

*Betsy Bradley:* As we sat down, I started thinking about that Thanksgiving day when we had our first conversation about the museum. We were at a family gathering. I had met you a couple of times, but didn't know you all that well and we immediately, in a crowd of people who were standing in line to get Thanksgiving lunch, started talking about something you had been reading about museums. And we were in the process here of deciding whether or not we were going to stay in our building and renovate it or move to a new place, but we knew we had issues. So, talk some about what you had been reading and how it got us thinking about the museum.

*Madge Bemiss:* That's right, it was Elaine Gurian's article "Threshold Fear," and it was about all the things museums do in design to really discourage people who don't normally go to museums from coming, you know.

*Betsy Bradley:* Right.

*Madge Bemiss:* And then, what I loved about you all's mission was the idea was to engage all Mississippians with art, yea.

*Betsy Bradley:* Then you said, well let's get Elaine to come help us. And I'm like, well you don't actually talk to these people who write these articles, do you? Uh, we have such an inferiority complex in Mississippi: they wouldn't be interested in what we're doing here in Mississippi. But she was willing to come.

*Madge Bemiss:* She was delighted to come as I recall. And remember we came over here and we sat with the staff in the dark area that we were just clearing out. And what did she ask? She asked sort of...What do you want to do here everyday or...It was very strange because it didn't seem to me to be at all what I thought about how you make spaces and the kind of questions we asked people about spacemaking, but it was really about how you want people to be drawn in here.

*Betsy Bradley:* And the word that got thrown at you a lot was "warm."

*Madge Bemiss:* That's right.

*Betsy Bradley:* People wanted it to be warm, and you kept saying to me, "I, I don't know how to make a building warm!" But, the first word people used when they walked in on opening day was that it feels so warm, so accepting, so comfortable. I remember one woman in particular who did not grow up here but she ended up coming to college here because her grandmother was a big force in her life and lived here. And then she went and worked for a politician in Washington who represented Mississippi, so she made a lot of trips here, but she just started weeping because it moved her so much, and it wasn't one particular work of art, and it wasn't one particular space, but something about it feeling, I guess, like home to her made her weep, and, you know, those are the things you don't ever get over as the director of a museum when everything's kind of been in theory and abstract and you see the human face, and I think that's what really, to me, makes this a special place. It's the combination of the physical construction and how you really

knew when you listened about our mission being about engaging people and it was not just about art, it was about what people did and how they responded in the museum. So, you're listening to that and absorbing what we were doing to bring that mission to life through programs. And then creating a physical structure out of, you know, concrete materials that really anticipated the human needs to create those programs. The ways we do function, the ways we talk to each other, the ways we see each other and know if we're going to be comfortable somewhere or not, with other people. It's resulted in this becoming a, what we had always hoped it would be, kind of a cultural center more than the stereotypical art museum.

*Madge Bemiss:* The museum is in downtown Jackson, which is sort of a city that has suffered, I mean, it is...it isn't...it wasn't feeling like a city, and the idea of having a shared open space, we wanted people to be drawn into the open space first, the green space, and then think "Eh, maybe I'll go into the lobby and maybe I'll actually even go in and have a look at those paintings." Jackson's not a city with an integrated public life. The museum at least directs your attention, and we can do various things to make sure you know you're welcome. The garden will have certain things that are in the nature of gardens that may also create a threshold fear, and it's been interesting even thinking about the artworks that evolved for the garden because they have a historical kind of connection with garden, and, um, there are so many audiences that museums are trying to reach that we have this really basic challenge, which is to make a community space where everyone will feel welcome.

*Betsy Bradley:* If we don't have experiences like a beautiful park and art and music and grass in the core of a city, then we're not going to be very humane to each other or to our children or the next generation, and so I think that Jacksonians are waking up to that.