

Transcript of Interview with Jay Chatterjee by JJ Wandikbo

Interviewee: Jay Chatterjee

Interviewer: JJ Wandikbo

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Transcriber: JJ Wandikbo

Summary: Jay Chatterjee an emeriti faculty member, former dean of DAAP and Architect at the University of Cincinnati for 40 years was the instrument for campus transformation that changed the UC campus to the beautiful campus that we know today. His work can be seen not only in the transformation of campus but also in every major architectural building in Cincinnati in the past 30 years. Some of his accomplishments range from the Queens gate II project, the transformation of the UC campus and even the reorganization of the college of DAAP.

Categories: DAAP, Architecture, Faculty Relations

Tags: Queens Gate II project, dean of DAAP, Sanders Hall, Vietnam, urban Riot, Marion Spencer Hall, Linder College of Business, dormitories

JJ Wandikbo: Hi, would you like to introduce yourself for us?

Jay Chatterjee: Yeah, I'm Jay Chatterjee former dean of the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning. I was Dean here since, from 1981 to 2001.

JW: Okay, nice. So, what are you passionate about?

JC: Architecture.

JW: Architecture, okay so, do you know why wanted to teach or serve at the university?

JC: It, it was much more of a coincidence. I graduated from Harvard and one of my classmates worked here and they wanted to hire me, and this was 1967. So ... I thought I would join the University of Cincinnati.

JW: Okay, nice. So, what did you hope students took away from your classes?

JC: Well most importantly that they would take away the same type of passion of architecture that I felt all my life.

JW: Okay. You said you were a dean, right?

JC: I first joined as assistant professor in 1967. I was appointed Dean in 1981.

JW: Okay.

JC: And then I still taught in 2010 but I retired.

JW: So you said came here as assistant professor at 19...

JC: 1967.

JW: Okay so what was the hiring process when you came here?

JC: It was ... pretty unusually simple compared to now. It's very complex oriented, for all kinds of rules, which is good, but at that time it was almost as simple as I told you. My colleague from Harvard knew me, and they knew what they were looking for and I seemed to fit the bill. Basically, they brought me here and spent some time with ... my would-be colleagues, etc. Then moved back to Boston and then decided I would come here.

JW: Okay, so...

JC: Now of course having been here for 20 years, I know now it's way more complicated.

JW: Yeah...(laughs)

JC: You can't just do that.

JW: You have a perspective of both sides back then and now. Okay. What were your relationships like among your colleagues?

JC: Very different from what it is now. There are a lot more... comings and goings in each family homes or getting together off time from classes, etc. Usually there will be some gathering at one of my colleague's place, etc. That's not quite so now as far as I can gather.

JW: Okay, so next question is ... since you said you were dean and in position of authority, how did you feel about and interact with the administration before when you were an assistant professor and after when you were dean?

JC: Oh my goodness that's a very, very different, different with presidents. When I was either assistant professor or associate professor, this was the second person who was president, appointed Warren Bennis. And I still was a fairly junior faculty member, but somehow, he saw something in me and always had an inner circle and I was very fortunate to be able to join that. All my life almost he served as a mentor. So, it was very different. So was the next president Henry Winkler, the third president was Joe Steger ... who I... not third that's the fourth president. With whom I worked as a dean for 20 years bringing major architects to the UC campus. Which I feel like was one of my major accomplishments here, to change the campus. The complete redesign of campus and the buildings.

JW: Yeah definitely. So, I know that you previously said that you were very influential to the change of campus. Could you talk about the process of that and what you had in mind and your vision for that?

JC: Sure, what typically would happen in those days was that deans would have a lot of power to make those kinds of decisions. I approached the deans with president's permission and suggestions and then I would, usually there would be a search committee. I chaired most of the search committees and ... they would ... well I would make a presentation to the committee about let's say thirty or so architect's work. Then we would boil it down to 3 or 4 or 5 and then I would try and get the major decision makers to go with me ... to their work sites to see their work in their office. Then come back then maybe even narrow it down to 3 or so and bring them back to campus. They would give a lecture also during that time and then from that we would make a selection. Usually I also worked out with the state, because at that time the state did not

allow outside architects to work. I wanted to bring major thinkers of architecture to here. So, I was able to work out a system in which where local architects and national architects would cooperate as a group, as partners. Local architects would be architect of record. In architecture there are 3 stages, one is preliminary design, another is called design development, and another is called construction drawings. Construction drawing is almost 60-65% of the work. The way we had set up the national architect would be responsible for preliminary design and design development and local architect would be responsible for construction drawings. This is separate from anything I had to accomplish that from before this whole process would get started. Including this was the first building, Eisenman's building and DAAP were the first one. Basically, this was the process really. The state architect would give half a dozen names then I would provide another half a dozen names then we would provide a group from that.

JW: Okay. Alright, So I want to delve deeper into the whole transformation of campus because I find that fascinating. Could you talk about each of the different buildings and designs and stuff that you did for campus when you transformed it and when you planned for it.

JC: Look there is almost a dozen buildings.

JW: There is?

JC: Yeah. The main thing about this building was to provide, it's a very long story.

JW: Yeah.

JC: I would take much more than an hour and this is looking at my life's work.

JW: Yeah.

JC: It would take much more time, but the main idea here is ... to develop and addition which it doesn't mimic the old building because all the construction methods, materials and etc. have changed. But it evokes some memories and the architects makes many moves such as bringing part of the old buildings to the new and part of the old buildings to the new. It's more complex than that but it's one of the major features of this building is that how it was accommodated to the old building. The next one was the Michael Graves building, who was one of our graduates, which is the Engineer Research Center, ERC. Which is, Michael was a... great architect, and developed a movement, he was part of a movement and certainly one of the leaders of postmodern movement in architecture. So... his moves were like brining classical forms to present context and that's what that building reflects. It also sits symbolically at the apex point of University Avenue coming down and then change levels because our campus is very hilly, and he provided the transitions about two levels up from there. And I can go on but these are generally what was taught.

JW: Okay, yeah that's fascinating.

JC: And we also simultaneously hired an urban designer/ landscape architect who did the plans for the whole university. So this was going on simultaneously. I also chaired the committee who brought this guy, George Hargreaves here.

JW: George Hargreaves. So, while you were, while they were doing the buildings and stuff you had someone else at the same time doing the design of campus itself?

JC: Overall design of the campus.

JW: Overall design, okay.

JC: We were able to then specify what type of building was going where and what we were trying to accomplish with that. Just like taking that as an example, the Michael Graves building, had to provide the focal point of University Avenue ending there. So we had ideas like that which were specified before. Generally speaking, we specified had the height and the bulk without designing it. The designing fell on the architect.

JW: So, you already had a pre vision of ...

JC: Yes.

JW: Okay before then and after that you went in there and designed it. Okay that's cool.

JC: If anything of this is of interest, I think when I was preparing for the new building as a dean and hiring Peter Riserman at that time ... the college also had to reflect, just before that I had to completely reorganize the college of what's known as D-A-A-P now, it was not like that. We had like 11 or 12 departments, I grouped them around design, architecture, art and planning and in planning there were 2 or 3 other departments of planning that were transferred to DAAP when the letter P was added. So it needed a whole reorganization of the college to better be able to respond to the next century. Another very interesting work that I did, those two certainly very important work in my life. The other one when I first arrived in 1967, at that time at 1966 there was the famous urban riot. Cincinnati was deeply affected by it then, the community and city hall did not get along, did not talk to each other. At that time West End and Queensgate II was being developed and they came to the University to see if the university would do the plan. And I was asked to join in as co-director of the project, so I worked on the Queensgate II development plan that was in 1968.

JW: 1968? So just a year after you came here?

JC: [Affirmative nod]

JW: So you'd say that your three proudest achievements would be the design of the campus, the organization of the college...

JC: Reorganization.

JW: And then the Queen's ...

JC: Queensgate II development. And just in general participation in cities, I was a long time, long time member of what's called Urban design review board which reviewed every building that went into the front of the city. Historic preservation board, so I worked with the city for a long time but that was a very specific project, it was a difficult project because practically myself and my colleagues would go into meeting with the neighborhood and with the churches, etc. Then coming back with the city planners, lots of the city hall and city managers and others, trying to get them to agree to a plan which we eventually did. And it was very volatile, so that was the most difficult aspect of the work.

JW: Yeah getting people to come together and agree. So, you said you were very involved in the city, is there a way UC or how the university has influenced the city of Cincinnati.

JC: Yes I also did very similar approaches to, for example downtown. I brought Zaha Hadid; I was involved with bringing Zaha Hadid to Cincinnati to build a contemporary art center. I brought, Cesar Pelli to do the work on Arnoff center downtown. Many of the, there's hardly any major buildings over the last 30 years or so where I didn't have some say or other to the urban design review board.

JW: Wow that's crazy, that's really cool. Yeah, I really like how, I think this is all fascinating to me.

JC: (Laughs)

JW: I think I've talked to other people's interviews before and then I like how the university now there are no cars that can really drive on it. Like before was there roads that you could really drive on and you had to change that in the redesign?

JC: [Nods] That was one of the plans, that streets crisscrossed all over the place and it looked like a, you wouldn't believe it, I really looked like a little commuter college or branch college ...

JW: Really Okay...

JC: The people mainly came by bus, the students and they just left, and it was completely empty by 6 o'clock. I was a very different kind of environment. We tried to create the environment where the student would stay and have food places, entertainment places, etc. So that played a big role in the redesign as well as the redesign of the neighborhood in the uptown neighborhood over there so that the food and other things are all developing there.

JW: Yeah.

JC: As well as the students developing, so we stopped all the highways going through the campus, created garages at the edges and they would have to park and walk.

JW: Walk in...

JC: Which was a very deliberate thing to do that.

JW: Wow, that's crazy. Now that I think about it, I can see that.

JC: They would all shutdown, yeah.

JW: Yeah that's crazy. Wow that's amazing. The campus is beautiful, I remember when I first came here, I thought the design ...

JC: Yeah, now it is beautiful, but if you are able to see old pictures or if anybody graduated in the 70s or 60s you would find that they wouldn't think very highly of it ... actually they hated it.(laughs)

JW: Really?

JC: Yeah.

JW: Wow, yeah that's the opposite of what I think. Yeah because I've looked at old pictures and I've tried to see where everything was in relation to it is now and it's crazy, the amount of change and the transformation that campus has gone through, that's crazy. So the, I guess, next

question would be, how, since throughout your years working here at UC, how have you seen students changed?

JC: Oh, the students come by generations and it's very, very different in different times. 60s and 70s students were ... very social conscious, very dedicated and they all wanted to be involved with planning and development of the city, etc. Then I would say, this is somewhat an over generalization, but that's the only way I can respond to these things. 80s were different, 80s were almost like ... me generations, what can you do for me and it was very centered on making money. Very different approach, it's an approach but it's very different from the 60s and 70s group. 90s again, the country was very, very steady, wealthy. Most satisfaction came from the huge urban development was taking place everywhere, a lot of suburban development were taking place. So, they were also quite dedicated in a different way. Little difficult for me to talk about after 2010 because I really, this summer I did teach a course but not regularly anymore after I retired so I don't have that direct contact still. But my answer to your question would be sort of, it seemed like it almost varied by generations.

JW: So, each generation was different?

JC: Different. I think it is also involved with what's happening with the world, what's happening with the situation. If anything to this generation is very conscious about ecology, about environmental aspects of the world.

JW: Okay. So I know that in previous interviews that I've had, I interviewed Oscar Fernandez before and he was a more recent retiree. He talked about the diversity of the students, it was very culturally rich and diverse here when he was teaching and I was wondering if the diversity of the students have changed throughout the years and has gotten more diverse.

JC: Oh my goodness yes.

JW: Really.

JC: When I first came ... I remember when the first woman appeared in an architecture class, the first woman ever. No question about even American blacks at that time.

JW: Yeah.

JC: That was a curiosity, I remember we didn't know how to quite deal with one woman in the class. I've seen from basically what it is to be a midwestern, solid ... some farm families and others, but mostly white American students, not mostly, all of them.

JW: All of them.

JC: Then there was a little bit at a time more foreign students were coming in, more African Americans coming, more women are joining. I've seen from there to now; architecture has more women than guys.

JW: Really?

JC: At least one year it was.

JW: On year it was?

JC: Yeah, yeah (laughs)

JW: That was recently?

JC: Yeah.

JW: Okay that's interesting, I would have never thought that, that's really cool. So, I guess next, how has the faculty changed over the years?

JC: It changes, but it also changes by programs. Different programs have different kind of demands and issues but. Again, it moves, seems to be like decades or something. Once if I can remember, if they get a tenure then they can have a career like mine. That hasn't changed very much, if people come here and they decided to stay here they usually finish up their career there. Which is very rare in today's world, because outside world is constantly moving, I'd see through my children, etc. They'd change jobs at a drop of a hat, this is the academic world is somewhat more stable ... sometimes some people criticize too stable and it needs to be more flexible in terms of hiring. So yeah, it also changes and just like the students I talked about, the emphasis changes. Today hardly anyone comes in that are not interested in the ecology area. When I first joined, maybe even a Bachelor of Architecture was enough to teach, no longer you have to have a masters and now you have to have a PhD to teach. So that's another level of change that has taken place as we're moving through, a lot of changes has taken place during the time I was here. I bet 50s backwards ... were far more stable, there was this image of American society depicted in movies. Movies are very interesting when they depict particular type of culture, society and life better and etc. But 50s, up to 50s, well war was very disruptive and then 50s the Americans, seemed to me sought desperately quietness, stability, family, etc. Then in 60s everything changed.

JW: Wow.

JC: Everything changed in 60s with Vietnam war.

JW: It just changed everybody's mindset from the war?

JC: Well sort of turmoil, the folks song came into being. People like Joe Bisen and others were singing at Harvard square at that time. As a student I could see them in small little cafes. And Bob Dylan was singing and they were having tremendous influence in their music, etc.

JW: Wow, that's really interesting. You said that throughout your years you've seen a lot of changes. I think that's what we're looking forward or for in this project is to get your guys' perspectives on the changes you witnessed throughout UC's history and record that, so we have better history of UC.

JC: Good. [nods]

JW: So, I think this is what this project is really about.

JC: Amazing changes have taken place in the last half of the last century. From 1950 to 2000 incredible changes has taken place.

JW: Would you like to say a little bit of those changes in the time that we have or talk a little more about those.

JC: Sure, as I said after world war II with the returning veterans, etc. When it was possible for them to get veteran's grants ... FDR had made getting mortgage, Federal mortgage association,

first provided mortgage, which now very common, but it was started at that time. So people started, and then Eisenhower and the whole highway system was introduced. The automobile industry was in ascendancy. Millions of cars started being produced, Detroit in those days dominated society. People started moving outside creating suburbs and living there etc. Then America got involved with the Vietnam War which had an absolute cataclysmic impact. Majority of the youth ... absolutely did not like it, felt it was not necessary, there was no point, there's nothing to do with the U.S. with what's going on there. So why get involved and the nationwide. Whenever armies committed, of course this big jarring take place. One side says oh independence, liberty and all of those kind of things and others challenge the value, etc. So, the value conflict is very high. So that was one great change. Of course when the Reagan era was ushered in the 80s' ... it ... individual efforts became very important to people. So certainly, once you drew ... again to movies would be very interesting to see that. Greed was good, the value system that was prevailing, individual certain how individual approaches society it's very important and is aggregation to this individual makes a society. That trend was also very strong in the American system and that prevailed. Then of course during ... early 2000s ... the involvement with Iraq and Afghanistan and its continuous on-going things and its been probably just separate to the society. And probably found the seeds of very highly divisive society which I've never seen before.

JW: So ... I guess going back to UC. How have you seen UC's priorities shift throughout the years that you've been here?

JC: Oh yeah. Each president ... and I've worked with almost 10 or 11 presidents [smiling] had a different agenda. Warren Bennis was certainly a very visionary man and to him the leadership, how you develop leaders for the future was the main kind of emphasis and worked from that. Then two presidents later, Joe Steger, certainly, his biggest legacy was what I worked on. That is to change the campus because ... I remember he had conducted an alumni and students survey and number one item came up on that survey that the students and alumni didn't like was the physical structure of the campus. So, he felt he needed to do that certainly, those two decades were very much emphasized on growth and development of the physical structure. Then our next president who was a woman president, certainly a lot more emphasis was given on the differences between the employment situation at UC. More women were brought in a leadership capacity etc. So that was a kind of change that's gone through. 60's also in Bennis's time also meant a lot to him to do and engage African Americans. Two colleges which are nonexistent now were created by Bennis, one was called University College and one was called College of Community services. They were all oriented into bringing more of the community-oriented students and structure that they felt UC should reflect what's outside in the community. So that was also a big change, those were the main massive changes that have taken place really.

JW: Okay, good. So ... you said the two colleges that Warren Bennis created you said are nonexistent now?

JC: [Nods in affirmation]

JW: That was his attempt to reach out into the community or around Cincinnati and connect UC to the community?

JC: It was basically felt afterwards that they had achieved their goals and not serving anymore ... real purpose of it because university college was felt ... people ... anyway didn't gain respect.

They felt, students felt different from the rest of the campus and it was gradually realized that's not the way to do it. Students would directly come to DAAP or usually used to be in those two colleges and take the transfers from there. Anyways so a lot of reasons that presidents and provosts of those times felt and the same thing about community services. They were abolished in early 80's late 70's.

JW: Okay. So ... I know that you worked on the main campus part and there's also the Med campus part of campus. Did you have any influence on the Med campus part?

JC: Oh yeah, one of the buildings I did was the Frank Gehry's building, the Molecular Biology building, the very curvilinear building. That's certainly one of, he became world's, most of the people we brought in were not that well known and now they're very well known worldwide so we select very well. And Frank inherited the Bilbao in Spain and it made a huge impact and he's probably arguable the best-known architect in the world. He got a Pritzker Price as did Zaha Hadid just after CRC got Pritzker Price, Thom Mayne who did the Rec Center got the Pritzker Price. Pritzker Price is like the Nobel Prize in architecture.

JW: Oh okay, so it's like the equivalent version?

JC: [Nods in affirmation]

JW: Okay interest, so he turned, so they weren't really well known before when you selected them. And then they became famous?

JC: They were not totally unknown, but they're not like they're right worldwide for instance.

JW: That's crazy they've gone around the world and like you said in Spain, I think.

JC: In Bilbao, Spain he did a museum, Guggenheim in Europe and it was, Bilbao was like Spain's Youngstown, you know what I mean. It's a rust belt town and all of a sudden one building went worldwide famous and really changed the culture of that city. So, architecture can have tremendous influence.

JW: That's crazy that, it can just turn something and boom it right?

JC: [Nods and agrees]

JW: Has, do you feel like that has happened here in Cincinnati?

JC: What?

JW: The, a certain piece of architecture has changed a certain area of Cincinnati and influence it?

JC: Oh yeah, I mean all that and impacted the University. Certainly, during my time architecture became at one point the number one program over Harvard.

JW: Wow.

JC: It has slipped since then, but at that time it was consistently on top ten and certainly one or two years they became number one and so the demand of students went up. The more creative students were trying to come here ... just see its like an architecture museum here, live

architecture museum with so much to learn right here. So it attracts a lot of very good students all over the world.

JW: Wow that's crazy, I didn't know it was above Harvard at one point.

JC: Yeah.

JW: Wow that's impressive. That was when you were ...?

JC: Dean, dean of architecture.

JW: Okay wow yea, that's crazy. So, I guess next, where do you see UC going in the future?

JC: Well the new president is giving a lot of emphasis on innovation, they're developing a innovation corridor up there. Where it will go is difficult to say at the moment, but they just got started. Certainly, it has a lot of possibilities and we just have to see. [smiles]

JW: So ... I'm trying to think ... Do you, there's a lot of buildings or there's a couple buildings that have been built since I've been here as a student. Were you involved in those buildings? I think it's the Marion Spencer Hall and the new Lindner.

JC: Lindner I was very definitely involved, Bernard showed be a French architect who I brought in. Which is the Marion Spencer Hall, I don't know that one?

JW: It's the new one by Morgan and Scioto or Sciota dorms, it's the glass one over there. By the I think its Turner circle. I think it's called Marion Spencer, that was just built recently I think.

JC: Built recently?

JW: Yeah, between the time I've been here.

JC: Over on that side, Jefferson side?

JW: Yeah, It's by Jefferson, it's by Turner and the two twin dorms of Morgan and Scioto.

JC: The Morgan and Scioto is by the William Howard Taft side isn't it?

JW: It's the one by MLK and Jefferson right here.

JC: Oh, oh okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. The new dorm you're talking about? That's called Spencer is it?

JW: Spencer, yeah I think.

JC: [Nodding] Yeah, yeah, there used to be three of those dorms. [Laughing]

JW: Oh really?

JC: We took one down and now that one has been replaced.

JW: Oh, okay. So was it there on the same spot or is it in a different...?

JC: Same spot.

JW: Same spot? Okay.

JC: Yeah. Two that looked alike right?

JW: Uh huh.

JC: But they were terrible.

JW: Really?

JC: So we had repaired so it was very costly to repair and at one time it was so bad, the one was taken down and that has been rebuilt differently. I didn't realize it was named, that's very interesting because Marion Spencer was a very good friend of mine.

JW: Oh really?

JC: Yeah, very good.

JW: That's crazy. So, yeah that was, so you were really involved with the new Lindner building?

JC: The Lindner building, yeah definitely, yeah.

JW: Okay, and then ... I'm trying to think ... I know there's some, I'm blanking, one sec You said that the buildings before with the new Marion Spencer Hall, the one I was talking about. There were a, it was just, you guys just tore them down, was it because it was just too hard to keep up or ...?

JC: Oh yeah, it was just in terrible shape really.

JW: Really?

JC: I mean, I had an office one time in Scioto, the middle one.

JW: Yeah.

JC: And it was terrible, you had a family living next door on the other side and you could hear all the conversation and everything when we were working. And it was terrible, it deteriorated very fast, its almost slum like really, it didn't work. So, first plan was all three to be taken out, we had taken one out, then we had found a way to renovate one. We liked it so much we renovated two. But we did not want to repeat the same one because it was taken down.

JW: Yeah.

JC: We wanted it to be a different one, so a different architect was selected to do that. Spencer Hall.

JW: Spencer Hall, that's cool.

JC: But they used to be called three sisters, they were just alike.

JW: Oh, so they were literally exactly alike.

JC: The exact design, yeah.

JW: Oh okay, that's cool, I had no idea. I like learning about how there were different buildings throughout the time. I know there was one big one that I just learned recently that I had no idea, I think it was called Sander Hall.

JC: [Nods]

JW: That was, I'm ... that was, I think taken ... I think.

JC: Down. It was a terrible building.

JW: It was terrible?

JC: it was 22 stories high.

JW: Really?

JC: And ... we couldn't reuse it for anything, it was a dorm, but it was, half of it was men's and half of it was women's.

JW: Really?

JC: And there were a lot of complaints about that. It, it really was quite a problematic situation. It was in code violation and all kinds of things, we did all kinds of studies to see if it could be reused somehow, but it was just not possible. So, it was taken down. The whole time was, it was amazing. They had this group who would do that and actually I photographed it as it gradually...

JW: Came down.

JC: Brings it down, yeah.

JW: Wow, so you were actually out there when it came down?

JC: Yeah, they allowed me to get, go pretty close with my camera so I could photograph it.

JW: Wow that's cool. Was that one of the biggest buildings that you guys tore down at the campus?

JC: It was the tallest one. Now we're talking about getting this one down. [Points at Crosley Tower]

JW: Oh the Crosley?

JC: Crosley.

JW: Yeah, that's crazy. So where was Sander located on the campus?

JC: After Marion Spencer's building that you're talking about, The university avenue. Then there's another new kind of dormitory, angular kind of dormitory and after that there's a flat building where, eating hall or something like that or maybe it's the African American Studies Center.

JW: Oh, right there?

JC: Yeah, it was the same building, just the lower part of the building and there was a tall structure right there, 22 stories high.

JW: Oh, so the African American building.

JC: At least it was there for a while, I don't know whether there's still that's what it's called.

JW: Yeah, I think that is what it's called. But that's where the building was?

JC: Yes.

JW: Ok so the building...

JC: Even that building was part of the same building.

JW: Oh, it was?

JC: It was the lower part of the building and the other was a slab that went up straight.

JW: Oh okay, so I thought when it just came down, it obliterated everything.

JC: No.

JW: They managed to preserve that part.

JC: They do a ... amazing scientific way they approach it, they just, very surgical.

JW: Wow, that's crazy, that's really interesting. Well, we've talked over, talked over a lot of the questions here. Maybe, last two questions, was there any incidents or events that happened that kind of disappointed you at UC?

[Camera Dies]