

CCAC interview with Lewis Levin on 18/11/2021 - transcript

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Project Name: Sunscreens Date of interview: 18/11/2021 Location of interview: Virtually (LL from Amsterdam, FLC from CCT offices) Language/s of interview: English Length of interview: 2:02:15 Interviewer name (and acronym): Francois Lion-Cachet (FLC) Interviewee name (and acronym): Lewis Levin (LL) Name of translator, if applicable: N/a Name of transcriber: FLC Notes on access and use, if applicable: N/a Mode of interview: Google Meet Number of recordings: 1 Audio file name(s) of interview: CCAC_Int_AUD_Sunscreens_LevinLewis_20211118.m4a List of acronyms: Wits - University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

START OF AUDIO RECORDING: 00:07:24

FLC: First question, please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an architect.

LL: I grew up in Johannesburg. And I became an architect, I suppose, because of Johannesburg. Johannesburg is quite an amazing place to grow up. And the reason I say that is my father worked in the Selby downtown industrial area. And I grew up in the machine shops of Selby and of southern Johannesburg. And when you grow up in a machine shop, which is where components for mining equipment are made, and heavy duty earthmoving equipment, you can't help but fall in love with Johannesburg. I mean, Johannesburg is an excuse for a big, hidden city underneath; there is a labyrinth of mines and tunnels, and of all sorts of things and adventures going on under the ground, and that's the underground river that the whole city is based on. I grew up as a child in the factory of my father who made machines and equipment for that mining town. It was logical that when you're surrounded by industrial objects, buildings, and especially machines, you'll kind of see the connection



between machines and steel fabrication. It was the logical thing for me to put that together in the study of architecture. And then I came to Wits, I was fortunate enough to have the amazing Pancho Guedes from Mozambique who had been there for a few years. So Guedes was an astonishing artist-architect from Mozambigue and he ran Wits from '74 when he left Mozambigue after the revolution. He was an extraordinary architect because he believed that architecture, art, drawing, sculpture is basically one thing. They're all linked by drawings. If you look at his work, and if you just Google Pancho Guedes, he died a number of years ago in his 90s. His work is this extraordinary celebration of organic form architecture, the modern movement, it's this tour de force of art, from Picasso to Paul Klee, you know, to Gaudí, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright. Seen through a lens of art, not necessarily seen through the lens of traditional architectural education - architects might get a traditional education in all schools about function and form and the importance of addressing the needs of the community and addressing the needs of the client - but Pancho, he addressed everything through art, and through sculpture, and through painting. His architecture was a version of painting and sculpture, and his paintings were a version of architecture. So being exposed to this creative mind. I mean, buildings weren't necessarily functional, habitable, responsible buildings. They were creatures. They were personnages, he uses this word. They were dreams, they were monsters that could come at you in the night. Or they could come out of dreams at night. It was just this extraordinary revelation for a young student to be exposed to this extraordinary creative force, which was completely Other. You know, if you go see architecture students - I was in Paris last week, I bumped into some architects walking, and we can talk for ages, you might have time limits and you've also got to get to the point, I suppose. But I bumped into these architects making drawings in the Tuileries Gardens, and I went up to them and asked them to show me the drawings. They were all so neat and so tidy. I asked how they draw and how they study architecture, because Paris is the best place in the world to study architecture. They were telling me about their technical studies, and I said you can draw all of these buildings around you, you can draw the Louvre, but it's more important that you wake up in the morning and draw your dreams. Because you've got this whole weight of Paris over you. Where's your own voice? So Pancho was this amazing force to kind of say, discover your own voice. But you must always use art as a laboratory for architecture. And you must use architecture as a laboratory for art. That for me was - the love of arts and crafts and the love of making things with your hands, all of that, that fabrication, and because of my machine shop upbringing, it all fell into place. You know, one way of making architecture is you make drawings, and then you then press a lot of buttons on the computer and you convince the contractor to go and do this thing in a somewhat conflictual situation, because that's what architecture is: you have a contract and it's legal, and it's a lot of money and you've got all the lawyers behind the scenes with contracts.



Pancho was saying, well maybe there's another way you can take all of that stuff and throw it in the dustbin. Not quite, you have to be responsible for the client, but maybe you'll make things with your hands, maybe you will find another way, maybe you will become the artist and the contractor and the technologist and the painter and sculptor, all in one. So that you don't have to have somebody else realising your works, and somebody else sending emails asking them to do this and that. That was how I started and that's how I still continue with the work that I do; very much hands on, using architecture as a laboratory. It's the Arts and Crafts movement. I'm a great follower of the Arts and Crafts movement. We're getting distracted, but to answer your question, I've given you an indication of how architecture came to me in the machinery, the mining, the underground of Johannesburg. Just a couple of points on that score. Art is amazing in South Africa. Art is amazing everywhere. But one thing that I don't see in art in South Africa is art derived – shapes, forms, ideas – derived from this huge industry of mining and of moving earth. The amount of turning wheels in shafts and lifts and pistons and winches and cables and trolleys and trains underground in Johannesburg, it's this futurist... Marinetti and the futurists only dreamed about that in Italy, and the Russian constructivists. Here in Johannesburg it's what makes the city go. The early modernists had this love affair with movement. I'm in the Hague now and I go to the De Bijenkorf, extraordinary 1920s stained glass windows. Maybe you can have a look at them on the internet. It's this department store built in the modernist style, in the Amsterdam style with organic brickwork. But the artworks, the stained glass windows are all about movement. The steel: it's this blend of ancient stained glass, the 20s with industry. In South Africa and Johannesburg in particular, we talk about the pains of the industry a lot and the dislocation of people, which is important. And I suppose part of the mission of the court is to address all of that dislocation. But on the other hand, there is this amazing laboratory of: it's a menu, it's a fruit salad, it's a smorgasbord, it's a palette of ideas. And that's what I miss about Johannesburg a lot.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:19:27

FLC: It relates to my next question: when did you leave Johannesburg? Did you study here? When did you go to the Netherlands?

LL: So, I spent most of my life in Johannesburg and most of the work that I've done was there: architecture and sculpture, mobiles, industrial artwork, and I came to the Netherlands about seven years ago as a sabbatical to be with my family who were keen on international life. My wife is a doctor and she wanted to research a particular medical subject, which is adult concentration problems



amongst the Dutch. It's called ADHD for volwassenes (adults). I wanted to stay for a few years and it turned out to be much longer. Because Europe is wonderful. It's a break from South Africa, but you can't leave South Africa. I miss South Africa on a cellular level. I really do. But what you get out of Europe is an urbanism that you live with, a historical urbanism which is completely addictive. When I talk about the things that move me in Europe it's quite simple. I mean, I just love the public transport. I love the trains; I can get on a train now and I can be in Paris in three hours, I can be with Michel de Klerk's architecture in Amsterdam – getting to these places through public transport and through the train stations. It's an absolute pleasure. These gathering spaces of people, which as white South Africans we missed out on. We live in cars. And of course, the most important reason I'm here is because, and I realised that only later, is because of the bicycles. We take bicycles for granted in South Africa, but the Netherlands has this love affair and respect and admiration for the bicycle that supersedes everything - the city is laid out with the bicycle in mind. You're always engaged with these turning wheels. For me it's an endless movie of turning wheels. I take my kids to school in the morning and I see so many turning wheels and so many different ways of moving around through bicycles. It's an absolute pleasure; if I had more time I would just, you know, leave my day job and just go and photograph and draw this endless river of moving wheels. It has meant a lot to me. I've loved being part of that urbanism - it has allowed a bit of quiet for me to work on my other projects. So that's my answer to your second question.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:23:04

FLC: Thank you. It's quite poetic. Can you tell us more about how, when and why the *Sunscreens* were made? Was there a specific brief and proposal?

LL: So if you remember, I think there was a competition run by the architects. For artworks at the court, you'd probably remember more about it than me. But they called for proposals for artworks. Do you remember the date? Do you remember the date that the competition went out?

FLC: The building was opened and completed in 2004. Around 1999 they started conceptualising, so it probably was around 2001, 2002 onwards.

LL: Ja. So it was a period where Janina [Masojada] and the other architects and the city realised the importance of art and architecture. And in a way, it comes from that first question involving Pancho Guedes – the role of art in architecture, and the role of public artworks in a building, not just to



decorate the building afterwards, but to be seen as integral to the building's language, so that the building and the artworks work together. It was a realisation, I suppose, that came after apartheid, that you know, there are other forms of expression, and other creative talents and sources that you can put into the design of a building. You know, last week in Paris, I went to the Garnier Opera. Have you heard of the opera theatre in Paris, the famous Garnier Opera? It's an extraordinary building, it was built in the last half of the 19th century from 1860 to '70. It's a monument to the idea that art and architecture are wedded together. And that any way of separating the building from artwork, impoverishes everything. I think Janina and Andrew realised this and they set up this competition for parts of the building that they wanted to address in an artistic way. That whole collaboration between art and architecture is what I've worked on, forever really, and still work on. Being an architect, I kind of wore two hats and saw this lovely building, this very brave and bold building on the Hill, of important architecture and artwork. The competition went out for these facades and I entered the competition and you know, in the beginning of the 2000s computers were also getting going in a kind of animated way. The flat kind of DOS programming language and the flat screen of the computer was changing to a more interactive thing. We all fell in love with computers, the eye candy of computers, sometimes to our detriment. But I think in 2000, 2001, or even a bit earlier, these GIFs and these animated images would come... these mouse-overs that you would start getting. You would have a kinetic artwork appearing on the screen as you rolled your mouse over. I saw this competition and I started kind of browsing over different animated GIFs, animated kinetic objects, which for me was a direct line back to Tatlin. These names are important. Tatlin made this famous this extraordinary kinetic building, the monument of the Third International. Seeing these kind of flickering images, flipping on the screen and then thinking of Tatlin's moving buildings, and these lifts and these buildings which would rotate, I came up with idea that a screen of artworks, which would be a series of animated squares, which would flip and then would turn, would be an amazing way to treat that facade. And to amalgamate an articulated facade with objects, surfaces that would tilt, and that would shed light in different ways, that would integrate light in different ways into the building. The most amazing buildings I've ever seen are the Indian palaces, and jali screens from Rajasthan. I mean, we think the West has produced architecture, but we've produced a little bit of architecture, but there's nothing like those extraordinary palaces at Fatehpur Sikri, where they've turned stone into lace. When you walk into the building and you're just bathed in the light of small apertures, you know, creating this sense that you're in a forest, but the forest is made out of stone, and the stone is turned into lace. This wonderful feeling of being in these buildings where the wooden technology moves into stone, the filigree screens have turned into stone. That facade presented this possibility of having an articulated screen that people could engage with, that they could touch, that they could move. It



would let in light in a perforated way. The patterns would be derived from very simple African fractals, you know, there is a field of African fractals and I think it's been developed- there's a very good book of African fractals, which you might look at, which shows the kind of pattern language that has developed in Africa opposed to the other geometries that we in the West have developed. It's really about simple repeatable rhythms. African patterns are based on the one irreducible element: it's the triangle, which is then twisted and turned and flipped. Doing a simple thing by going to the African Market or Art Africa in Parktown you just see this wonderful play of geometry, African geometry. So I thought, well these are themes, the jali screen, the light, the simple GIF that can turn when you move your mouse over it. And then, of course, human biography. These things tell a story. This must be a graphic novel. The French have used this word the bandes dessinée; it must be a building that tells a story. Francois, it's interesting having this discussion because I went to see the Institut du Monde Arabe last week. Have you heard of that building? That's Jean Nouvel's first building in Paris where he made these iris controlled perforations. They open and close. The sun comes into this facade and closes and opens and lets in different kinds of light, but it's a very complicated mechanism. It's quite amazing being there on the inside and seeing, you know, different times of the day as it closes and opens. But when I was there last week, I realised that it was missing... It had a kind of worn out look, because it wasn't an artwork. It was just mechanics. And it was just this universal facade. And what Janina and Andrew were encouraging by their building was a much more organic African exploration of pattern. It's not just the waffle bit stamped over and over again, but there's variation. You take the same theme and you vary it. When I submitted this thing to Janina, and with Patrick, it was based on the idea that you have a single element which then undergoes transformation. Tipping orientation, left and right, and in pattern and in colour. Just isolating the smallest element and a formula almost and flowing that through. You have a grid, you cut down on all the other options. That was the formula and I think that's what they liked about it. I made a model, I always believe in making models. And I made this little model – I think Patrick might still have it.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:34:31

FLC: He mentioned the maquette and I asked him if he has it, and he said you might have it.

LL: Gosh, I don't know where it is. What I've got here. Just this morning I found some of the original drawings that I made of those screens. It's interesting for me to look at it after all these years. We'll talk more and then I can show you some of the early images and the drawings. That facade on the African Steps is a fantastic promenade, it's a really outdoor building. I told them they should put the



facade all the way up to the top and make the whole thing a screen. But I think they were right in the end to curtail it to the band, because it's where you interact with the screen and where you interact with the stories. The stories, I mean, those stories... Patrick can give you the full power of some of those stories, but he would be running through Johannesburg with his notebook, and making sketches. He got his notebooks and interviewed people on the margins of society.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:35:54

FLC: That's part of my next question. We do have many of Patrick's illustrated notes on file and he's filling in some ones we don't have. The question is, please tell us about your working relationship with Patrick Rorke. The question is: who did what involving the concept and execution of the project, but we do have a fairly good idea that you looked at the mechanics, and he did the sketches. I also know from our interview with Patrick that you approached him. Why him?

LL: You know, getting back to that first point that collaborating with artists and architects is like the key to making, you know, good buildings. Gaudi worked with these steel makers, and these iron workers. When you work with an artist, and being a kind of dilettante artist myself, it's good to provide frameworks for artists. Because when you have a blue sky, with artists, they tend to, you know, they tend to invent so much, and the architectural discipline shows you that, you take the pediment of the temple, you work on the pediment, you give that to the artist. It made sense to me to give the framework, to set it up, and then to isolate bands within the framework that could run as a *bande dessinée*, a comic novel. The comic has matured really into an artwork, and to kind of think of that human... Can one present here? Can I present it here?

FLC: Yeah, you can, I'll take screenshots.

LL: So you look at these original drawings that we made, where the flipping screens, articulated screens, are this variation of simple patterns, which we can talk about later. But then these circles here are marked for the artist. For narrative stories that could run through the panel, so that on the one hand you got the grid and then you're breaking the grid, and you're going across the, you know, the framework that Janina... It all starts with the architects, they set up the window patterns, I then further subdivide them and allocate the patterns and the ornamentation. And then cross over with the panels that can then ride across and tell the narrative. So I approached Patrick, I think he was a



friend of a friend. Oh, he was a potter. That's right. I met him... Amazing guy. He was a potter. I made some potting wheels for him. That's right.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:39:58

FLC: He also mentioned the new Metro Mall. The taxi rank.

LL: That's right. Yes, I did that. Oh, that's right. He did some work at the Metro Mall. That's where I found him. At the Metro Mall where those hanging screens were. Have you been to the Metro Mall?

FLC: No I haven't.

LL: It's down the road from you. You can.

FLC: I will go.

LL: Ja, so we built these big screens, which was the forerunner of these screens, but they were not animated. There were different kinds of metals, mining metals that corrode at different rates in different patinas. He was doing some work there, ceramics, I think, it was mosaics, I think. We chatted, and he liked the screens, and I liked him. He had this amazing kind of hands on approach. He was a potter, and I made him some potting wheels that worked manually. It's a nice connection, the potting wheel because it's based on the flywheel technique. He had this idea of us building potting wheels without motors that you kind of turn and use, turn and use. He was a very gifted, hands on... a real artist, you know, somebody who sketches, makes things with his hands. And that's how I got to know him and chatted with him about it. I worked a lot with fabricators in Johannesburg. And I have a particular way of working with fabricators, not giving them drawings but actually giving them parts, giving them components, laser cut and pre-made components. You can make a drawing by pressing print, or you can press print on the laser cutter and it prints what you've drawn. That's a big difference, because then you've got this object, you know, architects love making drawings and then you give it to a guy with a tape measure. But if you can actually - we talk about 3D printing now, which is great - but Johannesburg is built on much older profiling systems - laser cutting, which has been there for 40 years. With Patrick I laser cut a few rings and flywheels and then I had a manufacturer put them together. That's how we started together. We then discussed the screens and how we would enter. And how he would then interview people on the margins of the society for



whom the screens would talk. I don't know if he's told you these amazing stories, the kind of extraordinary interviews that he had. And then when he brought them back to the screens. Has he told you about that?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:43:32

FLC: To an extent yes. We're also working with him to get his notes and luckily, in many of the original notes, which we have, he wrote down what inspired him or what was going through his mind when he was making the drawings. It relates to my next question that you already kind of started speaking about: what do you think of Rorke's artistic process and contribution to the sunscreens?

LL: So, just like Gaudi worked with his steel designer, you get collaborations which really work well. I think it was amazing with Patrick because I have a kind of geometric mind. And, sometimes that's a prison. All architects are slightly imprisoned by the straight edge. Patrick doesn't have any of that. His mind works in a different way with stories, with marks and scratches and shades, which sometimes elude an architect. Even with the tools of an architect, whether it's the pencil and the set square... the freedom that a sketch has is often lost in the building. If you look at some of the early sketches of architecture that were made by Erich Mendelsohn, for example, and some others, the building somehow lacks the freshness of the sketch. For me working with Patrick was a way to bring back that kind of freshness, that organic thinking, the storytelling. If you look at a comic book you've got the frame and then you've got this discipline of filling in each of the windows with something. Patrick was great, and especially the idea that Patrick could find stories, and he could find biographies. Because the biography element of the screens was crucial, because so much artwork is about an inner dialogue that the artists have with themselves and their ancestors. Patrick took another approach. He said, let's just let the artwork come out of stories from people that I will find. You know, he looked a bit of a beggar himself with his beard in those days, and he would just take these sketches and go to Hillbrow. He would say to people, you know, can I talk to you? He had three main questions. These questions were: your earliest memories, your dreams of the future, and what does the Constitutional Court mean to you? It was amazing, just three simple questions, and when the people realised that he didn't want to bum some money off them they sat and spoke. What came out of those discussions was wonderful, kind of natural, he was almost just transcribing. They were the artists and he was just transcribing. And so that's why working with Patrick was fantastic. There was a freedom attached to his thinking process and sketching process. And the fact that he could try any medium; an artist



sometimes says I only do painting... We came up with this technique of scratching into stainless steel, he just migrated from scratching on pen and into scratching into stainless steel. It's quite something.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:47:46

FLC: He mentioned he used a jeweler's grinder.

LL: Ja, we got all these tools. He sat there and scratched on them. It was a good relationship because we both respected each other enormously.

FLC: Patrick also mentioned that Donovan was also quite integrally involved.

LL: Absolutely. I was speaking about my steel fabricators. So Donovan Diamond is a partner and a collaborator. We kind of share half a mind, maybe together we make up two thirds of a mind. He's an engineer. He's also a bit of an ex hippie like Patrick. He runs a fabrication outfit in Booysens, and at that stage he was miles away in Honeydew. He made instruments for the orthopedic industry. He made screws. Because of my background in mechanical engineering and mining engineering, I met him at the Rand Show at Nasrec. He was designing an interesting articulating machine. I looked him up and I went to see him and I saw immediately that this was a mind that really was able to think like an engineer, but also like an artist at the same time. We worked together to develop the screens and the idea that you could articulate these screens. We would plan the system of how this would work. Out of the collaboration with Donovan, a lot of my work is made. It is similar to Le Cobusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. I'm not in that league by any chance. But you can see sometimes in a collaboration, you produce something. Donovan is not a manufacturer, he doesn't manufacture, he gives input at the level where he taps into the idea that you're looking at. He has a knowledge of engineering principles that are wonderful. Donovan then made the screens and put them together. We would then colour the plates. It's a collaboration. So I would then get the plates coloured, the laser cutting - we all had our own role in the manufacturing. It was all pooled together sourcing from different industries in Johannesburg.

FLC: How long did the project take?

LL: From inception, I think the competition was about four or five months, and I think we built the screens over about two or three months, maybe a bit longer. I'll have to check that. I think the whole



process to build and to install it, from beginning to end must have been about six or seven months. The beauty about laser is that you spend a lot of time thinking about how to do these things. When you press the button on the laser the cutting of all of these discs probably took one or two days. Because it's such a fast industrial process. But then, the finishing and the moving from plate to plate. and to get these colours right. That added a lot of time and research.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 00:52:17

FLC: Patrick mentioned there were some delays on the artworks and that it was finished in the nick of time, just before the building was opened.

LL: Look, have you heard of the concept of *charette*? It means in French a chariot. It comes from the Beaux-Arts in Paris, which was the great school of art. The students would have to hand in their work in the morning, but the *charette* would then, a little carriage or cart would come and collect the paintings, the drawings, the architectural drawings, and it would take the work to the supervisors and to the teachers. Except that the students hadn't finished working and they would sit on the *charette* painting. And so the word *charette* has always got the association of just in time. The last minute, all art seems to be like that. If you Google the word "charette" and "painting" you will see a whole lot of artists sitting on top of the chariot doing the last drawings and the carriage being taken through the streets of Paris. There used to be a shop in New York called Charette, which was a shop for architectural students and art students open 24 hours a day. Now you can do everything on the stupid computer, but in those days, you could go at two o'clock in the morning and get a lovely airbrush colour. That's the long answer to your short question.

FLC: It's lovely. My next question you kind of already got into. I'll ask it again and maybe there's something you want to add. What inspired the cube and weighted swivel design of the screens? The panels are reminiscent of an abacus that can swivel on a horizontal axis.

LL: So one idea that I thought about a lot over years of making both architecture and art is the idea of stringing beads along a chain. Stringing beads along a system, whether it's ball bearings... Some of the early drawings of Paul Klee have a very simple axis. And then you see a lot of creatures doing all sorts of things on them. It's a little bit like life, you know, we're all on this bead, on this chain. We can then create our own bead, and when the beads hang together, you have this pattern. It's lovely to see that in African bead-making and bead-making all over the world. So the idea of taking an armature system,



which is like an abacus, and having an axle through it, and then giving an identity to each plate, which is derived from the other plate, both in pattern and in permutation, became a way to break the grid and to weight the grid. The grid is a liberating form to start with, but it can also imprison you. So look at a city, a city is a grid but if a city only builds buildings in grids, that city is boring. New York is a grid, but it's a chaotic paradise. Paris is also a grid with everybody making their own interpretation. So you know, by having beads or having panels that you can then move and that you can weight, you're making a small variation. So you have a theme and you have a variation. There is a small musical piece that I had written here for this. And it's in one of the panels. It's quite an intriguing piece that a friend of mine composed where you can read it like this, like this, like this and like this. So you can read it in any way.

FLC: Just for the transcript, I want to note at this point that you'd like pointed sideways, up and down.

LL: The lovely thing about the noughts and crosses grid is that it's not linear, you can move in any direction. When you move in diagonals, and in other ways, you get surprising results. Music works in a similar way in that you have a formula, you have an irreducible fragment, you know, and the idea, this very simple theme: I was listening to an interview by Stephen Sondheim, the American composer, and he spoke about the smallest possible theme that yields the best results. The kind of less is more idea. But in the musical context and in the context of a few, or the serial view, it's a creative idea that you can have one pattern which is inverted and then swapped and then flipped and then turned. So the idea was to take the one plate– If I present this window here you can see the full plate [shares screen virtually, see screenshots].





Do you see this full plate? Now it's a five by five plate. Why is it a five by five plate? Because the pentatonic scale and the pentatonic theme is a very strong theme in design and in architecture and in music. Because the pentagon is a mysterious shape, the five sided shape. Also, there's kind of built in symmetries. The grids of three by three are interesting. The grids of four by four are interesting. I've done a lot of religious architecture, for another discussion, and I built synagogues, religious buildings, based on the same notion of the grid and the permutations of the grid and the – let's call it the sacred geometry of the grid. The five by five geometry here, let's call it the full scale, right? So there is the big bead and then there is the smaller bead and then by playing with combinations. Do you recognize what that one is? That one is in fact the mouse, the hand of the mouse. We're always looking at the mouse hand on our computer screen. The hand icon. Can you see the finger and the thumb?



And then setting up a system where these things are weighted. In the way these are bent with these holes, I was able to get a stainless steel rod at different points within the system. So you have a second degree, a second layer of beads. So you have one abacus, a second abacus and a third abacus; the idea of producing micro versions of the original theme which is that fractal idea that you can have an overall pattern and then you can make it smaller and smaller and keep the overall theme. By having the weight in different spots we could get the thing to hang in a different way. I mean, can you see these shapes? {*Refers to image below*}





TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:02:54

FLC: Are they on the sunscreens? I haven't seen them.

LL: Ja, they are clips that hold the weights in place. They're pretty things in and of themselves but they're teeny little details that you'll find hidden behind each weight. There's a stress relief here and they clip the weights together. These are lovely things that I derived with Donovan that we could laser cut, clip and hold the weights together. You're making me revisit all the stuff that I haven't thought about for 20 years.

FLC: It's amazing that you still have it.

LL: Ja, it's amazing that I still have it. Well you know that's the beauty of computers that you can keep everything. What might be interesting is to see the original laser cutting drawing which is what was sent eventually to the laser cutter. Here it is. This is in fact the drawing that the machine cuts. This is the palette, in the end all of that work comes down to this and then it's all assembled and then the other beads.



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FLC: You also already spoke to this: can the sunscreens be compared to architectural interventions elsewhere in the world?

LL: You know, the screen and the facade of a building is this interface. I mean, all buildings really are dressed with sunscreens. With brick you're keeping up the elements, but the idea of perforating and breaking the inside-outside barrier, that kind of mystery of what happens when you cross over into a building. That's what the sunscreens are all about. Le Cobusier did it in his work. It gives the shadow depth and it creates an interior. Stained glass windows are sunscreens. I was just in Sainte-Chapelle now in Paris - the best example of Gothic architecture just behind the Notre-Dame. It's wall to wall glass, even more impressive than Notre-Dame. I'm really committed to the idea of these screens all over in all my work. When my website is sorted it will help you a lot. When I find some more time I will get that all loaded up. But ja, the screen is what makes the building. When you go to India and you walk into those temples there's no glazing. That Taj Mahal is absolutely extraordinary. All the buildings that are around the Taj Mahal, they're all stone sunscreens. They're all sunscreens, because they've understood what is in fact a religious quality. It's a sacred quality. When you filter the light through a forest and through trees, you create a feeling called the numinous. It was a term coined by Rudolf Otto and it's the quality of sacredness that you get from light that is filtered. That's why churches and religious buildings have that strange quality and now that quality has been taken over by art galleries, to a lesser or greater extent. But the filtered, fragmented light is the numin and it's



miraculous because you can eat away the boundaries between the space, the light can eat away the stone, you can filter light in different ways. I spend a lot of my time thinking about this. I worked with other architects and we did sunscreens for Lebone, the school for the Bafokeng. And that took this idea to the next level where we actually made the sunscreens articulate during different times of the day.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:09:33

FLC: The numinosity you mention of filtering light through forests and trees – that's definitely something we'll pick up on, because the architectural concept is based on the idea of justice under a tree.

LL: That's right. You know, the justice under a tree idea, it's a biblical idea that comes from the prophetess Deborah in the Bible. She executed justice under the tree, she sat under the tree and people came to her for judgment.

FLC: I wanted to ask, as well, what informed the placing of the engraved screens in between the perforated ones?

LL: So that's an interesting one. Just to finish your last question, I'll send you some images of the screens that were done at the Metro Mall. Also inspired with another architect from Durban, I forget his name. And then the ones that I worked on at Lebone which were the next level. It's an interesting topic, because now screens have to be also intelligent. You also want screens to effect the heat retention and the energy consumption of a building. The best examples of architecture and screens are the ones that enhance the passive temperatures of the building, rather than being fancy technologies. The old technologies are just filtering spaces with objects and are much stronger than all these intelligent facades, because intelligent facades date very quickly, and the technology supersedes itself. There's nothing to beat an old idea of filtering the building through filtering the light. So the placements and the groupings. I think we probably looked together at how many panels would make up a story. I recall that we thought that a three panel, or four panel or five panel story would make up a short biography. So earliest memories, what does the Constitution mean to you, what are your ambitions for the future/how can you change the world? They relate to three crucial existential questions that we all ask. What are our earliest memories? How have they informed us?



Little biographies. Largely they were placed to cross over and to produce a kind of randomised, free notion of the grid, that you can inhabit the grid with your own personality. Often when you try and give a reason for the placement of objects within a random situation you get surprising results if you allow things to happen in a card throwing way. When I worked on the Johannesburg Holocaust Museum...

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:15:59

FLC: I often go there, they now have a fantastic coffee shop called Issy's, which is my favourite spot to just quickly run to if I need some space.

LL: You go there often? Okay, that's good. You know Issy's is named after one of the Holocaust survivors. Anyway, it's another story. But getting back to the point, if you look at the screens there, and you look at the way that we've done the railway lines on those facades, what I did is just work with all the different coloured stones from different parts of Johannesburg. The green ones, the Eikenhof ones, the Pretoria ones. I got these workers together and said you must now make these decisions, and you as they come out of your hand you'll place them. That's why that rock facade has this varied approach, because I left it up to them to kind of run itself. If you have a process strong enough to contain the randomised look. So I think the one principle we had is that they should work together in groups.

FLC: How do you perceive the significance of the public artwork, the *Sunscreens*, and what it represents?

LL: This particular one, this particular artwork?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:18:10

FLC: The *Sunscreens* at the Court, the significance of it, and what it represents in context of the Constitutional Court building, the apex court post-apartheid.

LL: So you can hope that you set ideas into steel and concrete and that people will respond to them. In a way, the public chooses to respond if the artist has communicated the idea enough. The idea of an artwork facing outwards on a small level... that's where I think Janina and Andrew worked well, you



address the interior and you address the exterior. Normally, artworks that are bold occupy the outside of a building. But I think that this idea of having smaller graphic biographies on the outside of a building brings the enormity of the Constitution, the enormity of this concept, down to individual human suffering. The suffering individual. I mean, this story of this one guy whose parents died, there's this image of him alone, they died of AIDS and he was brought up by his uncle. With the uncle there's just fights and arguments. There's drawings of that small little boy being overwhelmed by the uncle and then finally going off and leaving the country, and then dreaming of changing the world. With an image of the moon. I think Patrick found him again. He went to this screen and he said, "Now I understand why I had to go through that suffering, why I lost my parents, why I had to be brought up by my uncle, so that my story would be on the facade, so that my story is here". He had this backward joining the dots idea that his life had meaning, because his story was captured. Now, that is great. That story talks to this poor guy, for whom these concepts are just big words from another time and planet, he's got no way of engaging with that. But when he passed by and he saw that biography it made his life, somehow, work. That's what you hope the Constitutional Court screens would be. It's the kind of precedent of what you want art to be, right? You want it to be accessible, you want it to be seen by everybody, you want it to be touched. When I worked at the Science Museum, we spoke a lot about touching the art, you want them to be engaged, you want them to turn. Art should be robust enough, it shouldn't be this big, fat bronze thing in the middle of a public square that is so... You know, let them move it. It's robust enough, and the idea that you can kind of change it, spin it, so that it looks like another work of art. You're inviting the people into your art, not just as observers but as participants. So that is what I wanted it to be.

FLC: That's beautiful, thank you. I'm already starting to write the essay for the publication, you're giving us amazing material to work with. I've got a question here: how do you feel personally about having your work as an architect, but also as an artist or artisan part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:22:49

LL: Look, it's an extraordinary honour, it's the most humbling honour in the world to be part of a prominent public project. Architecture, generally, is quite a lonely thing. You spend a lot of time on your own thinking; you do work with teams, but a lot of your work is practical and functional. And it's a job. It's like a business. But having art in this public way, it captivates people's imaginations – it's the



greatest honour you can ever have. There's also an interesting short biography of both myself and Patrick in one of the screens. I don't know if you know about that.

FLC: I was wondering if there's something of you in the drawings on the screens.

LL: So there's something very interesting. There are three fascinating biographical stories on the court screens, which nobody really knows well. The first one: I took Patrick to see a very old man, a teacher of mine, he was 95 at that stage. He was a teacher from Lithuania who had come to South Africa in the 30s or in the 20s, and he remained vibrant, intellectual, a textual scholar with a fascination on the Dead Sea Scrolls and their discovery. What was interesting about him and for me as a character, in 1944 he was the chaplain for the South African Defence Forces in North Africa. It's luck of the draw sometimes what biographies get onto the screen, but I studied with him for many years, I started studying when he was 80. He said, look you've come a bit late, but I've got good genetics and I studied with him until 104. So I had 24 years of study with him. He told a lot of stories about his life in Djerba Island and in North Africa as a chaplain to the Jewish defense forces and to the other defense forces who were fighting Hitler in North Africa. He comes across the troglodyte Jewish community of Djerba Island. We're talking about so many things Francois, you'll have to edit this out and choose what you want to put in and whatever. I've kept my traditions, and he's offering this friendship but he says no. So that is this powerful small image.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:30:22

FLC: I recall an image like that.

LL: Let me see if I can find the image.

FLC: It is interesting, because I was under the impression that these stories were mostly from – as Patrick calls it – street people from Hillbrow.

LL: Yes that is correct. They were street people, but because the relationship that I had with Patrick was a friendship and it was like discovering his world: he married this Indian woman, and I had my world. We hung around a bit together and I took him to this old man. The other amazing story, I think these stories are human stories and they deal in a way with these constitutional– [connection issues]. So there is another story which is taken from the book of Daniel. You might be curious to know of



these biblical references that I make all the time. And I suppose it's because I have a scholarly interest in narrative and in the effect of Bible stories and legends on culture, and how powerful the Bible is in African cultures and in our culture. As it is in many cultures, but it's got a particular blend in South Africa, the blend between folklore and biblical lore mixed together. The book of Daniel is a curious story that takes place in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, the conqueror of Babylon, the Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem. He takes these three boys and puts them in the fire, and they survive. They survived the lion's den, and they survived the fire, and they look very healthy afterwards. It's an allegory, of course, of persecution. It's an allegory of persecution and oppression and survival underneath an oppressive regime. So Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians tried to suppress the people. It's a little bit like the story of the exiled slaves, the story of the narrative of the Exodus; freed slaves there's a hidden kind of reference to that in South Africa. The slaves that are freed and then have to create a promised land. Desmond Tutu's idea of this nation that is reborn, through the Constitution and other things and creating a promised land - that you have to go through the desert of apartheid to get to the promised land. So that story of Daniel is a metaphor in a way for what's happened in South Africa and what happens all over the world. Patrick and I are sitting in this old man's house, in this teeny little room in the old age home and he is attracted to the story that the man is telling of Daniel, and he makes the sketch of it and that sketch finds onto the Court. So there's a hidden allegory there. The biblical message of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are on one of the screens. The other thing is his story of his own life. He's got a biographical panel there himself, did you see that? He's got a panel of his own life. It's his homage to his wife. He thought at one stage it would be nice for us in all these biographies to include these personal stories. He has a little homage to his wife, which is an interesting one. He has a lot of images of pots that are broken which he must talk to you about pregnancies that are ruined. But the one of his wife is really interesting, and then he did one of my wife who is portrayed as an Indian Durga figure riding a leopard because there is the famous Indian story of Durga who is the fighter of demons. Durga is an Indian goddess who destroys demons but she rides this tiger and she's got multiple arms. Because my wife's a psychiatrist who destroys the demons of people's psyches when they are troubled and tormented, from there the image. But I thought that was a nice image because it's in a way, once again, a metaphor of what the Constitution should be about. That is to destroy the demons of the society, but not through witchcraft but through law and through the Constitution. You're filtering all this human tragedy, all this pain. It really is a place, ultimately, of human suffering, human conflict, which is then resolved in a way that a democracy is responsible for, not through witchcraft. But through, you know, through measured debate and discussion. So that's why that little image is also important.



TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:41:24

FLC: How do you see art is being connected to justice or human rights in South Africa more universally?

LL: So it's a vexed question because art has got to be judged on its own terms, because it's ruthless in its demand for excellence. Art ultimately - and for me personally, when you talk about it in theory and talk about it personally - art for me personally is this inward journey that allows you to explore and deal with all the pleasures and poisons of the society around us. It's the ultimate way, for me, that one can achieve meaning and resolution. You can achieve meaning and resolution through courts and laws and journalism, pronouncements and whatever. But ultimately, art for me is this expression which allows a deep personal inward reflection to happen. To create a story, to explore your society around you, to explore all these forces and to turn them into something. The idea that you've got all these energies, you've got all these pains, you've got all these forces that hit you on a day to day basis, whether it's political or personal. But art then says you can make something of it. You can make something, you can make a mask, you can make a sculpture, you can make a painting, you can make a drawing, you can make an object, you can make a toy, you can play. We talk about homo sapiens but the idea of homo fabricanus, the idea that you can take those energies and make something is such a strong idea. That is why we get such pleasure when we go and see Michelangelo, Van Gogh – I am living in his city, and Rembrandt. I'm 700 meters away from Rembrandt, the anatomy lesson and from his self portraits. Why does that move me now to go and sit in front of that Rembrandt because he's taken the suffering, his own personal story and he's made something of it. You stand in front of this man's inner dialogue, and it just talks to you because it talks to the message of all of humanity. That's what art does, it allows your personal vision to touch (if it does work) all of humanity. That's what public art should do. It shouldn't be decorative. It should, you know... talking about living in the Netherlands: yesterday I went to the Anne Frank House again, and I've been there many times. Why is this Anne Frank House important? Because of this diary. Why? Because everybody had a bicycle, everybody fell in love for the first time, everybody had the story. So this work of art, which is her diary, speaks to everybody. And if that personal autobiography that you derive from your own voice is interesting enough, you've undergone that process, and then in a way it's done and then somebody else picks it up and says, you know what, this story is meaningful to me, and it gives them comfort. So for me, artwork occupies the serious role in society of being the ultimate source of final resolution of expression. Because when all else fails, it's only art that remains. Politics will disappoint, everything else in life will disappoint. Life itself finally disappoints you. But you've always got this amazing



resource to make something to leave behind. And public art breaks the gallery, because the problem of a gallery is that there's a whole institution behind selecting the works that go into a gallery, which are tied into business and whatever. But public art, and if you can make public art, even graffiti art, you're bypassing the elite school of people who appreciate art and you're offering it to that chap who came to visit the museum. Look how he came to visit the screens, that's the most successful way, he touched another human being.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:47:30

FLC: Thank you. Are you mindful of conservation when making art? Or with your architectural work? To ensure the longevity of the works? And do you have any recommendations for the conservation of the sunscreens at the court?

LL: Well, let's talk about the robustness of an outside environment opposed to an internal environment. It's another world out there when you build for the elements. It's completely different to having an artwork in a neutral environment. When you compound that by an artwork that is moving, and that is mechanical, it's doubly complicated. I've done articulated artworks that are still outside and they stopped moving. And then I've done artworks that are interior and they still move. So you have to think practically about making a public artwork sustainable and to make it endure. You also don't want artworks to look like they were the day that they were put up, nice and shiny. You want them to develop the patina of time, and the patina of wear, because that's what's interesting. When we go to old cities and we see the marble from the 17th, 16th century, the patina that the artwork has is part of its attraction. When they polish it all up it looks like a piece of cardboard. But yet you can go down a slippery slope and have something really just rust into decay. So we worked with this fascinating material developed in South Africa called 3CR12 and it's a discussion that we should have at some stage.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:49:39

FLC: 3CR12 is one of my questions, actually.

LL: So it's the lowest grade of stainless steel developed in the mining industry in South Africa by the mining engineers. I think Iscor was involved and because of my knowledge of steel I came across this material that oxidizes but then forms a barrier to further oxidation. And it does it in different ways.



And it's cheap. It's readily available and is used in the mining industry. And it's stainless; if you would have built this thing in anything other than stainless steels it would have just rusted by now, which could have been nice, but we would have lost something. So we found this material, I could not have built it in stainless steel, it would be far too expensive. But the 3CR12 in combination with a patina, the colouring effect – which is gone in South Africa, they can't do it anymore. What's interesting about that process, there was also a bit of luck of the draw: you put it in, you kept it for 20 minutes, you got gold, you put it in the tank, and you kept it for 23 minutes and it came out orange. So, working with the last tanks that were available, we got the last tanks of colouring; the colouring system was abandoned in South Africa because they couldn't get the consistency of the colour. Inconsistency was exactly what we wanted. So we revived the tanks, and we put the chemicals in, and this guy made them and coloured them all for us in the most random way. And that was good, because it took a cheap material and with one technique we got something that lasts for a long time. So it's good to think about using materials that are external, that are not too expensive, and thinking of ways that could make them last. That whole piece, if you moved it indoors, you could have made it out of mild steel. As an artist you have that issue all the time. I've painted artworks which looked terribly tacky after many years. But for my work now, I've started to work a lot with renewable bamboo. Because bamboo is this extraordinary material that is hard and that is so renewable, you can almost watch it grow. It's replacing hardwoods all over the world. My whole house here is practically built out of bamboo, in the Netherlands. The biggest distributor of bamboo is actually here in the Netherlands and they get it from China. It's basically simple bamboo that is stripped into its elements and then packed together. It's half the price of the hardwood and it makes so much sense. You should use materials that are renewable and replaceable. On that score, architects have got this huge responsibility to think about – I mean, concrete is the biggest emitter of terrible... It's a real problem. But look at the building that you're in, it's all concrete. It's a beautiful material and architects are absolutely in love with concrete. But at some stage, we're gonna have to think about how to replace concrete. Bamboo, believe it or not, is a possibility. I'm getting beams and flooring, incredible products - I've just built a street library in Jerusalem, all built out of bamboo and steel and aluminum elements. So oxidation is the big one. What I learned from 3CR12 and the court, is that if you control the oxidation you control the patina that will happen over the years, like copper. With copper you'll have a green sculpture in 100 years.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:54:28



FLC: What is the conservation impact of oxidation c? And the environmental impact of the material, the 3CR12?

LL: In this case, we've frozen the surface. Because of the method it's made inert. So there's no further oxidation on the 3CR12. In the mines it forms this very thin layer. Have you heard of corten? Architects love it, they use it here a lot. It's material that then rusts and then forms a barrier to further rust. You know, the bridge at Wits is made out of corten. It's not available in South Africa, the 3CR12 is a wonderful alternative. I built the whole Lebone screens out of that, and I used aluminium, and then controlled the rusting of the 3CR12 elements and then the other elements would stay.

FLC: So how long do you think the sunscreens at the court would still last? And what would be the possible reason that they deteriorate to the extent where they have to be redone? Or is that still in many years' time?

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 01:56:15

LL: Well, they should last forever really. I mean, the Dead Sea Scrolls is parchment from the desert.

FLC: I'm asking all of this because we have a conservation section in our booklets, because it is something we actively advocate for throughout the collection and my colleague, Thina, who you met in the beginning, she works specifically with conservation. It's actually one of the exceptions, because normally in our publications we have a whole section about how we had to restore the work and how we did it. So in the case of the sunscreens, it's different because it was made the way it was, we don't have to restore it.

LL: All the elements there are either aluminum stainless steel, even the frames. I don't think it needs work. I mean, if it's oxidized, it hasn't oxidized up to now. I would like when I come back to South Africa I'll go and have a look. But I think that it probably just needs a wipe down.

FLC: Patrick said the same.

LL: I wouldn't spray it, just wipe it down. What we could wipe it down with is a silicone mix, because then it will bring out the colours again. You just need a silicone wipe down; you get a silicone liquid. We've got this thing in the Netherlands called WD-40. It's amazing material. It's like a silicone spray.



See if you can get it there. It's worldwide. You'd put it on a rag. I wouldn't overload it, because when you spray a moving part too much you attract dust. You've got to be careful of that. If you do too much thick, pasted grease, you attract dust, but if it's done very lightly, it will be amazing. It's also a much better way to clean dust off an object, because when you use a rag, sometimes you'll introduce grains and dirt and then you'll scratch. This stuff when you spray it on it glides off. Look Francois, I've got this meeting...

FLC: I am done with my questions. My last question was just if you would like to add anything?

LL: Francois, you've kind of inspired me a bit here. What I think we should do, let me go through my pictures and drawings and just put together a few images that I can send to you.

FLC: That'll be amazing, because we'd like to use them in the publication.

TIME ON AUDIO RECORDING: 02:00:20

LL: Some of them are old, but they'll also give you some more little details. I'll send it to you. And then we can maybe have one last little chat for 20 minutes when you're ready.

FLC: Thank you. When were you born? That's one question I didn't get

LL: 1961.

FLC: Thank you for your time. It's been very insightful.

END OF AUDIO RECORDING: 02:02:15