LAWSON: So this is the third session of the CalArts Oral History Project, talking to Dr. Steven Lavine, February 18, 2014.

LAVINE: [00:00:16] Sounds very official. [laughs]

LAWSON: What we’re going to talk about today, or start talking about, is the Northridge earthquake and the experience, the six months of reconstruction and time beyond that. So just to sort of start it off, the earthquake happened in the early morning, January 19, 1984. Do you remember?

LAVINE: [00:00:45] I was in Northern California, so I missed it entirely. We were celebrating Janet’s birthday. The next morning we were in a bookstore, which is usually where I am when we had bookstores, and we heard someone saying they couldn’t get through to Los Angeles.

LAWSON: So you hadn’t heard the news?

LAVINE: [00:01:10] No. We were having kind of a romantic birthday getaway. We weren’t paying attention to the news. They said they couldn’t get through to Los Angeles, and the clerk said, “Well, after a disaster, you can never get through.” And then we found out about the earthquake.

We called Janet’s mother in Boston. She told us it was terrible. Janet’s mother kind of saw the dark side of things, so I thought she must be exaggerating, so I didn’t take it too seriously. But we then found a TV and saw that it really was serious and flew back
to Santa Barbara since the airport was still closed here. Then Judy McGinnis [phonetic], my secretary, picked me up there and drove us back here.

LAWSON: And could you get here?

LAVINE: [00:01:53] We could get back to Los Angeles. That was okay.

LAWSON: So Los Angeles, but not up to here, unless you came across the back?

LAVINE: [00:02:00] We just got back to Los Angeles, then tried to drive out here, and Judy had told me about the Old Road rather than the freeway. I remember driving past gas mains had broken, and there was fire coming out of the street. We drove adjacent to where the freeway had broken altogether, that overpass, and came out here.

LAWSON: So this would be the Tuesday?

LAVINE: [00:02:33] I guess the Tuesday. Let’s see. It happened at four in the morning. Yes, I guess it would be the Tuesday.

And went into the building with John Fuller and someone else; I can’t think who. Because there was no power, it was totally dark, and we had no idea what we would find. Janet’s fond of telling this story. John and whoever else was with us came back out, and I was still in the building. What I was doing actually is I came in my office and I figured I needed my Rolodex, no matter what, for anything we were going to do. But also I had bought Janet a Sugimoto print for her birthday and had it been shipped by Sonnabend, and I knew from Judy it was in the office. I had no idea whether it was destroyed or not. I don’t buy a lot of art, and this was, for me, expensive. I came in, and it was still in its packing crate, and that was fine. Came out lugging the Sugimoto and the Rolodex. I remember being quite—so this must have been that next morning—being quite paralyzed, really not knowing what to do.
LAWSON: Well, I remember—I don’t remember which day it was, I think it was that day or the following day—that we, the deans and Beverly and John and Bob Egelston and you, of course, meeting, I think, maybe near the pool or somewhere to kind of talk about it. I mean, everybody was in shock. “What are we going to do?”

LAVINE: [00:04:34] Do we go on or, well, what do you do?

LAWSON: I mean, I know that that question was like—somebody said, “Well, we have the ability to continue here.” I thought, my god, it hadn’t quite struck me that that might even be—

LAVINE: [00:04:54] An issue.

LAWSON: —an issue.

LAVINE: [00:04:57] The payroll was managed by an outside service, so you could go on paying. The issue there really was—and we had no idea what the extent of the damage was. At that point, anything was just guessing. We knew it was in the millions, and we didn’t have insurance, but we didn’t know how much it was. But we did know that if we called off a semester altogether, had no tuition and still had everybody on contract, that then we were spending something on the order of $25 million—no, half of that, $12 million that we didn’t have, and we’d be in deeper trouble. I think we decided we just had to try to go on.

I remember John Fuller, the vice president of administration, was really one of the heroes of the story. He just kept going into the—he wouldn’t let anyone go in the building without him going with them. I asked him why. Did I tell you this? Maybe I told you this story. I asked him why, and he said, “Well, eventually someone’s going to get hurt, and the only defense we’ll have is that I thought it was safe enough to go in
myself or I wouldn’t have let anyone else go in.” So he kept putting himself at risk to go back in, just to try to figure out what you do next.

We did have a gas main—I remember the two immediate worries were we did have a gas main leak underground in front of Chouinard in the roadway, and so they were digging down trying to close up that gas leak. And John was great at just—and I guess Dean Houchin too—at just addressing those technical issues, that there’s just things that wouldn’t wait.

Then I remember thinking, “Well, we’re going to need space to do this in,” and I asked basically everyone in central administration to go out on the street and rent anything that had a “For Rent” sign. So this was the day after the earthquake, because I assumed that within a couple days any rental stuff would be gone as other people—and I said, “Call up and find out what the going rate is, and let’s try not to get gouged, but within a range just do whatever.”

So I think the first day or two we picked up 10,000 or 12,000 square—we’d lost 550,000 square feet, not counting art studios and other things, and we just kept sending people out again to—we went to all the churches locally, and the only one that would let us come in was the synagogue, and I think it was because it was a poor congregation that a new source of income would be a big help. Eventually, a lot of the music school ended up in this synagogue, which seemed to make sense. You have to have reasonable acoustics in a church to have services take place.

This will now be out of time sequence. What happened after a few days, having gotten still only maybe 15,000 square feet, we realized this wasn’t working, and I called Michael Eisner at the Disney Company and said, “You must have somebody who does
nothing but scout real estate things for locations for whatever else. Could you hook me up with that person?” And he did. And that person knew about that Lockheed had this facility at Rye Canyon, just north of here, that they had been trying to rent for a couple years and hadn’t found any uses for, and he hooked us up with the rental office there.

We contacted them and they wanted—I seem to recall it was $1.75 per square foot, and I called back to the people—or I think I called Stan Gold, who was Roy Disney’s financial advisor, and I said, “Is this really the going rate in real estate?” And he said, no, it was too high, that’s what he would pay for finished office space, not for a just used industrial facility, and that in any case, this was a disaster, they should just be giving it to us, which was something I hadn’t thought of.

We went back to Lockheed, and they weren’t going to give it to us. We were just dealing with the rental office. And Stan agreed to call Gray Davis, who was then secretary of—Stan didn’t know the head of Lockheed, but Gray Davis, secretary of state for California, did. So Stan called him, asked him to call the head of Lockheed to say they really should be donating this space to us. A day later or two days, maybe it was, they provided 175,000 square feet of space for a total of one dollar for eight months. There had to be some change of money to make it a contract, but they basically gave it. There’s one part they couldn’t give because they were storing Red Cross things there, and there was also a working wind tunnel that they kept. Otherwise they gave us the run of the space.

LAWSON: I have to say the art school moved into that, or the older part of that, and the film school moved into a newer part of it, and really that saved those two schools.
LAVINE: [00:11:20] Yes. No, that saved the whole thing. Without that, it just wasn’t going to work. I remember Lynn Rosenfeld, who was then—I think she was just called assistant to the president. I think in the wake of this she became vice president for special projects. But she had joked when I hired her that she didn’t do heavy lifting, and suddenly she was put in charge of the conversion of this facility.

LAWSON: [unclear]. [laughs]

LAVINE: [00:11:59] Yes. But, I mean, the bigger thing there was how amazingly—I mean, everybody really cooperated. Not everybody. A couple faculty members just ran for it. There was someone we had just hired, who just quit without telling us, just got in his car and drove back to the East Coast.

LAWSON: Yes. I found it was a real wheat-from-the chaff kind of situation, where some people who had been sort of prominent in the school kind of disappeared, never really recovered that kind of influence, because the others who had stepped up and kind of said, “Well, we didn’t.” It was an interesting moment, I have to think, that probably ran through the entire—

LAVINE: [00:12:59] All through the institute, although I’d say large numbers of people really did [unclear]. I remember Allan Sekula, this was later, Allan wanted us to—we were just then doing admissions for the following year. He wanted us to send a letter to everyone in full disclosure that we had no campus any longer. I said, “We’re not going to do that yet. We can do that later.” And he just thought we just had to send them this letter, which would have been a different kind of suicide.

The other thing I did was I called five institutions in Northern California that had suffered in the Loma Prieta earthquake: Stanford, Mills College, American Conservatory
Theater, and two others. I don’t recall what they were. Stanford wouldn’t even return the phone call. Mills College, the people who had done it had left, and so they didn’t know what to tell us.

But the guy who had been managing director of the American Conservatory Theater—and it’s embarrassing that I’m not thinking of his name, because he really was a huge help—came down and he told us that the key thing was that if we were going to have any chance of help from FEMA, that we had to hire a lobbyist, that we were going to be up against UCLA, the Cal State system, places that had full-time lobbying offices in Washington, and that although we legally were entitled to these funds, after a disaster there never were enough funds to go around, and somebody got to the front of the list and somebody didn’t, and the only way to have a chance was to hire a lobbyist.

And I recall that Michael Ovitz—oh, and he told us exactly what was going to happen, which was quite fascinating. He said, “The way a lobbyist can help you is you’re going to submit this stuff to FEMA.” I’m trying to think how this went. Well, I’m not sure now whether he told me this or the lobbyist eventually did. But the aggregate story was initially Congress can’t do anything to help you. FEMA is the executive branch of the government, and Congress doesn’t get to interfere.

However, FEMA would eventually lose our papers and they’d lie to us and say that they hadn’t received them, and the lobbyist would catch them in the lie. At that point, we had a right to go to our congresspeople and say we’re being misused by the executive branch, and at that point they could actively engage FEMA.

Eventually we hired this really quite terrific guy. Oh, so Michael Ovitz was then a trustee. I remember reading that Barbara Bush had had her own personal PR person
and lobbyist, and that woman was now working for Michael Ovitz as his personal PR person. I called her and I asked what the best educational lobbying firm was, she gave us a name, and we went to them. At the time it seemed just insanely expensive, $15,000 a month plus expenses, that we were still in a phase where we were counting every hundred dollars, and now we had no idea how many millions we were in debt for the building, and now on top of that we were going to spend $15,000 a month.

They came up with a very elegant strategy. They said, “What we’re going to do is we’re going to get the heads of the studios to sign on to just one paragraph that says CalArts is essential for the economic well-being of Hollywood, and we’re going to get that inserted in the Congressional Record. Then we’re going to organize our congressmen and the senators from the state to insert a piece of legislation that no one will care anything about, which simply says that FEMA can’t receive any more funding until they report on CalArts’ case.” Not that they have to give us money, just that they would report on the CalArts case.

Now, jumping forward to August of that same year, we were up against the date at which FEMA was going to go back to the government, and the Friday before the Monday, a check for just short of $23 million arrived in the mail. Just amazing the way it played out, and for me, in a way, it was fascinating. I had to learn how to be—I mean, the lobbyist set it up, but you’ve got to go make the case.

LAWSON: So you had to go—

LAVINE: [00:18:31] So I had to go to Washington again and again, meet individually with our senators and our congressmen.

LAWSON: How easy is it to set that up?
LAVINE: [00:18:40] It’s actually quite easy to set up, or at least the lobbyists, it’s easy for them to set it up. You were basically just repeating the case that had already been asserted and trying just to keep them reminded of where it stood and keep it on their agendas. A lesson in the process was that these offices are all run by children, I mean college interns who don’t know anything about anything, and suddenly they’re experts on education because they’re working for a senator who’s on the Education Committee.

Buck McKeon, who was the opposite side of the aisle from us—I mean, I’m a Democrat and “us” is—CalArts has not a—I’m sure we’re majority Democrat, but CalArts doesn’t have a politics. But I have politics, and Buck was the other side of the aisle, but he saw this as we’re a major constituent, and he really backed it all the way. He called friends of his on the Republican Party to side with it. So that was a process.

LAWSON: This is the still functional Republican Party.

LAVINE: [00:19:54] The still functional Republican Party, and actually Republicans and Democrats able to work together.

We were fortunate that President Clinton had asked a man named John Emerson to sort of watch over California in this process, I guess part of the Democrats holding California in the next election, not that that shouldn’t be very hard in California. So we did have a friend in the administration, and he was from California originally, eventually ended up out here as chairman of the Music Center, and now he’s ambassador to Germany. So it wasn’t like anyone was against it. It’s just there was USC trying to get a billion dollars, and Cal State Northridge having $600 million worth of—and each was using it’s own—whatever its angle was.
I’ll just put this in. It’s kind of irrelevant, I guess. But I remember reading that the then-president—Cal State Northridge had hired a cleanup crew from Atlanta, Georgia, but it was of a company run by a former civil rights leader, and they were basically playing on the fact that they serve a large minority population, and it was sort of the African American and Latino caucuses that would back their drive. So each had its own strategy for how to carry it forward. For a couple weeks, we operated just with tents, you’ll recall.

LAWSOON: Can I just interrupt?

LAVINE: [00:21:33] Oh, sure.

LAWSOON: This money, I mean 23 million sounds fantastic. Was it?

LAVINE: [00:21:39] I mean, it was fantastic, and later they gave another seven or so million. The total cost was 42 million, and I think in the end, the total we got was maybe 28 from the federal government. We had to raise 14. Well, we had no idea. I mean, we had no idea how we would do that. But in a way, the fact that we had done that fundraising campaign and the various things we’d been doing to kind of make ourselves more visible as citizens of Los Angeles, that we talked about in our earlier interview, I think they sort of—you can’t prove it, but I think they sort of paid off. I remember within a month the Getty Trust made a $2-million gift to CalArts that we hadn’t asked for, but I had certainly gone out and I’d met with people, all the foundations, about what situation we were in. I didn’t know what to ask yet because we had no idea still what the scale and damage was.

The reason for that is what you could see was cracks in the concrete block, but we had no idea what was behind the walls. So initially lots of the parts of the building
looked like they were undamaged, and then when you peeled back the surface, you realized, no, the plaster wasn’t damaged, everything else was.

LAWSON: It’s my understanding, and maybe you can correct me, but the building had been designed to withstand a certain kind of—between the blocks there was like a two-inch gap or something, but then where they bang into each other.

LAVINE: Yes. Yes, the six blocks with earthquake joints joining them, and I’m not sure what the real story is behind that. It might have been that originally—we know it was originally designed as separate buildings, and I think they eventually just joined it all into a single building using the blocks they’d already designed. But you’re right, some blocks were heavier than others, and when they moved side to side, the heavier blocks ended up crushing the lighter blocks, and so a lot of the damage was caused by that.

We were lucky, Chouinard—eventually everything was red-tagged. Oh, and I guess that’s the drama of these first weeks. So these FEMA inspectors would come, and you would try to treat them like visiting royalty and get them not to shut the whole place down because you needed someplace to do some work. Then they’d go away and make their judgments, and finally they just red-tagged everything, which meant you couldn’t use it, except a little bit this wing. I don’t know what block this is, E-block something, but this block is fewer stories than some of the others, and it’s mostly just offices, and it was lighter, and just sort of nothing much happened to it. The Broad art studios had survived, and Chouinard.
LAWSON: Because I remember we had the executive meetings, sometimes they were in
the guest apartment at Chouinard on the right side. I mean, there seemed to be a shifting
idea of where it was safe.

LAVINE: [00:25:05] Where it was safe, exactly. Exactly. I think I had sort of an
advantage in not having been here, I didn’t have the fear in my bones. I know Beverly
O’Neill, who played a big role in this recovery, Beverly was terrified out of her wits. We
were, of course, having aftershocks on a regular basis.

LAWSON: I remember aftershocks was freaking people out?

LAVINE: [00:25:26] Yes. And one of them was big enough to do $4 million more
damage just in the aftershock.

Then our issue became, in terms of the—I’ll go back to the educational part in a
minute. In a funny way, I had not so much to do with the educational part except for
driving the decision to keep the place open. But this was, in a way, the decentralization
of CalArts. This was probably one of the good things about it, because each school really
figured out—in the weeks in the tents, that couple of weeks. I don’t know what the art
school did. What they decided to do in the theater school was they’d take their very best
lecturer and that person would just meet with the students all day long while everybody
else went figuring out can we rent a theater? What can we do to go on?

LAWSON: I mean, it’s interesting. That’s an interesting observation, because my take
on things was that this was a moment that made it clear the importance of having strong
dean-ship, that the schools that had things in place, had their act together and moved to
kind of claim space that was being made available and made decisions, whereas I
remember the theater school, because I was an interim dean at the time, kind of futzing around, not being able to decide.

LAVINE: [00:26:55] Well, that’s probably why they had to do that thing with the lecturer, because they had to fight among themselves about what we’re going to do. No, the deans were—in a way, I already knew this about CalArts, that one of its features was that people complained all the time, but whatever the situation is, people seemed to find a way to get the job done, and a lot was driven by deans who were determined to deliver the education of the students, even if they didn’t think they had the resources to deliver the education, and we really saw it.

It’s amazing that I remember each day for those first two weeks, we had a meeting on the front steps at the end of the day in which we’d just report on what we had accomplished that day. Clearly, what we were trying to do was persuade the students not to drop out. You couldn’t urge them not to drop out, because, I mean, you were taking their money and you were going to have inadequate resources no matter how you cut this, so you didn’t. But I think you could say honestly, and some alumni have said this subsequently, that if you stay, this will turn out to be the most important of your semesters here, because you’re going to discover that artists can make something happen no matter what.

LAWSON: I remember a meeting, a meeting with students with Dean Houchin and Dick Hebdige and I met at Mom’s Cafe one night, and it had the quality of a revival meeting. The three of us were essentially kind of laying out the case for staying open and continuing [unclear]. We were trying to rally their enthusiasm to that exact – you know -
rise to the challenge, it’s going to be fun, it’s going to be—you’ll learn more in this semester.

LAVINE: [00:28:56] I remember saying these things, having no idea whether they really were true, but thinking it might be true. And in the end, something like between 85 and 87 percent of the students stayed, which is miraculous.

LAWSON: We had a full semester.

LAVINE: [00:29:14] I remember partway through the semester you said to me that changing the art studios people have is going to change the art they make, and it was the first time someone had said something to me that was kind of concretely positive about the situation, I mean not entirely positive, but that there was some good that might come out of it. And I remember in experimental animation, suddenly they got interested in book as art, because you could carry your book in your backpack, and you didn’t—

LAWSON: [unclear].

LAVINE: [00:29:54] Yes, and you didn’t run the risk that there’d an earthquake and you’d lose access to your artwork. So eventually we found—I think it was sixteen spaces. Some of them I don’t actually know how we found. Somehow the dance school found these dance studios in Pasadena.

LAWSON: Right, because their thing was getting buses.

LAVINE: [00:30:18] Yes, they had to get buses. Also we didn’t have running water.

People were flushing the toilets in Chouinard by taking buckets of water out of the swimming pool, but these dancers were arriving back here stinky, and so eventually someone thought to—there’s shower trailers you can—and so they had a shower trailer. It was amazing, I thought, ingenuity on the part of really each—I mean, the film school,
and probably graphic design had to do this, too, had to come up with a new Mac lab, had to come up with editing facilities for the film school.

LAWSON: No, it was really interesting for us collectively deciding what was essential, I mean, what did we really have to have, and reduce the supershop or Mac lab or—yes, our program determined that we had to have gallery spaces. That was—

LAVINE: [00:31:23] That was the essential thing.

LAWSON: That had to happen, and we could do with less classrooms. It was really an interesting sort of exercise. Also I think, I had—was the trailers, you know, the art—I think all the school of offices remained down here on campus but in trailers in the front, and then the rest of us were scattered. So I had an office up on the Lockheed campus and communicated—had a laptop that had a fax switch, and so the office had a fax machine.

LAVINE: [00:32:03] Communicated by fax?

LAWSON: So you could do that from – had to be on the phone. [laughs]

LAVINE: [00:32:07] Right. Then there was this issue of rebuilding.

LAWSON: So how long did it take then, do you think, to find out just the extent?

LAVINE: [00:32:29] We actually didn’t know for months what the extent was. What we did is we formed a little trustee committee, I think four trustees: Bob Dennison, Bob Egelston, god, I can’t remember who the other two were. And basically they were to oversee, be sure we didn’t do something crazy about budget during this. But they were the ones who saw maybe three weeks in that the little local company that we’d hired, the construction company to work on gas leaks and stuff, were simply not going to be big enough.
Then we had these sort of dramas of administration because John Fuller was an honorable man and he’d hired this firm, and they’d come in the midst of the crisis and been good players, and they hadn’t gotten behind in anything yet, and he didn’t want to let them go, and yet he could understand that they couldn’t possibly do the job that had to be done. So even in the midst of a crisis, you were dealing with the sort of human politics of making change, of just doing the right thing.

Then—I’m sorry my memory is so bad—we decided we had to get a big construction company, and no one wanted our work because the freeway was broken, and there was lots of work in Los Angeles. They knew that you were going to have to assemble a crew. And not only did they not want our work, but we wanted people to sign a contract that had no price limit on it, but it said they would provide enough workers to rebuild the campus by the opening of fall semester, no matter how many workers it took, which I don’t know if this would really be an enforceable contract in the real world. And this was before they could do an assessment of what the damage even was.

So Bob Egelston went to a friend of his who had been one of the great builders of the previous generation, or developers, now was retired, and he used his sway with a company that he used to work with to just—just kept phoning him and phoning him, and it was now run by the son of the founder. A.C. Martin was the company. He kept calling the father and saying, “You’ve got to talk to your son, and he’s got to take this job. It’s an important cultural institution, and we can’t let it—and if they can’t take students in the fall, they may not survive.”

In the end, they did take the job and they signed a contract, and I think at its peak they had over four hundred people working on the site at once, starting at each end of the
building, working toward the middle, I mean just uncovering—there wasn’t even time to spec out what the damage was to figure out how to fix it.

LAWSON:  They just moved forward.

LAVINE:  [00:35:53] They just had to keep—so we did some things in the first rush of just getting on with it that turned out to be mistakes, like there’s still outside of Tatum the sort of green pillars that look—they’re holding up the cafeteria. Well, the truth is they’re not holding up anything. It was sort of naïve engineering on—I’m not sure whose part. I think it’s before the big firm came in. We’d seen that the wall was cracked that was holding up Tatum, and we thought, well, putting up a support might do it. But the engineers later said is if it was going to collapse, it would just collapse where the collapsed wall was. This would just hold up the end that was the overhang that covered it. It wouldn’t do anything, really. So we made a few mistakes along the way.

LAWSON:  It adds to the seating out there.  [laughs]

LAVINE:  [00:36:45] Well, it does, actually.  It’s been nice.

LAWSON:  Just to quickly jump ahead, we figure that next conversation with that company then went on to work on the REDCAT.

LAVINE:  [00:37:01] No.

LAWSON:  Was there an individual with that company?

LAVINE:  [00:37:07] Yes.  No, the project manager we’d hired to work on our behalf, because what we’re having to do is we were going so fast to get this done that we basically were making decisions.  We basically set a criteria, and the project manager could make decisions up to I don’t know what, $100,000.  Beyond that it had to be this
board committee. But we were doing it middle of the night, just whenever the problem came up. [laughs]

I remember a very important thing that Bob Egelston, then board chair, did was he said, “You know, if we just get back what we had, this’ll be a defeat. I want you to come forward with a million dollars’ worth of improvements, and we’ll take to the board a commitment.” Now, this was something I never would—the idea that I was going to ask the board for a million dollars in improvement when we had no idea how we—I really learned a lot about why a board, much more than just giving money and stuff, I mean what leadership was on the part of a board. And he carried it forward, and the notion was that every area would have some evidence of a real improvement at the end.

One of the things was we decided that we had a very sort of outdated entry sequence as you come into the building, and we put some money into that. We went to three firms—it was maybe a Wednesday—and said, “Come to us with a proposal for the front entryway, the main gallery, basically that public area, and the cafeteria. And we need your proposal by Monday.”

Frank Gehry said, “We can’t do anything that fast,” and that was that.

Elyse Grinstein, the other two were the people who were—I’m blanking their names, too, the people who were the architects for the Wild Beast at the end.

LAWSON: Hodgetts + Fung.

LAVINE: [00:39:43] I went to Hodgetts + Fung since Greg was an alumnus, it just seemed like—and he did turn around a proposal, but it was way too complicated for our circumstances. And Elyse did come up with something by Monday, which was very simple.
But I remember when we were working on it, part of the decision was to put the two little galleries up on the mezzanine area, and having specified some kind of door one day at four o’clock or three o’clock, she came in the next morning saying, “I think this is a better kind of a door.” And we had to say, “It’s too late. We ordered the doors yesterday.” That was the rate at which things were getting done.

In a way it was quite thrilling, and in a way it was like a—I actually understood—when I was a kid, there were still people who were reminiscing about World War II, and you could actually understand why people did, because this did feel like a kind of combat, and you were in it together and you were trusting people to do their end. Even the project manager for the construction firm at one point said to me, “It would be great. We could build buildings so much faster. We could do everything this way if we really—and we probably save money in the long run if we work this way.” People really did get into it as—so that was—and then the semester was spent, for me, going to individual trustees. I have to say the Disney family, again, so often in CalArts’ history, came through, both Roy Disney and Sharon Disney Lund, but many other—a lot of trustees gave. I think every local foundation gave in some measure, and we actually raised $14 million that we had no idea we could raise, and we got the work done.

We made some mistakes. The cafeteria didn’t come out as well as it should have. I mean, there were some things that weren’t great. I remember one of the very first shows after we reopened. An art student decided that—Peter Norton gave generously. I’m just thinking back. Dick Seaver. An art student decided that he wanted you to only be able to see his show through a little window cut high in the side of the gallery wall.
This was a brand-new gallery wall. And I just, “Oh, please. We haven’t even paid for this yet.”

And Peter Norton said, “No, this building, it’s for the students. You have to be happy that this student wants to do this, not—.” And again you understand what it was to have the right kind of trustees who got it.

I think it was actually a profound turning point for CalArts. I think there were a lot of faculty, up until the earthquake, who were still not certain CalArts, which had had so many ups and downs by that point, was going to survive. I think six years of making $100 decisions and $500 decisions, I, in a way, was thinking too small about many things, I mean just trying to control the budget stuff, and suddenly you were agreeing on the basis of a telephone call to spend a million dollars. I mean, just the fact that we did it, to me it seemed like it just produced a new confidence at CalArts. I don’t know if you felt that other places as well.

LAWSON: Absolutely, I think it did. It was a very concrete demonstration that we were going to survive, that we would do this. The repair started with the physical work you could see happening, and it was done in less than six months. A successful semester was undertaken. The students produced great work, interesting classes unfolded, and then at the end of it, at least for the art school, we had this chance to have this exhibition at what was then called the TC Temporary Contemporary at that time, which was a great kind of acknowledgement from one institution to another of mutual sort of significant importance, even though it turned out their building had also been condemned. [laughter] We really weren’t supposed to be in there or something. But, you know, it was a great
way to end that semester for us. And then the graduation I remember also being kind of outside. I think all the trees were toilet-papered. I mean, it was a nice kind of— [laughs]

LAVINE: [00:45:25] Again, to me, striking from then was the curators at MOCA, posed with the question of letting us do it, said no. It was the director who recognized we’re all sister organizations or brother organizations in this – Richard Koshalek – and that, of course, they ought to let us use it.

LAWSON: And the curators were protecting their integrity. This was a show that’s not—

LAVINE: [00:45:53] Yes. These are students. We didn’t curate it.

LAWSON: And we were very clear with the students, and, of course, some of them still printed up cards and said, “Come to my show at MOCA.” [laughter]

LAVINE: [00:46:03] Right.

LAWSON: Yes, I think it was an intense period, kind of energizing.

LAVINE: [00:46:15] I feel like it set us on the track of—or maybe—I never know when I say “us,” whether it’s just I felt differently or whether the community felt differently, but I feel like it opened up a new tier of we could do things. I mean, who imagined we could find a way to pay off a $42-million bill on a—we still had only like a $22-million endowment or something. It just was unimaginable you could find $42 million someplace, and yet we did.

LAWSON: Also, I mean, to me it raised interesting questions about the nature of this building and our location. I remember there being conversations, why don’t we just abandon this location and move somewhere else. But as soon as you start examining
that, you realize how much space there is in the building, and how much space we would need, and then it’s like, “Oh, that’s [unclear].”

LAVINE: [00:47:23] Yes. There was one terrifying moment which was over by Chouinard. A crease opened up in the land, and there was a brief possibility that we actually were in an earthquake fault, and then you’re not allowed to rebuild. I remember some sleepless nights, and then it turned out it was just landfill had separated in the earthquake. When I was in parts of the building I had never been in before, up with the two-ton cooling units that had bounced six feet to the west or whatever on their springs that were supposed to be earthquake protection, but in fact they bounced off them altogether, just the scale and the complexity.

LAWSON: Yes, I saw that, too, but I think one of the more eloquent things for me were the concrete benches out front here and maybe down at Chouinard, a variety of them, but they’d all moved. They’d obviously gone up in the air. [laughs]

LAVINE: [00:48:29] And had come down again, yeah. In those first weeks, in fact for months, when you came in in the morning, there was ground concrete at the base of the pillars in the main gallery, and the construction people explained that the steel underneath had been twisted out of shape, and that the steel tried to—it actually was twisted under tension and it was trying to straighten itself back out. The metaphor is wrong, but it was springing, and as it did, it was grinding against the concrete that was holding it in place, and each day—and I remember feeling the sort of pain of the building. I realize again that’s just a metaphor, but it felt like that.

And in terms of my own life at CalArts, it was a different kind of bonding experience, because suddenly I really felt the building’s pain as my own. I remember
down outside of Tatum, they had to go sixteen feet below grade and build a whole new foundation for that wing. The wall there, no one ever notices, but the wall is about two feet thick, just inside the CAP office. For ten years when I gave tours, I’d always show people the wall, and then I realized no one was interested in the wall who had lived through this. To me, it had become a significant thing.

LAWSON: Part of all that reconstruction, that also took care of the deferred maintenance, at least—

LAVINE: [00:50:20] That was an amazing lesson, that if you do $42 million worth of rebuilding, you willy-nilly get maybe $15 million of upgrades. It was almost like a biblical parable of “the last shall be first.” The schools that had lots of damage got lots of improvement, and schools that had relatively less damage actually got less improvement. So I remember the film school, all the analog sound equipment, the whole racks just tipped over and broke all the equipment. Well, you weren’t going to replace old analog stuff with more old analog stuff. You’d replace it with new digital stuff, and so they got to go a whole generation forward.

Yes, the roofs leaked. We had to replace all the roofs. We got lots and lots of improvement in the process. And then just some quick things that may not have been elegant, but we built those couple of seminar rooms into the cafeteria, just dumb, simple things, but, in fact, they’re filled all day every day. I mean, we gained space positively in the process.

LAWSON: I’d like to talk a bit more about other sort of building projects, I guess spinning out in some way from the earthquake, but they’re not related. Start with talking about—you were mentioning Elyse Grinstein. She’d already done a project for us in the
Broad Studios, and that, I think, was maybe the first time that we tried to build more space using an architect rather than just contractors.

LAVINE: [00:52:28] Yeah, basically.

LAWSON: And it meant dealing with the intricacies of Eli Broad a little bit about, I mean, the art school needed more space, and I think the deal was that we gave up some space in the dance school or the theater school.

LAVINE: [00:52:28] I think it was the theater school, some space, yeah. We had built at the very beginning those really crummy Butler Building studios when the art school had agreed to grow in order to help save the finances of the institute as a whole, but they were really as cheap as you could do it and just barely—I guess they’re still usable.

LAWSON: We still use them, but they’re very utilitarian.

---End Excerpt---