

Benedicte Foo Interview

23 November 2017

Stephen Brooke – and like I said, as far as I understand from the University in fact, you just have to do one signature, rather than eight...

Benedicte Foo – So what's this all about then?

SB – This is the different aspects of the informed consent but then I asked someone at the university and they said the first signature can act as a kind of omnibus thing. If you want to sign every one of them that's fine ...

BF – Oh I see

SB – But the top one can cover each of the other ones. I just said well it's going to be kind of exhausting for people to sign ...

BF – It's sort of rather off-putting, isn't it?

SB – It's off-putting... I mean it is important in that it's about protecting people while they're being interviewed and there's a really good argument for it but it does get heavily bureaucratic.

BF – No its interesting because I saw a student just the other day and she's from China and she's going to do some research about open space and elderly well-being and she's going off to do her first sort of bit of fieldwork and I said how are you sort of organizing this? And she was a bit vague, and, cause she comes from there, I'll just go to the parks and talk to people, and I said well, I don't think you can do that...

SB – Not anymore, no. I mean. Time was you could do that ...

BF – Do you think you can give me a copy of this sometime?

SB – That's right, and what I will do is when I get home I will photocopy everything and send it to you with the transcript, depending on how long the transcript takes to get done, but I will send you copies of everything.

BF – Okay, yeah

SB – So the question was how I got interested in Matrix. I probably explained this a little in the email but, so I'm a political and cultural historian and the work that I had done before was on issues of feminism, sexual rights and the Left and that book and the project kind of ended up with the GLC in the 1980s and one of the things that I noticed in the archive, was sort of like, it's this mundane historical stuff, but it's this amazing archive of the women's committee where you could see not only the work of the women's committee but it had the applications of organizations applying for funding. And for a historian that's amazing because you've got this

two sided picture of grassroots organizations describing themselves, so I started doing that research about 5 years ago and this year I began to think about how I want to think about, how do I want to organize this material and the two organizations when I was thinking about how do I want to write about, so there's sort of this book about London and sort of radical politics and feminism and questions of space, the two organizations that really jumped out at my immediately was, one was the Dalston's Children's Centre, but I knew about Matrix through them because Matrix had been the architects for the Shacklewell Lane Baths and then I became really interested in Matrix and read *Making Space* which I really, it really sort of blew me away, because it's, I mean, I think a lot of what it argues is now common sense but in '84 to be arguing, well space is political in this way it's very political in terms of how we organize the interior of the buildings but also environmental space and how this affects people and that actually in the 90s and early 2000s became a really important argument in history and geography about this relations... So I just thought this is amazing pioneering work and I was very struck as well by resonances as well between the Dalston Children's Centre and Matrix about working practices, and, you know, collective working and all female workspaces, and I realize I'm a man in his 50s but this struck me as really interesting as well and so that's how I kind of came to Matrix. You know what I knew about it was very paper based and since I knew *Making Space*, I got what I could from the British Library, the various pamphlets and the one on daycare, on childcares, and the one encouraging women to go into architecture and ...

BF – Manual trades ...

SB – yeah I think it's called *Buildings for Women*, or making buildings... but I didn't really have any applications or I didn't really have much beyond that so that's why I got in touch with you this fall because it was a way of deepening my understanding of it and so yeah, that's how I became interested in it.

BF – It was very clever of you to find me... [Laughter]

SB – Yeah, it's that weird, creepy internet research now where you just have someone's name and you put it in there and you come...

BF – and then you find all this...?

SB – Well yeah, everybody leaves a ...

BF - ... a footprint...

SB – ... a footprint. And it's gone wrong sometimes. There was someone from the Dalston's Children Centre, and the name was Gilly Sharp – there is a Gilly Sharp that owns an extraordinary looking bed and breakfast in Ramsgate, really beautiful and interesting, and it's the

right profile... and this person is like, not at all, I have no idea what you're talking about ... But actually for the most part, it has actually kind of come back.

BF – That's interesting ...

SB – And what's been really great, people do seem to want to talk about it and reflect upon it, and Fran was mentioning, and again, I didn't know this, that there had been this conference in some ways based upon this exhibition at the AA about talking about women in architecture and the relationship of things like Matrix and the Women's Design service to that world. So my interest is in a very basic way, whatever you want to tell me about your involvement in Matrix. I'm interested in things like, what were your politics when you went into Matrix, and your relationship to feminism, or your relationship to, you know I understand the New Architecture Movement was very important and, but anything really. And like I said, I wanted to make clear that I would like to write something about these organizations but I don't really want to impose my analysis on it. I want to hear the testimony and then put it in context ...

BF – Except the way that you think about it is going to influence what's discussed and what you're told...

SB – Yeah, I mean that's going to happen but actually yeah, though I'm trying to get away from that. And I actually don't want to disavow that process of me being able to see organizations in a certain light, I do think at a certain stage in your historical career, you want to let go of that authority and just sort of present it outside of the box, rather than just... I don't know if that makes any sense but I would be interested in some ways in just writing it differently, if I can ... I may impose my authority on it...

BF – Yes ... isn't one of the issues, if you talk to say three of us – Jos, Fran, and Me - did you meet Anne?

SB – She's not available this week, I'm coming back in February and I'd like to meet her in February. And Julie Dwyer and god, sorry it's the end of a long week but there's another name that came up and I can't remember it right now. But coincidentally I don't know if you'd remember Helen Brown but I met, Helen was involved in the Dalston's Children's Centre and then became involved in Matrix, so there was a kind of ... there's people who, you, know, you need to tell me who I have to talk to...

BF – So don't you think we'll all have different pictures of it, and that's where you've got to sort of untangle it a bit...

SB – yeah, yeah

BF – Because I did get the impression that, I was not in London when Matrix finally folded, and the impression I got was that it wasn't terribly happy. There was a sort of, you'll probably need to talk to Anne about that, if she'd tell you ...

SB – yeah, I didn't... I think that the issue that I understand about that and people do have different versions of it and one was that it kind of, after the GLC was abolished and funding, public funding ...

BF – dried up...

SB – there had to be a different [life?]. And the other sense I got was that Matrix was interesting because it held together people who were interested in very different things around architecture which I think is something that I didn't really appreciate, whether it was – Jos seemed to be more interested in the kind of theory of feminist architecture, other people were more involved in on-site and that may have been something that kind of dissipated after a certain point. It is a very common story in organizations like that, that there is a, they have short lives. And I think one of the things that I am sort of interested in is the sort of emotional culture of collectives...

BF – Yup, yup... okay, there's plenty [inaudible]

SB – They're absolutely energizing but their exhausting too, and there's a moment where, one of the things I've been talking to people about at Matrix, and actually more about the childcare centre is how do you run a collective, how do you run a non-hierarchical workspace, and there are many virtues to it but it's exhausting. And so the meetings get longer and so that sort of thing becomes hard to sustain over a certain period. And certainly with other organizations, not necessarily with Matrix or the DCC, what I understand from the records that I've looked at is that the other thing has to do with 80s feminism – that this is a very diverse group of people, and then fissures and differences come up that are really hard to pull together after a while, as one can imagine...

BF – Yup...

SB – And that there are political differences that people go their separate ways. So yeah there are different stories...

BF – I mean it is quite interesting to see what happened in the Women's committee and what happened to Matrix. Different scale and different level of money and all that, and yet I think there were probably similar tensions, but they were more expressly political terms in the GLC, in a way you'd expect that. But yet there were similar kind of tensions I think in Matrix as well.

SB – On the ground...

SB – It's interesting what you say, I think, I don't think Jos was so involved in the design collective... she was more involved in the book...

SB – Yeah, yeah ... and publications and...

BF – At that time, I remember about the book, she got quite upset at one point and said oh people will just dismiss this as journalism because obviously to her, she really wanted to establish the kind of academic thing...

SB - ... intervention, yeah, yeah...

BF – and I think that in, working as a collective. I mean I'm very interested in that whole thing of how do you work differently? And actually partly in the end, after a couple of years, I just felt we were spending too much time on the... on trying to run this collective and not spending enough time on the work we produced.

SB – Yeah, yeah

BF – And that didn't seem ... I was quite keen that we produce good buildings. I'm sure the others were too but it's sort of like how much effort you then put into having endless meetings and how they're organized. Even things like, well we were very keen not to be split between people who were let's say professionals and admin, so we were really conscious about that. But somehow we got this admin worker at some point, who was so difficult, you know it was the sort of thing like, sometimes I can't remember what it was, but there would be a draft, you know how you write notes and drafts and I'd always was do it in red because, just so you'd see ..

SB – because that's what one does...

BF – and she was absolutely furious because it was like, she said, oh you're acting like a teacher, which was absolutely not my intention...

SB – Right, right

BF – I just said, well you can see it, if I did it in blue you couldn't see it quite so easily. But I think also, and you still see them today, the same tensions, who is more discriminated against ...

SB – Oh yeah, I work in academia, so yeah absolutely...

BF – And I was trying to think about what has changed since those days, and since I was coming to meet you I was thinking about the GLC a bit which I haven't for awhile. And that was a time when people were coming out and there was the whole lesbian and gay thing, which I think is maybe today similar to what's happening today with transgender...

SB – I think that's right, yeah ... and the same controversies and moral panics around those issues...

BF – Yeah, but I remember being in this completely, I thought it was crazy discussion about, is a black lesbian more discriminated against than a white lesbian, or white gay and it didn't ... I mean I could sort of see why people wanted to explore that but it didn't seem ... well I suppose personally I wasn't that, that wasn't something I would spend a lot of time on, and it just seemed slightly wrong, why do we look at who is more discriminated against...

SB – Right, right... I mean I think that that particular conversation about levels, degrees of oppression and about which groups, is right across the spectrum of the feminist movement and feminist organizations, which flourish under the GLC and the Women's Committee similarly have these arguments. And you probably remember there was a big controversy within the Women's Committee about it being institutionally racist. And, so, and there's a terrific book by a young female historian just about this argument about race, and about lesbianism and about how that, it's not unbridgeable but it becomes this frontier across which it gets hard to move and I think the issue there is absolutely about what, is it sisterhood, that is able to serve as this uniting force or not and it does seem with a lot of organizations that becomes a stumbling block. And on the second point about, you know just working methods; again you see that right across the GLC. As you might remember, one of its innovations was having these huge open meetings which were terrific in many ways because voices were heard that could not be heard but then putting that together as policy, you know there's an efficient end ...

BF – yup, yup

SB – You know and it was really [?] interesting how the GLC Women's Committee kind of ended up doing that, which was a series of statements in kind of binder that you, and it's a brilliant idea. You add in these statements from different groups but it is about efficiency and priority and you know, as a historian of socialism, there's this very famous statement from Nye Bevan, about 'socialism is this language of priorities' and that's a really difficult issue if you're trying to work in new ways or your trying to find a new language. I think it's a very common problem. And I joke about academia, but you're in academia too, that is, that's what happens in academia too. I always feel, we suddenly have this really weird déjà vu that we have discussed this, did we not discuss this five years ago and did we not come to an agreement about this...

BF – and it's endlessly open...

SB – Endlessly open, and inn that - maybe I shouldn't say this on tape but I love democracy, but necessarily when I'm in a departmental meeting because it's, you want a departmental Stalin to say this is... so I think that that's a really interesting tension ...

BF – Actually I've been thinking a bit about democracy too because last week I went to a lecture which was called, what was it called, something like 'how does architecture make democratic spaces'...

SB – a lot of ... [inaudible]

BF – I thought it was going to be more about architecture but actually the person giving it studies politics, he's from Princeton. And he gave us two lectures. The first was his take on architecture which I thought was a bit weak. And then the second bit, he was talking much more about spaces and architecture in a different sense, that is, like the internet and the structures of institutions for democracy. And I thought oh this is worth pursuing actually, particularly because he said, in politics, so he said democracy is like a process where you don't know the end, free democracy, so you can't tell when you start where it's going. And I thought well that's just like designing, and then I thought, actually it's probably like anything you do, like research, scientific research you don't really know where it's going but ...

SB – Yeah, that's a really great ... I mean, I want to go back to talking about space and politics but I think that's ... process has become really interesting to me, what I think I was sort of getting at, that I think as historians sometimes actually we approach it quite differently. It's like we know the context and analysis we want to think about and the process will serve that, whereas I actually at this point in my career want to think about it differently...

BF – Right ...

SB – ... what's the process, however messy the process is, that messiness is interesting and may lead me some place. But I think that, just on the point of the 80s, there are two things and you know, this is me kind of giving a context and wondering whether it's right ... that reading other stuff about politics in the 80s and the feminist movement, gay rights, ethnic minority rights .. one of the things that really struck me there that *Making Space* really nails is that there is a politics to space in the city and that even doing things like designing childcare centres, doing things like designing women's centres is a way of women claiming a place in the city and changing environments and so it is that thing of space and democracy and that's what really... when I first read *Making Space* there are historical works from the 90s and early 2000s who did talk about kind of the right to the city and how public space has changed but *Making Space* is about 20 years before that, saying the city is hostile to women, in terms of its space, we need to find ways of using design to kind of change that... I was really struck by the internal design of buildings but also just this idea of making the buildings warm and that kind of ...

BF – Psychologically...

SB – Psychologically... and I think it was Fran who in her piece was writing, well we want to start from feelings and how political that is. And actually how much it has become common sense in some architecture. So I think there is this really important point there. And the other thing - sorry I'm going on, I'm interviewing myself at this point ...

BF – That's okay, it's interesting ...

SB - The processing... again it was, so speaking as a political historian, the thing that I, and I don't know whether it's sort of simply the way a certain kind of male politics was done, but a lot of times it was very top down and very proceeding from an idea that then has to be implemented, whereas the sense that I get from both the Dalston's Children's Centre and Matrix, is that actually, no this is actually about living and working certain principles through, so we're going to see what it is to be a feminist collective or what it means, there's a kind of wonderful, I wouldn't say tentativeness to it, but...

BF – An openness...

SB – a kind of pragmatic, openness... I'm not sure if I'm saying it correctly but it is this kind of sense of 'we have these values, how do those values translate, whether it's into working practices or design.' Which I think is really, I mean it may be less exceptional now, but in the 80s it does seem to be to be quite exceptional to be able to do that and have the courage to do that. And it's quite painful at some points, because what happens is, what does it to be anti-racist on the ground, or anti-heterosexist... but anyway, that's a longwinded, I think that thing about process is so interesting in all sorts of different ways, in shifting the centrepiece of what you're doing in the workplace or design. Anyway... and I guess what I'm asking, is that what you thought at the time? That you were working in a new context?

BF – I think so... designing, you could say, well a lot of people then were talking about participation and when I was working in the GLC architects department I got involved in the first housing project that really, well that said, we have participation and it was going to knock down that whole area and typical thing, redevelop. And we actually had meetings there on site and as result of that we actually kept part of it, we didn't knock it all down, we kept something that actually could be rehabilitated...

SB – yeah, yeah

BF – and then we designed the rest, and you know, you can look back and say that was quite limited what we did, but that was kind of like the start ...

SB – This was consultation with clients, and involving them in ...

BF – Well we called it then participation, public participation, you know there was the Skeffington Report. But I think Matrix, when we were working with groups, we actually did it, well I was going to say more seriously, and I think it was more serious but I don't think we thought it was more serious. I suspect that we didn't have this overlay of bureaucracy and people telling us what had to be done when, so we actually did have these meetings and we worked with the user groups and the management committee so it was all much smaller, and it took time... but I think it was a different process...

SB – Were you, again it's something that has become more clear to me this week, there were people involved with projects, people involved with administration in Matrix, people involved with, like Jos with writing. Were you involved with the projects?

BF – Yes

SB – So were you involved with things like the Stockwell Health Centre and the Dalston, the Shacklewell Lane Baths, and Jagonari?

BF - My main one was actually [Suffolk?] Training Nursery which I did with Julia and it was a temporary thing which I'm pretty sure has now been demolished. So I really went there to, because it suddenly came live and they needed somebody...

SB – And what was that process like, in terms of what you remember about working on a project and that kind of consultation...?

BF – It was good, and it was, we had this management committee that we worked with and we did have sessions where we worked with them on how to read plans, which we also did with, there were slightly training bits of Matrix as well, where we would run workshops. So we do some of those workshops with this client group. And then we'd, it was quite funny, because the amount of effort that went into it considering that it was temporary, was quite good you know. And I think Matrix at that time, we always had two people on each project, two designers, and that was partly because we were really quiet conscious that most of us were not that experienced as architects...

SB – I guess generation would have been important... I mean you would have been in your late 20s at this time...?

BF – Yeah, late 20s, early 30s. But some people were younger, but also some people had not worked, actually it was a bit scary because I just realized I was the one with the most experience in a way. But yet in a completely different context, because you can imagine working for a very large architects department where for instance, you might, on different sorts of, I worked in housing until I worked in a women's building, but you know about that. But the housing things

were to be quite big so you might do a hundred houses, Like I'd done one about 16 was my first one on my own..

SB – Right ...

BF – But that was really different because you had the backup of all sorts of technical information. And this is an interesting, I don't know if it's too much detail...

SB – No, no. All the detail in the world is good.

BF – But for instance there's this issue of how do you design, and it's still an issue in architectural practice now. That actually the more you detail, let's say you detail a window and it leaks then you're liable, but if you say you're going to use say [?] windows and use their details, then if it's the window that leaks, and it's the window that leaks rather than the way it's built in, then it's down to them. So we'd always show, our drawings would always show where the window fits in the wall, near the outside, near the inside in the middle, or whatever, and how it works with the damp-proof [?]. But I think most of the others in Matrix were not, so that's what I used to draw, and then some of the others would say, but you haven't detailed the actually joinery, which was actually specifically something one would not do. So that's the sort of clash, the different ways of working. And I think there's still, even today I think most people actually wouldn't design the joinery now, that's all moved on, unless you're working for say a historic building or something...

SB – Well it's funny you mention that because one of my good friends in Toronto is an architect and he's sort of interested in this project, He was saying I don't know, what he designs, what he's involved in designing swimming pools, municipal swimming pools and he absolutely mentions the problem of leakage and who's liable for it, but it was exactly that point... because I was asking him about client participation and he said, well it's highly bureaucratized now ...

BF – Yup, yup

SB – They just sign off on a detail like that, this is the materials you're going to use, this is the possibility, the risk of ... but you sign off and it's exactly this question of liability... so ... yeah

BF – And it's also if you've got more institutionalized clients, like probably he would have doing a swimming pool, and I've been involved in a couple, but on the client side, on the client committees, and it's really interesting that people don't know what they're signing off ...

SB – Yeah ...

BF – And it's like, you have to keep saying, you do realize what this is ...

SB – Because this is a big issue... Do you think at that point that, thinking of the client involvement or the user involvement, one of the things I was struck by was the, when they were doing the design for Shacklewell Lane Baths, they built a model to show that the...

BF – they always built models actually...

SB – So that there was a kind of education on both sides these were groups usually – ethnic minority groups, women's groups etc, who were not used to the process but also you were pioneering a new way of trying actually to...

FB – Discuss it ...

SB – Discuss it you know, and cause it always struck me there's a resonance, or a parallel her with what the GLC is doing in terms of economic policy – popular planning, do you remember that from...?

BF – Yup, yup

SB – Like bring in neighbourhood groups to talk about... the problem with that is do we all have the same language and do we all understand... but it's this really interesting moment when there's an attempt to deconstruct authority, and say, well tell us what you want and we'll tell you if it's possible or not...

BF – But I think that's one of the problems, in all these choices, it's not either or, it's actually a whole raft of either ors and somebody has to decide which balance to go for cause there are all these different groups that want different things - and I'm thinking more in terms of planning issues, rather than a particular building, although it does occur in a particular building too. So it's like you can't have everything, and who actually decides then ... that's quite a problem.

SB – But again, and I think it's that difficult process of finding new ways to work and then there becomes the imperative of that this has to move to some sort of conclusion, I mean the buildings have a particular shape and...

BF – but you see I think what's happening these days is you do get this consultation and people go away into a black [?] and then out pops the answer, and they say we looked at all these things and you think, how did that come about?

SB – Can I back it up and ask what you're background was in feminism and architecture, and how you became involved with Matrix?

BF – I think, I wasn't so involved in the new architecture movement as the others, but I must, I find this quite hard when I think back on what happened, but I did know quite a number of that group and when they were setting up Matrix, very early days, we used to meet up and just

discuss things we'd read and they invited me along, so I went along. And then we, I can't quite remember the sequence but at one point we had a meeting to try and set up a group that could take on work if it wanted to ... if it was offered work, but at that point I think very few of us were architects, qualified architects and were the others students still? They were probably doing their professional practice experience. Anyway at that time I said I couldn't really get involved in a group, because I had a job, but I'd help out when I could. And then I think we formed a book group, so I was sort of not really so involved in Matrix except more on the side. I guess I got interested in politics and in, when I was a student. And actually that probably ... I mentioned compared to the others I was the one who most got involved in mainstream type things. So I sort of looked at, toyed with the idea of joining the Labour Party, and then thought, oh no, I don't think I can do this, and actually went more to the left. And then when I started work at the GLC I joined the union, which was extremely right-wing one, yeah, it was very right-wing... we got involved in a kind of pressure group to kind of [ginger?] it up more. So I was very involved in that sort of thing. And I was also involved in, well there was this rather genteel architecture class in the architecture department and I got involved in that, and then we started getting speakers who were more, less mainstream, not some big name architects like, for instance we got... do you know Walter Segal?

SB – I know the name, yeah

BF – He was a really interesting guy who, he had this timbre frame thing which was very much like anyone could do it, it was very simply joined and actually that was developed and used in Lewisham, there is a scheme which still exists, that people would built it themselves. I think I started doing this sort of thing when I was a student. I mean, some of us had even gone around to visit, gatecrash Walter Segal. We just sort of went along to his house one day and he said come in, come in. And was sort of a bit like, he was Austrian, small, quite tubby like the caricature of a dwarf and he was so open and nice you know. At that time they were living in this house, it was a temporary house, one of these [?] timbre frame things in the bottom garden while they were building the main house, and he just talked to us and told us about things. And he'd say, well you know, everything, windows cost a lot and he'd say well they don't have to, like you see these windows, and he'd go ... you see this window clatch, I mean it's just a suitcase latch, things like that. He had this incredible kind of joyful ease, I mean it's the sort of thing you can't do if you had a [inaudible] because they'd say thieves could get in or whatever. But at one point his wife came in and she'd say 'look, look Walter I've got to leave' – they were going off for the weekend or something – and she said, the meats in the fridge, but there are two, the one on the lower shelf is the one for the dogs ... it was so nice, and then because of these sort of connections you could invite home to come in and talk at the GLC. So I suppose, it's ... and I think through politics I got involved in feminism.

[38:25]

SB: Well actually, okay so I think that that's ... I mean in the 80s it's actually hard to find people who were Labour, mainstream Labour because I think, whether the legacy of '68, if you're a feminist, you're very suspicious of the Labour Party, quite rightly ...

BF – Yup

SB – And I think there's also that ambivalent view of what the state is, you know, whether you work with the state, whether you work inside... and there's this, you probably know, great book by, I think it's Claudia Cockburn, but I keep saying Cynthia Cockburn, *In and Against the State*...

BF – Yup

SB – and then Sheila Rowbotham and people like that are, you know it's a very interesting political milieu at that time, of a lot of people who are not of the Labour Party who become involved in the GLC. And the GLC is this sort of one-off Labour thing in a way...

BF – But that worry about being part of the state or not is still her, still there isn't it...

SB – I think yeah, it's a legitimate concern. Well and again this is where I would offer an analysis – the amazing thing about the GLC was it was a kind of living attempt to decentralize power and decentralize power through this very mundane mechanism of giving money to local groups, that was a way of transferring power from the state, through ratepayers, to groups. And a relatively cheap way of doing that when you think about how big these grants were, they're not very big; it was very much about giving ordinary people some control...

BF – Some say...

[41:00]

SB – And I think that's really a legacy of the new left in the 60s and 70s but not necessarily a Labour new left, sometimes and new ... but yeah, so I think it's a very interesting moment and that's still a problem, even more of a problem today ...

BF – Yup

SB – You think about the Grenfell Tower tragedy – this is what happens when you have no democratic accountability and things are centralized or privatized and there's no ability to address these issues or having any governance ... Did you ...

BF – I mean I think there's more, there's another layer to that, or maybe it's the same thing, that you just give over power to people who are making money out of it and so that's what [?]

SB – That's a great point, that the decentralization is actually privatization, yeah.

BF – And that was very much a thing of Thatcher, who was so against Livingston, and really I think she closed the GLC down because she couldn't stand to...

SB – Yeah, yeah. It's a, that funny thing, it's a literal poke in the eye for her because it's right across the river in County Hall. But you know, thinking about that point you were making when you were talking about space and democracy, things like the [?] docklands, very dangerous precedent that is set that what had been public space had become private spaces and are not subject to the same laws, and that's something that becomes very interesting in terms of even street photography – what you can take pictures of...

BF – Yup

SB – Or who can actually go into Canary... you know I think that's a really, again, you're right its decentralization but it's also shifting it to a private commons rather than a public commons. Just asking about feminism, did you become a feminist through Matrix, or before?

BF – No I think before, before.

SB – Was that an experience through your profession? I mean, did...

BF – No, no, I think it was through being a student, being an undergraduate.

SB – And where were you an undergraduate?

BF – At Cambridge. And it was sort of like, quite a hotbed. I guess you know, '68, that sort of period. Trying to think who used to come and talk. People would organize meetings and we'd get... do you remember Shulamith Firestone?

[43:50]

SB – Shulamith Firestone, who wrote the, I can't remember what year it was, about 1970, like the attack upon reproduction ...

BF – Yeah, and well, I can't remember if Germaine Greer came or not. Anyway, there were a number of people who came and they were quite, the kind of discussions were quite, I was completely green then and I used to think, oh it's about, under the sort of banner of feminism, but actually the discussion in the seminar was much more about authority and about not succumbing to authority. It was, I suppose, that kind of revolting thing, which is probably how I got into it.

SB – And did you find Matrix and kind of opportunity to see how this worked out in working life? I mean I guess I'm wondering about the experience of it as an all female collective and that many of its rights and many of its principles of working are actually feminist principles about non-hierarchical and collaborative, and looking for consensus...

BF – I think it was really interested in a way more about being a collective or a co-operative just as much as it being an all-women's thing. But the fact that it was all women was fine. So I think that was probably my interest in it. There was this issue about whether, you know like when we were trying to decide about which consultants to employ and actually very few consultants, I don't there were any that were entirely female, so whether structural engineers, or [?] surveyors, and there was a bit of discussion about should we employ any of these? So that's the whole other question of whether you work with women only, which actually was not realistic then, more realistic now though.

SB – but also there was also a question of working with male builders and the desire to work with women in the building trades and the connection ...

BF – I think there was, well from my point of view, that was far more, that's a really good thing to support, if we should ... it was almost like an educative thing to find groups of women that wanted to do carpentry and actually I think I mentioned that Haringay had a direct [labour pool?] and they did actually go out look for women carpenters, right because I remember meeting, going on a site with them and saying that's it's fantastic to work on a building like this, it was some old building, they were putting in proper trusses and one of them said to me, you know most building sites now you just have these [?] trusses, and they're just very thin, they're horrible things so things, as far as I could see, it was not really possible I think to only work with women craftspeople. So it was more encouraging those that were around or thought of doing it.

SB – yeah that's a really interesting aspect of that work, I mean because that brings up questions of gender, but also brings up questions about class as well...

BF – Yup

[47:30]

SB – about how architecture touches on this other world which is about young working class women and working class men as well, and I think it's again, before I started doing work on the GLC, I knew very little about that of course, but the GLC, one of its things, is it's not just interested in - they are interested in feminist issues, but it's not just... they're interested in apprenticeships...

BF – Yup

SB – and that strikes me as a story that is again, incredibly important now...

BF – Now it's disappeared...

SB – because it's disappeared. But also this is just sort of feminism on the ground, to get young women as well as men into apprenticeships for skilled trades at that time. And Fran was mentioning that too...

BF – yes, did she tell you she worked as a carpenter, she worked in the builders...

SB yeah, and a colleague of mine at York, when I told him about my project, said, oh that's really interesting, a woman I lived with in London in the 80s was involved in one of those schemes and, there was, it's a really interesting world of women in manual trades, and Lambeth, there was a Lambeth Women's Workshop, women's carpentry workshop

BF – Yes, that's right. But you see, I think this is interesting because let's see there was Fran, there was Sue Francis ...

SB – Who I haven't got in touch with yet...

BF – ... she died...

SB – Oh alright, okay

BF - ...sadly...

SB – Was that recently?

BF – Yes, just within the last year. Then there was someone called Mary Lou who I think is in the states, Mary Lou [?] I can't remember. Anyway incredibly middle class women and went and trained in these manual trades and you know, brought interesting knowledge from that experience. But I think that when you look at the numbers of working class women involved, it probably... we would have had contact with them through training courses, or in a couple of cases, doing buildings for them.

[49:56]

SB – and did you think at that point, that that experience of being in touch with working class women on the projects themselves was an exceptional one? I mean that, for architecture?

BF – It was quite, yes, I mean it would have been very exceptional in the GLC but because I knew other instances where women were kind of invited in and encouraged and so on, that just seemed like a great new thing, which unfortunately didn't really continue all that long after.

SB – Yeah, I mean that again, I don't want to overdo the importance of the GLC but that does strike me as what it enables at certain point. That diverse set of connections between groups that may not have been able to have connections before...

BF – yes, yes

SB – enabled by either public money or simply the bureaucracy of the GLC.

BF – Yes, yes. Actually do you, how are we doing, I've got to ring up my sister...

SB – No I was going to say, I don't want to keep you much longer. We've been talking for an hour and I know you have things to do. One of the things I was going to ask you, I'll be back in February and if I have follow-up questions, which I undoubtedly will have, whether I can bother you for follow-up questions?

BF – Of course, of course

SB – And I can come up to Cambridge as well; I know you have [?] to do. What are you going to today?

BF – I thought I might go the [?] But also I've got this sister who lives in London who, I think it's my chance to see her for awhile ... I just wanted to know whether it's [inaudible]

SB – No, no we can .. I mean maybe...

BF – I have got a few more minutes ... but I'll just give her a ring to say I'll be there ...

SB – How did your involvement with Matrix sort of end, probably organically I'm...

BF – I think it got to the point where my – can I just ring her up?

SB – Absolutely, absolutely. Shall we talk for 5 more minutes?

BF – No, no I think I can talk for another bit longer than that if I just tell her I'll go meet her at 1:30.

[55:49]

SB – So how did your involvement with Matrix end?

BF – Well I think I had gotten to a certain stage with this project and had it, probably it had started on site, done the drawings had gone out [?] I think. And, oh yeah, this was the time that we thought we could take the kids off for a year, and my husband had got to the point with work, cause he was in Haringey and this was how we knew about manual trades and women there, but he'd had really quite a few years of tough, tough, work and he also felt like politically it was

changing whereas the council had been very supportive of a lot of things, so he felt the mood was changing..

SB – this was around '84, '85?

BF – Yeah.

SB – like as abolition ...?

BF – I think later, maybe '87

SB – okay

BF – Because abolition was coming, I think I left the GLC just before abolition. And then I think I worked two years or so with Matrix. So then it seemed a good time to go to Wales, and for Mike to have a bit of a sabbatical, so that's why I said I'd move. And there was [?] about Matrix too, because we had a discussion about childcare because my kids were quite little and we'd decided when we had kids that we'd put my salary into childcare and we had a limited nanny, which really was very, I think people thought nanny, and that's a nit middle class something, but actually it worked well for us because it meant I could actually focus on work. I didn't have to knock off at a certain time and all that. And anyway, when I went to Matrix they said, well we can't pay, we're not going to pay, well, it was sort of like it's not really very fair if we pay for childcare that is so expensive...

SB – Right, right

BF – So I said okay, well I'll just have to [wear?] that. And then actually, the other reason was not just to have the kids see nature for a year but also I'd gotten to the point where I felt, it's quite interesting that for a few years it was fine having this really good nanny, and then they started going to school and I felt that didn't work so well. Funnily people say that's the opposite, most people say well that's when they can go back to work...

SB – Yeah...

BF – But what was happening was the interface with the school was through the nanny...

[58:43]

SB – Yeah, yeah

BF – So I felt like it was all getting a bit distant and I thought okay, maybe I'm going to, I thought about working part-time but I'd also got involved in some community voluntary work with the Chinese community centre, which was quite fun – we set up a woman's cooking co-op...and this was with women who couldn't speak English because they had come over because their husbands got jobs in restaurants ...

SB – Yeah, yeah

BF – and that was really, I mean it was fascinating for me as well. Nice to get to know these women, but also the whole thing of equipping the kitchen was like a different thing, because for instance we went shopping and I said why don't we get these J-clothes and they looked at the packets and they said, oh it's too expensive. And they didn't realize that actually they were actually very cheap because you got 10 in there, and you threw them away... took a while to get through to them. And we used to do, actually it was in a Cedric Price designed building in Kentish Town which was sort of like small workshops, like sort of startups and then it had this kitchen which was unused so we rented it. The interesting thing was we tried to do incredibly cheap meals, like baked potatoes, but we found that people were saying it was too expensive because of course it was more expensive than eating leftovers from home ... nowadays I think people would think, [?] you know the whole attitude has changed. But in those days it was really tough, you know, and these women were not being paid, it was more a kind of social, learning English and that kind of ...

SB – Yeah, yeah... but that domestic economy thing is interesting...

BF – So yeah, that's how I came to leave Matrix. I sort of went home...

SB – I assume it was not exactly free-floating, but there was a kind of organic looseness to it as well, that people seemed to have kind of come in for some projects, gone away for other projects and had other things that they were doing ...

FB – Yes

SB – So in that way it was kind of like, well a collective. And did you, I mean this is a very open question, but how do you view your time that you worked with Matrix?

FB – Well I, there were lots of things I really liked. I really found it ... I learned a lot about how things work or don't work, you know. I think a lot of [political?] people there were really great, so that was lovely. I think it was probably in some ways not realistic, but having said that, I mean Annie and Fran and also [Susannah?] who was at Matrix, came there just as I was leaving, actually have been running a very successful practice, really good...

[1:02:02]

SB - Yeah, which seemed to take up some of the issues, like carried through some of the issues from Matrix through ...

BF – ways of working ...

SB – ways of working, and particular kinds of projects...

BF – Yes, I think particularly the kinds of projects.

SB – Do you think it influenced your later career, I mean that experience, or ...?

BF – I think it, I mean, I went to Wales, for awhile I was working with an old colleague who was mid-Wales so I used to work half a week, so I'd go there down to mid-Wales and some back. And then I started to, cause I had been involved in the IRBA community architecture group, which actually did, had funding, little funding but for groups doing the sort of stuff that we'd been doing in Matrix, sort of feasibility stuff for premises, so I really had learned from that to go and do some of that work in North Wales. It was like new virgin territory, no one had done that there. So in that way it was quite good I got to know people, like [?], one villages, other places I probably wouldn't have known about and got to know in that way. And that was good, and I think it probably made me a bit more ... oh yeah, after that I sort of set up my own practice, small practice, partly doing that work. Or did I do it the, or, after mid-Wales I actually worked for a guy, a very interesting architect who was in the next valley and I worked on a student rooms in [?] at the Royal College of Agriculture, so that was a different sort of client, not just an institution but a very posh one. And then I started setting up my own and I got to do a project for a group that called itself a family centre and they really wanted to do educative work for parents with young kids and they were working out of a [?] and so I got involved with trying to do some work with the [Scout pack?] and tried to find funding for them, but they then fell out of the sky. And then we did more funding and we actually got them a site, this timbre framed building, quite decent size but it was more complex, gave them room and I think I was very good really setting them up and they won a Prince of Wales award for that, but not so much for the building but I think for the fact they existed, but I was aware that the building helped them do all that... so I think Matrix, the work at Matrix had given me confidence to do a lot of that sort of work. And you know, I still every now and then have contact with people like Fran or Annie and that's very nice. But I must say I hadn't known about this thing at the AA... how did I miss that?

SB – It's really good, really good. It's actually, it's just one room but it's really beautifully set out and it's from the 1920s to the present day, and Matrix has a corner all to its own. There's a beautiful drawing that I guess Anne Thorne did of the Jagonari centre, it's a gorgeous centre. Well thank you very much, and as I say I may be bugging you again...

BF – Oh please do, please do...