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You were mentioning about the first modern tea set.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, oh, yes, we haven't discussed that at all, and the silver work, because you just have done some new silver work. Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I'll show you some of the silvers that we have done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, the Postmodern tea set, when was that done? In the '70s, '80s? Oh, '84.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: '84.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Okay, well, there was, there is still, an Italian manufacturer. It's called Cleto Munari, and he commissioned at that time a whole group of Postmodern architects, like Hans Hollein from Vienna, Baxter [ph], and Michael Graves from here, and so on, to do silver pieces. And he commissioned us as well to do a tea set.

I was violently against, as you can imagine, against Postmodernism. And I said, "Okay, Postmodernism is playing a lot with the notion of metaphors. And okay, I will take that approach to condemn Postmodernism. And that's why—design that set, which has the Euclidian shapes, the sphere and the pyramid and the cube, and I show these shapes destroyed by these [inaudible] Postmodernism.

[Side conversation.]

And so that's what we did. And I designed that thing and that set showing this snake of Postmodernism destroying the purity of the Euclidian geometry. [They laugh.] And I was, of course, very, very amused by having used a vocabulary of Postmodernism, in a sense, to bring forward the issues of Modernism. So it was put in that kind of a tongue-in-cheek kind of game.

MIJA RIEDEL: You have such an interest in literature and literary metaphors. Are there particular critics—design critics, architecture critics, writers—that you have found particularly significant over time?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: All the good ones. [Laughs.] All the good ones.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there anybody in particular who's been—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] from Ernesto Rogers to Brunozetti at that time, and from Rykwert, Joseph Rykwert, to—you name it, all of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it especially significant when the architects are the designers themselves, right?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, always from architecture, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You see, architecture is really the only area of design that has a critical tradition. Design is so recent and so uncultured, in a sense, and is beginning perhaps now to have some critical historians, like [inaudible], in terms of graphic design, like Roger Remington, people like that, that are critics of graphic design, historians of graphic design. But it's a very young field in that area.

But architecture is [inaudible] has jillions of people like—I forget [inaudible] wait a second, architectural historian, went to [inaudible] as a matter of fact—Kenneth Frampton, very good friend. Part of my brain is really bad with names.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you've been pulling them out for two days straight.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Kenneth is a tremendous architecture historian, with great intuitions. And that is the kind of criticism that is missing yet in our field of design, in general. But if you read what they write about architecture, really you just learn as much that can be designed as well, can be transferred, [inaudible] understand and applied to other areas.

In Italy, again, another great writer was Argan, Giulio Carlo Argan, and he was really fundamental. He wrote one great book about the Bauhaus back in the '50s, a book that was [inaudible] in the Bauhaus. Very good essay about that time. And then you have all kind of things, like [Lewis] Mumford [inaudible], all the great writers and modernists. Mumford, [Sigfried] Giedion, [Nikolas] Pevsner, all writing about—Mumford writing about [inaudible], and Jane Jacobs writing about cities, and then Giedion writing about the process of industrialization. *Taking Command,* that's the title of the book, as a matter of fact, mechanization takes command, and then Pevsner's history of design. Oh, my God, there's plenty, and even before, in the '30s, a lot of great writers about architecture [inaudible] criticism.

See, the—it's funny. [Laughs.] Of course, there are no modernists. The last living modernist, as they say, because all these references are about books written, let's say, in the '30s and '40s and '50s, the first part of the last century.

In the second part of this century, you have a different kind of thing. You have like [Charles] Jencks. And the great ability of Jencks is making catalogues, making categories and making [inaudible] and putting really—dot, dot, dot—really diagram of how, when things lead to the other. He is a master of doing that. He does it very, very well, what is coming up in a certain year [inaudible], et cetera, et cetera, and I always love his ability of doing that. And of course, every time we met [inaudible]—[laughs]. And Joseph Rykwert is one—is probably my oldest friend, since the '50s, since early '50s. And we'll be friends all our life. He's probably one of the most important art historians, architecture historians today. So again, you see, it's also the company you keep, the friends that you spend the nights talking with, when you're young and even when you're old, but that is so important. And it all depends again—as I say, the most important fuel is passion. And if one has passion, all things fall into places, in the right place, because everything is connected, one way or another. And so you just weave all those connections to build up your own fabric. And that is the way things work.

MIJA RIEDEL: How do you think American design ranks on an international scale? And do you see it moving in any particular direction?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, when you look at this kind of American design, like Apple Macintosh or a lot of good products of that kind, then it's fine. Generally speaking, American design is tainted by commercialism and that is the label and this is the wraparound sometimes; also, it's very valid.

Now, let's look instead from a more serious point of view. If we look—for instance, let's look at furniture. Now, while the world was sleeping on Renaissance furniture, Knoll was already producing fabulous furniture, reediting all the great classics of Mies and Corbu, et cetera, and worked with [Isamu] Noguchi and worked with great designers and artists and architects. The first one to work really with architects on that scale.

Then prior to Knoll, you have Herman Miller working with George Nelson, and Nelson brought in Eames and Girard. Oh, Knoll had also [Harry] Bertoia, another great artist and genius.

First, we go back to the '50s. There hasn't been anything that is comparable. But because the times are different and the markets are—other countries picked up the leadership in that area; they stole the interest in the design. But this country has always been able not only to produce these designs, but also to make it available, to make it, to organize the distribution worldwide.

Knoll has never been a large company, but Steelcase has, and Steelcase has the Rolland chair that has been filling up the whole world, and the cabinets, very decent cabinets, and so has KI [Krueger Metal Products, Inc.], another company that has been dedicated to good design for the office.

The office is the major American environment; it's not residential. And as a matter of fact, the American design in architecture is the office building, the glass building, the glass tower, or whatever the piece. It's not a residential house. The residential houses have always been, yes, they have been there, and you've had examples, but it wasn't really any Modern movement. Even before, Wright was making the residential homes because he didn't like to make, basically, a large building [inaudible] more than just your [Johnson W]ax building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: But Modernism was office buildings, basically. And along with office building came the need to put furniture together along with that. And that is what America stood for, long before Europe. They didn't have the office buildings [laughs], and therefore, the need was only residential, basically. And most of them, the new furniture that came out of the war was residential because they had to rebuild homes, new houses [inaudible]. Everything has an effect. Over here, they didn't have destroyed homes, but also the people who had homes, they were not interested. They want to cheapen their house. They didn't want French decoration; they wanted Colonial; they wanted fake stuff. They wanted other kind of symbols because, again, the culture was weak from that point of view.

Now, only a few people were having Frank Lloyd Wright or modern buildings. Of course, they were—[inaudible]—and they had people like that, too—[inaudible]—very few. In Europe, because of the new construction after the war, the industry dedicated themselves to residential, much more than business, because business was not that great. [Laughs.] And because it is not a commercial country, anyone commercial is on a small scale; he doesn't have the grand view of the pie.

But America, of course, building up the empire. The empire, now is falling apart, but at that time was at least ascendant among them, flying on the wings of victory. Thereby it became the most natural consequence. And therefore, business, and therefore, skyscraper, and therefore, commercial materials—and anything that is related to business, rather than residential. And the precedents of the mega-corporation that had the fabulous offices designed by SOM [Skidmore, Owings & Merrill], and interiors by Florence Knoll. When they were going home, they were going back to Scarsdale Colonial houses. And that is where the culture gap becomes visible. You see?

[END OF DISC.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And now?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Now there is no more at that top, and there is no more of that bottom. There is a huge middle class. And the middle class, it's not aiming; it doesn't have the leadership of the super upper class. There are no more Astors and you name it, mega-industries, robber barons. [Inaudible] anymore, et cetera, of the turn of the other century. Now there is a huge middle class, which has not enough culture, not enough in general. Of course there are cultured people, thank God, but as a mass—is mediocre.

So what we have is a triumph of mediocrity, which, however, is slightly better than the nothingness that was there before the colonial, the French, and Spanish [inaudible], Mexican styles and so on and so forth. All those imitations and nothingness that fill up all the suburbia houses, the plastic, the Formica culture, in that sense. Now people have been traveling, and they refine their palates, their eyes, and their ears, and their customs. So they are much better, much, much better than it's ever been before, but by the same token, they're content of that level.

And that is where I say that is the limits of the—that the bourgeoisie became larger and larger and larger. The bottom fringe of workers is gone; the top fringe of the billionaires is gone; and that huge faction is content of all the things they're learned so far, the standard of living, and they spend their life in enjoyment of entertainment. [Laughs.] Entertainment is becoming the cultural force of this country, and that's what it is. It's probably a phase.

MIJA RIEDEL: How does that compare with other countries?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Oh, the entire world is following the American pattern. The American pattern is the dream of the world. When people live in houses which have no facilities, and they see the American heaven, this beautiful picture of the beautiful boulevards of suburbia, with the front lawn and the nice houses, each one, each family has, everybody wants to have that. The entire world is dreaming the American dream now. The whole thing. They don't know what they're losing [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you see anything particularly interesting in the new environmental designs? Some of the work going on in China, perhaps, or some of the things going on here? William McDonough, I'm thinking, and *Cradle to Cradle,* that sort of thing.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: You mean what is happening here?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, there's a lot of [inaudible]. It's incredible what's happening in China, of course. Because they've gone from nothing to their—-it's their moment; they're becoming the next empire.

MIJA RIEDEL: You see some interesting environmental—some green buildings going on—the green roofs, the recycled water—on a fairly large scale. There are limited examples of it, but interesting.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. I think that, gradually, the awareness that we are killing our planet is diffusing. And my hope is that—well, thank God, it will happen after my death. [Laughs.] But I hope they will do it before it's too late. There are plenty of books about this. It's frightening. I've read some, and it's pretty frightening to see what global warming is going to bring, and the consequences of that. It's a tragedy.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has the market for design changed in your lifetime? Have you seen any shift there?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, in the sense of diffusion, yes. When I was young, it was very little, nothing. The model was the American, as I said, the Knoll and Miller, when I was in my early 20s. But, well, the market has been extended tremendously in the last 50 years, just tremendously.

There was no market 50 years ago, basically. It was just beginning. And now it is—look at the amount of stores that there are now. You have the Crate & Barrels, you have the Design Within Reach, you have the, what do you call it, C2, you have the MUJI, you have—on and on and on. A lot of stores which were not there before, chains, and some are Japanese, some are American, and so on and so forth, and then there are all the major international brands now. All the Italians: Cassina, you name it [inaudible]—and all the brands, the Italian brands [inaudible]. Everybody's here now—Poltrona Frau, you know that one. You see it in that everybody is here. The Germans are here [inaudible], and you name it. Companies from all over the world are expanding in this market and bringing the offer, and everything is too expensive.

But go back to what I was saying before: the market [inaudible] is much bigger. The middle class is huge now. So there are many degrees of, let's say, possibilities—yes, I'll say acquisition possibilities there—so, buying power. There are many degrees of buying power within [inaudible]. And one has to just to aim to your niche.

And again, niche rather than mass market; the socialist utopia of a mass market is gone. The idealism with which I grew up, it's gone. Now, you have market niche—niches. And you have Vitra; you have this and that and that. Little niches everywhere, and that is the way it is. Is it bad? Is it good? It's neither one nor the other. It's the answer to the issue. It's the answer to the demand, the demand of this large [inaudible] of the bourgeoisie, or the middle class, let's say.

It's not even bourgeoisie; it's middle class. Bourgeoisie already has a connotation of the last century. But middle class is a very, very contemporary kind of thing. It's amazing that—well, in the past you had the top; you had a very little middle class; and you had a huge proletariat, let's say, a huge working class. Now the working class is like this, and the middle class is that, and the top part is like that. Now, the unfortunate thing is that this top part is governing the whole situation—commanding. And this is where the collapsing of the government comes into the picture, not collapsing, like in corrupted, not like in banana republics, but corruption—cultural corruption, in a sense, that—

[Side conversation.]

And so the—I was saying, corruption in the sense that everything is handled by the big money powers, and they want to keep their positions. And the money power is not necessarily only that little fissure here, but it's also this area, the top, in a sense. We are here, in a sort of speaking. And this is really the one; this is what the industry, the huge military industry is all about. This is what is conditioning the wars, the useless, totally useless wars, which are preventing the infrastructure from doing what they should do. Why we don't have railways? I mean, it's not—

MIJA RIEDEL: Why we don't have, sorry?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Railways.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes. Exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Can you imagine? This would provide a lot of work to us here.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has your work been received—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: I can see [inaudible]; I'm working on doing railroads.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know. I know, I've been on Amtrak a few times. They're working on some new cars.

How has your work been received over time, over the decades?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Always very well, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a high point, or do you see it's been fairly consistent throughout?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Consistent. Yes, consistent. There has been a peak, perhaps, in the '80s—from the '80s through the year [inaudible]. Definitely, I would say. Well, but I can say, from the day I landed in '65 with Unimark, from '65 to '71—Unimark years, boy, that was an incredible—those were the years that, if we are going to look from my professional point of view, that put us into the picture. Then we started in '72, it went up to—up to the year 2000. In the '80s, we were there and we went up. In the year 2000, when we closed the office, then, of course, that [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. A conscious decision to scale down.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it was a different thing, I would say, because a different scale of work, but we still had great, great projects and great clients, and very good-sized jobs, et cetera, et cetera, and fame—Jesus, it exploded in these years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly, just the resurfacing now of the whole New York City subway and projects, that's—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, that's another thing [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly, exactly.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Definitely, that is going to give another boost, but these are the years where we got all the recognition; that's when we entered into the life achievements award—[laughs]. The world's best, as I said, when you get that, you're out.

MIJA RIEDEL: A couple closing questions. Do you have any summary thoughts about the importance of design as a means of expression, what its strengths are, what its limitations are? And what in particular about it is important to you?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, the first thing: Design cannot change a society. That's the first limitation of design.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Did you think differently when you were young?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, of course. But I learned that, really, the real thing that changes society is the economy—politics and the economy—those things change the society, particularly economy, and the politics in the sense that they create the events, wars and whatever.

No, so design doesn't change society, but can make a fantastic contribution to our micro-environment. What [do] I mean by that? I mean that everything that's around us—on this table, in this house, in this room, in this house, in this world—okay, it has been designed by someone. Most of the time badly, but more and more, nicely. And to be surrounded by nice things is a very pleasant thing. Your life gets better. So I would say that what design can do, it can ameliorate, or increase the quality of life. That it certainly can do. It cannot change the society, but it can make the society feel better—[laughs]—if I can put it that way. [Inaudible.] And it is important to feel better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's true. It is.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And, as a matter of fact, it's important because when you ask, how do you feel today, it's much more important than "How are you today?" You'll never know how are you today. You can only know how you feel today. I feel good today. That's okay. And that is much better than knowing or not knowing if you are really good or not; you don't know. One has a [inaudible] disease and doesn't know. [Laughs.] But feeling good is terrific; it's very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you see your career in terms of specific episodes distinct, or do you see there's certainly a thread of continuity—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, definitely. Yes, I would say my growing years, the years when I was growing up, from 16 to 25, let's say, in those 10 years, more or less, then the American, first American period, from '57 to '60, then the Italian, the Milano period, '60 to— okay, let's put the dates here. That's what I'm doing. I'll say from—I was 16. It was '45. [Pause.] Forty-five to '57, when I got married. This is '57 to—30, then the Milano period is 31 to 34. Then the Unimark period, 34 to 41.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is your age?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, that goes to 41, and then up to '85, when we got the larger office—that is from, well, I'll just put the dates; it's even better. Let's do it again, this is 1945 to 1957. Then '57 to '60, '60 to '65, '65 to '71, '71 to '85, '85 to 2000, and then now, 2001 to today. So these are really the periods [inaudible]. So this is when I was growing up. This is the—

MIJA RIEDEL: So '45 to '57. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, this is when I came to the States the first time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fifty-seven to '60.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then back to Milano.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sixty to '65.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Then this is Unimark.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sixty-five to '71.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. And this is already Vignelli Associates, but this is the first phase with the—what we call the old office.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's '71 to '85.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Which is the big growth period. And then—and this is the big period [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Eighty-five to 2000.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, and it is in the new office. And this is no more office—[laughs]—and this is over here. So, I didn't tell you that, in 2001, I had a bout with cancer at the base of my tongue.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't know that.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And so that was a—it wasn't serious, but I had to go through radiations, which have affected the rest of my life. This is why I don't have to drink all the time. [Laughs.] And it was a—I think it was a psychosomatic reaction to the closing of my office, which, of course, I love so much, at that time. And particularly to lose the office for the greed of the

landlord made me furious. I'd wake up all night with horrible feelings and anti-Semitic feelings—[laughs]—which I don't have anymore, but all of a sudden, 500 years of anti-Semitism, European anti-Semitism, wake up [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Because I really hated that guy. [Laughs.] Well, that's why anti-Semitism came about, and that's one of those reasons.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, greed seems to know no limitations. It seems to find it in all cultures to be true.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, but [inaudible] they'll last for a long time around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MS. VIGNELLI: But at that moment, it really—well, of course, you're taking one individual and categoriz[ing] the whole thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It's always one guy that gives a bad image to the whole group.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And of course, history is full of—I was looking at Dickens last night, *Oliver Twist*, and the greedy guy is, again, the Jewish guy, so—it's an amazing—another example of anti-Semitism of 19th-century England. That is, well, that was Europe. Europe was anti-Semitic forever, for centuries. But also, for some reasons—you know that the landlords were, most of the times.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Greed and landlord seem to go hand in hand more often than, well, unfortunately more often then we'd like.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: And then, what happens is, usually people—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's tragic to lose such an exquisite space simply because—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, exactly. [Inaudible.] And also seeing it destroyed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That was really—so I got really sick. I'm convinced I was psychosomatically sick, and I got very little case of cancer, but [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Interesting on your tongue, your voice.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, but anyhow, this is the timeline.

Now, one question we were wondering about: you said it's going to be transcribed, corrected, and put online.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. We're talking about illustrations, perhaps, to accompany this oral history. And yes, is your archive at RIT digitized at all?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: No, I have it here. That would be here. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: It would be here.

MIJA RIEDEL: So I think we've covered pretty much everything we need to cover, and I know you need to leave fairly soon.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: That's okay. I still have a few minutes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. But I—perhaps we've—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So yes—

MIJA RIEDEL: —can finish up with the Vignelli Center at RIT, which is founded in 2008?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Well, I tell you, yes. I tell you why we decided to give our archive to RIT.

Now, the thing is that back in 1980, actually, 1979, Roger Remington came to my office along with the deans and asked, "What do you think should be the education over the next decade?" And I say, "Enough with the Froebelian games of the Bauhaus. Let's dedicate ourselves to history, theory and criticism. This is the time now to really recover the lost time." And they did it.

And a few months later, or a year later, Roger Remington organized the first international conference on history, theory, and criticism, graphic design. I was the keynote speaker. Then they kept going more and more, and they start to collect the archives of people like Lester Beall, like many, any other, like Vladislav Sutnar, Jacques Bertin, and so on, Cipe Pineles, you name it—many of the pioneers of modern graphic design. That was the only institution in the world that was doing that, and already collected all these interesting collections, not [a] great archive, but interesting collections. So when it came the moment to decide where we were going to leave our archive, I said, "Well, RIT is the right place, because of that approach."

So we started to talk with them, and we did a lot of projects [inaudible]. And every project was too expensive, so we had to scale down, scale down, scale down until finally, they found a way to build this building, that model you see over there, by attaching it to a construction that we were doing already. So it wasn't [inaudible] building anymore; it was an extension of a building, which is the School of Design. So it became feasible, possible. And that's what they did. So when it was done, finally, last year, we moved all our archives there and then stored it [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: So what exactly is there? Sketches, photographs, teaching notes?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Everything. Everything [inaudible] you've ever seen—

MIJA RIEDEL: Personal and professional correspondence?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Let me show you quickly. It won't take more than a few minutes.

[Side conversation.]

Okay, here is the building. And it says [inaudible]. That line is worth a lifetime. [Laughs.] It's incredible. So this is the archive building. This is the exhibition building. This is the beginning of an exhibit about our work; it's just the tip of the iceberg, and there are several [inaudible], and one is about public work, and the other one is about publishing, and the other one is about product design.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you design this interior?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes. Yes, designed everything here, and that is our cubes. There is not enough room, really, to photograph this, but it's also movable, flexible kind of exhibit, all modular and so on, and so everything is modular here. You have these cubes with samples. These are early books, very early books—Sansoni books I was mentioning yesterday. These are other books, et cetera, and this packaging, national parks, books, and the manuals for subways, and the products—silver, class, china, plastic, and so on and so forth [inaudible], watches, you name it. And then floor got furniture. So this is—

MIJA RIEDEL: Beautiful.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —pretty good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is this a permanent installation?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, almost. Yes. [Inaudible.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Poltrona chairs—

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: —half a museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Then there is a screen with slides of interior projects there, and furniture, and then in the next floor is where we do the master for history, theory, and criticism. There will be a master's degree in this room here. And this is the office of the director, Roger Remington. All the furniture is our furniture, naturally, as you can see [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Beautiful space.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible.] And then this is—look at the archive. There are 640 boxes, and it is full of printed matter, books and things, that, how do you call it, brochures and corporate identities, projects, everything. And there are two floors of this stuff. Look. You see? And there is furniture inside also [inaudible] storage. There are, you name it, all kind of things. There is also—

MIJA RIEDEL: And can—does one need an appointment, I imagine, to visit?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: [Inaudible] I suppose so. And then there are flat files, you know, with posters and drawings and all kind of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic. Fantastic.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Fantastic, and then there's [inaudible]. And that is the building. And this is the building—this is our building. This is what it's attached to. And this is the School of Design. This is also part of the School of Design. [Inaudible.] By virtue of attaching this to that, that made it possible. And I'm extremely lucky, but again, where there's a will, there's a way. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's right. Passion.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: So it is the first of its kind, and we're very happy to be the one. Okay. So now [inaudible] wrap it up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Final thought? Final question? Anything you'd love to do?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Anything I'd love to do? Well, just the school is the next thing that is intriguing my mind right now. Otherwise, the usual kind of projects that were done—more of the same is fine with me. Of course, I'm very excited by the development with the subway possibilities. We'll see what happens there.

MIJA RIEDEL: New York Transit, right.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, we'll see what happens. And then—that's about it, I guess. I have no idea, because I have no idea how long—how much life [is] ahead of me. And I have no idea how Lella's position, how Lella's disease, is going to develop. And I hope that that will not curtail all the rest of my life, but if that is the case, I have [inaudible] to do. So I lived a very exciting life and very rewarding and it's fine. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It's fun?

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Yes, it's fine, and it's fun. And the show can stop any time certainly. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you.

MASSIMO VIGNELLI: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]