James Snyder in Conversation with Josh Ginsburg | Power of Place From Rural America to the Creative Cultural World

- Good afternoon, everybody. I'm very pleased to welcome my dear friend James to discuss his personal journey from rural America to the creative cultural world. James Schneider is Executive Chairman of the Jerusalem Foundation and Director Emeritus of the Israel Museum Jerusalem, where he served as director from 1997 to 2016, and then as International President through 2018. He serves also as a senior fellow of the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School. James was appointed Executive Chairman at the Jerusalem Foundation in July, 2019. In this newly created position, James works closely with the foundation's international leadership to champion the vision of founder Teddy Kollek, Jerusalem's legendary mayor, to formalise and promote the city's role as an urban model for cross-communal existence across its economic, social, and cultural spectrum.

And for the mixed community of Jews, Christians, and Muslims who live and work there. During his 20 year tenure at the Anne and Jerome Fisher, director of the Israel Museum, James led the museum through the most dramatic period of growth since its founding and secured as one of the world's foremost museums. I'm delighted that James will be in conversation, with one of my team, Josh Ginsburg, who is the director of A4 Arts Foundation, a free to public not-for-profit laboratory for the arts of Southern Africa. We conceived A4 in 2015, and we moved into our physical home in 2017 in Cape Town. He holds a BAC in electrical-mechanical engineering, and a Masters in fine art from UCT. Thank you James. And thank you Josh. It now gives me a great pleasure to hand the floor over to you. Thank you.

- Thank you, Wendy.

- Thank you, Wendy. That was a lovely introduction. And actually, before we do anything else, I really want to say a few things to Wendy and about Wendy. We know about Wendy's amazing energy in the cultural world, and I guess particularly, I've had the pleasure to work with her a lot in the contemporary art world, on the contemporary art landscape globally. And it's really something that's been quite exciting. And during this pandemic time when we are all adjusting to a different way of life, of course Wendy's been extraordinary, to think of doing this series, which I call Wendy Fisher University.

And you know, everyone is looking at the internet and there's a kind of avalanche of webinars appearing in the internet and most of them go unnoticed. And of course it's pretty remarkable, Wendy, that what you've done has been able to capture an audience that is staying with you, and that is doing two things. It's giving a lot of people an opportunity to talk from where they are to others elsewhere in the world, but it's giving a lot of people all around the world the opportunity to be in touch. So before we do anything else, I simply want to thank you for doing that. Wendy asked me, for today, to do a kind of personal talk.

She said to do a kind of personal journey. I don't really like talking about myself, but of course

you can't say "no" to Wendy and what I realised I could do, and I've been doing it in these last few years since returning from Jerusalem to New York, I've been thinking about, of course, life in retrospect. And for me, what I realise is that: where you are, place, has a lot to do with how your life unfolds. And what you find is meaningful as you move from one stage of your life to another, and of course you don't understand this in prospect, you understand it in retrospect. And so I've really spent time thinking back to where I started, what that looked like, and what certain places over time have come to mean to me based on where they are, and what they are, and how they look.

And I guess for me, throughout all this time, I've developed this kind of sensibility about the notion that all things connect across time and across geography. And again, I wouldn't have said that on day one when I started to grow up where I grew up. But looking back, I see that that's something that's been really meaningful throughout time. And it's also, for me, given a meaning to the term "serendipity". This idea that things connect in amazing ways and they make you understand and appreciate what's happening to you in very different ways.

So what we are going to do is the following: I'm going to talk first about this notion of the meaning of "place", the power of "place"; and then Josh and I are going to engage in a conversation after that. And if you bear with me for a moment, I'm going to do my best to share screen and get to some images, which I hope you're seeing now. Josh, are we seeing these? Oh good.

Images are displayed

- [Josh] Yeah, we're good.

- So I will use these just to sort of go through this journey as a kind of physical journey over time. And then Josh and I will have a conversation afterward. You all know this opening image, I hope. If you don't, you will know it and understand it more when we finish. Being a view of of the Israel museum, it's east elevation, at a very special moment which is sunset at the summer solstice; when this place could not be more luminous. So keep that in mind while we're going through the other images I'm going to show you. Hmm, Josh?

- [Josh] Try the arrows, James.

- I am, let's see, I'll try again.

- In the bottom left hand corner, they look like their little arrows there. Just try to touch on those. Mm, just click there.

- Ah, okay. We can do it this way.

- [Josh] Cool.

- All right. So here you see a a sign for the little town of Bell Vernon, Pennsylvania, which is in rural southwestern Pennsylvania on the Monongahela River. It's a town of about, well, when I grew up there, there were 1900 residents there. It's in that southwestern part of Pennsylvania, which is about, was then about coal mining and steel milling. And you see on this sign that Bell Vernon means "beautiful green". But here is an image of the main street of Bell Vernon called "Broad Avenue". And you can see that it's neither beautiful nor green. And really, growing up there, if you were sensitive to the landscape around you, this was a pretty dismal setting to have in your surrounding.

But if you look here, this is actually Bell Vernon nestled into this river valley of the Monongahela River, which was, before the industrial period, a very beautiful and lush place in rural Pennsylvania. It became something else. But it's a funny thing that even as a child, when I would climb up on a hill above our town, which you're seeing in the foreground here, you understood this idea of a broader landscape. Now of course I wasn't thinking about that then, but etched in my mind is this thing about living in a place, rising above it and seeing a broader picture because of it. Now, about 20 miles from where I was born, nestled into another part of that rural wilderness, was, you all know this: Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic "Falling Water". And again, as a child, I would see this not because you could visit it, you had to be 18 years old or older to go there.

But we would all go to to ride the rapids on the river just in front of "Falling Water". And you know, again, it's not something that you could think of as a young kid in a sophisticated way or with a sophisticated vocabulary, but you saw something that looked like the kind of intersection of site, setting, landscape and architecture in a way that was unbelievably powerful. And again, this is something that I didn't understand at the time, but what stays in my memory, and it's always stayed in my memory. So from this part of Pennsylvania, I got sent off to boarding school, again in rural Pennsylvania, but in rural South Central Pennsylvania, a place called the Mercersburg Academy.

Most of you haven't heard of it. It was a wonderful place, it's still very close to my heart. But I knew from the day that I got there that I was in an exceptional place. It sits on a plateau surrounded by the Tuscarora Mountains, which are sort of foothills to the Appalachian Mountains. You see them in the distance here. And the school itself was built, initially, before the Civil War. And all of its architecture was a kind of Pennsylvania brick built on foundations of fieldstone that came from the place, that came from the site. And again, it's not something that you thought of, this is a vintage image from the 1890s. But, and actually, this building is sort of a kind of neo-gothic confection there, but all the buildings were of Pennsylvania brick on fieldstone that came from in and around Mercersburg itself. Today the school is magnificent.

You still, actually, all of the flora there is indigenous. You have these unbelievable magnolias in the spring that you never forget for the rest of your life. And the backdrop, again and always, is Pennsylvania brick on fieldstone. And here, you see just from a recent image, one of those

magnificent magnolias; behind it, one of these foundation walls of of fieldstone. So this is something very powerful and that did stay with me. By the time I was in boarding school, I was old enough to realise that the site, the setting, the landscape, the architecture of a place could really have an impact on you. Now when I finished my academic training and I went on to the Museum of Modern Art, as a very young professional, this is actually an image of MoMA the way that it looked, I arrived there in 1974. In this entry, You see the original 1939 MoMA with the two dark bookends, which are by Phillip Johnson in 1965. So this is a vintage image, but it happens to be from the time after 1965.

Actually, here in my study, if you look behind me, the backdrop, are the original architectural drawings for MoMA in 1939. At a certain point in my MoMA career, I realised the meaning of all of these things and I was given this set of drawings, which have stayed with me since that time. When you look at this image of MoMA, it's funny in a couple of ways. First, if you're not thinking in terms of the power of architecture in its setting, this does look a little bit like Broad Avenue in Bell Vernon where I grew up. Of course, we all have much greater knowledge than that. We all know that the original MoMA from 1939 is really one of the signature works of international modernism, adapted for the urban landscape in New York.

So this is about architecture and modernism, particularly in a landscape, but it's not a natural landscape. Rather, it is an urban landscape. And I suspect you all know the iconic power of the sculpture garden at MoMA, which also happened in 1965 when Philip Johnson was redoing MoMA. And when I arrived there, really not long thereafter, less than 10 years later, the garden had an incredibly powerful meaning for me because it wasn't about architecture surrounded by landscape, whether natural or urban. It was about landscape, in this case urban, surrounding architecture. So that this garden kind of burst out into the city from this location. And throughout all of my years at MoMA, it really was about absorbing the power of this.

And actually thinking back to Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water", which again was about magnificent architecture against the backdrop of of landscape, of nature. And here it's really about nature, this precious garden, surrounded by the urban landscape. Now, from that setting in 1996, I went off to Jerusalem with Tina, my wife, and with our kids to become director of the Israel Museum. First, I'll tell you a bit of a narrative and then I'll explain the drawings that are in front of you. I went for the first time to Jerusalem to see the museum in April, 1996. I'd never, some of you know this, we had never before been to Israel.

It was first experience there. I was sort of taken with the idea of a museum that was only 30 years old, which had somehow in a very short time developed a kind of signature collection that began with antiquity and came to the present. But I knew nothing beyond that. And I went off to see it on a certain rainy day in April of 1996. And I was immediately struck by what I was seeing. Now what I'm showing you here goes back before that time goes back to the early 1960s when the museum was just a glimmer in Teddy Kollek's eye. And they brought an architect named Al Mansfield, who was Russian born, German trained, sort of a Bauhaus emigre to mandate period Palestine. And he looked at the site and conceived of what you see in this drawing.

On the top you see a sketch of an Arab village on a Jerusalem hillside. Then you see a sketch, which was his first idea of translating that Arab village into a modernist modular architectural system. And below that, you see actually a photograph of the museum shortly after it was built. Now it's sort of rare that your first architectural vision becomes the reality, but you see in these three images, the powerful exception that the Israel Museum represents. Now, when I went to see the museum, it didn't exactly look like what you're seeing now.

This is how the museum looks today. But in essence, this is what I saw. And it really is just an extension of what you see here from first drawing to architectural conception to early manifestation, to its present manifestation. And it's really something powerful. And I got to the museum, this is, here you're looking at this notion of a city on the hill.

And Al Mansfield's idea was that using this modular system, the museum could grow organically over time the way that a village would become a town that would become a city. And here in this aerial view, you see how, in fact, the museum became that. And the approach to the museum, as I hope you all know from visiting there, is to ascend this promenade to to an apex from which you enter the museum and you begin to appreciate its cultural narrative.

This is a view in daytime, I'm showing you this view just so that you can really absorb the power of the architecture of this place. And in this image, you'll see the ascent to the Acropolis as you enter the museum and rise to enter into the galleries of the museum for your experience there. And when I went in April of 1996, I was halfway up this promenade when I realised that we were going to move to Israel and I was going to get to have the privilege of being the director of this museum. And you know, why did that happen? I knew it at the time actually.

But in retrospect, it's even more clear to me that you can't find a better example of this powerful collision or intersection of sight, setting, landscape and architecture to create a place that has enormous meaning. And while I had thought of that all through my earlier life and my earlier career, when I came here and then dropped into the galleries of the museum, I realised that there was another component to that formula.

So it's about site, setting, landscape, architecture and content. And we're going to take a quick run through the museum in a moment. But what I want to say first is, my own academic training was in modernism. The idea that something happened in 1850, something happened in the middle of the 19th century that enabled the invention of modernism. Everything in visual culture had been a kind of smooth trajectory to that moment. And suddenly then it started to change.

And between 1850 and 1900 and then 1900 and World War II, and then since World War II, that story has changed dramatically several different times. But honestly, before I went to Jerusalem and experienced and decided to embrace the cultural breadth of what this museum holds, I really didn't think too much about before 1850. And I arrived at the museum and I went inside, which we'll do in a moment, and I suddenly realised that 1850 was actually the thin crust on top

of millennia of cultural engagement and cultural evolution that, in fact, goes from the beginning of time to the present and is ongoing today. And that indeed embraces culture worldwide.

So again, I hope most of you have had this experience firsthand, but when you enter the museum today, you arrive at a centre point. We call it the "Cardo". It's sort of the heart, the main street of the museum experience. And from that "Cardo", you begin with material cultural history, a long time ago, a million plus years ago. And then you follow the trajectory of a narrative that comes to the present and goes around the world. So as you know, you begin with archaeology there. And the collection in the Israel museum is one of the great holdings, if not the most definitive holding of ancient Near-Eastern archaeology.

As one example, I happen to pick a gallery from the Canaanite period, which is the moment when monotheism was invented. But I show you this image because it sits within what was Al Mansfield's original concept for how to develop galleries for this museum. So that modest material like this, which is not made of gold or silver or precious stones, but rather of stone and ceramic would be warm and glowing against a cool backdrop. So this is archaeology there. And as you enter Jewish world culture, which is the narrative of really the Jewish world diaspora from the time that Jews spread worldwide from the Middle East, and the narrative is really about the cycle of life.

Which is why as you enter here, it's a kind of a circular installation, which gives you the opportunity to think of birth, marriage and death as a way to understand what that story is going to be about worldwide. And again, the idea here, is for it to be a connected narrative that does not treat each of its chapters discreetly, but rather in a unified way. So the notions of Sacred Secular Western Oriental are not really divisive here, but rather they are inclusive. And just to show you, because it happens to be in the one place in the world where you can see synagogue interiors from all over the world, from Europe, from Asia, and from the Americas. And this of course is a synagogue from Paramaribo, which is one of the oldest synagogues in the Americas from the middle of the 18th century.

And then here you see where the visual-cultural narrative begins. This is the entrance to fine art galleries at the Israel Museum. Of course you begin with a hundred years of art in Israel because you're in Israel. But the story goes beyond that, of course, to cover the fine art traditions from pre-Renaissance, from mediaeval times and then coming to the present and then worldwide. And here, just to capture for a moment, what classic modern art at the Israel Museum looks like.

And I show you this, again, because it's about all things connecting across time and around the globe. Here you are in the middle of the Middle East, looking at one of the great, classic, pre-war modern collections; and here with an aesthetic, which is actually quite similar to how the first director of MoMA would have displayed this art in the period leading up to World War II.

Of course, fine arts is not just about Western cultures, but also about Asia, Oceania and Africa.

And this is, and then ending with pre Columbia. So really bringing you through a kind of drift, continent to continent, until you circle around to the Americas. Now, this is a story that is all embracing, and it's a story that really does engage you in a subliminal way with the notion that all things connect and that this is about time and it is about an embrace of all things in the universe. And this is what the Israel Museum's story is all about. And it sits anchored in the Middle East, which today we think of as the Middle East. But which 3000 years ago, you would have appreciated from our perspective as the birthplace of the narrative of monotheism, which would enable the theology, first of Judaism and then of Christianity and then of Islam.

And when you think of the power of the architecture of the museum, it is, in its way, about translucency and transparency. And in its way it's about allowing you to explore ambiguity and also find clarity. And then, to use the content that we have just raced through to illustrate that story in any way that you want to accomplish that. Now, as part of the campus, of course you all know that there is "The Shrine of the Book". "The Shrine of the Book" holds the "Dead Sea Scrolls", which are the oldest surviving texts from the Hebrew Bible. And of course they are part of the Jewish theological tradition in a hugely important way, but they have an equally important role in the evolution of the theology of Christianity.

And after Christianity, of Islam, the architecture of "The Shrine of the Book" similarly is about power of place. This is architecture which is not about international modernism, it's an architecture which is about experience and metaphor. The metaphor is that one of the Dead Sea Scrolls is about the fight between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil; the light and dark, lightness and darkness. And the forms of the shrine are these opposing forms. One is curved, linear, white, glistening and bathed in water. The other is black, angular and dry. And so it's about forces in opposition. And then the shrine, the shrine itself sits on a base of indigenous stone.

This is local stone, it's Palestinian stone, done in a Palestinian stone work design. And you know, it's powerful to think that the shrine sits on a foundation made of the bedrock of the place. And you know, you know where I'm going with this. I mean, think about my boarding school experience and these buildings made of Pennsylvania stone on foundations of fieldstone from exactly where the buildings were being built. And you have that same resonance here, and I hope you know about this crazy model of second temple Jerusalem that was built as a tourist attraction in the 1960s. And it was built at a time when archaeologists from Israel couldn't go to the old city because the old city was then under Jordanian control.

And so archaeologists then imagined this at 50:1 scale as the city of Jerusalem at the time of the second temple. And the model, like the city itself, was built of Jerusalem stone. So again, it's the idea of a place built on its bedrock and built out of its bedrock. And on the periphery of this site, you see these stone walls that are made of indigenous stone. You also see bedrock here. And when we were doing this construction, we decided that wherever possible, we would leave the bedrock and then have the new masonry built on the bedrock so that visually, literally, you could see the building of this site coming out of its bedrock.

At the time that we did this construction, I hadn't actually meandered along the eastern wall of the old city in East Jerusalem. A number of years later, I did. And here you actually see a section of wall of the old city from Ottoman times and it's exactly the same construction. So it's this notion, again, of how things connect and resonate. And in this case, and again, where you understand that man's architecture, that man's creation, man's building on the landscape, when it is done from the stone of the landscape itself can have a very special additional power. So this is sort of the story of how all of those things connect, from site and setting, to landscape, architecture and content.

And you know, we're living in a kind of challenging time. I think it's an understatement to say that, but it also made me reflect on how this kind of experience and these kinds of places, nonetheless, even though they are cultural, perhaps also social, nonetheless connect to the complexities and the politics of the time that we live in. Now during my time at the Israel Museum, and actually this was quite different from all of my years at MoMA in New York. At MoMA, we never had a US president visit us at MoMA, even though MoMA's down the block from the Hilton Hotel, which used to be the setting for a lot of political events.

So presidents would drive by MoMA, but they wouldn't stop, get out and come in. You all remember I'm sure when President Obama, boy, this seems like ancient history now actually, you all remember when President Obama came to Israel during his second term. He was there for 48 hours and he particularly requested to come and spend two hours visiting the Dead Sea Scrolls so that he could understand and appreciate what their meaning was. And he came. And I have to say that this was a sort of extraordinary day in our lives. Here you see him arriving with the Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. You see that they're a little bit distant from one another. But, just, absorb that. We had an incredible two hours in the shrine.

I think I had the opportunity to receive three American presidents in succession. They would all come to The Shrine of the Book. Barack Obama spent the longest time there and really absorbed the notion of the powerful meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls; how they relate not just to Jewish theology, but to Christian and Muslim theology. And actually, the night of his visit to the museum, when he did his main public speech during his two days in Israel, he opened by referring to the Dead Sea Scrolls and by referring to the unifying power of those scrolls. So here he is arriving with Bibi Netanyahu.

On his way out, there was this funny kind of distancing. There was this funny kind of openness to appreciate what we'd been able to do because I guess I was a fellow American and he felt most comfortable saying thank you to me. And I'm next going to show you an image which has not been released because you're not allowed to hug or be hugged by the American president. Or at least that used to be the case. And he gave this very appreciative hug as we departed. So this was his goodbye with me in my professional capacity as director. And after we parted, he and the Prime Minister had this contentious little moment off to the side before they went off to have conversations that also had dimensions of contention within them.

Now be that as it may, and that's politics, but the meaning of the US President and coming to spend two out of 48 hours to enjoy and absorb the meaning of a cultural place like the Israel Museum and the meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls as central artefacts in the collection of the museum was something pretty strong. And actually that night, you all remember John Stewart's "Daily Show". John Stewart opened the "Daily Show" with the visit of President Obama to The Shrine of the Book to see the Dead Sea Scrolls. So suddenly, somehow, you have this connection between something that's not political at all, the museum, the power of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So this is like a cultural and humanitarian moment, which is apolitical, but which made a statement having to do with the political time. And it makes you realise that there is something about culture and cultural places that can have meaning even in political times. And I'll go next and last to the time when Ai Weiwei came to visit the Israel Museum. Perhaps, for me, this was another sort of seminal moment in thinking about how to connect culture to what's happening around the world. This was in the summer of 2016.

Ai Weiwei was in Israel, not really to visit Israel. He came to film in the Gaza Strip for the documentary "Human Flow", which he was in the midst of making then and which debuted two years later; and which is really about the universal narrative of the world migration crisis as we are still experiencing it today. He was encouraged by friends of his, on his way out of the country, to stop to see the Israel Museum. We had one hour together, during which time we raced through the several millennia of material cultural history that the museum represents. He hugged me, he thanked me, and he left. Three months later, his studio called to say that he couldn't stop thinking about the narrative that the museum depicted.

That it transcended political trauma and it was about world interconnectedness. And his message was that if we could clear our schedule at the earliest possible time, he would want to do an exhibition with us. Now, Ai Weiwei is very much in demand. There's a long list of institutions worldwide that want to do exhibitions with him, and he chose to put us at the head of that line. So this was then November of that year. Seven months later, we opened an exhibition with Ai Weiwei in Jerusalem called, "Maybe, Maybe Not". And the narrative of the exhibition was based on iconic examples of his work, in this case, that demonstrated the resonance between the spirit of people in China and the spirit of Jewish people in Israel and around the world.

The exhibition was extraordinary. Over 600,000 people came to see it. I won't take you through the whole exhibition, but I want to show you one work because you'll understand the power of what his message wanted to be. This is a work called "Soft Ground". It's actually a carpet. It's a very big carpet that was woven by 200 Chinese carpet weavers. And it is meant to be an exact replica of the marble floor of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where Hitler commissioned the staging of the Exhibition of Degenerate Art in the late 1930s before World War II. And the carpet was actually made in 2004 to be displayed over the actual floor of the Haus der Kunst.

The work is called "Soft Ground" and in that instance, Weiwei's idea was to demonstrate how history can lay over bad moments with other moments in time that can have other meanings. When we were planning our exhibition, Weiwei thought that it would be great to bring this project, and this is serendipity. If you want a definition of serendipity, the dimensions of the carpet being the precise dimensions of this gallery in the Haus der Kunst are exactly the dimensions of this contemporary exhibition gallery at the Israel Museum.

So the piece was installed there, and just think of the power of bringing something that was commissioned to cover the atrocity of the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Germany in the 1930s, to be celebrated in the Israel Museum in 2017. Now the rug is something you can walk on. It was meant to be a little bit of a kind of sanctuary space, but we are in Israel. So people could bring their families and their kids. You just had to take their shoes, your shoes off, and it became a kind of gymboree. And imagine this setting, which has such a weight of meaning, from the time of before World War II in Germany to the present in Jerusalem.

And you see all these Israeli kids having a great time on "Soft Ground". And of course, what is this all about? It's about Weiwei who came to film Gaza as part of a film about the crisis of refugee migration or non-migration. And instead he came to embrace the meaning of Jerusalem and the meaning of Israel in connection with all of the Middle East. There were some among his supporters who criticised him for embracing us, the museum, Jerusalem and so on. And his answer would be that he wanted to be with us and to work with us to show his embrace for and his care for the frailty of the region and the power of the emotions and sentiment of all people who live there. Now I'm just going to show you two more images.

Oops, well, these are his "Iron Trees" sitting in front of The Shrine of the Book. And actually they are about the residents between the petrified trees from the Gobi Desert in China, which hold the spirit of the ancestors of Chinese people and the landscape in Israel dotted with olive trees that represent the kind of immortality of trees that live for centuries. But what I want to show you is Ai Weiwei going into the Machane Yehuda food market and having a seed seller come out of his stall to embrace him. Somehow this seed seller knew about Weiwei, knew his celebrity, knew his connection with migratory people, and he came out to be with him.

Weiwei took this selfie, and when you look at this image, what are you seeing? You're seeing two guys that look like brothers and one is Chinese and one is a Mizrahi Jew an Iraqi Jew who now lives in Jerusalem. And you know, for me, this is the notion of the interconnection of people regardless of where they're from. This notion of connection across time and across geography. And so here you see it, and for me it's quite powerful. And the last image I want to share with you is from 2017. We do, at the Israel Museum, an amazing sort of teaching programme for sixth grade kids that come from all the communities of Jerusalem. They do an exhibition together at the end of the year celebrating their work.

And this happened to be a moment where orthodox Jewish kids and Christian and Muslim Arab kids wanted to do together a selfie to put on Instagram. And if you want to think of this notion of

connectedness, I think you see it here. So that's really what I wanted to talk to you about and I'm happy now to invite Josh to join me so that we can have a kind of exchange about some aspects of what we've just been discussing.

- Cool. Thank you James. Thank you, thank you. I just want to firstly start by saying what an honour it is to be engaging you in this way, even though we have a longstanding conversation, I still think it's an honour to be invited by you to this and perhaps also to pick up on the praise you shared to Wendy, also that my introduction to you from her was the equivalent that this is, this is someone who one can learn from continuously. And I'd say whether it's Venice or New York or South Africa where we've interacted, or now on Zoom of course, it's a total pleasure. So thanks for engaging me as it is.

- So I just want to jump in. There's, so many things to ask after so many different trajectories, but one of them is that the, what you described is a kind of emphasis around "place" and site and I suppose presence. And then there's this jump where you go lead the Israel museum and you're not from there at all. And, in fact, have not spent much time there at all. So I'm curious about how that, not happened so much; but what was like, effectively, to be a foreigner of a kind and have to now lead a major museum with a kind of material cultural wealth within it. Yeah, how did that, how did that play out? What did it mean for you?

- Well, you know, it's a funny thing and all of you who are listening and watching should know that Josh and I have discussed this a little bit, because I said to him when we first met, that coming from South Africa to another place in the world might be like my experience coming from, well, rural southwestern Pennsylvania, but then New York and going to the Middle East for the first time. And this I've thought about a lot and it is the whole notion of landing from another planet. When I got to Israel, people would look at me and say, "You're from another planet." And you know, at first, I thought, "Is that a criticism or is that a kind of expression of adulation?"

And I decided to embrace it. And, it is interesting. Definitely, there, I was from another planet. But coming from another planet gives you the ability to see things in a different way. I don't want to say to see things with greater clarity, but I want to say to see things through a different lens. And you know, Josh and I were speaking and I was talking about, how could it be that Irving Berlin, a Jewish immigrant child to America, could compose "White Christmas" and have it be the song indelibly etched in everyone's minds about Christmas.

And, in a way, it's the same thing. If you land from another planet, you have a different kind of objectivity about everything you see, and perhaps you're more likely to struggle to look for and then to celebrate finding connections among things that are across time and from around the world. I'll bet. Tell me, tell us about your experience coming from South Africa and being elsewhere in the world.

- Oh, it's interesting. It's, I mean, I think to some extent the question of, so White South African-ness is increasingly complex. You know, on the one hand, like very much of this place,

there is no other place that I know nor feel I belong inherently to. On the other hand I'm of Lithuanian descent, you know, recently got a passport there, which is kind of funny and interesting. And then of course there's also this connection to Israel. So there these dimensions to a sense of place and connection. And yet, this place is home. And it is to some extent contested increasingly so through race and claim to country.

But, you know, without all said, this is certainly home and I'd say that the diversity of this place is an asset in landing anywhere else in the world because one's familiar with a certain level of diversity as you interact with it. But I'm curious now, on your side, there's a disciplinary kind of "dextrous-ness", if that's the right word, that I see. And like, between art and architecture, I suppose are other facets. I'm curious whether, how that plays out for you in the similar vein. Meaning a kind of familiarity with an architectural language and landscape, flipping over to an arts context, and I suppose other parts of your learning and interest, yeah.

- You know, it's a funny thing, and obviously architecture for me is a big subject. And when I went from MoMA to the Israel Museum, something that came, that gave me some confidence in making that dramatic shift, was that both of those institutions had to do with being anchors for modernism as a vocabulary; as a backdrop for presenting a narrative of material culture. Now in the case of MoMA, it was about international modernism as a backdrop for showing the story of international modernism through contemporary art. When I got to Jerusalem, the comfort was that, that amazing campus was actually related to that same heritage, but not to its migration from Europe to America, but rather it's migration from Europe to the Middle East during the mandate period. And when we did the renewal of the museum, I mentioned it in passing, but we made the modern art galleries.

I wasn't thinking of it at the time, but the way that Alfred Barr, MoMA's founding director, and his successor of Bill Ruben as the chief curator for painting and sculpture, the way that they made their galleries resonated completely with the way that we did our modern art galleries at the Israel Museum. And there was something about that, that gave me the pleasure of preserving that legacy. And in the case of Jerusalem, again, putting that little kernel of 20th century in the much broader context of a million and a half years of world cultural narrative.

But architecture could become a key to feeling confident and to providing an encouraging backdrop for telling those kinds of stories. You know, you all in Cape Town have, in the last several years, had the experience of the creation of Zeitz MoCAA. And the idea of taking those grain silos, which have an iconic place on the landscape there and turning them into a backdrop for, in your case, contemporary art. How do you think that resonates with what I've just been saying?

- I think the aspiration is very much there to connect a landmark, a heritage site, and sort of reformat it in some way to become a cultural site. I think it's, I suppose some degree more complex in Cape Town because our cultural landscape is so sparse. So it's a major construction and yet the the kind of public infrastructure for the arts and the kind of availability and comfort, is

something that needs to be developed slowly and carefully. You know, the cultural landscape is pretty book-ended, I'd say, by the kind of commercial space and the academies.

And in the middle, there isn't really an established framework for the public to interact with art on the basis of it being a cultural catalyst open to everyone. And Zeitz is part of a push, largely by the private sector, actually, in South Africa to kind of establish some frameworks for public exchange with the arts. But it takes time.

So on the one hand, the grain silo stands as an icon of industry and to some extent there's some tension around that, and a kind of de-colonial sort of thought, you know, in South Africa, what is, what is that extraction coordinate? On the other hand, it's a heritage site that we respect and love and now there's this aspiration bolted to it to become a cultural site. But, you know, I think, yeah, the potential is rich and now it's about developing a public sensibility and interest and familiarity with the arts to make that really viable. On that note, actually, yeah, sorry?

- No, no, continue.

- No, I, this actually leads to another set of interests I have. You mentioned earlier when we were saying this idea of renewal and you used that to describe the, I suppose, the development project at the Israel museum. I assume that's the sort of context. But you also involved in a range of developments or sort of expansions, if we could call them at MoMA. There's this great line, I think I did mention it to you the other day, a great line that's always resonated with me by David Goldblatt, the late, great, photojournalist/artist/photographer who said that, you know, the structures we build, they carry our values, they represent our values, they are in some way a manifestation of the values of the makers of them.

So now having, you know, been involved in MoMA through many iterations of its physical architecture, then in Israel through, like, I like that word renewal, was there a distinction between the way that those projects undertook that notion? Was renewal something that was particular in the Israeli project and MoMA more expansion? Can you sort of speak about those development projects a bit?

- You know what, it's really interesting that you asked that. And I mentioned before these drawings, these architectural drawings behind me, which are the original MoMA in 1939. This was a simple building. It was six stories high, it was a hundred feet deep and 125 feet long. And when you look at the drawings floor by floor, you see how simple the mandate was then. It was to build, using a vocabulary of international modernism, a venue that could be a neutral backdrop for showing the unfolding of art in the the 20th century. And when we expanded MoMA in 1984, the idea was just to give more space to enable a deeper explication of that short history.

And there was an original spirit and the idea was to extend the message of that spirit. And that's what we did in that expansion. Jerusalem was a story, a different story altogether. In 1965, to

build a building, using this vocabulary of international modernism was already looking back to an identification with the same spirit that produced MoMA in 1930, MoMA's architecture in 1939. But we had already advanced to 1965. And when we were doing our project in Jerusalem, which concluded in 2010, the museum was only 45 years old.

And the idea there was to examine that original spirit and build upon it, not to change it, but not just to expand it; but rather to renew that original spirit. And we worked within the envelope of the preexisting MoMA, but we reinterpreted the narrative because the difference between being a brand new encyclopaedic museum in Jerusalem in 1965 and 40 years later, 40 to 45 years later, being in a position with the development of the collections there, to tell the unique narrative of material cultural history from its first evidence a million and a half years ago, to the present covering cultures around the world.

It was about renewing the original spirit, but with far greater potential based on the quality of what the museum then held. So it's much different story, but you know, to extend this to Zeitz MoCAA, it's interesting, because, you just mentioned it in passing, but continue with it, you know, those grain silos are a symbol of a certain time in history there. And yet, contemporary art in Africa is another story. And it is one of those moments of, sort of, socio-cultural political humanitarian intersection.

- Mm. Well actually that's perfect segue that you, I think at least, the Ai Weiwei story is fascinating because here's an individual from a completely different context and you guys recognised collectively the resonance of that work in Jerusalem. Similarly, Kentridge comes to the Israel museum some years before and brings with him a narrative that is of this place but somehow resonates explicitly in Jerusalem.

And so, in both cases, what seems to me to be something that we're interested in in South Africa, Wendy and I, is like, what is hyper-local? Meaning what is particular and resonant and urgent for a particular location, but at the same time globally legible? So perhaps could you think about like, bringing that project Kentridge into Israel and like what that meant for, yeah, and how that story landed or infiltrated in that context?

- You know, it's funny, when you just referred again to Weiwei, I wanted to add that it's not unlike the experience we had there when we brought Kentridge. Because these are two artists who are really, they are anchored culturally. But their sensibilities also bring social and political input into what they do. Not that they're political artists or social artists, but their sensibilities bring those concerns into their work. And the experience with Kentridge was actually quite similar. And in his case, it was bringing that toolkit to Israel and you know, actually, the Israel museum right around the time that I arrived there in 1996, our chief curator was already collecting William Kentridge.

We, at the Israel Museum, have a very substantial Kentridge holding. And of course it's because of the resonance between sensibilities in Israel today with the complexities, the social and

political and cultural complexities there and those same sensibilities in South Africa. And when, Kentridge's show was another amazing moment for me personally, and for all of us in the museum, and for our public. And when he came, he landed like, really early in the morning, on a Friday morning, and we'd arranged for him to give a talk. And of course, William doesn't talk, he performs. And he got up on the stage and he started by saying, "I want to tell you why Johannesburg is like Jerusalem."

And you know, I'd already explained to him about this unique city built of its own bedrock. And he told the story of the discovery of Jo-Berg and you know, we think Jo-Berg is like a hundred years old or 120 years old. And he said, that actually, Jo-Berg exists because three and a half million, I might have these facts wrong, three and a half million years ago, a meteor struck there and pushed a vain of gold deep into the earth. And only in the end of the 19th century did they find that vein of gold. And that produced Jo-Berg. This was actually very profoundly moving for me.

- Hmm. You know, I've seen those prints countless times and I've never known that. Seen that block in the land.

- And you know, this is very moving and having him there and looking at his work there, is a very different experience from looking at Kentridge in New York, for example. We also collected Kentridge at MoMA. But my understanding and appreciation for what his work was about, was that much deeper by going to Jerusalem. You know, Jerusalem's, like, really a special place. And if you want to have a life experience that takes you from "Falling Water" in Pennsylvania, without knowing why it's so powerful, to another place in the world, you couldn't find a better one than Jerusalem.

- James again, the nice segue there, is this, you know, we've been talking about architecture, place, material culture, it's preservation, resonances in these different contexts. Now your role's quite different, in so much as, through the Jerusalem Foundation is no material culture to preserve per se, or at least that's not the fabric of the work. It seems like it's more a social fabric that is the DNA of that. Can you maybe share a little bit about what the Jerusalem Foundation does, and how you see it playing a part in a kind of similar way of bringing different kinds of people together in different ways?

- You know, it's interesting that you say what you just said in the way that you did. You know, Teddy Kollek founded the Israel Museum in 1965 and he created the Jerusalem Foundation in 1966. And his his motive for the museum was to create a museum of national stature, although privately owned and operated, that could tell this astonishing universal narrative.

And his goal with the foundation was to create a way for private philanthropy to build the city culturally, socially, and economically as a kind of model for cross-communal engagement among all the people that live there. So it's funny, it's not as if the museum and the foundation have different goals. It's that the museum is about serving that goal on the campus of the museum

and the foundation is about serving that goal across the entire landscape of the city.

- Right.

- And you know, we've seen this just now, because COVID, which is having such a challenging impact everywhere in the world, of course, has had that impact in Jerusalem and in Israel. It looked early-on that they were already coming out of COVID. It seems that that's not the case just now, but just as an example of what the foundation does, even though this is not a philanthropic moment, because everyone everywhere in the world really needs to be concentrating on where he or she is; his home, his family, his community, his place.

And yet, in Jerusalem, the challenge of taking care of fragile communities was really something that was very stark. And the foundation, very quietly, was able to plan together with the mayor and with the team of the mayor for the city to provide an emergency fund, which was actually quite substantial. To take care of a hundred thousand or so people out of a population of a million who were being most threatened by COVID. For things as simple as food, or as complex as engagement while in isolation. So it's funny, for me, the brief for the museum and the brief for the foundation are not dissimilar.

- Right. Screen's just gone away. Yeah. I think that's pretty interesting, and maybe the, maybe the nearing the end, so maybe I can just like weave something in here and say from the perspective of the foundation that is actively trying to understand how different groups and organisations connect and weave to form some kind of, like, healthy social fabric and then the museum as place, or generally speaking as some kind of physical site, COVID has put that notion under some pressure.

The prospect of gathering has hindered and in some way compromised how museums function and what it means to bring people together around ideas like Ai Weiwei's or William Kentridge's, and in doing, inspire some kind of, I suppose, alternative future. So, what do you think, what do you think's the prospect in the next short while in terms of, you know, interesting modelling for museums or the role of culture moving forward in this otherwise despairic lonely kind of COVID moment?

- You know, that's actually the core question across the social and cultural landscape everywhere. Because, on the one hand, you might think that it's time to marginalise social and cultural concerns. Obviously, we are not being allowed to marginalise social concerns. But you might then still marginalise cultural concerns and yet serving social and cultural needs is nourishment. And I think there's a really, if you're pathologically optimistic, you can find challenges like this to be opportunities. It's a time for cultural enterprise to be really innovative about how you engage with populations, people and populations, communities, even under the constraints of COVID.

And you know, for a lot of museums, for example, which rely on international tourist attendance,

you're not going to have that kind of engagement. But it means that you need to look at your own local community. This is what we're now discussing in Jerusalem. There is not now and there may not for a while, be tourism in Jerusalem. But you have an incredibly broad and diverse community of people who live there, who should be nourished by the cultural resources of that city during this time. And actually in the in museums there and in the foundation, we're really encouraging organisations to think about how to use this moment in that way. And frankly in Israel if, and particularly in Jerusalem, if things can happen there, that can be models for innovative ways to survive COVID and flourish after, those can be models, not just locally, but all over the world. And actually this is what we're trying to work on now.

- Amazing. James, thank you. I think we've come to the end sadly. I mean, I could to you for a while, but I think interest of perspective, I just want to thank you. Whoa. Thank you hugely for yeah, again, for inviting me for that wonderful presentation for all those like complex and polyphonic insights. Yeah. Wendy, are you there?

- Yes, I am. So it's been very, very special to have my two wonderful friends and two very important people in my life on today. And James, I just want to thank you for your very kind words and for your inspiring presentation. Your vision and commitment to the museum has really has transformed the Israel Museum into one of the leading cultural institutions in the world. And it really does engage one in a way that connects universe across time, as you say, and across geography. Today more than ever, we see that culture has meaning in political times; transcending trauma, hopefully, and political upheaval. We're certainly going through that right now. James, we have worked very closely together for many years and I've learned so much from you, really, it has been an incredible privilege.

Your reputation is legendary and it's no surprise that presidents and prime ministers have added the museum onto their busy agenda to come and visit you. To my wonderful director, Josh, it's been an absolute pleasure working with you over the last 10 years. Thank you for being in conversation with James. We are the family and we all look forward to hearing more from you when you do your presentation on the works of David Goldblatt in a couple of weeks. So once again, thank you to James and thank you to Josh for a very interesting presentation. to all of you who have joined us this evening and this afternoon, thank you. And on that note, I say goodnight and enjoy the rest of your day. Thanks, bye-bye.

- Thank you, Wendy. Thank you James.

- Thank you Wendy.

- [Wendy] Thank you.