ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH INGA SAFFRON

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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Inga Saffron Interview

Risley: Okay, it is November 6, 2020. I'm here in Philadelphia doing an interview with Inga Saffron. So, we'll just start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Saffron: I am a native of Long Island, New York. Born in 1957, November ninth. Coming up, my birthday

Risley: Yeah. And can you tell me a little bit about your parents and your family?

Saffron: My parents are New Yorkers. My father, in particular, was an avid newspaper reader. I grew up in the days when there were many local newspapers. New York was a great newspaper town. We had four newspapers delivered every day and my father would not let my mother throw out a newspaper until he had read it. There were always stacks of newspapers at our house. And, like a lot of people back then, I started reading the newspaper by reading the comics. I loved Brenda Starr. I know it sounds funny to say this, but I got the idea that a woman could be a newspaper reporter from reading that comic.

Risley: Where did you receive your education?

Saffron: I started out at NYU. I worked for the student newspaper paper, the *Washington Square News,* as reporter and an editor, and spent *way* too much time in the newspaper offices. And we would go to the printers every night and put the paper to bed. I sometimes didn't go to class the next morning [laughter].

Risley: Sounds like my college experience.

Saffron: For full disclosure, I was studying French. I decided to spend my junior year in France and loved it so much that I decided not to come back. I didn't finish NYU. Instead, I ended up in Dublin working for local magazines and newspapers.

Risley: As a freelance writer?

Saffron: As a freelance writer. Now, I did have a few other college experiences if you want the whole long saga.

Risley: Yes, please.

Saffron: So, I was already working at the *Inquirer* when I decided to go back to school part-time. I went to Penn for a while, but because I lost a lot of credits when I transferred, it just took too long. Then I had a baby and that was the end of that. Much later, I had the chance to go to Harvard on a Loeb Fellowship. Still no degree [laughter]. I'm going to work on that when I retire.

Risley: That's okay. You turned out alright. Tell me about working in Dublin and the freelance work that you did.

Saffron: That was really great. I was all of 19 at the time and I thought I was falling behind in my career. I already had quite a bit of journalism experience working for the college newspaper when I got there. I arrived right after Ireland had been admitted to what we now call the EU, and all of a sudden, money was pouring in. The Irish papers were getting their first color presses and people were starting magazines. I went to work for a magazine called *Magill*.

Risley: *Magill*?

Saffron: *Magill.* It was a monthly news magazine that modeled itself on *Time* magazine. They were really excited to have an American journalist work for them, so I wrote features for them. I also wrote stories for the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Times* and had a little side gig as a stringer for *Newsweek*. It felt very exciting. The country was changing really fast. I remember going out to the far west of Ireland to write about how dairy farming was being transformed by the infusion of EU money. Suddenly they could afford milking machines. The country was still very poor and underdeveloped, maybe about 30 years behind the U.S. in standard of living. For example: I lived in a typical Dublin flat and most people still didn't have phones. This was 1980. I would do all my interviews on this payphone in the hallway. I would have to throw in like five penny pieces and ten penny pieces every few minutes to keep the call going. But being a Yank, I marched into the *Posts and Telegraph* office one day and applied for a private phone. I said, "You know, I live very close to downtown. I bet there's a phone line, you could run into my apartment." And then lo and behold, they found they could do that. After they installed a telephone in my apartment, my landlord's eyes just widened. All of a sudden,

he realized my little basement flat was worth way, way more money than it had been before it had a phone line.

Risley: How long did you work in Ireland?

Saffron: I was there for two years.

Risley: Then you came back to the U.S.?

Saffron: I came back to the U.S, yes. I was all of 21 and I felt I needed to have the rigor of working for an American newspaper -- just to learn the basics of covering a beat.

Risley: What was your first job here in the U.S.?

Saffron: I got a job with a medium-sized daily newspaper in New Jersey called the *Courier News*. It covered what they called Central New Jersey -- not north Jersey, not south. I covered a bunch of small towns.

Risley: Local government stuff?

Saffron: Local government stuff. I covered school districts. I covered a city in Central New Jersey called Plainfield, New Jersey, which had its first black mayor at that time.

Risley: When did you join the *Inquirer*?

Saffron: I came to the *Inquirer* in 1984. I was a stringer at first. The paper was just making a big push into the Jersey suburbs. I was hired on staff the following year -- 1985 -- but I continued writing about the suburbs. I covered a bunch of Jersey towns. I also became the county courthouse reporter for a while and covered the county government. This was really a typical trajectory for a young reporter. I covered all this municipal stuff and I think it was great training.

Risley: That's what we tell students.

Saffron: Yeah, unfortunately those jobs barely exist anymore because there are fewer local papers. Either they don't bother covering local government, or they don't have the resources to do it.

Risley: And then you worked overseas for the *Inquirer*?

Saffron: Right.

Risley: So, tell me about that.

Saffron: I already had a taste of working in Europe. I had spent a year in France as a student. And then two more years in Ireland. I always had this vision of myself as a globe-trotting foreign correspondent. I was very interested in international affairs, and particularly in Eastern Europe, which was still under Soviet control. One of the great things about working for the *Inquirer* at that time, was that they had a foreign desk and a staff of reporters. There were six foreign bureaus. I thought I could eventually claw my way into one of those foreign beats, even though they were pretty competitive. As I said, I had a long interest in Eastern Europe. In the early 90s, when the Soviet Union was breaking up and things were changing dramatically in Eastern Europe, I was really desperate to be there writing about the changes. It just so happened that the early '90s was the beginning of the financial issues we would see later in the newspaper industry. To save money, the *Inquirer* offered to give people a year-long leave of absence with health insurance, to go do whatever they wanted. So, I took a leave to go overseas. I could see that Yugoslavia was about to break up and there was likely to be a war, so I decided to go there as a freelance reporter in 1991. I remember telling the *Inquirer's* foreign editor, "This is gonna' be a big story." He looked at me like I was crazy: "Where is that?" But indeed, the breakup of Yugoslavia did turn out to be a big story for a while. I actually wrote a few stories for the *Inquirer* while I was there. And I freelanced for some papers in Ireland and a couple magazines. I spent a year there, covering the early part of the war. I was in Sarajevo when the siege began. I felt like my work demonstrated I could be a foreign correspondent and cover a war. But I was also beginning to feel like the clock was ticking. I felt it was time to think about having a baby [laughter]. After the year's leave was up, I came back and got pregnant a few months later. I assumed once I had a child, there was no hope I was ever going to be a foreign correspondent for the *Inquirer*.

Risley: That was for about a year?

Saffron: Yeah, I was there for a year -- 1991 to 1992. I came back; I had a baby. Then, three weeks after my daughter was born, the foreign editor came to me and asked if I would go back to Yugoslavia. They realized that the war was going to be a big deal.

Risley: Yeah.

Saffron: Well, I really couldn't go right away. But in 1994, when my daughter was sixteen months old, the editor asked if I was interested in the Moscow bureau. That was actually, you know, a lucky thing. The Moscow beat required a fair amount traveling, but you still had a home base. It was actually a good beat for a mom -- a new mom -- because so much of the story was in Moscow. When I arrived there for the *Inquirer,* it was only three years after the breakup of the Soviet Union. There was tremendous upheaval; it was the equivalent of a great depression People were out of work and the government couldn't pay peoples' pensions. There were so many stories about how they were trying to reinvent themselves -- or not.

Risley: When you look back, what stories were particularly memorable?

Saffron: So many stories. I did try to travel around the country as much as possible. I went out to Siberia to write about how the economy had completely collapsed. Factories had shut down, all the jobs had disappeared and retired people weren't getting their state pensions. It gave me a sense of what the Great Depression must have been like in America. Later, when the Chechen Republic tried to secede from Russia, I ended up covering another war. Probably very few people in the U.S. had heard of Chechnya, but the war became a big story for a while because it suggested that the turmoil could spread throughout Russia. It also made it clear that we were naive in expecting Russia to transform into a functioning democracy overnight. It also revealed the brutality and ineptness of the vaunted Russian military. For me personally it was really a crazy time. Everything in Russia had broken down. You would book a flight to go somewhere for a story and then the flight wouldn't take off for four days. You'd have to bribe someone to get your luggage. I became an expert at bribing people.

Risley: I guess you learn to be resourceful too.

Saffron: Right. Russians were experts at that even before the breakup. I like to think that being overseas, the only person in the bureau, taught me how to operate without a net. I really loved it and had a great time, which I know is a strange thing to say about covering wars and a world-historical economic collapse. But there were so many wonderful stories about Russian life and the resilience of people there. Some of my favorite pieces were classic features, like one I did about a family trying to eke out a living from the garden at their

dacha. Dachas are Russian summer houses. I also wrote a piece about the efforts to preserve a traditional drink called Kvas, which was made from fermented bread, at a time when Russians just wanted Pepsi and Coke. Of course, I wrote a lot of war stories, too. One that stands out is a piece about arriving in a Chechen town right after a ferocious battle and meeting people who had just emerged from days of cowering in their basements.

Risley: When did you come back to the U.S.?

Saffron: I came back at the end of '98, beginning of '99. I felt I had gotten the foreign bug out of my system and I started to think about what I would like to write about in America. Ever since my Plainfield days, I had been interested in the fate of American cities, particularly how decisions about development and transportation contributed to their success or failure. My experience covering Plainfield really shaped my whole world view. Plainfield was a beautiful city, full of Victorian homes, but it had been in decline for decades, like so many American cities and like Russia. There were riots there in the '60s and that was followed by the usual white, middle class flight. Like other cities in that situation, Plainfield embraced urban renewal as a solution. Shortly after those riots, a decision was made to level a large portion of the downtown. I guess people figured, "If we tear this down, we'll get a big corporate headquarters, Plainfield will become a big employment center again and everything will be fine."

When I got there, it was already the mid-80s. I'll never forget arriving there and seeing this giant parking lot in the center of the downtown. There was still Macy's department store and some small shops, but the place was dead. That's when I began to think about how these kinds of decisions could reverberate for decades. In Yugoslavia, I had also watched people destroy their cities, in a very different way of course, but with similar effects. I spent a lot of time in Mostar, a beautiful, sixteenth century Ottoman city in Bosnia, where the main military targets were their medieval mosques and churches, and this gorgeous, white stone, one World Heritage bridge. It was just heartbreaking watching it being blown apart. Anyway, those experiences, in America and abroad, got me really interested in cities. I had always been interested in design and aesthetics. During my eclectic university career, I had taken several courses in art history and architectural history. After covering small town government and foreign conflicts, it all started to come together for me.

Just as I was getting to the end of my tour in Moscow, I heard that the person who has been the architecture critic at the *Inquirer* was taking a buyout. As soon as I heard that, I wrote to the culture editor: "I want that job!" I even said I would leave Moscow immediately. The editor thought I was out of my mind. Anyway, they weren't moving very fast. So, nothing happened and I finished my tour. In those days, you'd do a four-year tour abroad and then come back to the states. Unlike the *Times* or the *Post*, the *Inquirer* foreign staff was pretty small, and we didn't have career foreign reporters. There was always a problem of what to do with those returning correspondents. You couldn't send them to the suburbs after they had been globe-trotting around the world. A lot of former correspondents were elevated to editors or sent to cover Washington. But I really couldn't see myself doing that sort of thing. And there weren't that many plum jobs, anyway. So, I asked if I could become the architecture critic, the Inquirer editor agreed right away. They hadn't even filled the position in the year since the previous critic had left. They were just so excited that I wasn't asking for the moon and said, "Great!" [laughter]

Risley: It's all yours.

Saffron: They basically said, "Yeah, sure." I told this little story in the introduction to my collection: I had been working as the critic for a maybe couple of weeks or months, when the editor of the paper, Bob Rosenthal, took me aside to see how I was doing. He said, "You know, you don't have to do this if you don't want to." I was touched by his concern, but I said, "You don't understand. I really, really want to write about architecture." I know it didn't completely compute. There has always been a big divide at the *Inquirer* and other newspapers between reporters who covered hard news and reporters who wrote soft news, like features and cultural criticism. It was hard to imagine someone who had been a foreign correspondent pivoting to write culture stories. There's less of that divide today. But at that time, it was just incomprehensible that someone who had the kind of career that I had, someone who had covered wars and government news would want to become a features writer. It wasn't unprecedented, certainly, but it wasn't the norm.

Risley: Do you remember your first column?

Saffron: I didn't start out doing that column. I started out doing like more architecture coverage.

Risley: I didn't mean column. I meant story.

Saffron: One of the earliest pieces I wrote was about the demolition of the One Meridian Tower, an office building across from City Hall that had been destroyed in a terrible fire in 1991, the year I left for Yugoslavia. Because of a big battle over the insurance claim, it was still standing in 1998, when I came back from Moscow. The inability of the city to remove that burned out hulk seemed to symbolize the city's inability to pull itself out of its long decline. I saw the demolition of the tower as a hopeful sign that the city's fortunes were about to change.

It was just lucky timing for me, but Philadelphia really was at the beginning of a comeback in the late '90s, even though it was evident to everyone at that time. Mayor Rendell had brought a new optimism to the city, and he fought like crazy to keep Philadelphia from going bankrupt. But there were still a lot of serious policy people who believed the city would just continue to decline. I remember interviewing some of them in those first years, and they would tell me with great certainty that, "Philadelphia is the next Detroit." That was back when Detroit was a kind of poster child for urban collapse in America. Things were still pretty bad in Philadelphia at that time. The city was still losing population and jobs. Very few new buildings were being built at that time, which made it kind of tricky to be an architecture critic.

Risley: What did you write about?

Saffron: I really had to dig for stories. The job description for an architecture critic was much more narrowly defined in those days. You were expected to write about important, new works of architecture, the kind of things that would eventually go down in the history books, and that was pretty much it. Many American cities had experienced a remarkable revival in the '90s. They were far ahead of Philadelphia and they were starting to express their renewed health by constructing high profile civic buildings, mainly museums and concert halls. The template for this architecture was the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which was designed by Frank Gehry. The museum opened in 1997 and it was an immediate sensation. It wasn't just the design, although that immense silver ship was very striking. Bilbao had been a declining industrial port, but the Gehry museum instantly transformed it into a major tourist destination. Cities all over the world were trying to replicate what happened there, and critics started calling this phenomenon, the Bilbao effect. People who never spent a minute thinking about architecture were riveted to the story.

Back then, there were packs of architecture journalists who went from city to city covering openings like that. And when Gehry's Disney Hall opened in Los Angeles, the *Inquirer* had me cover the story. I also covered the opening of Rem Koolhaas' Seattle Library. But the paper really couldn't afford to have me write about every big opening. Besides there was much more value in writing about what was happening locally. Since so little was being built, I had to kind of invent a beat that was right for Philadelphia. And that's when I started covering the policy decisions that were shaping the city as it tried to navigate its reinvention.

Risley: So, a lot of stories about planning?

Saffron: A lot of stories about planning. Mayor Rendell had really pushed hospitality and conventions as a replacement for the lost industrial jobs, and more and more visitors were starting to come downtown to attend shows and dine in restaurants. This was at a time when Center City's sidewalks would roll up at 5 p.m. and the downtown was seen as unsafe after dark. A lot of policymakers were convinced that we needed more parking garages so these visitors could park right next to their destination. I thought that was a really bad response. A lot of perfectly good buildings were being torn down to make room for parking. At one point, there was even a proposal for a giant garage on Rittenhouse Square. I felt in my gut that this was a very bad strategy.

All those memories of Plainfield's empty parking lots came flooding back. I knew that cities with acres of downtown parking were dead cities. I found myself writing column after column criticizing those garage proposals and trying to make the case for why they would do Philadelphia more harm than good. The downside of parking lots wasn't immediately obvious to people back then -- it still isn't, actually. At one point I received a note from the *Inquirer's* editor telling me it was mean of me to criticize parking, since everyone needed to park. This isn't exactly true, of course. Philadelphia is a great walking city and many residents don't own cars. We also have a great transit system here. I would try to point it out. I would use my columns to explain to ordinary people the trade-offs that came with easy parking, and how it could actually make cities feel less lively and more unsafe. Because so many of the garage proposals involved demolishing nice old buildings, preservation became part of the discussion. I was very much influenced by people like Jane Jacobs and Holly Whyte, who argued that cities function best when they have blocks of continuous activity, uninterrupted by dead-eyed

parking garages. I was firmly convinced that Philadelphia's old buildings were one of its greatest assets, a key to its salvation. Other cities had ripped themselves to shreds with urban renewal and highways, but miraculously Philadelphia had survived its bad years relatively intact. Even when the city was at its lowest fortunes, you could walk for blocks and blocks. The city never stopped being a living city. It was a real city, an inhabited city. It wasn't a Plainfield.

Of course, when someone did propose a new building, I'd be all over that story. I remember when a new high-rise apartment building was completed on Washington Square. It was the first one and a decade or more and I treated it like the big story it was.

Risley: So, what is the role of an architecture critic?

Saffron: Well, I think it's like any other form of accountability journalism, you're a watchdog. Architecture is just another venue for politics and big money. The exchanges are all going on below the surface, and it's your job to really bring them to light and show how planning and design decisions are going to affect ordinary people. Sometimes, I jokingly call myself an investigative critic. I mean, not all my pieces are like that. Sometimes I'll write just a very pure aesthetic review or assessment. But a lot of my stories are explaining how the sausage is being made and why people should care. It's actually become increasingly difficult to write about a work of architecture in isolation, without considering the social and political forces around it.

Risley: Why is that important?

Saffron: I have always believed that architecture criticism is different from other types of cultural criticism, like restaurant or movie reviews. If you go to a movie and it's a dud, well, you're out a couple of bucks. Of course, good cultural criticism offers insights into the values and ideas shaping our moment. But often it's really consumer-oriented and it exists mainly to tell you how to spend your money. Buildings are different. They're part of your life forever. The design and placement of a building will have a tremendous effect on the quality of your life. It affects how you interact with the city, with other residents. Its design can impact your physical safety and your mood. Are there cars pulling across the sidewalk and perhaps endangering you? Is it casting a shadow that will put you in a bad mood? A beautiful building can make you feel really happy and positive about the world. But if someone tears down a block of buildings, and you have to walk past, you know, a

trash-strewn lot every day. I mean, that's going to make you feel terrible. So, all these decisions are tremendously important.

And then there's the money [laughter]. How is your city government spending the money? In the middle of the Black Lives Matter protests, I found out some news: The city was about to spend a ton of money building a new police station in one of its poorest neighborhoods. I wrote a review, and that was the first time most people heard about this project. It came at a point when people were having a big debate about how much money they should spend on police.

Risley: Why is it important for a city like Philadelphia to have an architectural critic?

Saffron: Well, this is a great architectural city, for one thing. And it's a big city. There is a lot of construction here, a lot of development, a lot of irreplaceable buildings that are important not just to Philadelphia's heritage but to America's heritage and history. And I just think it's an interesting beat. I mean, why have a political writer?

Risley: Is there something about Philadelphia in particular?

Saffron: Well, Philadelphia is pretty special, and I think that specialness is a product of its built form. In New York, a large percentage of the population lives in apartment buildings with other people. They're kind of above the fray, and, if someone built something nearby that's not nice, they're somewhat insulated from the effects. But Philadelphians mainly live in houses, row houses. We share party walls. We share things in common in a way that very few American cities do. I mean, Baltimore, obviously, you know, Brooklyn, New York, and Boston. But this is a very intimate place because of our housing stock. We don't live in townhouses. We live in row houses, which are much smaller and closer together.

Risley: That's interesting. I never thought about the difference between Philadelphia and a city like New York.

Saffron: We also have this whole culture that is derived from the way our neighborhoods are organized. They grew up around the factory, around the church, around the school. Your cousins might live on the same block. You'd have a web of acquaintances. As I said, it's a very intimate place. And I think this network of relationships is one of the great things about Philadelphia. Even though so many factories are gone and churches have closed, we retain

that neighborhood feeling here, like in New Orleans. For a long time, people who were born here, stayed here, for better or worse. So, we're very passionate about our little neighborhood. It's a very neighborhood-oriented city. We are famous. Our sports fans are kind of famous [laughter].

Risley: Or infamous.

Saffron: For their loyalty to the team. That same loyalty exists to the block, to the neighborhood, to the bar, to the church. You know, we're very tribal here in a good way.

Risley: How would you describe your writing style in the column?

Saffron: It's evolved over time. When I started out, I thought I knew a lot. I see now, I didn't know anything. But, because I was a reporter, reporting undergirds every column. For a recent column I just finished, I must have interviewed twenty-five people, way too many. I always start by calling someone from every side of the story and trying to understand the issues as deeply as I can. I do have a set of values that informs my writing. So, after I collect all that reporting, I try to construct an argument using that information to support my view of the situation. What I write is very much a point-of-view column, but I'm not like a political columnist, who might be pushing an ideological point. I mean, I am ideological, but I also try to give people enough facts to understand the issues and, if they want, disagree with me. So, my columns are explanatory as well as argumentative. Sometimes, that can be really tricky to write and make interesting. I usually try to set it up as a story: here's the problem and here's what the problem means. Here are different approaches to the problem. And here's what I think about the problem.

Risley: That's interesting. Are there other critics that you admire, that you've learned from?

Saffron: In a way, architecture critics have a kind of oversized visibility. I mean, there haven't been that many of them. There are way more food critics, I'm sure, than there are architecture critics. But you know, my predecessors like Ada Louise Huxtable, the great critic from the *New York Times*, and Paul Goldberger. And my contemporaries like Blair Kamin at the *Chicago Tribune* and John King at *San Francisco Chronicle*, have taught me a lot. I also owe a lot to my predecessor at the *Inquirer*, Tom Hines. Just reading their work, I feel like I just learn so much. A guy named Michael Sorkin, who was a professor in New York, and wrote a wonderful book *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan,*

about everything within twenty minutes of where he lives. And of course, I mentioned Jane Jacobs and Holly White earlier.

Risley: Who are they?

Saffron: Jane Jacobs wrote a very famous book in the '60s called *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* kind of like the Bible for architecture critics, although there is some criticism of her now. She was one of the first people to criticize the demolition caused by urban renewal, the first voice to say you're destroying cities by building these towers and not respecting neighborhoods. So, definitely she's kind of a saint -- St. Jane. Holly Whyte wrote a lot of different kinds of books, but he's best known for doing very intensive studies of how people use space. He would film them and he would show how some spaces were dead in cities because of the way they were designed and other spaces, you know, attracted people and made them comfortable and in larger cities. So, he was very, very influential. Ada Louise Huxtable had a wonderful, elegant writing style and was very skeptical of developers and banks, everyone trying to cash in on the city.

Risley: So, what columns do you look back on with particular pride?

Saffron: [Laughter] I've got my book here! Let me see here.

Risley: I know that's a tough question.

Saffron: It is a really tough question. So, pretty early in my tenure, I wrote a column criticizing the city for trying to build a shopping mall on the Delaware [River] waterfront. I argued that a beautiful river was the absolute wrong place to put a windowless box of a building, especially one that everyone would have to drive to. That column, and then some subsequent reporting, led to an incredible public conversation in Philadelphia about how we should redevelop our waterfront. Along with parking garages, the waterfront became a regular topic in my columns. Ultimately, a non-profit convened a citizen-led planning effort to rethink the city's approach to the Delaware waterfront. The ideas that came out of that process eventually formed the basis for a new city master plan. One of the things about covering a beat for a long time is that you get to see how the story turns out. A couple of weeks ago, the agency overseeing the waterfront picked a master developer for the Delaware, based on the ideas that were developed during those citizen engagement sessions -- ideas that were first proposed in my columns back in 2000 or 2001. It's immensely gratifying to have contributed to a new way of

thinking about the waterfront. I also feel all my crazy garage columns -- don't build this garage and parking shouldn't be the most important thing -- have helped change the culture here.

Because I've been writing about architecture for so long, seeing the change in the public mindset about cities has been breathtaking. In the beginning, I always felt like a lone crank. There was a lot of criticism of my approach, my choice of subject matter. You'd see online comments where people would write, "Real architecture critics don't write about parking garages. You don't know how to be an architectural critic." It was very hostile. It took a long time before people started saying, "Oh, yeah, I see your point about how if you privilege the automobile, and put people and pedestrians in second place, you're going to make the city less appealing.

Over the last decade, the city has been transformed by an influx of millennials with a very different way of thinking. They ride bikes and don't own cars. Many are way more radical in their thinking than me [laughter]. And sometimes they get mad at me because I'm like, "*Well*, maybe a *little* parking in this development could be okay." And they say, "No parking!" But it was a very exciting moment for me recently when I reviewed a new high-rise apartment building on Walnut Street, which was the first building in probably half a century to be built without any parking at all. I just felt the world had evolved, and people got it. They understood that this is a big city, very walkable, very pedestrian-friendly. We can manage without everybody owning two cars and we're better off. So, I'm quite proud of contributing to that conversation.

I'm also proud of several columns that I've written about the construction trade unions, even though they've gotten me in hot water. The trade unions are very powerful politically, and some feel they have too much influence over construction. A few years ago, I did a couple of pieces about a developer who was trying to do a project with a mixed shop -- that is, part union and part non-union. This is a story that goes beyond construction, though. For a long time, many of the trade unions were white bastions, and they kept people of color from getting good-paying jobs on construction sites. That's not an issue you would expect an architecture critic to focus on, but I felt I couldn't keep writing about what gets built without writing about who does the building. A couple of years ago, the developer with the mixed shop made a public promise to hire more minority workers. I wrote about that, of course, But then a year later, I went back to investigate whether the developer

was living up to his promises. That may be my finest piece and there is very little in there about Architecture with a capital A.

Risley: Do you think you've expanded the definition of what an architectural critic is, or what an architecture writer is?

Saffron: I think I've contributed to that because as I said in the beginning, people said, "That's not what architecture critics do." They didn't really understand how architecture touches so many different policy issues. So yeah, I do think I did, and I think, like so many things, the world was changing. I call these urbanist issues because when you hear "architecture," people think pure aesthetics. But urbanism, that word kind of describes the whole spectrum of issues. By the mid-2000s, we started to see these websites like "Brownstoner," and "Curbed," and a few others that have all come and gone. They were all writing about cities and urbanist issues, not so much in the voice of a critic, but just reporting. Reporting about new developments, reporting about bike lanes. When I started out, we were just seeing the rise of these niche websites. And so, while there are many fewer architecture critics today working for legacy media, like mine, there are many more voices writing about these related issues for various websites.

CityLab, which was just bought by Bloomberg, is another one. And you know, that coincided with this major urban comeback nationally. So, not only did I start doing this at a time when Philadelphia was experiencing this revival, cities across the country were picking themselves up, and millennials were moving into cities for a whole variety of reasons. They had a different way of thinking than their parents. So, cities were becoming cool to live in. You're seeing new housing and restaurants and parks and bike lanes. And everyone has an opinion about all that stuff. So, that first decade of the twenty-first century was really an incredible urban comeback decade.

Risley: Do you have columns that you wrote that you regret?

Saffron: Of course, of course [laughter].

Risley: Like what?

Saffron: I think I was very slow to recognize the impact of gentrification and that has a lot to do with my age. I grew up in the '60s. I was a child in the '60s when cities were falling apart. And it was a desperate, desperate time. I came of age as an adult when cities were at their lowest point. I really felt that for cities to

survive, they needed middle-class people to live there. They needed new construction, you know, sensible new construction. They needed preservation. They needed to embrace a more European style of living. And because I was so gung-ho about that, think I was late to recognize that the effects of all these newcomers into cities like Philadelphia was, really threatening to poorer people who lived here for a long time. Prices in this neighborhood quadrupled in the last twenty year, and not just here. You used to be able to buy a house in Philly for $20,000 and you paid $300 a year in property taxes. I mean you can still buy a house for $20,000, but there are fewer and fewer neighborhoods where you can do that. So, in neighborhoods where, you know, twenty years ago, a house might go for $50,000, now it goes for $500,000. That's a shock to the system. For older people and people of lesser means, it's really hard, especially when their property taxes go up. It took me a little while to appreciate that and kind of make up for that, but there are people who want no new construction. I think because I remember the bad old days, I realized there has to be a balance.

Risley: What did winning the Pulitzer Prize mean to you?

Saffron: Well, it was really, really wonderful. I'd been a finalist three times, so I thought I would never win. People joked I was the Susan Lucci of architecture critics. For journalists, obviously, there's no bigger prize. But for me particularly, it clearly validated that what I was doing was legitimate architectural criticism. As I mentioned, there were some readers and policy people and developers who felt I was not fit for this job. And they strongly disagreed with my arguments. It wasn't just that they disagreed with me. Those feelings that I was not legitimate had been pretty strong. And once I won that prize, I was legitimized. And partly as a woman, in a field where almost everyone is male, that is an important seal of approval.

Risley: How have things changed for women in journalism during your career?

Saffron: Oh, we could have a whole interview about that [laughter].

Risley: Yeah, I know.

Saffron: It's incredible. I mentioned earlier that I thought I was never going to be a foreign correspondent because there were so few women in those jobs at the time. And that's why I had a child -- well, I would have had a child anyway, but you know, I just thought like, I had my fun during my leave, and now it's over and no one will ever send a mother overseas to cover a war. That was in

the '90s, which isn't so long ago. Now nobody would even think that today, right? So that's one way it changed. That's why I was so crazed when I was 19, thinking, I've got to drop out of college, I've got to become a journalist right away because I only have, like, ten or fifteen years to make my career because then, my biological clock will be ticking, and then it's all over. Yeah, that's how I really thought because that was what the world was like at that time.

Risley: Are there just so many more opportunities now for women?

Saffron: Well, I think people look at you, much differently. When I was starting out with the *Inquirer*, there were so few women doing hard news, covering cops or City Hall or sports. Women had to really fight for those kinds of positions. Those were the status positions, too. It was not easy -- baby or no baby -- for a woman to become a foreign correspondent. There were so few women in those roles, and no one ever thought of you for those kinds of jobs. And I think that's completely changed. I mean, I just, felt for a long time, I wasn't taken seriously because I was a good feature writer, which was bad for my career [laughter].

Risley: Because?

Saffron: I was a soft news reporter. You know, even now, it's hard for some journalists to understand that you can do both things. I am very picky about aesthetics and design and beauty. But I also love a meaty news story.

Risley: How have the *Inquirer's* financial problems and ownership affected your work?

Saffron: The *Inquirer* has been through multiple soap operas. We were bought and sold like six times in the span of, I don't know, eight years, or whatever it was. There were lawsuits. There was a lawsuit brought by two competing groups of owners that ended with the good guys winning and then one of them dying in a plane crash the following week. If you wrote that in a novel, it would sound utterly melodramatic. Almost from the day I started [on the beat] the paper has been contracting. So, I've had to roll with that. Since I became the architecture critic I've just had to adjust. I did go out of town on stories more often in the beginning. I do that less now. It's much more local. Our horizons are more limited. Yet, I have a tremendous amount of freedom. I had that twenty years ago; I still have that now. So, in some ways, I've been unaffected.

Risley: Good to hear.

Saffron: I was the last Moscow correspondent for the *Inquirer*. The bureau and all the foreign bureaus were taken over by the chain, Knight Ridder, at that time and that company later was sold. When I started at the *Inquirer* in 1985, we had six foreign bureaus and ten national bureaus. Today, we have one Washington correspondent. We barely have suburban bureaus now. So that's been a really, really dramatic change. There is much less local coverage. So, when I go out to the suburbs sometimes -- because I do believe in covering the whole circulation area – I'll be the only one writing about those urban environment issues. Because there's nobody covering zoning and planning for the small towns.

Risley: It seems like you've embraced Twitter and social media as part of your job. Why do you think that's important?

Saffron: I was kind of early to social media. It's a great way to promote your stories and promote your worldview. I am an opinionated columnist and I like engaging with my readers. And as President Trump knows, it's a very direct way to engage with your audience without filters. So, I think it's just a really important phenomenon, a really important tool for every journalist to communicate with their readers, to be present. And it's a great way to promote your work.

Risley: Do you use it as a reporting tool?

Saffron: I do, I do. I'll crowdsource some things -- more on Facebook than on Twitter and I've gotten amazing responses because I have a pretty big network. I use Instagram a lot too, which is really the most enjoyable social media.

Risley: Why?

Saffron: Well, I'll admit, I've kind of grown to hate Twitter and Facebook because there's a little too much fighting and ugliness, and it can really make you tense. Instagram is more pleasurable. My Instagram feed is almost entirely buildings, and you can argue about their merits in a friendlier way. It's just a more low-key place than Facebook and Twitter.

Risley: Is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

Saffron: I do think it is important to talk about women in journalism and how that has really, really changed, especially with the #MeToo movement. And it's obviously the challenges aren't over for women. That's all I can say. It continues to be a struggle for women, for women journalists to be taken seriously and to be judged on their merits.

Risley: But all in all, you feel like you've been judged fairly?

Saffron: Well, I had to fight for a lot of what I have. And it's gotten much easier over time as I gain some stature. But, when I look back, I see now that the big problem with all this -- and I think people of color face this as well -- is, you don't know if you're being ignored because you're really not up to the task. Is it a lack of talent, a lack of ability? Is it who you are and how you're perceived? And so, if you have a lot of self-doubts -- and I do! -- you're always asking yourself, am I doing this right? Is this just how people are treating me? I think it's a real struggle. So, when I was becoming a journalist and becoming an architecture critic, I thought all my failings were my own. And now, in hindsight, I see that some of the career limits put on me were not my fault and that it was hard for people to wrap their heads around the fact that I was a woman saying what I was saying.

Risley: Thanks so much.

Saffron: You're welcome.