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Interviewee: Zweig, Peter

Interview Date: October 24, 2013

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Interviewer: Jackson Fox

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Jackson Fox is a student leader of the Three Continents Program at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at University of Houston. As a student of Peter Zweig at the time of the interview, he asks his professor to describe the focus and goals of his career as an architect, researcher, and educator in Houston. This interview offers a unique perspective of Houston's relationship with the natural environment. As an architect, Zweig has worked professionally for over forty years. He has myriad awards and grants, eighty patents, and an impressive client list. Recently charged with directing the Three Continents Program at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, Zweig explains how he and his students are researching the effects of urbanized coastlines, focusing especially on Houston. From the politics to the pollution, his research is attempting to "capture a snapshot" of Houston in an era of transition. This interview also includes Zweig's own personal, optimistic reflections on the studio, the research, and the city.

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Professor Peter Zweig

Interviewed by: Jackson Fox
Date: October 24, 2013
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Houston, Texas

JF: Alright this is Jackson Fox interviewing architect professor Peter Zweig of the University of Houston on October 24, 2013. Let's begin. So if you could just start by telling me a little bit about your background in education as well as the profession of architecture?

PZ: Okay I was 24 years old when I got my architectural license. I was very young and I had an education where I did it very quickly, very unusual situation but I received two bachelors, a bachelor's of arts and bachelor's of architecture and a master of architecture all at the same time. It was at Syracuse University. It was quite a long time ago and I had the privilege of working with a lot of very famous architects that almost all passed away but people that I collaborated with over the years that people like Philip Johnson, _____ (1.09) Rudolph, Charles Moore, Walter Netsch, so there was many people like Jerry _____ in Italy, very interesting people that I did projects with professionally so my career has turned into doing a building, being an educator, I have 80 patents that I've worked on.

JF: Wow!

PZ: In terms of inventions. I started entrepreneurial businesses that I've built on 6 continents. These patents that have new building systems. I've worked for presidents of countries. I've worked for the King of Morocco. I'm very lucky for clients around the world. I don't know if that is what you are looking for.

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JF: Yeah, no that's all good. So enter U of H. What brought you here initially?

PZ: I was 24 years old and there was an oil and gas shortage in the world at the time and I was in New York City. I was born and raised in New York City and I thought I could teach. All the famous architects so Peter Eisenman and Richard Meyer and [REDACTED] they were all teaching and it was people that I admired and so I thought I would try teaching and I was 24 years old and there were only three colleges that would hire me at the time. And two of them asked for interviews for me. It was Pratt in New York City and it was 300 applicants for one job. Again it was this shortage and Texas A&M which I had never heard of. Being from New York City Texas was in my vision kind of John Wayne territory.

JF: Cactuses and tumbleweeds.

PZ: So with Pratt, they narrowed it down to five and I was one of the five but they couldn't commit and they said, "Okay we're going to do another round of interviews with the five of you." Being 24, I was up against some stiff competition." Texas A&M on the other hand sent me a check and they said, "What would you like to do?" They put me in charge of the graduate school at 24 and to me it was a very interesting time and I thought I had come for six months. I ended up meeting my future wife and her family is from Austin so U of H seemed like a logical place to go so that's how I ended up here.

JF: Great, awesome.

PZ: So my own personal story.

JF: Yes, alright so that brings us to the Three Continent Studio that we are doing today. So if you could just for a bit just describe your role within the project, where did this idea come from and why is it so important?

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PZ: Well it is very interesting. The dean— we have a new dean— and she had this idea to do three continents in three [redacted] and she thought we could relate it to water and she knew some people from around the world and she came to me and said, “Would you lead this project?” That was it; that was the charge. There was no further elaboration of the topic. So I spent the last year coordinating the concept. We have now been entered into the [redacted] (5.01) The Argentina and The Netherlands as the [redacted] and now we are working on the Venice Studio and we for myself I have worked with water before, I have worked with Houston before but never before on the scale of an entire city and with history and where we are going and [redacted] and what this project did I think opened my eyes as well as I think my students that many of the hidden secrets of Houston and it’s one of those topics that I think in America now we are focusing on jobs and growth and capitalism and entrepreneurialism and Houston fits the model but at what expense? And that became to me a very interesting question about these deltas around the world which represented a percent of population around the world and 60% of the GDP around the world and the economies around the world. So it’s got the wealth, it’s got the population and almost all the deltas are facing the same questions of industrialization. And the question is, “Can man survive these kinds of environments?” And what is the true worth? Where will people rise up? And can we live with nature? So I think the topic with me was so far reaching and so critical to take a step in this direction that personally I got very excited about this topic, the research and where it would lead.

JF: So if you could describe Houston’s current attitude towards the natural environment in a few words how would describe it?

PZ: Well I think in order to do that you have to step back in history and the Houston happenings because the Allen Brothers basically as developers painted a picture of Houston that

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didn't exist. This beautiful waterway and their concept was to move the port from Galveston which was thriving to this non-existent place you call Houston which we later called and even politically it was meant to say Port of Houston egotistically to "This is the capitol of Texas" at the time. So for me just looking back Houston was kind of based on a lie. A kind of marketing ploy if you will.

JF: True.

PZ: I think very quickly over time once Spindle Top happened and the hurricane happened in Galveston happened and Galveston destroyed that Houston actually became the center and everything moved from Galveston to Houston and essentially Buffalo Bayou and the turning basin and the shipping channel really became the center of the economy of Houston. At that time it was considered functional. It was considered just something useful for refineries and chemical plants and by the 70s Houston was declared the Buffalo Bayou was declared dead by the EPA because there were no birds, there was no fish. The EPA sued Houston and the industry backed off and they decided to clean up the water. So what you find is that it was basically a dumping ground and it died. In the last 40 years the water has come back and the people that I talked to and the researchers and when I asked, "Can I swim in the Bayou?" They said, "Yes you can. If you drink the water you will probably get a stomach intestinal flu but you won't die. In 1975 you probably would have died." So we continue to lose wet lands. We continue to lose the beauty of the bayou and why Houston is here as a natural system. But I think there is a movement to beautify the bayou in certain areas and we are thinking of it as biking and pedestrian and running but in reality it is what will keep Houston alive. It's the arteries and the veins of the area and the water sheds and the how the houses that works. So I think the paths of the under privileged needed is simply to help treat it over the bayou and their solution is to freeze

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it in time is to start improving is totally incorrect and those look like (10.15) kills the birds and the nitrogen and so I think our view of nature is changing but it's really the next generation that's going to have to take it a level that makes sense for greater Houston. I'm optimistic.

JF: Yeah we need optimism for sure. So would you say Houston is unique in this problem with the Bayou and the environmental zone?

PZ: No I think when we studied the deltas around the world they are all different. So in Buenos Aires as an example the sediment that is occurring in the center of the river water lines is actually increasing and it's filling in the water. In New Orleans their Mississippi delta the sediment is disappearing. So what you have is basically land. New Orleans will be surrounded with an island at some point. So each delta is different. The industrialization of each is different. In Buenos Aires is not as developed. They have not as industrialized yet. They have not poisoned the river ways, the delta but New Orleans has. They are similar to us and we are actually connected, pipelines and oil rigs and high ways. So we, you know we have poisoned the land as well as the air and happened both in Houston as New Orleans which is different that The Netherlands. Since the 1500s they used the idea of control and they have a philosophy that in defense that there is no option there is no retreat. That by law when the beaches erode they have to replace it every year. So the beach line has to stay exactly where it is and the dykes that protect the levies protect the country have created a situation where these in films these island of levies create land on the center have sunk as much as 21 feet so that they are below sea level so when they say there is no retreat they have no evacuation point. If a dyke breaks it could potentially put 21 million people at risk which is staggering.

JF: I did not know that.

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PZ: And The Netherlands is now beginning to figure out that they are perched at war so for the last 500, 600 years has been one path but they are in a dangerous territory. So to answer your question each delta is different, each condition is different and the level of growth is different but each are heading in the same direction.

JF: That's a good way to put it. So I think that both of us have found out that there is an immense amount of environmental research, especially around Houston with the EPA and the Texas Commission on Environmental Equality. How are you incorporating all of this research into the projects that we are doing now?

PZ: What I found that there is a real hidden secret in Houston and a lot of these things are just not published in a sense where the public has reacted. So we had a situation where a very passive citizens living in an environment which is producing carcinogens and other things that affect our public health but people are wanting to come for jobs and that the industry is not doing a very good job— to put it politically correct— they are not doing a good job at communicating what they are really doing to the environment and each act that occurs is met by “we're not sure” and it's a similar publicity to cigarettes you know where for 40 years they wouldn't admit that they produced cancer and all the reports and they find all the memos that they knew back in the 60s that they actually knew and I think this is the same or similar public relations that's going on in Houston and there is new things coming, uncalled, to Houston that are staggering in its implication. So I think when I introduced into the studio is to try to look at this with very clear eyes, with non-judgmental eyes and let's do research that reflect what's really happening not from the publicity end or from trying to incite riot. It's trying to take a very academic approach, but what it really proves the more we do the research is that each area has devastated effects on the citizens and I think the research simply verifies these kinds of thoughts and now it's up to the

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students to hold the manner and their careers and fight for something that is really for the betterment of man and keep Houston lively in a real way not just for jobs.

JF: You mentioned this kind of communication breakdown between the researchers doing the research and ultimately the information getting to the public it's not getting there and in Houston do you think this is because maybe there's such a large presence of energy companies, industrial companies that are you know around the ship channel? Do you think they have certain political control over how much information is released and when it is released?

PZ: No question. The EPA is the PQC, the Primarily Quality mission.

JF: Yeah the Texas Environmental...

PZ: You'll have to get the right name for it but they are set up by Texas to act as an intermediary between the industry and the EPA so when the EPA comes they can't report to the industry they have to go to this the Environmental Quality people and they have become a public, publicity machine that is bent on countering every argument, every [REDACTED] (17.12) is doing to kill business rather than support is, anti-government position where there should be no regulation and the industry has the ability to monitor itself and what you see is an industry basically unleashed in Houston that has no controls, no standards and as they are being put in standards the EPA suing Houston right now because the industry has underreported pollution by a factor of 6 and we are already the worst polluted city in the U.S. by all standards.

JF: What charts?

PZ: And everyone agrees but we may be much worse than we think. And this is what the EPA is trying to make it transparent but industry is not going there. The other thing that industry has done is if you look at a map of Houston you will notice that Harris County has certain areas that live in [REDACTED] and Houston is the largest city that has been eaten away by tax for tax

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purposes and expanded by 627 square miles which is incredibly larger than any city in the U.S. and it's based on the [REDACTED] but when you look at the city or Harris County as a city or Houston in particular you will notice that the city has these gray areas that are not incorporated and in certain places that have industry [REDACTED] right along the ship channel, Texas City, these very, very large areas which are actually refineries that area outside of the city of Houston which deems are not outside of Houston's jurisdiction and this is what is also one of the best kept secrets. And I think it's a real problem. They have not been incorporated or at least been willing to abide by Houston.

JF: If we could bring it back into the microscopic level of our studio again. What would you say, how would you describe the general atmosphere of the studio on a typical day? What would we do?

PZ: I think I'm very intense teaching wise. So there is a workshop mode that goes in the studio and what I found in something like this type of topic there is so much research that you have to do with designs are performance based that as a professor I try to teach that architecture is based on something as opposed to making it look pretty. So this idea of performance is that some [REDACTED] (20.16) and some will create architecture. But as we look at deltas and industrialization and exit pollution and question studio on a microscopic level it's how do you incorporate research things at a time? So even the idea of carbon sequestering in planted trees, do you off set the pollution and the carbon dioxide in the air to use oxygen? All these things that have to be incorporated take so much extra work as opposed to make just making it pretty that I think the studio is a great staging has to be very intense, you have to start at point A and my goal as a teacher is to get to point Z which knowing that this is going to be shown internationally helps me again and again in the bar of the studio. So in the daily basis on this micro scale I think

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for the students it's very challenging, it's intense, but I believe anytime you go through a very intense experience that you learn so much that at the end when you look back that people become very proud. It think on an intimate level at the moment there is a panic to produce knowing that there is so many things to incorporate that they make the challenge. But I appreciate it, I appreciate it, but I guess I'm looking at the long range portfolio development getting a job for the students, taking something into account which makes them a better citizen not just a better architect.

JF: Okay so you've kind of touched on seeing a substantial change in a student through this project and maybe take things more seriously, they look at their city differently maybe? Can you talk about that for a little bit?

PZ: Yeah I think when I talked before about the best kept secrets I think as the student begins to have their eyes opened and see reality and the research and what's really happening I think you go from that kind of teenage wide eyed "everything's a marvel and fun" and looking at the city through the metro area as almost 6 million people and this culture and there's game football and baseball and all the things that's making it vibrant there's also this under belly and I think by exposing to the students I'm hoping that a transformation that allows the students to look at the veil below the surface of what's really happening and then really bring out in the larger sense of what society should be. And I think this, I'm very optimistic about this next generation because having been brought up in tougher economic times even the real estate collapse in 2008 was all man made produced. It was all things that financial things investments that was based on banking systems that were fooling the public as to what was happening and I think the students potentially can change their view as much as the city and the country as much as we can go.

And I'm hoping that this is an education that in really in my mind will keep mankind going.

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This is a method of survival. But it's not just learning a profession or a trade but it's something much larger. That's my hope that architecture can take the position of bringing people together in a way that sees the truth of what's happening rather than the publicities of the marketing. It's very prevalent . (24.21)

JF: Great. Have you changed at all through this project?

PZ: In my career I've done many things that took this path but I think by trying to do an international exhibitions in a very short time I've taken research topics that are very global. It's actually made me unhook the veil of things that are happening in Houston and the more research or trainings it's actually transformed me as a professor. I've always believed that when I teach that you start down a path and part of the fun of teaching is not knowing when you end up that it's not a prescription. And when you do research and when you let things happen by performance I'm always surprised of the result that there's an explanation and so for me this has been transforming in a sense that it has not been just the language of architecture but it's the language of mankind.

JF: Now you've presented this work to a number of audiences both within Houston, within the country and internationally. People have a preconceived notion about Houston when you bring up Houston. Certain connotations of... well I don't know. Does the local reaction I guess differ from the international reaction? How are people responding to this work internationally as opposed to?

PZ: Internationally I have given two lectures. One was at the Viennale another was at a conference. When I was at a conference and the universal reaction you know when people talk about Houston the first image that comes up is NASA or the Astrodome and they always say, "Houston we have a problem." You know there are certain stereo type images when people

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thing of Texas they also go to John Wayne and tumble weed but they also think of politics in Texas there is an international image of George Bush eras. But I think the reaction when I present Houston and the size of Houston based on cars and population and how it has been organized historically. I think people are kind of shocked and when they see, they pretty much know the refineries and they know about the industry but they didn't know I think there is a knee jerk reaction at the shock about the amount of pollution the water pollution there. I think the reactions that I've had, the reactions that I've had diverse people is that Houston is a turning point that it's a representation of what's going to be happening in the world in how we industrialize and that Houston is a great laboratory for seeing what might happen next. So I think they...

JF: For better or for worse.

PZ: For better or for worse. But they try to join me for the optimism. But they are quite alarmed that the negative side of industrialization and how it's being swept under the carpet.

JF: Alright, okay so last question. So how does this work fit into the larger picture for Houston in the 21st century? The project that we are doing right now? How does this affect how Houston moves forward?

PZ: What I love in doing research if you can do something which is a real snap shot of your time period and I think it's historically important because it's documenting something which really existed at that time and you know for me at the 21st century we are kind of in the beginning of the century. But its incredible research that you're doing and the students (particularly you) it's really looking at Houston as it is and I think it's a marker for me is it's up to the public to where does it go to the future? For me I think the amount of carcinogens and the negatives and then we talked about the public understands that it's possible to reverse that. We

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can live with industry in a way that is beneficial to Earth that it's a partnership not a patented environment. To me that's the heart. And I think industry will come to a pull where they will understand that it's in their self-interest to not just look at a fossil fuel and how much money they can make per quarter. It's not . It's environmentally pro-active.

JF: Yeah there's a balance.

PZ: And so I think you have the citizens, the government and the industry that hopefully will bond and create a pathway that will clean and will find that sweet spot and that's my hope for the century. Again I'm optimistic.

JF: That's perfect! Thank you

End of interview.

