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Alexander Ratensky oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 20, 2003

Alexander Ratensky (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Ratensky came to USF in 1986 as the director of the FAMU/USF Cooperative Master of Architecture Program.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Ratensky to USF

Before coming to USF, Dr. Ratensky was the director of education at the Boston Architectural Center for many years. The BAC was then an undergraduate degree program in architecture. Before that he was at City College in New York. He increasingly became interested in getting involved with graduate architecture. He noticed that FAMU and USF were interested in starting a graduate school in architecture. "The opportunity to start something from scratch at the graduate level was very appealing," he states. Dr. Ratensky had been at the BAC for seven and a half years. He was ready for a change. He applied at USF and was called for an interview. He came down and found the whole thing very appealing. He was offered the job to start the program.

What did the campus look like in 1986?

When Dr. Ratensky came for his initial interview, he was given a tour of the campus. The tour consisted of a walk from the Administration Building to the College of Business Building. Dr. Ratensky recalls the walk: "It was so hot and humid. And there was absolutely no shade. No relief what's so ever. I later became engaged with efforts to make the campus a little friendlier partly because of that initial experience that I had." Dr. Ratensky says there were fewer trees and buildings. Also, the buildings were less closely packed. "The campus was kind of a prairie at that point," he says. "It is a very different place. It is much more sophisticated today in terms of the buildings. Most of the buildings had been built in the late '50s, early '60s style. It is a style that has largely gone out of favor. The College of Fine Arts was one of the few places where you could find people outdoors, relaxing, and eating lunch. Now we have the Martin Luther King Plaza and more people relax there," states Dr. Ratensky.

People in Tampa want USF to have an architectural program

The initial desire to establish a school of architecture at USF began in the community of Tampa in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The architects then in the region worked with USF to develop plans for a school of architecture at USF. The plans were presented to the Board of Regents in the early 1970s.

The Federal Office of Civil Rights' lawsuit against Florida's university system

The Federal Office of Civil Rights brought a lawsuit against the state of Florida and the state university system in the 1970s. The lawsuit aimed to cause the state university system to increase offerings to blacks and other minorities. Dr. Ratensky believes the court order causing the state to increase opportunities for blacks and other minorities happened in 1972.

Plans for an architectural program at USF cause anxiety for FAMU and cause USF to lose its plans for an architectural school

Dr. Ratensky says the beginning of plans for an architectural program at USF caused FAMU some anxiety about whether or not USF would draw students away from their school. After the Office of Civil Rights got the court order, it approached the Board of Regents with its worries about architectural plans at USF. The Office of Civil Rights told the Board of Regents that increasing opportunities for minorities means increasing professional degree programs for minorities. Dr. Ratensky says the Office of Civil Rights basically said to the Board of Regents that they see the board starting an architectural program at USF, but the board should really be starting it at FAMU. Dr. Ratensky says with the force of the courts behind the Office of Civil Rights, the regents acceded and lifted the architectural plans that had been developing in Tampa and took those plans to Tallahassee. The architectural program then began at FAMU around 1972.

Tensions between FAMU and USF

Dr. Ratensky says the people in Tampa who wanted an architectural program at USF lost something they had been working for for a long time. Dr. Ratensky says during its first decade of existence the school of architecture at FAMU was not a strong institution. FAMU's graduates were unevenly prepared. "When I came in 1986, practitioners here in Tampa were really hostile to FAMU and they were not willing to hire their alumni," Dr. Ratensky states. Dr. Ratensky came into a tense environment. Dr. Ratensky says shortly after he came to USF in 1986, FAMU's School of Architecture was getting much stronger.

The FAMU/USF Cooperative Master of Architecture Program begins

The cooperative program between the two institutions began in the fall of 1986. Dr. Ratensky says the cooperative program was an "administrative device for satisfying the court order that the state was under, which specifically enjoined the state university system from doing anything that would diminish opportunities for minorities." Dr. Ratensky says, "The cooperative program was expedient for the regions and relates to the racial history of the state."

The program at USF specifically

Dr. Ratensky says many people did not even know USF had an architectural program. People thought the school of architecture existed in Tallahassee since FAMU's architectural program began in the early 1970s, fourteen or fifteen years before the program began at USF. On the USF campus the program was known as the architecture program. The official title was the FAMU/USF Cooperative Master of Architecture Program.

Early initiatives of the School of Architecture at USF

The first initiative was the program itself. "The early efforts were to develop the best possible professional education that we could muster. The excitement is in starting something that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The thing you get to do when starting something from scratch is you get to give some direction to the ethos of the school and program. We began a school that was more focused on user needs, and the way buildings are used and built," Dr. Ratensky says. He says the program became very engaged with the community from the start. The architecture program picked problems within the Tampa Bay area. The program did design work in Ybor City, Sulfur Springs, and Pinellas County. The School of Architecture also did an urban design planning study of U.S. 41 in Sarasota. "We have done a range of problems in the communities that the university serves, but also in areas that the university does not serve, such as Zephyrhills and Brooksville," states Dr. Ratensky. The School of Architecture took on the Department of Transportation when the DOT wanted to widen Flower Avenue, and not put in adequate street lighting or sidewalks. The School of Architecture won the debate and the DOT agreed to add street lighting and sidewalks along the widened area. The School of Architecture did the bus transfer depot beyond the VA Hospital. Also, the school did the Temple Terrace city gates.

Campus initiatives of the School of Architecture

The second weekend of each fall semester, the School of Architecture has an annual charette. A charette is an intense short period of design work. The School of Architecture has had annual charettes for ten years. During one charette, the School of Architecture was involved with the USF botanical gardens and its plans for expansion. The School of Architecture also proposed multi-purpose bus stops with shelter, visitor and campus information kiosks, and bicycle parking. Although the plans did not get approved, Dr. Ratensky says they produced great results. Another charette involved taking on the beautification process of the Fowler Avenue entrance to the university. Dr. Ratensky says from the very beginning, the School of Architecture got involved with the campus architect, the head of Facilities Planning. Dr. Ratensky has been involved in search committees that hired the last two directors of Facilities Planning. Dr. Ratensky became involved with parking at the university. He was in favor of remote lots that would have a cheaper parking rate. He was told that this was not a good idea. Dr. Ratensky says that USF now has remote parking lots that are reasonably full when he drives by them. The School of Architecture has also been involved with building committees about the planning of new buildings on campus.

What was the typical architecture student like in 1986?

Dr. Ratensky says the students were exclusively graduate students. They were typically in their middle to late twenties. Typically the students had been out of school for three to ten years and had discovered that their first career choice was not satisfying in a creative sense so they went back to school to become architects. The average age of students in the beginning was thirty-two or thirty-three. Dr. Ratensky says many of them had families and financial responsibilities. Dr. Ratensky says the students needed to have real skills that they could market and become successful. “We focused in the beginning on producing graduates that would be a desirable commodity in the market. I hear from the alumni that we have succeeded,” he says.

Women in the School of Architecture

Dr. Ratensky says women have been a part of the school of architecture from the very beginning. He says the number of women in the school has increased substantially in more recent years. He says women never represented less than thirty-five percent of the program. He says unfortunately, the number of women in the school of architecture is much less than the number of women actually in the profession. Currently in the school of architecture, women represent well over fifty percent of the population. They are the majority in the school.

Minorities in the School of Architecture

“We have had a remarkably diverse student body from the beginning,” he says. Dr. Ratensky says the school of architecture has a large number of Hispanics. Dr. Ratensky says at one time Hispanics represented twelve to sixteen percent of the population in the School of Architecture. He says that was double what USF as a whole had at the time. Now, the percentages have greatly changed in recent years. Dr. Ratensky says the architecture school has a fair number of blacks, but a smaller percentage of the population as a whole at USF. The school has a substantial minority of Asian-Americans, possibly twelve percent or more. Also, the school has several Indians. Dr. Ratensky says that as the faculty began an initiative to bring undergraduates into the program, the composition of the student body has changed dramatically. Dr. Ratensky says the age of students has shifted downward. The undergraduates outnumber the graduates. The undergraduates are just as diverse as the undergraduate population is on campus as a whole.

Diversity of the faculty in the School of Architecture

The full-time faculty has been exclusively male. He says the faculty is diverse except in gender.

The cooperative program ends

The cooperative program between the two institutions ended in 1994. “Peace has broken out now since FAMU upgraded its quality of programs and alumni and the cooperative program ended in 1994,” he states. Now each institution has its own architectural program.

President Jack Brown

Jack Brown was the president in 1986 when Dr. Ratensky arrived. Dr. Ratensky says President Brown was very accessible to him.

Dr. Ratensky’s positions in the School of Architecture

He was director of the school from the beginning when the architecture program was first founded in 1986. There was not a dean at that time. Dr. Ratensky’s title was changed to dean when the cooperative program dissolved in 1994, and the architecture program at USF received full accreditation in January of 1995. The name of the school was also changed IN 1995 to the School of Architecture and Community Design. Dr. Ratensky was dean of the School of Architecture and Community Design from 1994 to 1999.

Where does Dr. Ratensky see the School of Architecture heading in the future

There is new leadership in the School of Architecture. Dr. Ratensky says the new dean is pushing the undergraduate programs hard, and they are flourishing. The community involvement remains to Dr. Ratensky’s delight. “The likelihood is that we will remain engaged with the communities that USF serves,” states Dr. Ratensky. The School of Architecture was given an urban focus by the legislature when it approved of the establishment of the school in 1986. Dr. Ratensky says the reason for the urban focus in 1986 was because Tampa was the fastest growing metropolitan area in the state, Florida was the fastest growing state in the nation, and urbanism was the future, not just in Tampa, but elsewhere. “The likelihood is that an urban design focus and possibly an urban design program will be forthcoming in the next decade. There may be a landscape program too,” he states. Since Dr. Ratensky is no longer the dean, he is looking at trends that may or not be recognized by his replacement. He believes that urban focus will continue and possibly expand. “The primary responsibility of the school is still to produce a first rate professional degree program. The excellent preparation of architects is first and foremost,” says Dr. Ratensky.

Did Dr. Ratensky think he would be at USF for seventeen years?

He says he did not think he would be at USF for this long. Dr. Ratensky was involved with previous institutions for eight to ten years. So he thought eight to ten years was the right amount of time to spend at places. “On the other hand, the opportunity here was an astonishing one, and the scope for effort and activity was much greater. The opportunity to found something has been very exciting and positive,” states Dr. Ratensky.

Any last words Dr. Ratensky would like to leave behind about USF?

“The engagement with the community is a sustaining and positive experience. I would urge people to never renege on that, but to maintain their focus on the communities that

we serve. I hope that people stay focused on what's happening in Tampa and the state and learn from it and help to shape it," states Dr. Ratensky.

End of Interview