

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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DART AND ESTHER CHERK

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2017**

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In this oral history, visionary architectural and choral duo Dart and Esther Cherk recount their lives, their work, and their reflections on community. Esther and Dart describe growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown during World War II where they attended the same elementary school. Remarkably, they continued to attend the same schools all the way through college, both studying to become architects at U.C. Berkeley. In 1956 they got married, and two years later bought a cottage in Mill Valley to fix up. Dart and Esther describe how they first became involved in community life with the PTA when their children went to Old Mill School. Esther then went on to serve on the Flood Control Committee and Dart on the Architectural Advisory Committee. They describe the heyday of growth in Mill Valley during the 1960s and 1970s, and the involvement of local architects in designing public spaces like the downtown plaza. They discuss the Steps, Lanes, and Paths controversy, ongoing at the time this oral history was conducted, and share their vision of building affordable housing in Mill Valley so that people who work in the community, such as teachers and firefighters, can once again afford to live in it. Lovers of song, Esther and Dart conclude this oral history of their lives and community involvement by singing a duet.

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Oral History of Dart and Esther Cherk
January 29, 2017

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Dart and Esther Cherk, who made minor corrections and clarifications.

0:00:01 Debra Schwartz: Today is January 29th, 2017. My name is Debra Schwartz, and I'm sitting here with Dart and Esther Cherk. Am I saying that right? Cherk?

0:00:13 Dart Cherk: Correct.

0:00:13 Debra Schwartz: And these are two longtime Mill Valley community members. I know both of you have been quite active in our community for some time, and quite invested in your life here in Mill Valley. Would you say that's correct?

0:00:34 Dart Cherk: Correct.

0:00:34 Esther Cherk: Yes.

0:00:37 Debra Schwartz: You both mentioned a story before we started talking, and I'd like to open — actually, I think it's a wonderful way to open this interview, which is for the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Library. Before we open with my grand idea I just want to say, first of all, thank you both for contributing to our oral history collection. It's your stories, your experiences, that help everybody here understand the multi-faceted experience of being a community member and helps us to understand change and growth over time. So thanks very much for your time. And so, back to the story, you both mentioned that you guys went to the Marin Theatre Company last night and you saw *Native Son*, right?

0:01:38 Dart Cherk: Correct. It was a matinee, actually.

0:01:40 Debra Schwartz: It was what?

0:01:41 Dart Cherk: A matinee.

0:01:42 Debra Schwartz: A matinee.

0:01:43 Dart Cherk: That we saw.

0:01:44 Esther Cherk: Yes.

0:01:45 Debra Schwartz: And Dart, tell me what captured your attention. By way of introducing you, you told me this story about how you introduced yourself.

0:01:54 Dart Cherk: Well, we walked into the lobby and on a table was a stack of forms that people were filling out and tacking on the wall. And it simply said, “I am blank and I’ll fight for blank.” So as a way of introduction I wrote, “I am a visionary architect and I will fight for world peace by making place.” That’s what I wrote and tacked on the wall. [chuckles]

0:02:41 Debra Schwartz: How about you, what did you write Esther?

0:02:43 Esther Cherk: I didn’t write anything.

0:02:46 Debra Schwartz: Would you be able to think of something to write now?
[pause] No?

0:02:56 Esther Cherk: No.

0:03:00 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Fair enough. Well, obviously, you are an architect.

0:03:05 Dart Cherk: Right. That’s true.

0:03:08 Debra Schwartz: And how long have you both been here in Mill Valley?

0:03:13 Dart Cherk: We were actually searching for a fixer-upper in San Francisco in 1958, and we saw so many houses and got so tired, of course, drawing up plans for each one that we saw to see how we could fix it up, that one weekend we noticed that, “Oh, there’s a place in Mill Valley.” It says redwood trees and babbling brook, and we thought, “Oh, that’s just realtor talk.” We were tired enough that we thought, “Okay, well, let’s take a break from house searching in San Francisco.” So we came over here and met the realtor downtown, and the realtor drove out this dirt road, which seemed like it never ended — it was like a mile out of town — and showed us this place, which we could see, well, he wasn’t lying. There was redwood trees — in fact it was so dense you don’t see sky except right overhead and the creek was running.

0:04:26 Debra Schwartz: Cascade Creek.

0:04:27 Dart Cherk: Yeah. Actually, it’s Old Mill Creek. [chuckles]

0:04:30 Debra Schwartz: Old Mill stream.

0:04:33 Dart Cherk: Well what swayed us was the price. It was just a little bit over half the cost of what we had been looking for in San Francisco, which I would say was in the maybe \$11,000 to \$13,000 bracket, and here it was \$7,500, and you needed \$500 down and \$50 a month or something like that to make the payment. And we figured, yeah, we could do that.

0:05:15 Debra Schwartz: What year is this again?

0:05:17 Dart Cherk: 1958. And that would leave us a little bit of money, because if we were gonna be fixing up something you need some materials. You can put in your time but if you can't afford any materials, you can't do anything. And so the places in San Francisco that we looked at were nicer and probably you could move right in, but you couldn't fix anything for a while — probably have to work another year before you can attempt to acquire enough materials, lumber and things, to do any fixing up. But here, I could see, I could attack the situation right away. So, that's what brought us to Mill Valley, because it was cheap. [chuckles]

0:06:08 Debra Schwartz: Boy, things have changed! [chuckles] We are in this beautiful hipster house with windows, it's practically inside outside, surrounded by green, beautiful redwoods, light streaming in. This is a bohemian paradise, I have to say.

0:06:29 Dart Cherk: But I will add quickly that it wasn't a bargain. It was about what was expected at that time. And what we were getting was a summer cabin with no foundations. It was sitting okay on some piers, but you know that that's not gonna be permanent. So, we had our work cut out for us.

0:06:55 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so before we get going about with your life in this community, perhaps we could get a little context. Esther, can you tell me a little bit about where you came from, a little bit about your parents, and could you please include their names too? Your parents' names.

0:07:15 Esther Cherk: Oh, I see. It was fairly unconventional in that I was born in China. My parents, my mother, was born in Milwaukee and was sent back by her parents for schooling in China. And evidently, she must've met my father there. So, for the first years of our lives, my father would be actually coming over to work in America and going back for visits.

0:07:49 Debra Schwartz: What year are we talking around?

0:07:51 Esther Cherk: I was born in 1933 and things seemed very happy. We built a house in Canton, which is Southern China. But then, it was obvious that things were changing. The Japanese were starting bombing up north of China. So my father applied for a visa for us and we moved out to Hong Kong and waited for things to be approved. After a year, we were able to get on a ship and came — we disembarked in Seattle, and took a train right across the country to where my father was in New York. I lived there for a few years until the war really racked up and my father decided he needed to get to working for the defense. He came to San Francisco to work in the shipyards, and so I ended up in San Francisco. I entered in the fourth grade, the same school that Dart was, and we went through the same schools from then on.

0:09:09 Debra Schwartz: And what school was this?

0:09:11 Esther Cherk: This was Commodore Stockton in Chinatown.

0:09:15 Debra Schwartz: So, you lived in Chinatown?

0:09:16 Esther Cherk: Yes. During the war and before the war, the Chinese were really segregated. They were not able to conveniently move outside a very small area in Chinatown.

0:09:33 Debra Schwartz: So, your father and mother's name?

0:09:36 Esther Cherk: Mamie Toy and my father's name was Walter Lee. And the background, it was quite remarkable in that my grandfather came to work in the railroads back in the 1800s. He was a good businessman and he did a lot of importing, and the time was right for him. He settled in Milwaukee and he opened a restaurant and an importing business, made a lot of money, but traditionally in the Chinese culture, the boys got all the money. [chuckles] The girls were left with nothing.

0:10:29 Debra Schwartz: So, your grandfather was your mother or father's father?

0:10:33 Esther Cherk: My mother's father.

0:10:34 Debra Schwartz: So that wealth did not pass on to her?

0:10:39 Esther Cherk: No, but she was sent back to China where they had — my grandfather had built a couple of beautiful homes in Southern China and the eldest son had one house. And we just didn't have any part of that. I didn't meet my mother's father until I moved here, and just very briefly.

0:11:03 Debra Schwartz: So you're living in Chinatown as a little girl, basically.

0:11:06 Esther Cherk: Yes, until the end of the war we were able to — I guess both Dart's family and my family moved out, mine to the Avenues in San Francisco, right near the beach. But we went through the same grade school, middle school, high school, and college.

0:11:27 Debra Schwartz: And your middle school was?

0:11:31 Esther Cherk: Francisco Junior High.

0:11:33 Debra Schwartz: And your high school was?

0:11:34 Esther Cherk: Washington High, George Washington High.

0:11:36 Debra Schwartz: And the college?

0:11:38 Esther Cherk: Berkeley, U.C.

0:11:39 Debra Schwartz: Both Berkeley, go Bears!

0:11:42 Dart Cherk: Go Bears, right.

0:11:43 Esther Cherk: So, we've known each other for too many years. [chuckles]

0:11:45 Debra Schwartz: My goodness, you really are related —related not just by marriage but by experience and time.

0:11:53 Dart Cherk: Related by time.

0:11:56 Esther Cherk: Yes and no. You know how groups are in school.

0:12:00 Debra Schwartz: Yes. Oh.

0:12:00 Esther Cherk: You know of each other, but it's not necessarily anyone that you're particularly interested in. [chuckles]

0:12:08 Debra Schwartz: And then, how about your family, Dart?

0:12:12 Dart Cherk: Well, my family — my father came — his parents were doing business in Yokohama, Japan. And as a boy of 11 or 12, I'm not sure, his parents thought that it's not a good place to be at this time in Japan.

0:12:38 Debra Schwartz: What year are we talking? Same time?

0:12:41 Dart Cherk: About 1912 — '10, '11, '12, somewhere around there. He has an older brother, Raymond. And so they sent Raymond — he's Homer — and he needed to go. He wanted to go, as a boy, with Raymond. So the two got sent over to America, where it was away from the Japanese. And so, he's got a much more amazing story than I do. Because he had to pretty much make decisions as a boy in America.

0:13:32 Debra Schwartz: Adult decisions.

0:13:34 Dart Cherk: As his own. For instance, he could write —

0:13:38 Debra Schwartz: And he's how old, when he comes over?

0:13:40 Dart Cherk: He's probably 11.

0:13:42 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:13:43 Dart Cherk: Because they probably had to do something to make sure that it's under 12, because of ship fares, would probably change. But for instance, if he didn't feel like going to school, he might come the next day with an excuse, and who's gonna write it? He's gotta write it. [chuckles]

0:14:08 Debra Schwartz: And his brother's how old?

0:14:10 Dart Cherk: And his brother probably was a year or two older than him, I'm not sure. But anyway, his brother, after a few years went back to China. But he stayed. He —

0:14:24 Debra Schwartz: Your dad's name is?

0:14:27 Dart Cherk: Homer Cherk.

0:14:29 Debra Schwartz: Homer Cherk, okay.

0:14:30 Dart Cherk: Yeah. And he kinda liked what he saw. He liked America. He liked the freedom. He liked being his own boss. And so, he has a lot of adventures that I'm sure I would never have the chance to experience, because he was in a strange place. But strangely, he liked the strange place. And he got along well with people. He's very gregarious, and he just had a great life.

0:15:04 Debra Schwartz: He sounds self-possessed, for a young man. Wow.

0:15:08 Dart Cherk: And the spirit that I got from him was simply can-do. There's nothing that he cannot do as a boy. I could not believe. Where did my dad learn how to make a brick barbecue? Because he's telling his friends, "I'll build you — " It was the time when every backyard had a barbecue. And they, his friends were over in Berkeley. And so, he did that and many other things. In Chinatown, he belonged to, as a youth, to the Chinese Methodist Church. That's probably where he met my mother. There was an empty lot, and he made a garden. The garden was complete with a pond. And it was a place I could ride my tricycle around the path. He built kind of a semi-circle bench out of concrete with some kind of filigree ceramic embedded into it, and some marbles on the concrete. Anyway, he made it pretty fancy. But the main thing is that he planted a tree. And he didn't know much about anything, but he's willing to just do it. So he found a eucalyptus tree, here. It's small, I can dig it up, and I can plant it. So in Chinatown, it became a landmark. It was so big.

0:17:04 Debra Schwartz: Is it still there?

0:17:06 Esther Cherk: No.

0:17:07 Dart Cherk: It wasn't like a street tree that you normally see. But this tree just went up into the sky. Unlike what you imagine to find in a crowded little city like Chinatown.

0:17:26 Debra Schwartz: A spirited tree planted by a spirited boy.

0:17:30 Dart Cherk: Yeah. So anyway, I could —

0:17:32 Esther Cherk: It's the tree in Chinatown, not Brooklyn.

0:17:33 Dart Cherk: I could probably tell you many more — it'd be a much more interesting story about his life than my life.

0:17:40 Debra Schwartz: Growing up in Chinatown, how do you feel about it? How was that for you both?

0:17:48 Dart Cherk: You wanna answer that?

0:17:50 Esther Cherk: It was fun, because we had friends. We would walk to middle school, to junior high school together, come home. We would get together. Everyone was close. We were able to go and play jacks or games together. There was a lot more community then. So, it was okay. At one point in our lives, the building that we rented from was sold, and the owner wanted our apartment, which was bright and airy and sunny. And in the middle of the war, we had to move into a real tenement, a living room that you could barely — almost touch the walls — and I slept there. My parents would have the one bedroom — had to go down the hall to put money in the meter to take a bath. It was very, very bad. So you could imagine the moment my father was able to buy outside of Chinatown, he did.

0:18:57 Debra Schwartz: And that's when you went to the Avenues?

0:18:58 Esther Cherk: Correct.

0:19:00 Debra Schwartz: How about for you? How was it for you growing up in Chinatown?

0:19:02 Dart Cherk: Well, when we're talking about community, we didn't know anything but community, because we lived upstairs on Jackson and Stockton Street on the corner on the third floor above a Fong Fong bakery and ice cream. But the thing is, you just go down to the street and everything's there already. Your friends are there, you skate there. You see all kinds of people there, lots of strangers, some people who are hobbling, some people that are really poor and old and decrepit. But you just learn tolerance. Everything is okay. There's nobody that you have to avoid. Everyone is okay. And you nod. You don't really need to talk to somebody who's just kind of shuffling along, but you acknowledge and that's about it. And you can skate on the streets. And you joined — there was a church and there was the YMCA and Cameron House and choir practice, and midnight snacks after YMCA club meetings.

0:20:38 Esther Cherk: All very accessible.

0:20:39 Dart Cherk: And everything is there and everyone participated in everything, so you grew up as a community. There's no such thing as hiding by yourself.

0:20:53 Esther Cherk: You should tell how many people shared your apartment.

0:20:57 Dart Cherk: Well, we had, I guess it was a one-, it was probably two-, I think it was a three-bedroom. No, it would be a two-bedroom flat. And there's the parlor. My dad was an insurance broker, so he had his desk in the parlor and he would have clients come to see him there, although he mostly handled the clients at their place, at their stores in Chinatown, the art good stores. They'd have valuable things that were insured. And so he did his business by just taking a walk [chuckles] along Grant Avenue. He could walk into every store and customer and he took really good care of them. When he was home in his home office, it seemed like everything was so friendly on the telephone. He would call up, either the customers would call him, or he would be talking to the insurance company, but all on a person-to-person — they knew each other. He was a happy man, doing his business, and he was very efficient. He would not think of two strokes when one stroke was sufficient. [chuckles] So he came up with his own system of — I wouldn't say like IBM cards but something that's similar — little marks meant certain things, and he could keep track of renewals and everything without any problem. And he was on the board of the YMCA. In fact, on our house coming up, you see that sign there outside the window?

0:23:11 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:23:12 Dart Cherk: It says "Chinese YMCA." He tried to persuade the board not to switch to the more modern interior lit signs, which is a plastic sign with a fluorescent light inside that they thought — the other board members must have thought that we have to modernize and keep up to date. So he said, "Okay, you're gonna dump that, I'll take it." It's about a 12-foot high, carved redwood sign that he sent to —

0:23:51 Debra Schwartz: I see it right there. It's lovely.

0:23:53 Dart Cherk: To Hong Kong to have carved. And so, to me it's a work of art.

0:24:00 Debra Schwartz: Absolutely.

0:24:00 Dart Cherk: He kept it parallel to his parking space in his garage for years and years.

0:24:06 Debra Schwartz: How many people would come into your house? Was it a way station?

0:24:09 Esther Cherk: Yeah, definitely.

0:24:10 Dart Cherk: Oh, yeah, I should finish that. So here's this insurance broker occupying the parlor. The next room, on Stockton Street — it was two rooms wide on Stockton Street — was a dentist. He had his sign, "Dentistry," and so at the top of the stairs there was this low two- or three-seater bench back, and there would be people waiting.

0:24:41 Debra Schwartz: This is inside your house?

0:24:43 Dart Cherk: Yeah. So there would be people waiting to have their teeth pulled, or whatever the dentist would be doing to them. [chuckles]

0:24:52 Debra Schwartz: The insurance, dentist, who else? [chuckles]

0:24:54 Dart Cherk: And so, I'm a kid. I'm just on my trike, and so I'm just going down — it's a long hallway, a string of rooms, and I'm just going up and down, and I see these people there. So, when you're thinking community, we're all in it together, and besides that, it seemed like everyone had a key to our house, because people that I rarely saw would come up, and they would be entertained. It was the days of the — offering a cigarette was a fine thing to do. So my dad had learned all the things that you need to know, all the social skills to get along in America, right? He was very polite, and very kind to everybody. And so, you wouldn't think of some stranger coming to your house, and not offering him a cigarette. [chuckles]

0:25:57 Debra Schwartz: Jeez. And strangers would come to your house. [chuckles]

0:26:01 Dart Cherk: And, of course, friends. The friends had a key. And so, families of the —

0:26:07 Debra Schwartz: Well, why have a key, actually? Because it seems like, if everybody's coming in, what's —

0:26:13 Dart Cherk: Well, it's a way — the front door is way down at the street.

0:26:17 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I see.

0:26:18 Dart Cherk: And so, you entered a door, and then you went up two floors of stairs. And the way we opened the front door was, we'd go just about half a story down to where the stair turns, and we'd pull a rope, and the rope was attached to the lever that unlocked the door. So we would open the door when people rang the bell that way. But, anyway, to make a long story short, it was community, and people we grew up with, community all the time, versus a whole lot of privacy, which Americans now seem to demand, with their private places.

0:27:10 Debra Schwartz: You know how every area has its own particular quality of light, or smells?

0:27:16 Dart Cherk: Yeah.

0:27:17 Debra Schwartz: Or sense, some sort of input, sense input that is unique to that area. Like, we're surrounded by all these beautiful trees. There's a lot of filtered chlorophyll here, and lots of beautiful brown, warm wood and paneling. When you think

about walking down the streets of Chinatown, can you recall the sensory input? Esther, you start.

0:27:45 Esther Cherk: They sold a lot of oranges on that street corner. We happened to have lived at one point across the street from each other. And so, you would smell the oranges. And then, always, the roast ducks. Lots of smells. Lots of people. Not so many cars. The sidewalks were wider. Yeah, it's a very rich feeling, but I wanted to remind Dart, he had forgotten the influences that he had from his family having friends that lived in Novato, in Petaluma, because that really shaped his childhood. So he should tell about that.

0:28:37 Dart Cherk: Well, most of the kids in Chinatown, my friends, they didn't have the advantage that I had. I felt really advantaged, because summer times we'd spend in Petaluma, on the chicken ranch. And I felt that, "Oh, a few my friends, they've gotta be in the city, throughout the summer vacation." So that added a whole different dimension. There you can ride a bicycle. You can have a dog, and cats, and things like that, that you can never have in the city.

0:29:17 Debra Schwartz: I recall my grandmother, who was raised in San Francisco, calling Petaluma "chicken town."

0:29:23 Dart Cherk: Yeah.

0:29:24 Debra Schwartz: And she said that the thin highway that took you out to Petaluma, you could smell when you were getting closer. Is that your experience?

0:29:32 Dart Cherk: Oh, yeah. There's piles of chicken shit, you know? [chuckles] In fact, I think my sister stepped in it. [chuckles] Don't let her know.

0:29:46 Debra Schwartz: How many siblings did you have in this house, this shared community center?

0:29:53 Dart Cherk: Oh, well, I guess, we were a family of five. I have an older sister and an older brother.

0:30:02 Debra Schwartz: And their names?

0:30:04 Dart Cherk: Dot is my sister, Homer is my brother. And we stayed in one room, and there was a little lavatory place in between our room, and I think it was originally a dining room that my parents used as a bedroom, because between that room and the parlor there were these sliding doors that were never slid, they were always closed to make two rooms, and on the other side of the sliding doors was their piano, which is why I grew up with a lot of singing. My dad loved singing with his friend, and his friend was a minister, so he had an amazing voice.

0:31:03 Debra Schwartz: What would he sing? Give me an example, if you don't mind singing a song that your dad sang.

0:31:09 Dart Cherk: Well, he sang, I don't know words, but "Holy City." [Dart hums the melody; Esther begins to sing.] And my mother played the piano.

0:31:35 Debra Schwartz: And these are songs you know because you were in church together?

0:31:38 Esther Cherk: Correct. Oh, no, actually I went to a Presbyterian Church, because they also had Chinese school at night, in the afternoon. Dart's family went to a Methodist Church, it was just half a block away. We had different churches, but somehow we've been together so long that — [chuckles]

0:32:04 Debra Schwartz: You know the same songs.

0:32:04 Esther Cherk: We learned each other's.

0:32:05 Debra Schwartz: You made beautiful music together. Do you have siblings, Esther?

0:32:09 Esther Cherk: I had one brother. Basically, he was injured at birth so he was born deaf, so in effect, he was always away at school when I was growing up.

0:32:25 Debra Schwartz: His name?

0:32:26 Esther Cherk: I never really knew him.

0:32:28 Debra Schwartz: You knew his name?

0:32:30 Esther Cherk: Robert.

0:32:30 Debra Schwartz: Robert.

0:32:32 Esther Cherk: When I was in Hong Kong he was in a boarding school. When we moved to New York he was also off in a boarding school, so I grew up practically as a single child.

0:32:48 Debra Schwartz: So time progresses, you've had this experience together in Chinatown, a common experience in many ways, and then you moved to the Avenues. What year is this?

0:33:01 Esther Cherk: Well, we were married in 1956.¹

¹ It was before high school, 1948.—Esther Cherk.

0:33:05 Debra Schwartz: Okay, very briefly, because I know we have other things to talk about, but here you had grown up near each other, but not necessarily in the same group of friends, but somehow or another you two managed to meet.

0:33:19 Esther Cherk: Well, what happened was since I moved out to the Avenues I went to George Washington High School, because that was the closest school to me and I could walk. Dart, on the other hand, with his friends, decided to take a street car all the way from Russian Hill where his family now lived all the way to the beach to go to school. So there was a tight group of boys — men, what'd you call — who went to school. We happened to be in the same school together.

0:33:56 Debra Schwartz: So the fates had decided.

0:34:00 Dart Cherk: When we went to Francisco Junior High School in the North Beach District, before our class, I think our class was the first year that they opened up the high school, so that you can pick any high school you want to go to. Before that I think you just go to the high school in your neighborhood, which would have been Galileo High School, which was fine, but a bunch of us in junior high school thought that, "Oh, let's try some place different." So we decided to take the street car way out there just to go to a new school. It is a pretty spectacular school in that it sits on the hilltop, and has a view of the bay, and has a football field. It was a different experience.

0:35:00 Debra Schwartz: Gee whiz, sounds like somebody that you may have inherited a little bit of the spirit from —

0:35:06 Dart Cherk: Yeah, we thought, "Let's try something new."

0:35:07 Debra Schwartz: Let's try something new.

0:35:10 Dart Cherk: Everybody's going to Galileo or Commerce.

0:35:13 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so you're how old when you meet, you married at what age, in what year?

0:35:20 Dart Cherk: 1956.

0:35:22 Debra Schwartz: And shortly after that you save some money by moving to Mill Valley, and so let's start there then now. Let's talk about Mill Valley. You both have a particular version of community that's in your consciousness, what community means. And now you're in a very different environment, not closer together, in fact, the community that you're in as it appears right now is a community of living trees.

0:35:48 Dart Cherk: Exactly, right.

0:35:49 Esther Cherk: Right.

0:35:51 Dart Cherk: We have friends.

0:35:52 Esther Cherk: Our first experience of community was when our children went to school. That was our community, all the parents from Old Mill School. And we volunteered right from the beginning. I was on the PTA. Dart did some designs for teachers for their classrooms, and one of the more ambitious projects was actually opening up the kindergarten room to a usable deck outside. We enlisted volunteers, took one summer off and every weekend we would gather the volunteers, gather the materials and put them to work. And for many of them, it was a new experience, construction. We had doctors, we still talk to them, who got bad backs and sore muscles. [laughs] But it was a good introduction to how it was to volunteer. So Dart continued and —

0:37:00 Debra Schwartz: And you work as an architect, yes? And where did you go to school? Oh, Berkeley, right. That's where you went to. I remember, how could I forget that? Of all things to forget. So, you're now galvanizing community support for your school and in the process making new connections and friends.

0:37:22 Esther Cherk: Right. It continued from there. I remember one of the first projects I got involved in was serving on a Flood Control Committee. We were fighting the Corps of Army Engineers who wanted to put a concrete ditch across, parallel to Miller, to take care of the creek water so it wouldn't flood. I met for two years with this committee, and we worked out a plan, where it would be so much better and cost-effective to have areas that would widen to allow for heavy waters to come, and resulted in something like Park Terrace having these beautiful ponds. So we convinced the Corps of Engineers that it was not economically feasible to do a concrete ditch.

0:38:28 Debra Schwartz: Sure would've looked different, too, wouldn't it have?

0:38:30 Esther Cherk: Yes, so I feel that that was my first contribution to Mill Valley.

0:38:35 Debra Schwartz: What year is this approximately?

0:38:37 Esther Cherk: Oh, my gosh. I can't — toward the beginning.

0:38:40 Debra Schwartz: '70s? '60s?

0:38:43 Esther Cherk: It would be the '60s. So that was the beginning. And then meanwhile, Dart designed, worked on public bathrooms, but mainly he was asked to serve on the Architectural Advisory Committee. And that was the biggest service that he offered.

0:39:13 Debra Schwartz: And what was that service?

0:39:20 Dart Cherk: In the '70s, and in fact I think it started in the '60s, because a friend, another architect that I work with, suggested that, "Why don't you volunteer to serve on the Architecture Advisory Committee to the Mill Valley Planning

Commission?” Matt Copenhaver got me started into a community service. Did the kindergarten project come before that? Maybe it did.

0:39:58 Esther Cherk: I think so. Yes.

0:40:00 Debra Schwartz: So they saw the potential for somebody. They drafted you?

0:40:04 Dart Cherk: Yeah.

0:40:04 Debra Schwartz: I guess they thought, “Here’s somebody.”

0:40:05 Esther Cherk: It was a fantastic period of growth for Mill Valley.

0:40:09 Dart Cherk: So it was a time of Mill Valley’s growth, like the whole Shelter Ridge was just open space at that time. We gave it guidance to make sure that a nice project would result. And I was one of, I think at that time, seven members, and so we were quite dedicated to — aside from reviewing plans and making our recommendations to the Planning Commission, we also were sort of generalists. We don’t just specifically look at things that people present us. But we looked at our town, and wondered how can we make it better? So, as a result, we have a town square, which I’m sure would not have happened if there wasn’t a bunch of crazy architects saying, “Why do we have that parking lot out there? This place has no place for people to gather.” And so things like that happened in the ’70s.

0:41:36 Debra Schwartz: ’Cause the buses were coming in by then. What had been the train depot became — the buses came in, a lot of big buses.

0:41:45 Dart Cherk: Yeah. It used to come into the depot. The depot had an archway, it was open like a porch, where you can stand out of the rain and wait for the bus, and buy your tickets. And when that went away, the bus just stopped down on Sunnyside after that and it was just parking. So it was a lot of transition to the automobile, but when do we transition to people? We needed to do that. At that time, the merchants were hurting because it was the beginning of shopping centers, and so shopping centers were starting to suck away the business that local businesses thrived on. And so the 701 plan, which is a federally funded — well, there were some federal funds you can apply to have a grant with — anyway it’s a section of a HUD document, I guess. The city did partake of that, and the consultants Sedway Cooke were the first to actually come up with concepts. How about re-routing all of the Miller Avenue traffic around the back of these stores to Madrona, and you can shut off the whole square from wall to wall. And we architects were reviewing that and said, “That’s great, but I think that maybe that’s a little bit too indirect.” We probably gave it a little bit of —

0:44:19 Debra Schwartz: Tweaking.

0:44:20 Dart Cherk: Maybe we don’t have to do that, go to that extreme. But we did then end up with plans that we thought were more acceptable, reasonable, and so I have a

big six-foot square drawing of the downtown, for instance. It's in a book in the library which is basically called a "Blueprint for Mill Valley," which shows I'm trying to sum up things that were bounced around between these crazy architects at City Hall. And then put it down on a paper so that at least we have an outline of where to go. And had we followed the plans, I feel that Mill Valley wouldn't be in trouble today. Today we've got traffic, people call it the East Blithedale crawl. [chuckles]

0:45:29 Debra Schwartz: I have heard that. [chuckles] Yes.

0:45:32 Dart Cherk: I think we have a songwriter —

0:45:35 Debra Schwartz: That's a good word for that.

0:45:36 Dart Cherk: Songwriter neighbor that's probably working on a song. We have a lack of housing, and one of the things that we devote some time to, at least, is to attend the Affordable Housing Committee's meetings. And it's all because we failed. We set the plans aside and somehow in — exactly in 1980, there was a — I guess you would call it, if it were a nation, it would be a regime change, I think, might be the right word. But anyway it happened to be the year Ronald Reagan was elected. And while that affected national politics, we found as architects in Mill Valley a complete turnaround. Basically, the Architectural Advisory Committee was disbanded by City Hall for whatever reasons, and new help brought in to run the planning department. The new help felt that, "Oh, Mill Valley is built out, so who needs to draw plans?" That thinking — there were no further plans. The plans that had been outlined before were not continued to be developed so that it could see reality, because you kinda go step by step. In architecture you start with some schematics and go to preliminaries and then you go to working drawings, and you seek contracts —

0:48:00 Debra Schwartz: That was interrupted.

0:48:00 Dart Cherk: And you get it built, and it's done. Many people often, in my own experience doing this for clients, they're not completely sold until after they've used the space, whether it's a house — and then maybe a few months, or maybe even a year, they say, "Wow, this changed my life." [chuckles]

0:48:28 Debra Schwartz: Right.

0:48:29 Dart Cherk: But there's reason to be wary and scared, because why would I wanna change my living room to become a bedroom, let's say, or something like that.

0:48:44 Debra Schwartz: Transition issues.

0:48:45 Dart Cherk: Or open the house to a whole different part of the lot that happens to have sunshine or whatever — to connect the house to the outdoors sometimes. It's not really hard, but in the minds of some clients, they think that's such a drastic

change. “How can you do that? A house is built to stand. You don’t just tear down a wall.” But we understand what holds things up, and yes, you can make drastic changes.

0:49:25 Esther Cherk: Could I just summarize?

0:49:26 Dart Cherk: Sure.

0:49:28 Esther Cherk: What you might have forgotten is that the Architectural Advisory Committee was made up of very able architects and planners. They’re almost worldwide famous, and they were all doing it as a volunteer project. So they not only reviewed the important things, but it was a time of Mill Valley’s growth. We did not have all of east Mill Valley, the hills, but also the office park that is by the freeway. The Bayfront Park was not there. Alto Center was just starting to form, so it was a very important part of Mill Valley’s growth. They not only looked at projects, but they also took on projects, such as figuring out how to do good street lighting. They studied Miller and height controls, how to preserve light and sunshine views. They did so much more, and it was such a short period that they were, “able to give their input.” It was really a shame. Could I finish what I was saying?

0:51:01 Debra Schwartz: Yes, yes. But I wanted to actually include some of the names of the architects you worked with, the group.

0:51:08 Dart Cherk: If I can remember. [chuckles] Ivan Poutiatine. Kal Platt, and also from the SWA office, I can’t remember his name. They were pretty outstanding architects.

0:51:32 Esther Cherk: The person who did the San Francisco Great Highway?

0:51:36 Dart Cherk: Oh, Michael Painter? Augie Rath?

0:51:44 Esther Cherk: Kagy. Ed Kagy.

0:51:45 Dart Cherk: Ed Kagy, from SWA.

0:51:50 Esther Cherk: Dory Bassett?

0:51:52 Dart Cherk: Dory Bassett, who —

0:51:54 Esther Cherk: Was married to —

0:51:56 Dart Cherk: Married. But she got a lot from Chuck Bassett of SOM.

0:52:06 Esther Cherk: Chris Degenhardt.

0:52:08 Dart Cherk: Chris Degenhardt. Yeah. Wow, you got a better memory. [chuckles]

0:52:17 Esther Cherk: Who you mentioned before —

0:52:20 Dart Cherk: Matt Copenhaver.

0:52:21 Esther Cherk: Matthew Copenhaver. Jan Mountjoy.

0:52:25 Dart Cherk: Jan Mountjoy, right.

0:52:28 Esther Cherk: Anyway, they're really top notch people, and wanted to continue that. Jan did a color study of downtown and created a pallet that helped the storekeepers come up with a very beautiful coordinated color scheme, and I helped her with that. Dart redesigned the Council Chambers as a volunteer project, because at that time, where they met, people could not hear, they could not see, and Dart got the concept of inclusion, of having a three-way interchange of the Council, the citizens and the project that they're looking at. It was a fantastic period, and something that I don't think we'll ever see again.

0:53:39 Debra Schwartz: When you're thinking about this fantastic period, where opportunities presented themselves, and solutions came after, and that must have been very satisfying for people who wanted to create that sense of community and accomplishment. Do you think things have changed?

0:54:04 Dart Cherk: Drastically.

0:54:06 Debra Schwartz: How's it changed?

0:54:08 Dart Cherk: Rules and regulations.

0:54:10 Esther Cherk: Things take a lot longer now.

0:54:12 Dart Cherk: Rules and regulations, as opposed to knowledge and judgment and making decisions.

0:54:23 Esther Cherk: We see projects go on for year after year with no reason. The bathroom downtown has been talked about for what? Four, five years. The planning of Miller Avenue took three whole times of very expensive consultants before they finally got to doing something. There seems to be such a process that nothing gets done very fast. The other thing that happened during the AAC period was that the Redwoods Retirement Center got built. And so things like that don't happen anymore. Anyone coming in with a project expects to spend at least — even a house remodel — expects to spend a year in the process period. That's no way to live.

0:55:25 Dart Cherk: And because time is money, that's why things are so expensive. People trying to do something, it might take them years. And we saw in our time, with this bunch of architects that we help people get their projects done. We'd make — do

our homework, go prepared, ask the applicant if they'd be willing to make some adjustments and most times they were happy to say, "Oh, didn't think of that. That'd be better." And it cost no more and got the stamp of approval right there. So the process today is something that is hideous. It's the biggest thing that is like hitting a blank wall. We used to get things done and now we just talk, talk, talk. That's the biggest change.

0:56:49 Debra Schwartz: So how do you think that affects our community in a practical way?

0:56:53 Dart Cherk: It hurts everybody. Nobody benefits from all this. Because our basic goal, this crazy bunch of architects, whoever they are, they think the same. We're all trained to basically make the space better for people. It's a general thing that we're basically taught, trained to do. And today's process has basically blocked that. Today's processes — in a way, it's brought about because they think that it's more democratic and you can't really argue that. Yeah, if you have every neighbor giving his opinion on his neighbor's house, you might say, "Well, that's democratic." I don't know, to me it's not community and it just makes for, it pits individuals against each other instead of bringing people together. Because they can see that, "Oh, our world, our surroundings, our place is getting better and better. The streets are getting more beautiful." So you have that happiness to offset any minor things that, "Oh, I don't like my neighbor's color of his house or whatever. Or the shape of his roof." So with the beauty that you can give everyone has so much more power, that when you take that away, then naturally people get finicky about the things that they think that they can control.

0:59:18 Debra Schwartz: How about the way that houses — the original houses that were built here, the earlier houses, were smaller, more cottage-sized, and then comes in the wave of larger houses. Do you think some of the regulation has to do with restriction of the size of a house on a lot and the concerns about that?

0:59:39 Esther Cherk: Obviously it didn't work, because we have more and more big, big houses occupying lots where there were small houses. If that concept were true, we would not have houses, say on level, that are so big. So what happens, we feel, is that the size of family remains the same. In fact, probably smaller. So why do we need such a big house? It's because people can afford it. And what we find is that if you're interested in traffic, it's not the added people that are creating the traffic. It's all the basic services that help maintain this big house. You have gardeners, you have maintenance person, you have pool maintenance, you have dog walkers. You have deliveries several times a day of things that are ordered. You have children, nannies. And it's just amazing how much traffic we've generated. This used to be a very quiet street. But now, we see traffic coming up and down all the time. We don't even know where they go because it's such a cul-de-sac. We have to get back to some reality and downsizing. Our trails — we've been so involved with trying to maintain our trails. City Hall doesn't seem to have the personnel; that's what their excuse was.

1:01:31 Debra Schwartz: So now we're —

1:01:33 Esther Cherk: Big project.

1:01:33 Debra Schwartz: Segueing into another discussion here, specifically about the paths lanes and steps here, the issue. And for those listening, who may be listening to this some years from now or perhaps aren't aware of this issue, this is an issue that there is a lawsuit that's been created to request, to demand, that the city protect the paths, lanes and steps, the historical paths, lanes and steps and also our escape routes.² This is what we're talking about now, yes?

1:02:05 Esther Cherk: Right. Historically, I remember seeing the big plan that Dory Bassett did when she was part of this Architectural Advisory Committee. She identified all the public easements that are in Mill Valley. It has since been worked on. And during that period, our neighbor, the Mountjoys, Jan Mountjoy, in particular, and I, worked on the Tenderfoot Trail. We put it on the map, so to speak. We made sure that it was included in the map system. And she put so much work in it, it was amazing. We identified owners and gave them an alternate placement for construction, so that it would not require cars to be going up and down.

1:03:07 Debra Schwartz: To interfere with the actual path of the Tenderfoot?

1:03:11 Esther Cherk: Right. Because a car could go up and in the middle of it, build a big house. She wanted to preserve it for foot traffic and bicycle traffic. And I remember, she would be going up and down, sometimes twice a day, bringing people to show them what the situation was. She was so successful that the city actually bought a parcel that was vital, that we could not find an alternate site for, a building site for. So that was all a volunteer project. Her husband, at the same time, redesigned bridges, foot bridges across creeks. It was all volunteer. When the reservoir was given to Mill Valley by the water district, Dart —

1:04:12 Debra Schwartz: This is at the end of Cascade, right?

1:04:14 Esther Cherk: Correct. Dart, with a small committee of engineers and other designers, saw to it that it was safe structurally and that it should be open for public use. And that has just recently been a subject of controversy, because the city allowed property owners to fence and to claim it as their own. So that's been the fight for the recent steps, lanes, and paths controversy that we want the city to protect all these right of ways for the future generations. They're vital in a hill town where access — streets are very parallel to each other. Dart, as part of the remodel of the Council Chambers, had a topographical model made. And you could see how if you were to drive, and all parents know, if you were to drive the streets, it would take a long time. But children scamper across from street to street. That's how we should have access to the mountain; and, as they say, for recreation as well as for safety. So that's another aspect of just having to protect what we have. And part of the reasoning that was given to us at the last meeting was that —

² The City refers to them as SLPs: steps, lanes, and paths.—Esther Cherk.

1:05:53 Debra Schwartz: Which was just the other night?

1:05:55 Esther Cherk: Right, last week, was that we've lost the historic background in that three long-term employees that were taking care of the trails and trees left. I think that's a real problem in that people who are staffing our city do not have the historic background and they do not live here. And that's true of all our public servants. We only have one fireman who lives in Mill Valley. So that any disaster, you have no one to help you.

1:06:41 Debra Schwartz: Because it's too expensive for firemen to live here?

1:06:44 Esther Cherk: Everything is connected, it's too expensive because we allowed these big houses which cost multi-million dollars, because we don't pay attention to what our needs are.

1:06:58 Dart Cherk: So we tried to ask the city to hire locally, because that's key in keeping, say, a small town character that we've lost for a long time now, since all the stores don't really serve your needs. We're not asking the city facetiously to hire locally. We say, if you really like someone and you wanna hire that person for whatever position in City Hall, just say, "We'll find you a house. And so we'll make sure that you're a resident qualified —"

1:07:56 Esther Cherk: These are the key positions.

1:07:57 Dart Cherk: "Highly qualified person." And as an architect, I see housing everywhere. Once we're out of the frame of mind of possibilities, that it's — basically before 1980, it was a world of possibilities; after 1980 everything has been made impossible. "Oh, this, we're built out, we don't have room for housing." No, that's not right at all. We should be housing average people, you know? [chuckles] I'm out of step. I find myself talking to the wall or something. It's like nobody believes us anymore because we're just some crazy architects who not only can [design] — because we know that a house is just a bunch of sticks and you put it together or any kind of building — but [also recognize] there are opportunities that you don't recognize as an opportunity. If I could expand a little bit, in the old days on Miller Avenue there was every week the Mill Valley — it wasn't the *Herald* — the *Record*, run by the Mills, would report on how many cubic feet of dirt had slid off of the slide-prone hill, which was probably cut when they brought in the railroad tracks along Miller, and probably is quite unstable and they've just approved for Al Von Der Worth, his project of nine luxury condominiums.

1:10:25 Debra Schwartz: On that site where there's slippage?

1:10:26 Dart Cherk: On that site, yeah, which we view as a) probably no person who can afford a luxury condominium would wanna live right there and b) it's so under-utilizing the possibilities of a beautiful piece of land which is unrecognized, most people just look at it and say, "Oh, no, it's what it is." But it isn't.

1:11:00 Debra Schwartz: What would you see it as?

1:11:03 Dart Cherk: One day I had [an image] in my mind —because I heard that we needed affordable housing or something — and I had in my mind when I went to bed, and in the morning I got up and went to my drafting table, and just at the end of the morning I came up with that. [Dart shows Debra a drawing.] I didn't even know what my hand was doing, it was just kind of going over this paper and in a couple of hours I had this image, because it was already in my mind and I was just transferring it. My hand was just on the paper; I hardly knew what I was doing. But it's basically a hill town, where on the street, there'll be life. You start with life, a little plaza, a mini plaza, people, things that people need — food, books, coffee, for me — and from there on, you have the needs, naturally you have to have some garaging, but you don't really have to have many spaces, because you're gonna share. You're gonna have shared cars. You need a car? Go ahead, use whatever you need. You might have a shuttle in there.

1:12:57 Esther Cherk: And you have transit, buses.

1:13:00 Dart Cherk: And then, there's a bus stop right on the street. So what you do is you just look at any town in any other part of the world. Do they leave the hills bare? No. Often they just start walking up the hills and as you're walking up, there's a doorway and you go a little bit further, there's another doorway, and everyone's there, and you build little, and you can accommodate lots. So it's all there, all the possibilities exists and it would bring energy to that whole lower part of town, that's kinda like a —

1:13:49 Debra Schwartz: This is over by where the Taco Bell used to be?

1:13:53 Esther Cherk: Correct.

1:13:54 Dart Cherk: Not Taco Bell. Kentucky —

1:13:56 Esther Cherk: Kentucky Fried Chicken.

1:13:57 Dart Cherk: KFC.

1:13:58 Debra Schwartz: KFC, right.

1:14:00 Dart Cherk: And with the KFC parking lot there, you can imagine that would be a beautiful little plaza.

1:14:07 Debra Schwartz: I have to say, this reminds me a little bit of Chinatown.

1:14:11 Dart Cherk: Well, indeed, that's what I had in mind. [chuckles]

1:14:13 Debra Schwartz: Yes, you had all the action. I'll take a picture of this. Where you see the market and you see this — a little bit more of a plaza, Chinatown downstairs, and then the housing as it follows the rise of the hillside.

1:14:32 Esther Cherk: You also see that being developed in Sausalito.

1:14:37 Dart Cherk: And it would connect school children to go to school because this rises up from Miller, all the way up to Homestead.

1:14:50 Debra Schwartz: Practically speaking, of course, this would be a huge process to get something like this.

1:14:55 Esther Cherk: Oh yeah. Right now it would take a lot, but the Housing Committee is checking with Bridge Housing, which has done several projects for us in Mill Valley, and they're very interested. That's in the process.

1:15:13 Debra Schwartz: And this would be affordable housing then?

1:15:15 Esther Cherk: Correct. Because they're small.

1:15:18 Debra Schwartz: Yes. So this is where workers, and firemen, and —

1:15:22 Esther Cherk: Teachers.

1:15:23 Debra Schwartz: Teachers. All people that we want to be in our community. I hear you telling your story, and I can sense the frustration, especially since you've known an active, productive time. And now it seems to me, in the way you describe it, you feel stymied both in creativity, and service to the community. So does that affect the way that you feel about Mill Valley and the community you live in now? You're here in your beautiful home, you're living in a bubble right here of beauty and calm, but how does this make you feel as far as identifying with yourself in Mill Valley?

1:16:07 Esther Cherk: Well, the frustration is there, but we continue to fight. And we continue to support projects that help the community. We've been very interested in the Mill Valley Lumber Project, which wants to combine small work spaces, a small café — I think what we could use more of, we continue to try to get local music — we were very happy that the Book Depot has decided to have some music on Friday nights. In other words, we want a town that we could live in, to play in, and we will continue to work on that. But it is frustrating. It takes a lot of work. Throckmorton Theatre has been wonderful, in that they are really trying — Lucy Mercer is really trying to bring the community in, opening the front spaces to invite the community to come in.

1:17:33 Debra Schwartz: I had chai there the other night.

1:17:35 Esther Cherk: Yes it's wonderful with chocolate.

1:17:37 Debra Schwartz: Oh, and oranges. Walked past it on a cool evening, finishing a walk and —

1:17:43 Esther Cherk: So we need more of that.

1:17:43 Debra Schwartz: Walked in for free.

1:17:45 Esther Cherk: We need more of that. The town is a wonderful one for visitors. We see bicyclists come all the time. But we want to be part of that community as well, so Dart and I force ourselves to go and take a walk downtown every day, just to say that, “We’re still here, we’re residents, and we welcome others to come to enjoy, but we’re not gonna give it up to you.” Well, this has been a constant wish to keep residents serving stores. We’re fixed-income seniors, we want to be able to go in and buy practical things like some writing paper, to get some batteries downtown, instead of having to go out to the highway. We can’t afford to buy boutique clothes. I love the Mt. Carmel thrift store, and many people like that, but it has to have a very concerted effort in order to have things continue.

1:19:12 Debra Schwartz: If you were on a committee to talk with incoming people that are moving here, maybe young families that have built their large homes, or bought into a smaller home, and if you had something to say to them about how to get the most of Mill Valley, how to maintain the community feeling, and how to protect that community, what would you say?

1:19:48 Esther Cherk: What I would tell a person moving in is, have them think what they want to see in a town, where they want to raise their children, and not think so much of possessions or what they have. Because I remember very clearly hearing the story about someone who moved into Cascade Drive, got into a fairly good size house. He told me that he decided to come to Mill Valley because when they drove into town, his son saw the plaza with circle boys playing hacky-sack, and children running around, and he, the son, said, “I want to live in Mill Valley. This is what I want to grow up in.” So, that’s what everyone should think about when they come in.

Mill Valley was a center where artists lived, writers lived. When we talk about the plaza downtown, I remember the first art festival was held in the parking lot, and we would go down because we wanted to see our neighbor’s works displayed. So many things have started here, that Smith and Hawkins started here, Banana Republic started here, in a little space underneath a stairway in a big building. And they’ve all gone into big business all over the country, but they all started here because it was a good place to nurture startups. They felt it was real when they started. And then something happens that gets caught in to the big picture. So when you move in here, be involved with what’s happening, take active participation, go to the library. I think the library has become a community center, so much is happening there. Don’t just sit home and run off on vacations elsewhere. Start living at home.

1:22:26 Debra Schwartz: How about you?

1:22:28 Dart Cherk: Well, I would, I guess, go into the planning department and say, “Where are your plans?” [laughs] See, I’m from the time when planners meant you

thought about problems and you solved them; you drew up plans. And so you have a plan of attack, and you know where you're going. Now, planning departments, I don't see any plans. So that's why I've got all these plans because I [chuckles] I saw the stoppage of plans. There was no one thinking about, "Where do we go from here? How do we get better?" Yeah, I know it looks like a friendly place, but look at that person crossing the street, that's terrible. We are so backwards in taking care of and making it a more pedestrian-friendly crosswalk. We've almost from the beginning asked, "Shorten that crosswalk. Give more of the street space to walking and less to driving." That's what better communities do, but we haven't moved. We continually make things narrower for the walkers, and make more room for parking. Who needs parking? I want people walking.

So we make plans. Okay, in order to get people to walk, kids, they can run, and just give them a nice, broad promenade. There ought to be a beautiful promenade so you can get to school or whatever. And for elderly people, like at The Redwoods, they love to walk, but how are they gonna get back? There should be a walker-friendly shuttle that will just stop at the curb and, "Oh, you need a lift?" and pick you up. This is such a small town. We have a loop that's only — I knew the miles before, but I've forgotten it, but it takes about, maybe, 15 minutes to go around if you were going at, let's say a jogger's pace, maybe 10 miles an hour. Just go slowly around, you can pick up anybody. If a kid doesn't wanna walk the two miles or so from town back to the center of the city, they can just hop on that, too. It's so simple, and with technology, it almost can be automatic, robotic, and probably be safer, even, than having to hire, let's say, a bus driver, so maybe technology could come in handy. But so far we haven't seemed to be able to make the best use of it.

1:26:23 Debra Schwartz: Seems like you're a visionary.

1:26:27 Dart Cherk: Well, there's no planning these days. You go into the planning office, I don't care if it's Mill Valley, or Marin County is even worse.

1:26:38 Debra Schwartz: What do they just respond to people's projects?

1:26:42 Dart Cherk: Yes. It's always just playing defense. It's never knowing that, "Hey, you can throw the ball, you don't have to just guard your enemy or the other team from completing a pass. You can play offense." Think about what you can do. Instead of trying to stop something, do something. And so with rules and regulations, all you do is stop things, and they're pretty good at that. They stop things for one year, two years, three years, 10 years, 20 years, so nothing happens. Okay, maybe it's better that you stopped a lot of things, because there's sometimes bad things and good things, but unfortunately, there are good things that you are stopping. The best is to think, plan, think about all things. I'm kind of a generalist, all things considered. You're not gonna hit 100% ever, but if you're doing 80%, good, anything over 50% is good. And, all things considered, that means everyone's not gonna be happy. But as a whole, it will average out. The people will generally be happy. The vast majority will be happier, and so why not do that? To make everybody happier? I don't understand.

1:28:35 Debra Schwartz: So basically —

1:28:36 Dart Cherk: We don't do that these days.

1:28:38 Debra Schwartz: So basically, your point, if I might summarize, is that, yes, it's important for each of us to have that private space in our homes that we're comfortable and safe in. But equally important is the public space, because in this day and age, when people are on computers and they tend to stay home and maybe go out less, that there's something lost in that. And that, so very important in the identity of a community and a town in the support of it, is to create and to ensure that we have inviting, safe, productive space on the sidewalks in our town, and ways that we can live together in our town. And that what makes your community and your town in that we're all in that public space together sharing it.

1:29:39 Dart Cherk: Yes, and when you make high quality public spaces, you don't have to worry about people's private spaces. When we had that in mind in the '70s on the Architectural Advisory Committee. We never reviewed people's houses. They do what they want. A man's house is his castle. You don't go and tell him what color and how to do things. No, we'd concentrate on the public spaces, the downtown, the storefronts, the square. Maybe when there was a shopping center at the Alto Center, yeah. Because that's gonna be a people place. And so we just gave our critiques on those. We didn't touch people's residences at all. So today, in contrast, I watch — sometimes I tune in city meetings and I say, "Oh, live and let live, why not? Why do you have to go into so much detail? I know that aesthetically, you're superior than the homeowner, let's say. But set that aside. Let this homeowner learn a little bit something." He can build what he wants, and he might find that it wasn't that good. [chuckles]

So you're kind of taking away a learning experience by just telling them what to do. And I get pretty bothered by just how much time they would just agonize on moving your wall back 10 feet. It's just like, demonstrate it. Build beautiful public spaces. And people would just appreciate it so much that they'll learn more about aesthetics and quality from being able to live in beautiful public surroundings, and they'll carry that back to their residences. That'd be a much nicer of way of giving them the freedom that their —

1:32:20 Debra Schwartz: To be the change you want to see.

1:32:21 Dart Cherk: House is theirs. You know? [chuckles]

1:32:25 Debra Schwartz: So I appreciate you both sharing your ideas of what it means to live in the Mill Valley, that you would love and have loved. We talked about when you were living in Chinatown, the experiences, the quality of light, the smells, and so on. Can you both think of that in Mill Valley? When you think of the essence of what you love in Mill Valley, or what you've experienced in Mill Valley that moves you, that you identify with, that's the best of Mill Valley, when you think about it what can you imagine? A

moment, a day, something that's happened in your life, perhaps? Or with your children or family? Do you know what I'm saying?

1:33:15 Dart Cherk: Not exactly. Maybe you do.

1:33:17 Debra Schwartz: Give me an experience you've had here that embodies what it is you really do like about it. Have you had a day where you walk downtown and experience that sense of what is here? Or maybe on your street or — no? Maybe I'm asking a difficult question.

1:33:39 Dart Cherk: It's difficult, but I guess when we go downtown each day, just to walk around the block and be seen and be part of the scene, because we feel that the most important thing that you can do as a resident is just to be a public person, just make your presence felt, or seen. Be present. Because you're part of the community, you're part of a bigger thing. And you never know who you're gonna run into in downtown. So the best times are when you do run into someone and you have a nice meeting. Or you sit in the sun, and somebody sits next to you, and you have something that you're both appreciating and sharing. That's a good feeling. And it's not very specific but it's — so I'm thinking that, "Okay, what are these things?" Okay, you go to Mill Valley market. You sit at the bench. You say, "Oh, this is so nice. The sun's already gone in the canyon, and here I'm sitting in the sun." But you notice that your dog is sitting at your foot. There's a tree there. There's a bike leaning against a tree. Some person shuffling along, can hardly get around. And you wonder, "What's wrong with this picture? I keep on — " It's beautiful when you're sitting there, but there's something wrong about this picture.

1:35:25 Debra Schwartz: It can be more beautiful, more physically comfortable.

1:35:28 Dart Cherk: Exactly. Those two cars don't — take that away. And you can have a beautiful little mini square with just benches and the market. Sometimes they like to —

1:35:46 Debra Schwartz: Samples.

1:35:46 Dart Cherk: Retail some things, samples, or maybe have some product that they're trying to bring out. And there'll be space for that. There'll be space for the dog to lie [chuckles] without blocking the path. And so, that's one example of many of now taking the 100% that's public property — that is, street space, that's not private property — and changing the equation so that the pedestrian space is increased at the price of the automobile spaces. And to me, that change would be grand. [chuckles] But even a little at a time you need to do that to have a more pedestrian place. And the pedestrian — if it weren't for people walking in the streets, it would be a dead town. Why would you wanna live in a dead town? So, the more you can get people out, to me that's quality of life.

1:37:08 Debra Schwartz: So, I see that your moment isn't here yet.

1:37:13 Dart Cherk: No. [laughs]

1:37:14 Debra Schwartz: But it may be, in the future.

1:37:17 Dart Cherk: We've got the plans. [chuckles] That's for sure.

1:37:19 Debra Schwartz: I love that. Okay. So, we've got to close up here. But I'd like to include one last thing. Before we had the interview we talked a little and I understand that you both are excellent singers. And we're talking about moments, and we're talking about what matters and community, and the things that in the essence of your life really are the make the difference, as far as space or community and town and place and home. And obviously you're involved in many things in this town, but you contribute with your voices as well, is that true?

1:38:09 Esther Cherk: Well, we started off several years ago by going to art walks and offering a song at the different galleries. And at one time we had a little group we called Moving Targets, because we would never stay long at one place to be a target. [laughs]

1:38:34 Debra Schwartz: That's clever.

1:38:34 Esther Cherk: We've done it with neighbors who are musicians. And they know us now that if we come in they'd say, "Oh, are you gonna sing something for us?" Our feeling is that there should be more music around and more singing specifically. So that's what we contribute.

1:38:53 Debra Schwartz: Would you contribute in your oral interview here with a song?

1:39:00 Esther Cherk: We'll try.

1:39:01 Debra Schwartz: You gonna stand here?

1:39:05 Dart Cherk: It's hard to sing sitting down.

[Esther and Dart begin to sing.]

1:41:02 Debra Schwartz: Oh, that's beautiful. I just want to thank both of you so much for contributing your story and your feelings and your concerns, and your appreciation for our community and the people that live here and don't live here anymore and should come back to live here, and how important it is to be present in our town, to be with each other downtown. And now that we have met, I know that if you're sitting on that bench at Mill Valley Market or in the Depot Plaza, and I sit down and we have a moment, it may not be a big thing, maybe just a quiet thing, but it's an important thing.

1:41:51 Esther Cherk: That is important.

1:41:52 Dart Cherk: Yeah. I'm not much of a conversational — [chuckles] I don't get into much details, gossip, I don't follow most things that's happening, but I think it's just the presence, just having bodies. I feel very comfortable among the — what do you call it? Strangers? When it's just, there's a word, I can't even think of it. Anonymous. I have no problem with being anonymous. I kind of like circulating amongst a crowd of people, just bodies. I don't know, it's kinda strange.

1:42:39 Debra Schwartz: Well, we all are in it together, aren't we?

1:42:42 Dart Cherk: I'm not getting to talk to anyone in particular. I just observe how people move, and as an architect, I understand about how to corral people, maybe or —

1:43:06 Esther Cherk: Make it comfortable.

1:43:07 Dart Cherk: Yeah, how people operate, how they move, body language. And so we know that if you had a big, big square where someone at the other end can't even recognize a face at this end, that that's not good. We learn these things. How to make space for people. And we can't practice it, because of what we think we can control by rules and regulations, and so it's — the view is stymied. [laughs]

1:43:51 Esther Cherk: But it's true. I was thinking after your last question, and the best parts of the day are when we encounter either a friend or someone to talk to, because people are what's important in a town.

1:44:09 Debra Schwartz: And therefore the space that holds the people is very important, as well. If we end up sitting next to each other on that bench, can we sing a song together?

1:44:20 Esther Cherk: Sure.

1:44:21 Dart Cherk: Yeah.

1:44:21 Esther Cherk: What would you like to sing?

1:44:23 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I don't know. We'll have to — I look forward to that moment when it happens. [laughs] But I'm game if you are.

1:44:29 Dart Cherk: Great.

1:44:30 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Well, on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Library, I want to thank both of you for taking the time out of your life to share your story and your feelings, and thank you very much.

1:44:45 Dart Cherk: Thank you for listening.

1:44:46 Esther Cherk: Thank you.