

Art is All Around You  
Tape 8

I: Cusiworthim's fountain there... –

A: Oh, yes, yes.

I: Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

A: **08:00:32** Elena Cusiworthim's fountain on Praire near Travis is part of the Cotswell project, and it has quite a bit of public art integrated into it. In that particular project, what we were really trying to do was take our very first block of **08:00:52** the Cotswell project -- which was intended to introduce a new type of environment in the downtown that was more intimately scaled, more richly detailed, more pedestrian oriented -- and we had this problem -- and the problem was that the new garage for the Rice had no ground floor uses whatsoever, it was just a basically a big parking garage with a blank wall **08:01:18** on the ground -- and we used that blank wall as a opportunity to create a work of art -- sort of a test work of art and a test fountain for the Cotswell project -- and working with the Cultural Arts Counsel with Debbie, we -- we got Elena Cusiworthim involved, and then she worked with the design team, Ray de la Reza and SWA Group, to come up with the overall concept for the fountain.

I: What's the overall concept?

A: **08:01:50** Well, the overall concept -- they really -- I think Elena had a lot to do with it -- and she's she has a very Latin -- sort of Latin American point of view, let's say -- and she was bound and determined that Houston should, you know, sort of engage its urbanity -- you know, and not be ashamed and not be timid about the fact that -- for instance, we might be creating a seating area where a homeless person might sit. **08:02:21** She -- she thought that was fine, as did the rest of us, and so she was really trying to infuse this -- this environment with a lot of life and color. Now, in a first round of the fountain -- not what you see out there today -- working with the designers, she came up with a concept as bronze leaves that that would then have water pouring over them as -- as one of the effects on the fountain, and she was happy to do it. **08:02:52** But bronze and that and sort of a monochromatic style wasn't really what Elena was about, and we did have some vandalism on that fountain -- a number of the leaves got stolen, and we got together with Elena and with Rey de la Reza, discussed it, and she said "We need to do it with tile." **08:03:12** And then -- so then -- she created her just wonderfully rich sort of voluptuous, swirling sort of tile, leaves and stems, and -- and all, you know, sort of all the elements that you see on there today, and it and

it just, you know, has this incredible richness to it **08:03:30** -- and I think especially at night when the lights are on and the water is shimmering and -- and, you know, the fountain really does what it was intended to do on that -- on that block.

I: Which it really does. It really infuses a lot of color and --

A: Yes --

I: - movement into that otherwise really boring --

A: **08:03:49** -- it could have been a very dead about a half-block or so adjacent to that garage -- and it's ended up being -- it's a wonderful block in downtown with the various clubs and restaurants and, you know, the eating at Cabo up above and the great view of the fountain from -- from the -- the deck of Cabo on that second floor over the sidewalk.

I: I'm going to make a note of that.

A: **08:04:14** Yeah, yeah. No, it's a wonderful -- they -- just in general -- it's a great place to go and have a margarita.

I: Okay. Are you familiar with the art in Market Square?

A: **08:04:22**I'm familiar with it. I live right off of Market Square, so I walk through there almost every day.

I: Tell me what you think about the art in Market Square.

A: **08:04:30**There's a lot of the art in Market Square that I -- I really love. I think James Searle's piece is wonderful, and --

I: Which piece of James Searle's?

A: His is the -- I don't even know the name of it, but --

I: Points of View.

A: Points? Okay, **08:04:45** James Searle's Points of View in the center of the -- of the Square. It takes on the role of your traditional obelisk or equestrian statue or - or whatever you might find in a more traditional public square -- let's say in the northeast, but it -- but it's very organic and -- it's -- and it's sort of very much

about Houston, let's say in the 1980's. **08:05:12** And then the -- Melu Flato's benches are wonderful works of really public furniture and of a great scale and sort of solidity. I'm thrilled we got her to add the tables -- the water tables out to the side. Paul Hester's photographs on the benches -- **08:05:32** I can't tell you how many people I see who actually -- just standing in the middle of Market Square Park, literally going one by one through the photographs and -- and -- and looking at them -- and then the various fragments in the pavement, some of which are from places like the Shamrock swimming pool that I remember as a kid and, you know, it's kind of scary that that part of my childhood has gone on into history. So, it it it's a wonderful park in a lot of ways. **08:06:01** What it's missing is a city around it, and it needs to have its four -- four edges developed again. It needs to have activity and life and -- and -- and -- and a city on all four sides again, and I'm -- I'm hoping that will happen soon. **08:06:18**

I: Can you talk a little bit about those architectural pieces that are in the ground? What are they, and explain all that?

A: They -- they are -- **08:06:26** the architectural pieces in the ground, as -- as -- as -- as I understand it, are fragments from various historic environments that were endangered, and the artist team went around and scavenged them -- they, on -- I don't know, Sunday night whatever -- would go and jackhammer up a tile piece out of a sidewalk that looked like it was going to be demolished. They got a little fragment of tile from the Shamrock Hilton swimming pool. **08:06:58** So you see these -- these vestiges -- these just moments taken out of context. You don't know where they were from, although I think they're explained on the-the main marker, and they're just sort of scattered randomly around the park. -- and I think that randomness is appropriate for Houston, too. **08:07:18** You know, it's kind of the way the -- a lot of the city seems to work.

I: How about Paul Hester's photographs? What are they? What are you seeing?

A: **08:07:27** Well, generally the photographs I -- are of environments sort of before and after and -- I'll be honest with you, I haven't looked at them in a while because I -- I know the environment pretty well, and I think it's -- they're more important for people who -- who don't know this place and don't know where it came from and why it is what it is.

I: What do you like about James Searle's piece?

A: I think it has -- **08:08:01** James Searle's piece has a presence to it that is important in a space like that. It -- it's -- it's competent and assertive. You know, and -- it

has enough scale and height. When the lights are working, the up lights, it's quite beautifully uplit at night. So, I mean, there's a lot of reasons –

I: And how about the – you had talked about the furniture there. Could you talk – do you know any of the back story on those pieces at all? What they're made of? How long they've been there? Any of that?

A: Well, well, Melu – **08:08:37** Melu Flato's benches are -- have been there since the park opened. She was one of the original artists -- and they are glazed tile, and they are intended to pick up the richness of the market square when Houston's public market was actually located there – that richness of life and color, and, you know -- the vegetables and the fruits and the farmers and the activity and all of that – and kind of capture that in those pieces. **08:09:09** And they are very – the thing I like about them is they're at a -- a big enough scale that they --they -- they have a presence -- unlike your typical bench or piece of street furniture. They really mark the spot, and you sit in them and you feel safe. **08:09:28** They kind of close in around you, -- and you-you -- you don't have an unprotected, you know, whatever -- approach from -- from behind. You're completely protected by those benches.

I: Okay. What about the water table, too? I thought those were really neat.

A: Well, we – **08:09:51** The Cotswell project, when it was originally announced, proposed to basically remove Market Square Park and build an underground parking garage --and create a water garden -- on the park itself. And that was a set of proposals that were basically born in the private sector -- and as the project evolved into a City of Houston project managed by the downtown district, there were concerns raised by people who had spent years, if not decades, raising money -- and going through the effort to create that park saying, **08:10:35** “We can't destroy this place!” I mean -- it really hasn't even come into its own. So when the newly instigated Cotswell project really got going, we -- we made a commitment to work with the artist who was originally on the team, and that in this case -- being Melu Flato. **08:10:55** It's her pieces that are around the edge of the park on the sidewalks. And in working with Melu, she -- I believe, indicated - - that she had originally wanted to do some type of table piece in front of the benches -- and the idea of integrating water into it, because water was the theme of Cotswell, sounded great to her. So you get these -- these very reflective table surfaces made out of water -- and now that we have a market back at Market Square, **08:11:31** I love to see the kids playing in playing in the water table, you know, with the parents resting on the benches and whatever. It's -- it's that kind of -- kind of moment that – I've been using the word “serendipity” too much --

but where it just sort of happens -- and it's those experiences that we need to be creating for, not only kids, but for adults as well.

I: Great. Um, anything else you want to say about Market Square, or do you think we hit it?

A: Oh, I think I've said as much as I possibly can [laughing].

I: Um, David Adicke's Virtuoso... you want to talk a little bit about --

A: Oh my goodness!

I: Just try and talk...

A: **08:12:11** I saw in the paper that David Adicke was protesting the col -- his, the bowtie on Virtuoso being painted black.

I: The mustache.

A: Oh, the mustache, that's right. It was the mustache being painted black. I-I'm kind of shocked by that, too. **08:12:28** I think Virtuoso is a -- Houston version -- of pop art. I mean, it's -- it's -- clearly a work of art that that came out of David Adicke's mind, and then it was sited in this location, which is a perfectly fine location for it, but there's a funkiness to it that that is what Houston is about. **08:12:57** And so, on the one hand, I -- don't like the music that's played around it, but it's a -- funny kind of funky work that -- that's not trying to be too serious, and -- in -- I think the theater district kind of suffers a little bit from too much seriousness. We need a little bit more funny and funk, and so in that sense I like it.

I: What else do you think about it?

A: [Laughing] Um [Pauses] I'm not sure if I've thought too much more about it. I'm -- y-you're catching me off guard on this question.

I: That's all right. Everybody says they hate it, but nobody want to say it on camera [laughing]

A: [Laughing]

I: I understand.

A: Yeah, I -- you know -- it's -- I don't hate it. I don't hate it. **08:13:58** I think 20 years ago I did, but something that -- I'm -- I'm growing much, much more comfortable with what makes Houston what it is, and it's pieces like that that are part of Houston's psyche. It's just the willingness to do something like that. It's the willingness to have it at Aquarium across from the opera house. **08:14:29** I mean, what other city would you find that -- a ferris wheel and -- you know -- and on the one hand I know a lot of people who -- who really *hate* those kinds of situations, and in a Boston or Paris or something like that -- yeah. But you know, in Houston, that's part of our personality, those -- those crazy juxtapositions. **08:14:50** So, having the Virtuoso sort of sitting there -- if, like, you roll your eyes and you go, "Okay, you know -- we know where we are, we're in Houston," and -- that -- there's something okay about that.

I: Why do you think that piece has such reaction? It's one of those that -- 'cause a lot of times with public art, people -- actually you might want dab while I ask[inaudible]

A: Dab? Up here?

I: Yeah -- right there -- You know, a lot of people, like you were saying earlier, don't think anything about public art, don't have reaction to it, but, boy, that piece is one piece that people either love it or they *hate* it. Why do you think that piece has such a reaction?

A: **08:15:24** Well, I think it's in a -- in a location where a lot of people who have a lot of opinions about art see it. I mean, it's very near various performing arts facilities, so you're going to get a more opinionated cross-section of Houstonians -- opinionated about art -- viewing that piece. **08:15:46** It is unusual. It is sort of, I don't know -- a little bit trying to be Picasso, but not really. [Laughing] You know? So, I -- I'm not sure -- but you're right. It does get strong reactions. **08:16:06**

I: Anything else that you might want to add that I might not have asked you, but I ... --

A: Oh my gosh! No, you've asked me a lot.

I: Okay [Laughing]

A: [Laughing] I think you've wiped me out.

I: Okay. You did a great job.

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A: Okay.

I: You did a great job. [Pause] That's it.

A: I had no idea you were going to – I'm not complaining at all, it was fun, but it's like, "Wow!" [Laughing]

I: [Laughing] Well, I'll bet you and Debbie... [tape cuts off]