

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project

Craig Kiest

Role in project: Landscape Architect



Interviewed November 4, 2024 at the Marshall House, Vancouver, Washington, by Madeline Hagan, historian with Historical Research Associates

This interview transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity. To view the entire interview on YouTube, [click here](#).

Madeline Hagan: I am interviewing Craig Kiest. Craig, would you please introduce yourself?

CK: I'm Craig Kiest and I've been a landscape architect in Portland, OR since 1979. I was registered in 1982, and I was involved in the restoration here at Officers Row in the late 1980s.

MH: What was your first introduction to Officers Row?

CK: George McMath, of the McMath Hawkins Dortinacq architecture firm introduced my business partner, Wallace Huntington, and me, to this project. We had worked with them on other historical projects.

MH: What was the early stage of the project like?

CK: The buildings were pretty derelict. We had to be careful going up the stairs. Bad flooring and water damage in the buildings. The grounds had been let go except for caretaker maintenance. The grounds were mostly lawn. What there were of walks were broken concrete. Many of the plants had been let go also.

MH: Tell me about your role on the project.

CK: In my role as junior partner, I did a lot of legwork. We measured all of the trees. One of the things that we had to establish was how to modify the property to allow for more cars, and where they could park and not be seen. We had to find places for the garbage and the mailboxes and that type of thing. We still wanted to maintain the entrances on Evergreen but have those necessary functions.

MH: How long did you work on Officers Row during its rehabilitation??

CK: We saw the whole project through to the end, when the grass was coming up and the sprinklers needed adjusting. We had to make sure that everything was installed correctly.

MH: How did discussions work with architects and other stakeholders about what the project was actually going to look like?

CK: Not like it would work today. (laughter) The stakeholders were involved. Kelly Puntene was there as the parks representative, and the architects were there. The developer was really the person running the project. I don't remember anyone talking to different neighbors or that type of thing that you would see more in current projects.

MH: Was the goal for it to be fulfilled as a historic landscape? Did you look at historic drawings and photographs?

CK: Without a doubt, the landscape was going to be historic. The team was very much in favor of trying to make it as historical as possible. In the planting, for instance, there were no modern trees. There were only trees that would have been here. Most of the big trees were native trees.

MH: What trees and plants did you plant?

CK: There are a lot of big leaf maples and Douglas firs and cedars.. I remember that we planted things like Oregon grape. Today it's easier to buy Oregon grape with all of the restoration projects, but at that time, it was much more difficult to find native plants like Oregon grape. A lot of the plants would be what we would consider old-time plants, like the forsythias and the quince that would have been popular at the turn of the last century. Mr. Huntington had studied many historical plants and had given several lectures on historical plants.

MH: What was the process for tree planting?

CK: We didn't plant all that many trees. It's amazing how many big, wonderful trees there were here. The trees we planted were probably two-inch caliper. As in all developments, there was always a little crunch of money. It's an easy thing to downsize plants because they'll grow. Other things could not be cut. The landscape budget had to have some cuts here and there, and plant size was one of them.

MH: In a landscape that involves so many buildings, what is the relationship between the landscape complementing buildings, or buildings complementing landscapes?

CK: This is a collection of buildings and the landscape had to be continuous throughout. You'll see a repetition of the plant material, repetition of the sidewalk layout, repetition of the trees. It's all supposed to be open and harmonious. A goal was to keep it very low maintenance, because they knew the expense of maintaining these few buildings with this much land.

I remembered all of the big trees while walking here across the parking lot. There are leaves everywhere. With this many acres with leaves, there is a lot of work.

This wasn't a garden with buildings in it. These were buildings with a landscape around them.

MH: When you finished with Officers Row, what other projects have you done that have been similar?

CK: Well, I don't think any of them have been similar, because this is a very unique project, but I've worked on many other historic buildings. This kind of project doesn't often get built.

MH: Did you see Officers Row contributing to the growth or the vibrancy of Vancouver? Did you see a merit to the project in terms of community development?

CK: Looking back on it, one of the most interesting things is that it was so hard to develop a multi-use project. They had residences next to buildings that were supposed to be commercial. That was very, very hard at the time where you wouldn't build a building and have retail on the lower floor and upper floors with residential. That just wasn't done because how things were financed and how things were zoned. I think they were a little bit ahead of their time in trying to use the space efficiently and in encouraging the community here.

MH: What were some of your favorite memories working on Officers Row?

CK: I do remember coming out and measuring all the trees. It took more than one trip, because it's a big place, and it was just such a pleasant place to be. It's like going to the park for the afternoon. Coming out and doing the fieldwork was really a very nice part of it.

MH: Do you think that Officers Row has, and the landscape more specifically, has stood the test of time?

CK: The buildings when you drive down here look like they did the day we were done. It is just amazing. The big trees are here and all the walks are here and all the grass is here.

MH: What are you proud of about your work here at Officers Row?

CK: The fact that it's still here. So many projects like this, they keep on adding a little memorial here or there. This whole thing still holds together. I hope that they're able to continue with that and continue to plant trees that are appropriate and not introduce new fun trees, but to stay with the good old standbys that this project was built around. I think the landscape here does make the setting. The scale of these trees is very important to the amenity that Officers Row provides. Where else can you have such wonderful broad, big trees? We know that they will be here for a long time, and many of them were here a long time before. Preservation of that big forest canopy is really essential to the integrity of the landscape.