Michigan Family Farms and Farm Buildings: Landscapes of the Heart and Mind Transcript

Author: Hema Dandekar (HD)
In Conversation with: Hunter Francis (HF) and Joel Orth (JO)
Date: March 11, 2011
Location: Robert E. Kennedy Library, San Luis Obispo, CA
Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, Michigan Family Farms and Farm Buildings: Landscapes of the Heart and Mind between author Hema Dandekar of city and regional planning, Hunter Francis of agriculture, food, and environmental science, and Joel Orth of history.

[Music]

Karen Lauritsen (Moderator): Welcome to Kennedy Library Out Loud, podcasts of library programs and events. This podcast captures Conversations with Cal Poly Authors, the public engagement and outreach program of the library that occurs approximately once per quarter in Room 111H of the library. This podcast was recorded at the inaugural event on March 11, 2011. For more information about library podcasts, visit the website at lib.calpoly.edu/outloud, and for more information about Conversations with Cal Poly Authors, visit the series website lib.calpoly.edu/authors. Conversations with Cal Poly Authors is a celebration of the published work of Cal Poly faculty, a way to share their work across colleges and disciplines, an attempt to stimulate the interest of students in new areas of research. This podcast of Conversations with Cal Poly Authors features Professor and Department Chair of City and Regional Planning, Hema Dandekar and her book, Landscapes of the Heart and Mind: Michigan Family Farms and Farm Buildings published by the University of Michigan Press in 2010. Two invited respondents, College of Agriculture Food and Environmental Science Center Director, Hunter Francis, and professor of history Joel Orth join Professor Dandekar in discussing her book. The podcast is divided into five segments. This first features Hema explaining how and why she wrote the book, Landscapes of the Heart and Mind: Michigan Family Farms and Farm Buildings. She talks about her interest in studying barns, their relationships to the land, and the people who use them. She explores the idea of adaptive reuse, form following function without losing the integrity of the whole.

HD: The barns and the farm buildings of Michigan were always in my peripheral vision as an architect. I came here to this country from India when I was about 17 as an exchange student and I was already in architecture school. And so I had said to the Exchange Committee, "I want to live with an architect. If I'm going to come, I'm going to leave a college education and come and be a high school student, at least I can live with an architect," and they said, "Oh, we don't have an architect. You can stay with this family that has a Frank Lloyd Wright house." Well, I thought that over and it took me about two seconds to say, "I'll take it." And I was here, I was in Michigan living in this gorgeous Frank Lloyd Wright house and driving to high school and along the way was a small rural community, Galesburg, Michigan, and I would see these barns. And they were fascinating because they had integrity, they were huge, and nobody talked about
them. But I was a modernist; I didn't really give it special inquiry at that time. But then, some years later, I ended up as an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan and I had really been working on India and on farming in India. Farm communities in India that had been transformed because big cities like Mumbai were industrializing and sucking out manpower, viable manpower, out of the countryside and I was looking, as a planner, on what kind of effect industry was having on the rural hinterland. I never thought about American farming, really. And when I was in Michigan, I was a member of this South and Southeast Asia Center, and we have everybody, people who did history and culture, archeology all the way to the computer scientists, who were crunching numbers on Thailand or something. And the parties were the best part of that center. And in one of those parties, I was talking to Walter Spink, an art historian of South Asia about these wonderful buildings on the countryside, these barns. And I was still fascinated by them, and he said that's a humanities project. You can get money to look into that, and I said, "Come on, no way. I'm just going to have to kind of do it myself." And she said, "No, no. There's something called the Michigan Counsel for the Humanities and apply there." And I was young; I didn't know about research, I didn't know about funding. But I wrote up this project and I got $2,000. And it doesn't seem like much now, but, boy, that seemed like a lot of money as a startup person. And I started traveling along the countryside and I could drag a student along because, you know, now I could pay them three bucks an hour or whatever [laughter]. They had to come with me. They would resist because they didn't like driving in my Honda Civic, you know, they had better cars, [laughter] but this whole field work started with—there didn't seem any methodology in architecture to look at what was important to me, which was the relationship of these buildings with the land around it—what was going on in the buildings. Because to me, those buildings spoke really of a great integrity and the nature and the quality of their materials. As I say in my book, they basically come from the ground up. If you have stone, you use it for the foundation. If you have a certain kind of wood, you use it for this structure. You may have to input some of the cladding from the Upper Peninsula, but if—you do it if there’s a railroad link. Otherwise you make do with something else, so there was a real integrity about the materials. And there was a real connection with the form with what was needed. If it was a hay barn, it was a certain volume and the roof pitch was increased so that you could maximize the amount of hay you could put into it. So form follows function in the post-modernistic constructionist mode of architecture, kind of fell by the wayside, but with agricultural buildings, form followed function. But people had been deeply involved in the building of it. These are basically self-help buildings. So you would talk to a farmer and you’d say, "Hey, you know, I..." They don't really want to talk to you, but then you'd go trotting down there and say, "What about this barn?" And they'd say, "What?" "Barn, the barn, this building." And they couldn't understand my accent, and I said, "I really like that building there," and they said, "Oh, the barn." [Laughter] But suddenly—you know, I wasn't doing a sociological interview; I wasn't asking them about their families. They would spend hours pointing out where the wood had come from, what kind of joint. They would have messed with it too because as they change from a certain kind of dairy to a more mechanized kind of dairy, they'd rip out things, but they still had great feeling for what it represented in aesthetic sensibility about the building overall. So I don't think they messed with it. You know when I talked to historic preservation people, I say the life of a building is in the living in it and off it. And so to me what the barn buildings represented was this adaptive reuse that was, form
was following function without losing the integrity of the whole. But then yet more, one more
layer came out of these conversations, which was these peoples' stories, their relationships.
And these are taciturn people. They don't really want to—they're not going to tell you about
their latest angst and their psychological sort of—[laughter] they don't do that. But you can—and
they're very terse in what they say. And so I was kind of getting it, but not really. But I was
recording everything. And this was back in 1984, I looked up the time, 1986. That was 25 years
ago, that was $2,000 grant. And I had money to buy tape recordings and a tape recorder, and
so I taped everything and following that, of course, tenure loomed and I wasn't going to be
writing about flakey stuff, although I did write a cookbook, but there was only one
transgression allowed [laughter]. I had to overcome that cookbook, so I was writing very
mainstream stuff. It was about structure, it was about, you know, it was about architecture and
planning basically. And there were a lot of—I did a number of peer-reviewed publications and
everything got set aside. I started administrating, I got tenure, I was promoted, but you know,
things sort of start piling up on you. And it was many years later in 2004, I was a department
head at Arizona State University and I had a little bit of discretionary money, and I was really
tired of administrating. There was a law suit, you know, I said, you know, "What am I doing?" I
took the money and I ran to Michigan and I went back to all the farms that I could. And I
expected everybody to be dead [laughter]. And these are hardy people. They were not dead,
[laughter] most of them weren't. And some of them actually even remembered me. You could
pick up the conversation as though it was yesterday. It was really fun. And so again I came back
really excited about all the things that I had learned. And my first foray was kind of doom and
gloom. These family farms were dying. There wasn't, you know, how were they going to
survive? They were great. There was nostalgia. There were a couple of things like the
strawberry farming that was a kind of niche farming with you pick that's seen some potential,
but it did seem like, you know—it was sort of—I was watching an end of the era. When I went
back in 2004, a surprising number of people, if they were not actually in farming, they were
managing to keep the farmstead going. And I think these case studies show a variation of
adaptation, but a very stronghold and a strong value for that land, for those buildings, for that
way of life, for the community that they were a part of. And it was a really wonderful story to
come back to. I came back to administration and nothing happened. I was taking care of law
suits and doing administration. And it wasn't until 2007, when I was rewarded with six months
off, having finished my administrative five years. I had six months off at home. I started
listening to the tapes from 1986 and it was like this whole world came alive. And I started
transcribing and that's when I started understanding what words people were using to describe
their situation. And when I had written more professionally it had made sense, but it was my
sense of it. And they were so much better at articulating their situation. They used one
sentence when I had used five. Just not, not just that I'm an academic, but it's just the way, you
know, we have to cross every "t" and they didn't. And so, I thought, you know, I need to write
with their voice. And so that's how this book started being pieced together and there were 600
pages initially. And there's no way a publisher is going to publish 600 pages, but I took them
anyway. I took them to the University of Michigan, I took them to Wayne State University Press
because—Wayne State had given up. They had been talking to me about this book for 15, 20
years, "Ah, she's never going to do it, throw out the file." I was lucky that I got a good editor
and she said it's got to be half the size, but we'll do it.
Moderator: You're listening to a podcast of Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This second segment features Hema explaining in detail what the stories of the Michigan farmers and their barns mean to her. Hunter Francis and Joel Orth join the conversation, and discuss the challenges American family farmers are facing today.

HD: And what I realized, these stories had given me was an insight into what I admired so much about America. And it wasn't the high-speed machinery and the washing machine and the great domestic kitchens and the car in every porch, but the sort of sense of being able to fix things, do things, the kind of stuff that—my father was an engineer, always spoke to me about us being American. These people on the farm are phenomenal and I write about it. They know how to fix these great big combine harvesters and they know how to do this gismo. And I would dutifully listen and transcribe. I had no clue what they're talking about, but they knew what they were doing. And they were keeping this machinery going. It was a very hands-on practicality that was an innate, innate strength and an innate problem-solving capacity that I don't think I've observed as readily in the kind of hierarchical society I come from. And if you see it, it happens to be in the lower classes and it is not privileged. And what was right in the American scene was that these people had carved out a terrain for themselves where they could privilege it themselves. They didn't give a darn, you know, they just led their lives, they took care of business, they maintained their properties, and they carved out a really satisfying life for themselves and their families. So that one thing. Taking care of families and neighbors came along with that, the dependency. You heard it from people all the time. And, you know, you hear it about the Amish, but it's really a way of life with the family farmers that I met. And there are stories about, you know, some kid who was going to high school, but he would take care of the milking of their neighbor's before he left to walk two miles in the Michigan winter to go to high school in the snow. So he was getting up at four in the morning and, you know, how his classmates didn't like him because he smelled of manure. He had to prove himself. And that was a really American story. These were really American stories for me. So taking care of family and neighbors and not being afraid of hard work, a huge self-reliance and a determination to carry on with physical challenges, the story of Bill Lutz, his knees had been replaced, he's in his late sixties, and he's telling me, "Well, I changed that window to do a more energy conserving one." So how do you... He went up the ladder with his new knees and he was just a little afraid he might drop the window, not to drop himself, I said, "How'd you get the window up?" You know, but anyway he did and it was that kind of self-reliance that I thought was fabulous. And there were women. I talk to a woman still; she's 93, she's alone on her farm, Mabel. And when I called her in 2004, I called her and I didn't expect her to be alive and there she is, you know. So she said, "Hello," and I said, "Mabel, is that you, Mabel?" And she said, "Yes. Who is this?" And she remembered me, I mean, she remembered the conversation. I remember she wrote up a little note in the newspaper that she had gotten this conversation with me. They are really amazing people, but then the last element I think is frugality. And that really echoes to my Brahmin soul because we're very frugal, you know, we may have money, but we like to mend our clothes, we like to be very frugal. I mean, it's not a good idea to be too consumptive. And it
struck a chord with me, the way these people led their lives. It was, everything was possible, it was good for the other person, but not if it didn't fit that farm, that place, that way, no. And I remember because when I was growing up in a Brahmin household, we were all very liberal, everything was okay. There was no judgment, but it wasn't for us, you know, for a variety of reasons. And I sense that same sort of sentedness. It’s okay for other people, but this is right for us and I really, besides which, I think they, you know, they understand science, they understand economics, they're stubborn, [laughter] self-reliant. And I think this is what has made America and Americans the strong resilient and resourceful country that it is. And I hope we don't lose that. And I worried about losing that as I worried that farm life was going to disappear. So that's what this book is about.

HF: I'm just wondering, after having gone back and visited the people again, how strong is your sense of hope and given how you've seen things change, even over these past few decades?

HD: Well, you know, could I turn that question around because how strong is your sense of hope of that? You were so much closer—

HF: I asked you first. [Laughter]

HD: —and the work is so much deeper, and I was really very curious about how the two of you reacted to the narrative from the disciplines you come from.

JO: I have some ambivalence, I guess. It depends on when you ask me or what day or what's happening. I think it's somewhat of a moving target, and I think there are some real signs of hope particularly with this whole, what some people are now starting to call Food Movement. A lot of interest in food, where food comes from. I think a lot people particularly young people are looking for more of a connection to where their food comes from and that is creating opportunities for farmers, small farmers. And yet, you know, in reading it I, the stories, really feeling the challenges that small families face in the competitiveness of the global food system and I think as you pointed out, that the buildings and the life styles are really preserved when they're put into use, right? That there has to be a way to keep them viable. And that is, you know, as we stand here today, that is a serious challenge for small farmers. It's amazing in the fast-paced society in which we live, how quickly things can change. I think that the looming thing that could change everything is oil. So much of what we do in agriculture and really in all our endeavors is predicated on abundant or relatively cheap oil, and if that changes significantly in our lifetime it will change everything. That could be one, that could very possibly be one factor that drives agriculture closer to home. You know, I think the 20th century, from my perspective of, you know, we saw departure of agriculture. It went somewhere else. You know, we became more urbanized, but this to me, spoke, I don't know, it made me feel in myself, a longing for that connection.

HF: There's something really compelling about a farm. And I've seen it here at Cal Poly just running farm programs, bringing students out who haven't had much exposure to agriculture, but seeing the animals, seeing the, you know, picking up a carrot out of the ground and tasting
it, I mean, that's a connection that I think is really meaningful. And perhaps the fact that we're missing it and that people are looking back in some ways to reestablish that connection that gives me hope.

JO: There are ways for young people to find their way into these new farming ventures, then maybe it will continue. I mean, it's going to be reinvented. Or maybe this is the great opportunity, you could have some sort of internship where you get young Cal Poly students to go intern on one of these farms because, you know, these people, these voices we're hearing, they're sitting on this divide, right? This is a divide in U.S. history. They grew up in a world where they were growing their own food, they were canning, they were producing for their home, and that all disappeared in the '50s and '60s and farming was commercialized. And some of them kept it, of course, but they have those skills. They built these barns, I mean, tongue and groove, and go out there and do it themselves, I mean, this is amazing. And, you know, with them, those skills are going to disappear.

[Music]

Moderator: You're listening to a podcast of Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. In this third segment, Hema, Hunter, and Joel discuss how the cost of land and urban planning affect the ability to farm.

HD: But I think the land is the critical, the cost of land.

JO: Here, especially, yeah.

HD: And it seems everywhere. And so I think there is a role as an urban planner, you know, falling back into my own field, this sort of whole issue of green belts and purple belts and belts that are productive, but are connected to a market place, which is the center. I mean, some of these movements, I think, are gaining ground because people see it as a healthier environment. People see it as wanting to live denser. I mean, I think it's connected with, I'm hoping it's connected with a shifting sensibility about not necessarily always wanting the suburban prototype as a way of living.

JO: So are you seeing that in your profession? Is that a serious movement that you think would gain some strength?

HD: Well, it depends on how you read the tea leaves, you know. It's definitely a movement back to the downtown densification.

JO: Well, but even in suburbia, I think I recall reading an article lately, there was some plan for a, you know, a suburban track community, but that also made space for a farm, right? So that this community, have you heard much about, I mean, is that?
HF: There were plans for that out in Dealdo property. There were going to have small organic farming houses.

HD: At which one?

HF: The Dealdo property off of [inaudible] road.

JO: Off of [inaudible] road.

HD: Yeah. The Planning Commission here just heard from them. I watched the Planning Commission on Channel, and they just approved an agriculture zone. Its zoned agriculture and they've got a demonstration project that they are going to do for kids. And I think that, you know, it is, the kind of work you do is really important and public awareness of office activity and its meaning, but it's got to make economic sense at some level. And I think the oil prices might do that.

HF: A lot of knowledge goes with them, you know, that's experiential and it can't just neatly be kept in the library. And so I really appreciate the effort to go have those conversations because I think as you said, it brings an added element that goes just beyond the mind.

HD: I just want to talk about the niche farming though because if you see in the book, there are people who are surviving. The guys who are raising these Belgian horses for the Mackinac Island tourist trade. And they're doing some hay and they're managing to stay on their property because they love the way of life. It's tenable because he's got some help on the land ownership from his father. So I think to me, the land price is really critical, you know, you've got to make land available. But we have a lot of land in this country, you know, I mean, it's not like China. It's not like India where land is really a very scarce commodity. And if you give land and you can create an opportunity for people to become farmers, I think that there are many who really enjoy the lifestyles.

HF: It's still a relatively small sector of the food production industry in this country. It's only, I think, under 5 percent still and I think this local thing is probably, is the next wave. A lot of conversation about how to create food sheds, how to stimulate regional agricultural economies, I mean, we're even doing it here, having these conversations here because we're in an ideal place of all places and grow all year round. We also have a lot of our agricultural resources still intact. And we're close to some really big markets. So that's kind of an ideal circumstance. If anyone should be able to do it, it should be us, I think, in this county. So maybe you could say more about, you know, you mentioned several times that this connection of farmers who love the farm and love family life, in a way is a national asset that we should try to preserve. What would be your prescription? I mean, what do you see as some of the main obstacles? I guess, it's the land, is that what you're saying, it's the land prices from your perspective as a planner and an architect and having done these stories?

HD: I'm not sure anybody has solutions. I was hoping you guys would.
JO: Okay, find somebody dictator for a while?

HD: Dictate it. Well, I don't know how it sits historically, Joel.

JO: Well, this is something that's changed. I mean, you know, it didn't used to be this way. Obviously it's economics that's driving those changes. It became as Hunter was pointing out, it became cheap to ship things around. It's only gotten cheaper, really.

HD: Yes.

JO: Until that changes, I don't know that we're going to go back to that world, but it certainly, if those conditions change, I think that it might change pretty fast. I think he's right about that. We might be surprised how quickly that could change because, again, these people are sitting on that divide, the world they grew up in. They were still producing many things locally, I mean, the classic example I have, I mean, I went to graduate school in Iowa, in a small college town in Iowa in the '90s. And the Farmers' Market was a joke in the '90s. It's a joke. I mean, you go there and you talk to some nice people, but there was not, there wasn't much there to buy. And that's changing rapidly in some place like Iowa, but that it could be that way, you know. And then when these people were growing up in the '30s and the '40s, they were still growing their own food and fixing their own clothing and repairing their own barns and doing everything themselves. And then that changed very rapidly, you know, that we moved to a very commercialized style of agriculture in which people went to the store to buy everything they needed. And they grew two things, corn and soybeans. And that was just all they, it made economic sense to do that, and in some ways you read the life style that these people are living, you can understand why many were eager to embrace that change. It's very understandable, but in terms of switching back, it might be happen faster than we think. Again, if a place like Sam Lewis might, Berkley certainly would, might create open spaces and make those available to farmers who wanted, you know, long-term leases or something.

[Music]

Moderator: You're listening to a podcast of Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This fourth section features Hemma, Hunter, and Joel talking about the immense amount of hard work required to farm successfully and the current status of farming in California.

JO: The farm supported not only what they were doing as farms, making a living there, but as families. Because one of the things I see with some of these is they grew up as a family working together. I mean, I go away to work and I leave my daughter at home and I don't see her until I get home in the evening. And I'm sure they sort of had some of that, but at the same time they're working on that same space as a family. You know growing up, being around each other together, and that's, and that's a pretty neat thing.

HD: Yes.
JO: Were there things about the actual layout of these places, the buildings, the connection between the buildings, that facilitated that sort of lifestyle?

HD: I don't think it was in the layout of the buildings, because the layout of the buildings had to minimize effort, you know. You when you're trying to do production you lay things out so that you minimize how much effort it is, because it is really hard work. But all hands were needed to do the production and so you hear in these stories, going out and working with—one of the respondents talks about going in and working with his grandmother who only spoke German, and so he learned German, as a kid. And how she, you know, she was a real taskmaster and so he learned to be a taskmaster. And so I think you know this way of life required all hands on board. It's from when you are small and I found that in India too. When we were with farm communities the little children would be running off to the chickens and my daughter has experienced that because I've taken her as a kid. She thought that was great you know, there were the chickens running around and she could run with them. But that kid's job was to keep that chicken safe and not have anybody steal it. And so on. So, in that society, you know, you had to protect every little thing and the whole family was involved in protecting resources. I think that the farms themselves, they were small. There were fewer rooms. They were tiny rooms and people you know, they did not have bathrooms for the longest time. And so people were really lived in closed proximity. You couldn't go off and hide in your room.

HF: Its quite remarkable, isn't it.

HD: Yeah.

HF: Raising a family four and seven hundred square feet.

HD: Leaves little room. But people felt comfortable you know, it was home. It was fine, I mean I think this idea of this house that has grown. I mean in architecture we've documented how the size of an average house has grown. It's ridiculous. The size of the family goes down and then you have two people in 3,000 square feet homes. It's inversely proportional to the size of the family. And I think there is a roll back of that in architecture. There has been a roll back of that. The problem is the housing stop doesn't supporting that kind of choice. But I feel hopeful in California. I love being back in California because I think you know our farmer's markets are more diverse, for instance, and the products—and I think this idea of heritage products, I talk about this yellow apple this guy was going to go find the seeds for, because it was resistant and he knew there was one back in the backwoods and I don't think he ever did go find that apple tree and collect those seeds. And it's that kind of knowledge I think that is being lost but in California I think that there's much more awareness about legacy seeds, indigenous plants you know. We used to grow this, can we keep it alive? Because you know the things that you've grown over 100s of years tend to be much more resilient for that climate type unless there's a huge climate change. I'm very hopeful in California. I like it. You know people say we are socialist and we're over regulated, as a planner I'm really happy. [Laughter] And about the green space, I mean we do have a green belt program around the city, that's why it's so
beautiful. And the Williamson act which we you know there isn't any money for, a city like this is trying to maintain with its own coffers and it's been mostly open trekking and you know but you can also be farming. It can also be ranching. And we have acquired easements and conservation easements to ranches. The problem is if economy is going down, cities are less inclined but when the economy starts going up, and if these kind of people survive in America, I think we’re going to be okay, you know. Because there’re going to be innovative. But when it starts going up I think it's really important for us to be having these conversations about what kind of world we want, once the economy is going up. That maybe we don't want to go to very large suburban homes that we have to drive everywhere. That we're developing a culture that everybody loves San Luis Obispo when they come. And I think to some extent it embodies that kind of density and vitality that many people say they want, you know. And it's very hard to create it artificially actually.

HF: One of the stories in there, I guess it was the Ann Arbor one, was that the Let's Farm. That was very close to Ann Arbor and sounded like he was having some difficulties though, making that work. Isn't there a bad side to being close to urban areas like that? I mean the smell would be an obvious one eventually.

HD: And I think this is where zoning can help. I mean this is where I think we can put in land use zoning and jurisdiction where—he was afraid of it and Michigan isn't a strong pro-planning state. But they do now have a greenbelt in place and my students were proposing this back in the mid-eighties. You know, we had gone to the city council with a greenbelt, a beautifully articulated greenbelt proposal and it would have cost them a fraction of what it is now costing them to acquire land. But Lutz is still holding on that. You know and he's in fact making his own greenbelt. He's buying up more land, so... [laughter]

HF: So, yeah.

HD: So he can't be too close to the person who's going to you know not like the smell, you know, I think it's part of the education though, that— you know I remember buying a farm, a barn for my daughter when she was small and she loved it, and every kid loves barns and those little animals that go into it, you know. It's really something almost innate that we love that, and it gets sort of beaten out of us as we get older. So I think there's maybe a way of remembering that too. And then also creating that zoning and planning so that you can protect this activity because its more than just an economic—it's important to our health, to our walkability, to our quality of life, to our recreation. And the worst thing is lawyers, I think. Because the farmers I talk to were afraid to open up their homes for bed and breakfast, or to let them go canoeing in the lake because they were afraid they were going to get sued. Everybody is afraid that they are going to get sued and that they're liable. Maybe we have a national liability act or something that protects people so that they can do these valued added activities. The woman from Finland who was making cheese from her, from her dairy cows, but they stopped allowing her to sell it because it was not proposed. But we're importing unprocessed cheese from France and buying it at Trader Joe's. And we can do that because they've been available to pass set marks whereas this Finnish lady up in the Upper Peninsula—
the health department is coming down on her. So she only gives it to her family. So maybe there's something we can do systemically that enough of us saying, this is going a little bit out of whack.

[Music]

Moderator: You're listening to a podcast of conversations with Cal Poly authors. In this fifth and final segment, Hema, Hunter and Joel discuss the philosophy of farming and the relationships required to successfully care for the land.

[Music]

HD: And you've invested to a great debt burden to a great amount of debt in order to facilitate that production and yet the market doesn't allow—

HF: Doesn't support it...

HD: —warrant it. So you've over expanded and you know Lutz talks about that, you know. I'm not going to do that. This is my size of farm and I think in a way extension service was partly responsible. Because there was this myth infinite growth and the green revolution.

JO: Some of them won that race. Some of them are wealthy, they own large farms.

HF: Yes, but the result is...

HD: And giving them tax subsidy.

HF: Yup, yeah...

HD: We're subsidizing all kinds of things to make them profitable but we don't subsidize the small farmer for anything and we legislate against them, selling directly, value adding, all kinds of things.

HF: Pretty deep statement about our values as a culture, isn't it. I mean the whole idea that even the farm building reflects and the way the farm is setup, layout and all that, I mean it reflects our policies, our attitudes, what we want. As long as we just food as stuff, it's really materialistic reductionist thing, you know. If we just see food as calories or whatever, then why not make a farm building a machine, right? And to me that's a challenge of our day. Is how do we reinsert quality back into the equation. We have a very difficult time assessing it. We all use it every day through our senses, we know, I mean that's the hard part, right? The connection. We know what feels right, but when it comes to policy, when it comes to decision making, and a lot of times it even comes to teaching. It's about the quantity. It's about the show me the data. And I just think it's a huge problem. But if we ever are going to get back to quality of life, we have to find a way to reinsert quality back into the conversation and the decision making.
We have to accord it recognition. And I mean even though we do accord it, or we appreciate these things, we see them and we feel them, but, but we really have to find way. That's my soap box.

HD: Very well said. And I think that's that sort of stepping back and making some internal decisions about it. Which is what I think these people did and which one appreciates. It's making some internal decisions about what is one's choice and what one does with one's life.

JO: I'd be curious to know, do you have any comments on, on the Indian farm landscape and tradition, you know, traditional structures or how their buildings or infrastructure reflect those conditions of climate and culture and traditions? And you know for me as an American, when I think of that stereotypical farm I think of those types of barns with the silo and what's it look like in India? Has there been—I mean you must have, we have centennial farms, you must have millennial farms, right? I mean after thousands and thousands of years?

HD: Yeah, but you know the millennial farms, it's not the buildings, but it's the lands. They will—you know, people die before they'll give up their land.

HF: Oh, yeah.

HD: Connectivity with the land is sacrosanct.

HF: Very strong.

HD: You don't sell your land if you can possibly help it. The housing is kind of you know, it's all central, it's not you know, each farm on its own plot of land. People live in secure village like environments but they—and then they walk out to their farms. It's not efficient. And then they got the crops and sleep on all the land when the crop has come to fruition so somebody doesn't rob them. But they don't even have to have, oh the British brought in land holding records. Before that, nobody sold land. It was your family land you just kept it, you know. So I think the connectivity and the nurturing and the concern is with this land and I think it's being a conservation practice because it was your land and you did everything you knew to keep it going and to nourish it. And so I think it's only with green revolution technology and with legalization and plotting, platting of land, that the idea that you actually could sell land or you could, you know—this is come with modern science and modern agriculture. You said you liked the title the Mind and the Heart, yes? Do you see a distinction?

HF: That's my soap box, or my thing that I think about all the time. Because, just as I said I think it's the crisis of the day. I make a lot of reference to it and I joke about it sometimes, one of my thoughts is that I work in a building and when you walk over there you see agricultural sciences. It's great. The mind loves that stuff. But I always say, well where's the agricultural arts building. True farmers and the farmers that really impress me, it's a blend it's a balance. Of course science, technology, putting things in boxes, disciplines, they all have brought us these wonderful benefits, technology and so forth. But I just think we are in a humpty-dumpty
situation. You know where we have all these pieces now and we talked about that day in the university, interdisciplinary, cross disciplinary, you know we have to put the pieces back together again and that's an art. And a farmer who's worth his salt, is not just a technician, he is a nurturer, he's a husband of the earth and those old farmers I mean they really—when you see someone that has that connection and that capacity, that's a heart thing. It’s love. Learn by doing, we’re going to get somewhere when we learn by loving. Right? That sounds very silly doesn’t it?

HD: No.

HF: But guess what? It’s going to have to start a lot less, sounding a lot less silly if we are going to solve some of these problems. When you come to a university, you learn by thinking. Now Cal Poly has an added advantage, which is really great and I tell this all the time, we also learn by doing. So we use our hands. The next question is who's using their hearts and how do you teach that? That's the big question and that’s going to be really interesting when we get to that point. Because how do you teach someone to care, or to love, or to nurture? But boy that’s going to be a good investment, because I’ll tell you what, that costs a lot of money. That is not sustainable. You only have to look as far as Libya right now to see what happens when people can't communicate and can't—and when their values are on their head, that's very expensive. You know and that stuff so... that’s my soap box. So it struck me because you brought it out a couple of times. Where you were kind of saying, yes, these buildings have functions and they're very hard headed in a way, they're practical people, the people that you were talking about. And yet, and in your scholarly discipline, you know, you did the work of understanding the history and kind of the more rational aspects of it. But this book in itself was adding the heart component, you know. And it's through that, those stories, and through that connection, through relationship that those heart capacities are built. It's almost like the mind likes to separate stuff you know. That's what the mind is good at. But the heart brings it back together. And so, and it has to be a balance you know, because if it is all heart then it's just this Kumbaya, and just you know—and we tried that too in certain places and, you know, you got to have some hard headedness. But it has to be balanced and I think since the birth of science and the industrial age we work in, we’re just top heavy on the mind side I think. That's my thought and we have to make more space for the values, relationships, meaning connection. Those things you were talking about in the book and we have to put the plug in for those when we can.

HD: And I think these people are doing that just by obstinately sticking with what they have heart for. You know they don't articulate it that way, but in their actions that’s what they're doing.

[Music]

Moderator: This podcast is a production of Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly 2011. Visit lib.calpoly.edu/outloud for more information about library podcasts and lib.calpoly.edu/authors for more information about the series conversations with Cal Poly authors.