

WILL (WILLIAM BERTHOLD) FLEISSIG. Born 1951.

SUMMARY of OH 1046V.

This interview was recorded on December 3, 2001, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Paige Good. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Paige Good.

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00:00 From 1994-1997, Will Fleissig served as Planning Director for City of Boulder. Born in 1951, White Plains, NY. Childhood dream of being a conductor. Became a scientist. Worked at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. Discusses how this led to his interest in design. Educational background, description of how he came to be an architect, designer, and then a planning director.

05:55 Discusses how he became involved in public policy and urban design.

07:13 Discusses learning how to analyze a project by applying skills in design, public policy, and finance.

08:55 Formed a company called City West that advised groups all over the western United States about how to bring people together to use design and public policy to solve development issues. Worked in Lower Downtown Denver, Bay area, Tucson, Seattle, etc.

10:13 Hired by Federico Pena to act as Director of Downtown Planning and Development for the city of Denver: 1984-1987. This time involved many projects for the revitalization of Downtown Denver such as Lower Downtown, Convention Center, Coors Field, lofts downtown. Brought a lot of groups together to effect the revitalization of the LoDo area.

11:15 After 1987, became very interested in looking at ways to work with community groups and understanding their goals so that his projects would be solving their issues. Began to do a lot of affordable housing projects in the Colorado mountains and in the Bay area as a developer. His projects integrated very low, low, moderate, and market rate housing. The housing was near transit stations, so people didn't have to have two or three cars. He put together coalitions of employers, civic groups, city government, and bankers to form nonprofit groups in a variety of locations, including Aspen and Steamboat Springs, to build housing and then to work with employers who were having problems finding housing for their employees.

13:33 Came to Boulder in 1994. Describes how he became Planning Director for city. Grueling process. Was offered the job after fifteen straight hours of interviews.

16:22 Boulder represented a big challenge. The history of planning in Boulder was very powerful. The original vision, from 1968, to create a compact community and surround it with open space, was still very clear. His feeling, though, was that the city had lost its way in

trying to resolve the thorny issues of transportation congestion, affordable housing, maintaining open space, and keeping the tax base strong. He felt that the open space part of the mission had been successful, but that there needed to be more successful work on affordable housing, mixed use buildings, a transportation network, and creating economic diversity within the community. Other issues: 1) describes problems with morale and direction for city planning staff members at the time that he arrived. Took it as his mission to rebuild the department, protect the staff. 2) Despite Boulder's incredible beauty and amenities such as the bicycle path, he felt that the quality of design was fairly mediocre, especially in the more recent subdivisions, which felt like they could be anywhere rather than being Boulder specific. Wanted to help define a Boulder look that would bring together history, culture, climate, materials, etc.

20:19 Had a goal of creating affordable housing that would be physically and visually integrated into the community. Transportation planning was critical to decrease congestion. Wanted to create cooperation between departments—such as between planning and transportation. He had to manage many different groups: preservation, landmark, downtown and other committees.

22:15 At the time he became planning director there was a building moratorium. City manager directed him to figure out how to get the moratorium lifted.

23:55 Neighborhoods in Boulder. Each area had different issues. The challenge of North Boulder: annexation of North Boulder had occurred in 1991, three years before he took over. When you annex you have to designate zoning. The zoning had been given but there had been no plan to see what the city wanted. So at the point that Will came on board, the property owners already had their development rights and then the city said, well, we want to do a plan. This order of doing things made it hard to shift things and change things. Did a community workshop to involve the citizens in designing what would be the future of North Boulder. One of his biggest achievements as planning director was getting a new plan adopted for North Boulder. New zoning and new guidelines were written. This new plan created a much more cohesive neighborhood.

26:00 Poplar Housing Project (west of Broadway on Poplar) opened door for diverse, well-designed and affordable housing in Boulder. It was really nicely designed, but “the neighbors went crazy about adding these twelve houses, because they were a little bit smaller and it was a different kind of arrangement, but... I was able to convince the planning board and educate them about these other housing options. But that became a prototype, which then allowed for the Buena Vista project, which happened at Yarmouth, and which then opened the door for the Drive-In Theater (development), which will be primarily a mixed-income project, as well as the Dakota Ridge. So I felt that again through demonstrating really great design, that we could get the citizenry to say, ‘you know what? This is pretty good, this adds to the neighborhood, and look at the people who are living here, it doesn't detract from what is here, in fact it enhances it,’ that we set the base for these other projects that are coming down the line.

27:15 Zoning code was not producing projects that the community wanted to see. So every project had to be negotiated or you had to get variances or you had to get the planning board

to overrule the "by-right code." Told planning board that either they would have to continue negotiating every project or the code had to be changed. More and more projects were being reviewed by special review—in some cases it took years to get a project approved. There was a faction that wanted to stop the whole system and institute another moratorium, create a commercial growth management system which would limit the amount of development that would happen in any one year.

28:46 Council called him in and asked what other options they had. Will suggested changing the code so that jobs and housing would be in better balance. Council said, OK, rezone the city; you have six months. This is a process that typically takes 2 to 4 years. He said, it can't be done in that time. They said, sorry, do it. He went to his staff and said, in order to do this, we are going to have to change the way that we function if we are going to be able to rezone 5,000 properties in six months. Council had been adding more and more work for the planning staff to do without giving them enough increased resources.

30:28 Had dozens of neighborhood meetings to engage people very early on. Some council people argued for down zoning the downtown. Will believed that would be the wrong thing to do: should add not subtract density from downtown—its where you have your best transportation and people can walk the most. Called together the chairs of the five boards involved in downtown. Created the Downtown Alliance with Dan Corson, who is now on city council, and over the course of three months "rethought the zoning code, showed people what it would look like, created bonuses for housing, and we changed the rules. What resulted, once the rezoning happened, are the buildings we now see on Pearl Street at 8th and Pearl, at 9th and Pearl, at 17th, 18th, and 19th and Pearl... they all became mixed-use buildings that had housing, that had retail, that had offices and that were compatible with the downtown." By getting the rules right, developers could get a permit in three months rather than in four years. "That is one of the things I feel so good about, because people realized that you could get good design and also add density at the same time and get something that was compatible with the neighborhood. Plus it's multi-use, so we've actually found that people don't have to have a car, they can get around and take the HOP." At the same time that this was going on the shuttle buses—the HOP, the SKIP, the JUMP—were going in.

33:32 Issue of design guide lines. Not that much more housing was going to get built—only about 3,000 lots left—but there was a lot more demand for commercial development. Could see that over time, people would buy the smaller, older homes and pop them up, build them out and they would bulk up and lose some of their character. Convinced council to test an idea in one of the neighborhoods. Didn't want to define what people could build, but wanted to define the streets, the public realm, what you would see from the streets, so that Boulder would not lose its individual neighborhood character. Decided to test idea on Flatirons Neighborhood, which included parts of Uni-Hill, which volunteered to be the guinea pig. One citizen group in the neighborhood didn't like the idea and was successful in getting the council to vote against creating the design guidelines. But the planning department had finished a pamphlet about design guide line and some of the residents were using that pamphlet in deciding how to remodel their homes. Thinks that the city should have a role in offering design advice to people who

are redeveloping their homes.

36:17 Two large unresolved projects: 1) Crossroads Mall. Wrote a memo to city council in 1996 saying that Flatirons Crossing was coming and that Boulder had to proceed with a redesign of Crossroads that would include mixed use and mixed income housing. Tried to get council to focus on it, but they didn't seem to think it was important at that time. 2) Other thing that was not successful was what to do with the North Boulder Village Center, which would have been the heart of the neighborhood around Broadway, Yarmouth and Violet. There was a plan to house a Safeway plus other retail, offices and housing on the site. Neighborhood opposition led the applicant to withdraw the application. Without this neighborhood center, people have to drive two miles or more to stores such as Albertson's, which causes more congestion. Development of a village center would have reduced the vehicle miles traveled. People would have had shorter trips.

38:28 One of his favorite moments as planning director: Was trying to change the work expectations for planning dept. People were being seriously overworked. For example, Will was working 10-hour work days, plus an average of 3 night meetings a week. About a year and a half into his tenure, the staff came up with a new way to organize the work that involved immediately stopping work and "debriefing" when something was going wrong. The new organization led to much more effective work, communication, and job satisfaction.

42:01 Story about pushing for a redesign of a building (where Dandelion's is now) to create a better building and a pass-through that improved the look and use of the area. As a result, The Boulder Daily Camera also changed its parking lot and finished the alley. "It was again this Boulder approach which has worked so well through the years: you do a demonstration project, you do a little piece—like the Boulder Creek—you did a little piece, that's cool, let's do another piece, you do another piece, and here we have the great Boulder Creek Bike Path." The HOP shuttle started as a demonstration program. People said, this is cool—and now there's the SKIP, the LEAP, and the BOUND. Design has been the same. His intention was to show that by using good design with appropriate materials you really don't experience the sense of additional density—this is the key to creating more affordable housing.

45:22 Three crucial challenges Boulder faces for the future: 1) Relationship between the University and the city. Is at a low point now. University is the major institution that will help Boulder to succeed—they are tied completely, at the hip, the heart and the lung—there has to be better leadership on both sides and a changing of the mistrust on both sides. Need to think through how to handle the development of the South Campus. 2) Crossroads Redevelopment. Need to create a gateway to the city with mixed-income housing, retail, a walking environment, cultural opportunities. Need to bring East Boulder back into Boulder. That area is now the geographic center. It could become the new downtown and the current downtown could be preserved as an historical part. The 28th and Pearl area could be a more contemporary downtown, where all the pieces come together. Boulder Steel Yards (30th and Walnut), which was approved under his tenure, is a good example of mixed-use and affordable housing. 3) If affordable, mixed-income, housing projects are not pushed forward and designed properly, Boulder will become a "wealthy person's ghetto" like Palo Alto is today, where you have \$700,000 homes and people have to make

\$150,000 to \$200,000 to even consider living there. “If we don’t maintain the diversity of housing type and affordability, and really put housing in your shopping centers and shopping districts...—along with transit, that’s critical—Boulder will just become another wealthy place to be and will lose its essence, its character as Boulder....I fear that. I hope that the leadership and that the future planning staff and housing staff will continue to show exemplary projects of how to incorporate the affordability right into the design so that will continue on for many, many years.”

49:01End of interview