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Side A

INTERVIEW WITH JANE FLEMING AND BILL LEIGHTON

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PLANS FOR LIFE



When you decided to become an Architect - what were the things that persuaded you, and how clearly did you understand what was involved?

Well it was really by accident because I had as a youth and a child a grounding in the trades where my father built boats, and pearling luggers, and I had skilled training in all the trades, but I had some skill as a draftsman and I could draw, in fact I could draw and copy things so well, that a friend suggested - have you ever thought about being an Architect, and I said what's that. So it shows how much I knew of architecture at that time.

So he introduced me to the firm in Fremantle - ..Alan. & Nicholas was where I did my five years articles.

You grew up in Fremantle and your family had been in Fremantle for some time.

Yes, since 1856, when they came here. But my father had spent, he died when I was 12,(at 62)and he spent most of his life on the coast. My grandfather of course had been a convict gardener at the beginning. But being brought up in Fremantle of course I was very grounded in early colonial work with limestone walls and shingle roofs, and that was the type of house I was born and brought up in, you had to..... the doors in those days, in the earlier colonial houses, were only 6 ft tall as the early ones have got..... too. So all these things of course had a little influence on my thinking, and why you couldn't build better houses and different houses, and the limestone walls in the bedroom where I was always brought up in were always damp, so this is one of the things I don't believe in any longer - building houses with limestone walls.

Because of the porosity of it?

Yes it's always porous, we 'd be painting them with tar outside and so on, and they just don't stand up to the weather at all.
So I went onto do my five years articles with Alan & Nicholas and....

What sort of impact did that have for the family from their point of view, actually an undertaking like that?

Well it was rather hard because my father having under territorial houses we weren't very financial and my brother had gone to sea, he became a master mariner eventually, and my three sisters weren't much use as far as producing income was concerned, and so there was very little income for the family, so very fortunately the firm articted me instead of asking for a down payment of cash, they very kindly helped by paying me a small wage right throughout the five years - which I very much appreciated their help, and of course very early in the articles I had to - as the Architects Registration Act had just come into force21 realized that there were examinations to be studied for and faced up to, so I became - I joined a group in Perth with Bill Bennett - who was one of the prime leaders at that time, quite a group of Architects who all had the same problem of how to advance their studies, so we formed the architectural Students Association.

We used to meet upstairs in an old S.E.C. Sub-station in Murray Street and there we had our meetings. So we organized it very successfully I think, many lecturers, one in engineering from Saunders and Steel, I can't remember their names now. Lecturers in engineering, plumbing and all the various facets of the trade, a lecturer in design was Mr. A.R.L. Wright the Public

Works Department Principal Architect, but I'm afraid his knowledge of architecture was rather primitive, he's a funny little old man, he did a lot for the professions, he worked very hard in trying to do his best, so we finally approached the Architects Registration Exam, B. Bennett was the first to pass in his year, he was number one on the register, and about two years later I passed as number 6.

While you were doing this five year period and working as you were with the firm in Fremantle and having to come up to Perth for your courses and so on and for the things that the Association organized, how complicated did that make your life?

It was very strenuous and you had to really devote your whole life to architecture, and of course I have unfortunately much to my wife's horror, but I had to go to Perth to Technical school lectures every night on the train. In fact one night I was that tired that I fell asleep on the train going back and when I woke up it was going the other way, so I had fallen asleep and slept through to it was on the way back to Perth again, that's how tired you used to get. But it ^{really was} a lot of work for a few years, - you had to do it really.

You'd had a fair grounding before this too haven't you in skills that were useful to you?

I had a grounding on the because I didn't know that architecture one of the professions was not in sight then and as most of my early life was influenced by boats, boat building, boat sheds in the backyard and things I elected to study the trade so I had to at that time decide whether you wanted to do commercial or the trade, so I had a good ground in carpentring, blacksmithing, tinsmithing and all of those things which you had to qualify, and I was quite a good reasonable tradesman as well as being able to draw.

How exacting are the sorts of studies you did in that direction, you know what level of competence was expected in the students?

Oh, no particular - I think it went on for a couple of years, it was a couple of days a week we spent from out of Technical College in various trades at different time, and if you were keen enough you finished up fairly competent, they were very good instructors especially in carpentring and of course they also did geometrical drawing down there, as that was one of the parts necessary for the arts certificate, and I was so proficient at that, because I had already been doing architecture a couple of years before that, and I was a natural draftsman, I got 100% two years running. In fact the instructor used to let me take over the class when he was home with the flu and so on. That was in geometrical drawing, but that was only just because I had a very good flair for drafting, and I think I was a very good draftsman.

Do you think that the extra knowledge you had in sort of trade areas and all that experience has stood you in good stead when you were working on the site later?

Yes, I think so. Because you must be able to talk the same language when you go onto a building, the tradesman must accept you as a person who's at their level, who knows what they are doing, knows what they are talking about and in fact I had a discussion once with a plasters on Princess Margaret Hospital job that they were doing, and that was one of the trades I couldn't master and he wasn't doing right, and I said look I know how you do it but I can't do it, but I know how to do it. But there are a couple of trades like

plastering, bricklaying and things like that that I had never mastered, they take a lot of skill.

Do you ^{think} there is enough emphasis on the appreciation of all the different facets of the actual building that all Architects perhaps who are fully appreciative at the degree to which they should be conscious of these things, have a full understanding of them?

I don't think all of them, most of them but there are a few that think that architecture is an art and it is one of these things of drawing pretty pictures and - in fact I think a lot of girls who want to be Architects think it's one of these professions where it is all art and drawing, but when it comes to going onto building construction sites and pushing carpenters and bricklayers around and objecting to the way in which things are being done it becomes different. But I think it's hard to explain really because I think the working of a drawing for a building, it should be for a builder to be able to look at and see how to put everything together and this you must have a knowledge in construction, but of course that doesn't mean that you have to be able to do it, but it helps a lot if you have been trained in that direction.

Of course in the time that you've been involved in architecture, there has been a great number of changes in technique and technology, the thing has become more complexed and to some extent more specialized, does that make that more difficult?

Yes it is more difficult now to be the type of Architect that I thought was the standard of an Architect, today it is so much more specialized that it's quite - to me forgiveable for a person to be very specialized without the knowledge of the trades, and that's the way things have changed with introduction of so many things. Air-conditioning is one of those things that was unknown - I put the first air-conditioning insulation in Western Australia in the Picadilly Theatre, and those sort of things - there has been a lot of technical changes and I think where we've opposed the dismemberment of the profession in the past and said you know let some people train in this direction and others in that direction and not be a master of everything, but this was very strongly opposed for many years, but I think we must admit we are reaching a point now where this is inclined to make sense, because it is becoming too specialized.

Has it been an exciting time do you think to be involved with all the advances and changes in technique and so, and...?

I think it has been a lot more worrying time than exciting, because an Architects life today instead of being a very pleasant enjoyable profession than in fact it used to be, a gentleman's profession today-it is just a worry it's so technical, so many faults, so many mistakes, so many things that can go wrong that you live in terror all the time unless you've got a very big organization, a big office, and of course then the terror is spread and its not concentrated, but if you were a small practitioner on your own you live in fear all the time of the things that can go wrong, because the techniques even on ordinary building constructions the new techniques that have not been tried and tested can let you down.

Of course along with that too it's very much a barometer of the economic times isn't it, so that's another pressure on Architects?

Yes.

They - their fortunes fluctuate to some extent with the whole economy.

With an Architect.

Yes.

Yes well, it has always been an insecure life for an Architect because the depression - I remember the big great depression I don't think there was hardly a thing being built anywhere. In fact I was working in New Zealand at the time and things were still going there, and I left New Zealand and went back to Sydney where they gave me the golden handshake because everything in the big office that I worked in stopped, so I came back here. There was absolutely nothing, so I saved up my pennies and went back to New Zealand.

When you were first studying and working with that firm in Fremantle what sort of work were they mainly involved in, and what were the sorts of jobs that you learnt in the business end?

Small warehouses, small factories, I think there was Mills & Wares in South Fremantle, there were car barns for the Fremantle tramways, we built the north Fremantle big flour mill with the dingo on it, that was being built when I was quite a lot of domestic ordinary standard houses which of course were the standard house of that day, which everybody's trying to immitate now and we thought at the time that it was a load of rubbish, and we couldn't knock them over quickly enough.

What were the sorts of influences on the architecture that was taken place at the time, where did the ideas come from?

I think then the only influences I can see was studying the magazines and books we had on what was going on in Holland, Europe, and F.L. Wright I think was a bit later, really it was only keeping up with the magazines and what people were doing elsewhere, and that's the only influences - what flowed through the magazines. But as far as what actually went on there in those days, it was very little in fact the flushed door - the introduction of the flushed door in a house was the first really modern thing that happened.

And today of course it staggers me that they are all going back to panel doors, but the flushed door that was introduced to houses in Perth at the beginning - this was really modern, because it was dust free, it avoided a dust problem, but it surprises me to say that we are all going back to panel doors again now. But that was the first move into modernization in domestic architecture in Western Australia, in Perth, there was a great tendency on some of them like Eales & Cohen who used to repeat the half timbered gothic house, and you could always recognize even today a house that was built by Eales & Cohen then, because of the half timbered design, it was good quality work but....

That was largely because of individuals and their particular preference?

Yes, Eusten Cohen and Bill Bennett they used to do that type of thing, they left their mark on everything but it was always well built, but it was the style they..... really.

How much, do you remember ^{of the} individuals from that period who were the people say in the profession that were sort of the memorable ones at that time?

Well there was a student where I went, he started about 12 months after I qualified, but during the student period I was fascinated by some of them who were really fine gentlemen of the day, there was H. Eales, a portly old gentleman who used to play the organ at the Cathedral, he was a really qualified English Architect. Because a lot of our early Architects came here in the days they were not properly trained at all, they were promoted from carpenters and joiners. But there was a few that were properly qualified like; Coole, who did a lot of well known, very good Government buildings, and as I was mentioning before he always changed into his dinner suit every night regardless - always..... it used to fascinate me. Never an evening without a dinner suit and his monicle. Old Eusten Cohen, he was a fine man, again a man that wore a monicle, a fascinating gentleman, old H. Parry, he was a very, very fine one, there was some fine gentlemen in those days. The fact that - in danger of them doing work for someone else, and to danger them crossing over your field, they'd ring you and tell you, do you mind there's someone coming to see me, they want me to do the job. But today those ethics have gone I'm afraid.

You went away then quite soon, after you had qualified - and why was that?

I wanted to broaden my knowledge and experience, there was nothing much in Perth in 1927, 1926 they built the Ambassador's Cinema which I worked on for a while, but all I was doing was - doing working drawings of all the things that had been built, but had never been passed by Council. So I was drawing..... and putting them on paper.

So I went over to the Eastern States to broaden my knowledge and experience, others before me had changed, some of those before me that are in Allan Nicholas's office went to Singapore - one of those came back later, he used to be in Duncan Steel & he was in Allan & Nicholas's office, and some went to Singapore or a few went to the Eastern States.

What sort of things were you working on over there, and did they have much impact on what you did when you came back?

Yes, well I really, when I went over I was involved with the cinema business, and theatres, and I was working - I first tried to work with Henry White, he was the big theatre Architect in Sydney he had an enormous office, but I couldn't get in there, so I got into another firm Borrins, Tailor and Johnson, who were working on all states, theatres and cinemas and I must - they claimed that I had been a very excellent draftsman whatever else happened, so I was advanced in the firm on my ability of a draftsman, my knowledge of construction so I worked in Sydney first - always on cinemas and theatres - then I went to Melbourne, I worked in theatres there, back to Sydney and then there was - they had a commission to build the Civic theatre in Auckland, which was a huge 4,000 seater. So I was sent over to New Zealand as the local Manager and Supervisor of the construction of the Civic theatre in Auckland, it staggers me now that I was still only 25 I suppose, only a boy. Anyway that was very interesting too, and then the depression hit - the world depression hit and the big office in Sydney started to fold up due to financial problems so they asked me to fold up the office and send the money home and come back. So I went back and received the golden handshake with a gold pen which was stolen from me not long afterwards on the ship, and I had married - in Melbourne, and we then came back to Western Australia. I thought surely the hometown would be able to support me, but there wasn't a jolly thing being built. So I wasted time for some months and then I wrote to my friends in

New Zealand to James Fletcher it was, who died when he was a builder on the big civic Theatre that I had been on, and he knew me quite well, and I said what's doing over there, and he said come back here I can fix you up. So I went back, I did a lot of work for the Fletcher Construction Company for quite a while, while the depression was still raising here, I built a big freezing works and numbers of projects, and very interesting and of course in the end I got itchy feet - I could never stop in one place too long, so I started writing to Sydney again, and they said come back, so I went back into the cinema business again.

And I got sick of that because that looked to be, you know not getting anywhere design wise it was becoming a bit rubbishy, so I was employed as a senior draftsman with Budden and Mackie - who in Sydney, were then doing most of the government buildings, and I was with them a few years too, we did theAssociation and Administration Building, and the Water Board office building, now demolished, and a few others, and that was quite an experience until Lance Brisbane from Perth came over and asked me to dinner, and said what about coming back to Western Australia, so he was responsible for me coming back here.

When you got back what sort of work were you involved in?

Well, we were scratching away doing various types of things and I almost immediately ran into the cinema business again, which I was very glad that I'd left and one ^{man} name Cox, Baxter Cox, of course an Architect who helped the commission to build Picadilly Arcade, Theatre and Arcade for so seeing he knew nothing about cinemas, and I was the man for the job, so of course having done that all the other oppositions cinema people wanted their places re-built, so I went and did the lot I did Picadilly Theatre, I remodelled the Plaza Arcade, which has only just been re-modelled internally, re-modelled the Theatre Royal and built the Windsor in Nedlands, and the Cygnet in South Perth, and the Astor in Morley, and then the big Metro Theatre which was since demolished.

And a very interesting phenomenon though in both socially and from a building point of view, the growth of the cinema, across the world I suppose but in Australia it probably - some of the cinemas would be the only example for people who are very conscious of the style and the time?

Yes, yes well at that time, this is pre last war from about 1930's (late) really that was the thing that most building activity was going on, entertainment buildings, theatres and cinemas, and this - that was the most interesting, they were the most interesting building operations that were going on in Perth, it was all these jolly cinemas and theatres.

What were the things in terms of style that appealed to you at that time, the sort of influences on you and how much did they mirror what was actually happening in modern building elsewhere do you think..... cinemas?

Well cinema planning of course became my speciality in the actual detail planning and so on especially in legitimate theatres, but the treatment of the aesthetic appearance of them largely - I was largely influenced by Mackie, Budden and Mackie, where I worked in Sydney and he was a lecturer in architecture and design at the Sydney Technical College, and he was trying to develop his ideas - were what modern design should be and he sort of modernized all the facets in detail, and you can see this on the forsard,..... offices, and everything he did had this modern version of the classic moulds, and dentals and things and he's influenced me a lot, and I have always been very prone to decorating the public buildings, and the - artists and sculpturers had a try, and I was rather inclined to decorate everything also, and you can see this goes through - not in domestic

architecture but you can see this go through, most of things I have done, particularly all the cinemas that ran right through, even though in the Fremantle Port Authority Administration Building which I did personally again you can see the influence of decorating in trying to introduce the arts to make the appearance look beautiful.

Do you think it is important to some extent that some things from that period at least stay as a record of that change in society, as buildings are in a mirror of the sort of things that are important to people, and the sort of social change at the time?

It doesn't worry very much I'm not one of those who - I'm rather to say well that's all gone out to date let's pull it all down, I'm afraid I am not very with it things I don't like destroying are early historical things such as the Barracks Arch, it would be over my dead body if they pull that down, any of these things that are good specimens of history, some of the other architectural things - if they are a good quality in the time that they were built, yes, there an example of the type of thing that was being done but there's not a lot of it that's really well built in those days.

But they do mirror the times...?

Yes, some of them do, the mirror of the type of things that are being done but I got so sick of that type of thing that now I'm rather prejudice I say let's pull it all down, it was rubbish.

After the war you know, a bit of time after the war in the 1950's you were involved with the Building Advisory Committee in the drafting of the uniform building weren't you? What impact did that really have on Perth and on Western Australia?

Yes, well I was out of the army in 1945 and I went to work with the Public Works for twelve months at the kind graciousness of Mr. Clare, and shortly after I recommenced my - or again took a great difference in the activities of the Institute and found myself on the, well I became a member of the Chapter Council and then eventually became Chapter President in 1952, and while I was Chapter President efforts which had been going on for some time to try and tidy up the building situation, fruit. At this stage every local council authority had its own building by-laws, which was chaotic, there were 30 odd different lots of by-laws you had to work to, and as far as council regardless of Government Departments.

So we succeeded in getting the Government interested enough to agree - alright you can get to work and come up with a proposal - so we formed a committee this was through the Institute of Architects Office, Mr. Clare who is Principal Government Architect and myself representing the Architects and Mr. T. Sloane was the city building surveyor, and the three of us formed a basic committee. And we commenced drafting a uniform building code. The only place in Australia where this already existed was in Melbourne, at the time, and they had - they already got a uniform building code. So we had some good basis on which to set our sights. I think it took us about 8 years before we finally came to the situation where the by-laws draft - the first submission of the draft went to Parliament and they rejected it because we wanted some little things - a number of things, one was the distance of the house from it's side boundary, we required 5 ft, and Mr. Watson a member of Parliament said it should be 3ft, and anyway they were these silly things that were rejected. However we made certain changes and

re-submitted, and accepted by Parliament 12 months later or not long later afterwards, and became the uniform building by-laws as a standard basis of building code.

Later on, much later there had been pressures from various Government state Government Departments to get a uniformed code for fire, this introduced - this resulted in the formation of a committee called the A.M.U.B.C. Australian - I won't try it - who set about producing an Australian standard, and each state contributed to this committee in trying to form a basic Australian code. And of course its not practical and not desirable that that code should apply to every state, so it was used as a basis and each state was to make its own indeptation.

The changes were mostly in the domestic field to the code, and I think outside the domestic field most of the building code is Australian Standard, it's been now adopted in the Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria - never does agree with anybody else and they had gone their own sweet way to produce their own basis, but the A.M.U.B.C. Document is still the basis Austalian Standard Basis for Building Code.

We could name a few things, many things we don't agree with and we've beared them for instance flats have got to have concrete floors, but the Australian Code didn't require this to a certain fire ratings required, but this was one of the things that had been accepted here in building practice and we said..... some things we are going to keep, and that is you won't build flats unless they have got concrete floors and not wooden floors.