



WHITNEY R. SMITH, ARCHITECT FAIA PROFILE

I took the opportunity in the summer of 1992 to personally interview my new friend, Whitney R. Smith. The following is a capsulation of that interview revealing the broad experience of this noted architect.

Obie: What are some of the differences between when you were a student and a student today; and what do you think is good and bad about those differences?

Whit: Well, of course, there are lots of them. When I was at SC, in '29, we still had the Beaux-Arts system, and we had it for about two years. We were working on problems and sending them to New York for judgment. That finally changed right about '30, right after the stock market crash. It was during that five years that I was at SC. Generally the spirit of the school changed from doing just classical architecture and following the Beaux-Arts format of teaching and using teachers that were trained in the Beaux-Arts. All of us were taking two years of French because we were all supposed to go to France and study in the Beaux-Arts. The whole thing was kind of silly looking back. All of which suddenly became impossible when we hit the worst part of the depression.

So, the language got dropped and all of us got more interested in "modern" architecture. But it took quite a while. It took about five years before it happened because our teachers didn't know that Frank Lloyd Wright had just built five buildings in Los Angeles.

There were people like Shindler who had just arrived on the scene and Neutra and a fellow named Kem Webster who was the teacher I liked the best. When he left and went to Art Center, I followed him up there and that was in my fourth year. I got permission to leave SC and take my design work at Art Center and USC at the same time so I was right

at the midst of change between academy architecture and the modern movement.

Obie: Did you take life drawing all the way through, I mean all the years or just one year?

Whit: Well, no. That was just one year, then water color and sculpture and things like that. But the rest of it sounds just like it does now. Materials and specifications and so called working drawings and of course, history. There were at least two years of architectural history and we used Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. There is a beautiful satire on the subject *A History of Architecture on the Disparative Method* by Forrest Wilson.

And, of course, we finally kind of laughed at Fletcher because in the first place there were only about five pages on Oriental architecture. Well, in my opinion, if you're really going to have a history of world architecture about half of it should be Oriental and the other half should be European. And so we started making ground stick ink drawings, and all the different capitals and all that kind of stuff, big stretch water color paper and ground charcoal and stick ink and made all these things to start with. None of which has anything to do with anything today.

I don't know much about architectural education today, except for the few people I know, and the people who come and ask me what school they should go to. I knew when Cal Poly San Luis Obispo was doing so great, they had something like thirteen hundred students. I could recommend it because I knew some of the teachers that were there. I was a visiting lecturer there and I got to know a little about it. Right now, I don't know anything about architectural schools except I do know that every four or five years a new group of architect teachers come in and if they are post modern teachers that's what the graduates know and do when they get out of school. So it can change almost every five years, the style and approach and everything depending on who is teaching where and what.

When I went to school there were only two accredited schools in the state, Berkeley and USC. That was the only choice you had if wanted to go to an accredited school. Now of course there are more, and splinter schools have broken off and graduates from SC and others have formed their own schools. All I can judge is from the design that comes out and I don't feel that the present young architects are fired up like we were when we finally got through the apprenticeship.

Obie: I think of the Smith and Williams office building in Pasadena as a classic, maybe even the classic example of the Southern California architecture of its time. It was an outgrowth of the post and beam glass panel house. I've always thought of it as one of the best examples of the type. Do you think that's a fair appraisal?

Whit: The building was built for five different firms that were just starting up, just incubator small time, almost one person firms. We designed the building specifically for them. It was interesting, I don't know anybody else that's done that. We often worked together. Sometimes we would go in as a group. Trying to get a city hall job in Salinas,

we took all five guys with us to the interview. Some had written books; we had the books there: traffic, city planning, art, landscape or whatever they had written about. We said these are the guys that are actually going to work on the job, they're in our office and here are the books they have written. So we beat out Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for instance, doing our presentation. It was a really good idea, we called it Community Facilities Planners (CFP). We did over forty jobs doing that. Wayne Williams, my architectural partner for 27 years was the one who thought of the idea of a collaborative of five small offices, each with a different discipline. Smith and Williams, architecture; Eckbo, Dean and Williams, landscape architecture; John Kariotis, structural engineering; Simon Eisner, city planning; and Selje and Bond, interiors. For a while, it was a very interesting way to develop a sales pitch that was truly good. We could beat out the guys that had sound/motion picture presentations.

Obie: What about post World War II modern architecture?

Whit: There were quite a group of people trying to do their darnedest to do the best they could, and I think that was about '50, '54 or '58. To start out with it wasn't a very big group. When I first got licensed in '41, if you were really into modern architecture – it meant European International style, Bauhaus and like that. There were only about six architects that you could find. But following that from '46 and '50 on there were The Case Study Houses. I was involved in two Case Study Houses in which "Arts and Architecture" magazine had a strong impact on everybody. Everybody was reading it and everybody was trying to get their stuff published there. There is no such medium today that I know of which you can depend on to have a principle and policy about arts and architecture like it did.

Because of our exposure in "Arts and Architecture" Egardo Contini, Quincy Jones, and I were selected to do a cooperative housing project in Brentwood. That was really an unbelievable challenge where five hundred housewives would be the client and we would have all these meetings and interviews and committees on whether there should be a gas stove, or an electric stove, and all this kind of stuff. It's also unbelievable to realize that the Federal government was against mixed groups, meaning minorities and whites, saying they were opposed to it. In fact to get an FHA loan you had to sign saying that you weren't going to have any minorities in the group; now it's just the opposite.

The co-op housing, *Mutual Housing Association*, was considered a success from the standpoint that 100 homes and a nursery school were actually built even though the balance of the 500 homes never materialized due to some insurmountable problems. Those who are talking "affordable housing" these days might take a hard look at the few co-ops that were built in the 1947-49 era. However, in today's climate, it might be considered "un-American" as it does away with the developer's profits.

Obie: Didn't you work for Harwell Harris? Why don't you tell me a little bit about that?

Whit: Harwell had a small office and about a year before had done his first house which had become nationally famous because somebody had copied the floor plan of it and won

a competition with it. So, there was this big hubbub, how it wasn't fair, that Harwell should have won the competition because this guy had copied the floor plan that Harwell had used. Now it doesn't seem like it's a very unusual floor plan, they had placed a courtyard between the garage and the house. Architecturally it was all based on Frank Lloyd Wright's work.

Anyway, it was an interesting small office. I enjoyed it. My tenure there was very short. I would have to guess it was six to eight months. Harwell thought every job he had was the very last job he would do so he put everything into it. I enjoyed all that intensely. So I got to know him very well, of course, and his wife who ran the office.

Obie: Was the work primarily residential?

Whit: Mostly residential. I worked on Grandview Gardens, a restaurant in L.A. Chinatown.

Obie: Was there a lot of burn out on the part of the employees if he was pushing that kind of intensity?

Whit: I don't think that. Except he would assign you a project, and it was like working for a writer or somebody, you weren't sure every line you drew wasn't a wrong line. You worried about whether you were going to please him or not. He would come by at the end of the day and take your stuff home and he'd work on it and come back and say we ought to be doing this instead of that. But I was making a little bit of a living at home at nights by doing renderings for people. I did a lot of renderings.

Obie: What medium were your renderings, typically?

Whit: They happened to be charcoal pencil and water color combination. I got that from Kem Weber.

Obie: How do you mix those? The charcoal's going to dissolve in the water color.

Whit: That's part of the deal. These are charcoal pencils, not stick charcoal.

Obie: Are you charcoaling both before and after you put the washes of color on?

Whit: Sort of both. Well, what you do is you have different grades of pencil and then you have a board brush or some soft brush to make it look more like an etching line, maybe even slightly fuzzy or something like that. And then if you want to, you can fix it by doing water color over, and it's been pretty well set by brushing it in.

It doesn't dissolve the hard line sketches. So it turned out that a number of the guys that came from Germany and Holland like Kem Weber used that same medium.

Obie: How about Neutra? I remember he had some drawings that had some wonderfully fuzzy lines on them.

Whit: Well some of that was charcoal.

Obie: I always thought it was pastel. Maybe it was both.

Whit: Maybe both. Because I used pastel in conjunction with the water color and I still do. It takes a very gauzy air brush to make those smooth things, but you can brush in pastels and use it too.

I enjoyed renderings and I still do. Of course where I learned perspective was in the movie studios because we had to make drawings every day. Maybe one, maybe more than one, two, three or four. The better guys were fast, I wasn't very fast but you had to make these drawings and a lot of the time you had to make them in perspective depending on what angle lens the camera was going to use. You put on the sketch what angle lens was going to be used and you learned different things which architects don't normally learn about perspective when you change that lens. In addition to that, some of the guys knew how to project back from a perspective drawing into the working drawings.

At the time we had motion picture cameras that would go through the models. We could make the models and take the motion picture cameras through the things. People think that's fairly new, but we were doing it at that time. I'm just saying I learned a lot about perspective from the studios so I could do it easier and faster than a lot of people, and I enjoyed it.

Obie: You were and are friends with John Lautner. Tell me a little bit about how you and John met and a little bit about the early days you guys had together.

Whit: Well, let's see, who was John working for? He was working as a draftsman for architect Doug Honnold. There so few architects doing modern work that we all knew each other and could meet and all that. So, we knew John from his work and he landed in LA partly to do supervision on Frank Lloyd Wright's work. Of course, as you know, he studied with Wright in Taliesin West and East and maybe now is accepted as the most successful graduate from Wright's school. He's finally being recognized in a lot of published material. Where I got to know him best was when they assigned architects to work in San Diego on war housing, about '42 or '43. There were very few architects in San Diego, so the government was hiring and sending them to San Diego.. There was lots of war housing being built in San Diego for the aircraft workers from the Los Angeles area. John and I roomed together. It was very dull work; we hated the fact that it was even called war housing.

We finally got to do a shopping center in San Diego. The National Housing Agency prescribed Earl Giverson of San Diego and me as the associated architects for the project. I did all the architecture and architectural drawings for the shopping center. That was one

of the first shopping centers that had peripheral parking for deliveries and the rest of the parking inside for customers. It was out of scale and it was too large. It was almost all wood because at the time you couldn't use any metals due to the wartime restrictions. So that part of it was really fun, to work on the shopping center. It was built and published all over the place as being a new idea. So that's where I got to know John, and we've kept in touch all the time and been on a few forums together. He's finally now being recognized and he just took an exhibit of his work and a lecture to Vienna and Vancouver.

Obie: You've been in Sonoma for how long?

Whit: For years.

Obie: And you are doing a little bit of development right now?

Whit: Just my work remodeling houses I've purchased for investment or remodeling on buildings in South Pasadena that we own. I'm not doing it for a client. I think that would be very difficult. There are 29 architects in Sonoma and a few of those, maybe a third of those do not do anything in Sonoma. The style that's considered indigenous to Sonoma doesn't appeal to me at all. I basically don't think there are any, what I would call, good architects in Sonoma. What the newspapers publish is so poor it affects client appreciation.

About two weeks ago the Press Democrat had a thing about some designer or contractor who was following Greene and Greene's ideas of simplicity and use of materials, and doing this wonderful stuff and it had pictures of these houses.

Obie: Could you tell it wasn't a real Greene and Greene?

Whit: It didn't look like anything. I figure I may be one of only fifty or one hundred people that understood what a terrible mistake it was for the writer who wrote it and the guy who built it. What a terrible misuse of the example. So, I'd be very surprised that I could find a client that I could even talk to in Sonoma. I'm talking about the City of Sonoma.

Obie: Yes, I see that kind of thing happening a lot, at least up here. How does that happen? How can that happen? Is it that the newspaper's bottom line of accuracy and quality is so low that it allows writers to put together any kind of story that the most numb-minded individual might swallow?

Whit: Well, I guess that's about the best way. They, of course, have a connection with the LA Times and the New York Times.

Obie: Those are pretty decent newspapers.

Whit: But it's getting worse. They just reprint the stuff that appeals to the editor and the editor is already brainwashed into this format and also the advertisers. Ads that they publish about this great house that identifies with the Sonoma County area, the country house, and so forth...None of this makes any sense to me.

Obie: I think that the Press Democrat does a real disservice to the population of Sonoma County.

Whit: That's true. At a certain time, of which I have some of the copies, the Los Angeles Times had a great home magazine.

Obie: I remember that quite well.

Whit: When they had a good editor...

Obie: Dan McMasters?

Whit: Yes, and then one other person. The same way with Sunset, it depends on that person—they can just turn over things, none of this is telling me anything. And they educate, theoretically, all these people because not just the middle class, but the affluent people too, read the same thing and they believe it, because they buy the same thing.

Obie: They're probably among the most numb-minded.

Whit: Probably that's true. Well, we used to say that the poorest clients were the best clients and the richest were terrible and that was too bad because the poor guys didn't have (sic) to build anything and the rich guys didn't know how to judge it. Finally Lautner somehow caught on to that, some guys did. Certain architects did that nationally, they could get people with money. But even Wright for over ten years didn't have any work. Apparently Wright had two lives: before and after this big lapse in which he didn't do anything. I don't know what happens to the cycle. I don't know how you affect public taste, but the media has a heck of a lot to do with it.

Obie: Well, ignoring the town of Sonoma, what comments do you have about North Bay architecture, Sonoma County architecture?

Whit: Well, of course there are many good things, like some of the wineries. Most of it's done by San Francisco or outside architects.

Sea Ranch is in Sonoma County and I consider this some of the best. You can find them but you have to hunt. It reminds me of lots of people who come to Los Angeles and expect modern houses to be on every corner. Los Angeles isn't like that, you have to search and search and search.