Budd Harris Bishop is the director of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. The main focus of this interview is the beginnings of the museum.

The nascence of the idea for an art museum came from the Gallery Guild, a community organization whose purpose is to support the programs of the University Gallery. Noting problems with exhibition space, storage space, and parking, the group set up a committee in 1981 to study the possibility for a new museum. A site on NW 13th Street was selected, and an architecture firm was chosen.

Bishop saw an ad calling for a director of the new museum, and the idea of building an art museum from scratch intrigued him. He held previous positions in the Hunter Museum of Art in Chattanooga, TN, and the Columbus Museum in Columbus, OH. Bishop has also done research and published on early Tennessee artists, the pre-Civil War South, and George Bellows.

The first priority of the Harn Museum, even before Bishop officially came on board, was the design for the building. He emphasized space over elegance in the design. Time was crucial, because there was a risk of losing state matching funds if deadlines were not met. A goal was to raise $4 million in private money, which was greatly aided by a contribution of $3 million by Dr. and Mrs. David Cofrin. Florida Congressman Jon Mills suggested that the museum be combined with the performing arts center that Santa Fe Community College was planning, since as a complex it would draw more attention and support. Plans were also drawn for the Florida Museum of Natural History to be included. A new site on SW 34th Street was selected for the new complex. Due to state rules, a new search for an architecture firm was necessary, which Bishop details.

The next goal was to establish membership, which brings in an audience and dollars, especially at the higher levels. The Harn Museum currently has about 1,000 members. In the first twelve months it was visited by approximately 91,000 people, a very high number. Bishop ranks the Harn Museum in the top ten in percent of local population and in the top thirty overall. He is most pleased with the response of the community, noting the work pool, membership, and art and museum community. Artists and experts alike are very pleased with the facilities of the Harn Museum.
M: [This is Carol MacDonald, and I am] interviewing Mr. Budd Harris Bishop, acting director of the Harn Museum of Art. Today is 24 January 1992. My first question is: When did the idea for the Harn Museum originate?

B: Certainly around 1981. I cannot say that the idea for the museum did not originate earlier. I think there was casual talk, but in 1981 there was group called the Gallery Guild, which had been in operation since about 1975. The Gallery Guild was a community group to support the programs of the University Gallery--community-active people. In 1981 that group appointed a committee to study the possibility of a museum, because the University Gallery was viewed by everybody as inadequate. It did not have storage, it did not have enough exhibit space, [and] it did not have access to parking, so as early as 1981 there was a formal movement.

M: My next question is: How were you introduced to the job? How did you become director?

B: I am not sure, but I think I saw an ad, although I cannot remember where I saw it. They were advertising the job. I was not looking, but I was reading the ads for a lot of reasons. When you are the chief administrator in a museum you read the kinds of things that are available to see what other institutions are doing and how they are describing their opportunities for curators and for other positions, because you never know when you are going to be looking for some staff member. You try to keep current with the way the field is going. I saw this ad that said the University of Florida was going to build a new art museum, and they were looking for a director to guide the project. It just sort of tugged at me. It was a very intriguing concept. There are very few brand new museums anywhere getting started. Usually they are started by somebody for their own collections, and so the director does not have a very big role.

I had been a director for so many years and had encountered so many different kinds of challenges in that length of time that I thought: What an opportunity it would be not to have a lot of prior constraints on the opportunity to build an "ideal" museum! The University sounded kind of interesting, too, so I applied. I think I called them up. I do not remember exactly. I can reconstruct that from the correspondence. But I just called them cold and said, "I'm interested."

They were sort of shocked, because both the University Gallery director and some of the other people on the faculty had heard of me and knew of me in the past, and frankly they did not expect to get applications for a new museum from someone
already that experienced. They thought they would probably be getting a younger person [who was just] getting started. Of course, that is the wrong way to go, I think. I think it would have taken an experienced person to take on all the various aspects of planning a new museum.

We got together, and after they determined that I really was serious I think I was easily the front-running candidate from then on. I do not think there was any question after we had our first two or three interviews.

M: Tell me a little bit about your previous position in Columbus.

B: I was in Columbus [Ohio] for ten and a half years, and before that I was in Chattanooga [Tennessee] for ten years, so my entire career has been in three museums for a total of more than twenty-five years. In Chattanooga I started as a director at the Hunter Museum of Art; I was twenty-nine. That museum was very small in the beginning. It was in a converted old mansion. The facility was not designed as a museum, so there were a lot of challenges. Eventually in the ten years I was there we built up a very substantial collection and raised the money to build a new addition which gave us a modern museum attached to the old mansion. So we had the best of both.

My experience there attracted the attention of the Columbus Museum, which was looking for a director. I applied there, and I went there in 1976. That was a mature museum, almost a hundred years old. In fact, it celebrated its hundredth anniversary in 1978, two years after I got there. That was a completely different kind of challenge. Instead of a small institution needing to grow, that museum needed a great deal of renovation and improvement based on its very good collections and its very good facility already there. It was a very important collection in an important large-scale city with a large staff. That was an opportunity to be in one of the leading institutions in the country, the top thirty-five or forty. I was there ten and a half years, very happy years.

We did a lot of projects that I was very interested in. I started a sculpture program, collecting sculpture. We designed and built a sculpture garden using a great landscape architect from England named Russell Page. Later we renovated parts of both the old and new buildings there, and we designed a good deal of the way the museum showed its collections. It was a very creative and exciting period of time.

M: Have you published research of your own during your career?

B: Yes. Frankly, very few directors, after they become full-time directors, have the opportunity to pursue their research because it is just impossible to have a foot in both of those fields. One of my director friends refers to the fact that he guesses when he retires the only thing he will be able to publish will be his collected acknowledgments that always appear in the beginning of catalogs.
When I was younger and in Tennessee I began some serious research into the early Tennessee artists and published that in both the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* and eventually in *Antiques Magazine* when they did a feature on the state of Tennessee. That led to expanding my research into the art of the pre-Civil War South, and I have published on that subject and have given lectures as high up as the Williamsburg Antiques Forum on that subject. When I was in Columbus I published on George Bellows, who was a native of Columbus, and on twentieth-century sculpture, both interests of mine. Frankly, I have not really seriously pursued any research projects for the last twenty years.

M: My next question is: What was your first priority upon taking the position of director?

B: That is an interesting question. I have not given it any thought. Of course, the calendar was the first priority. The meter was running on the state funding, and we were going to face a problem of losing our state funding if we were not into the design of the museum at a certain date. So time—the deadlines—were the first priority. I interviewed for the job in April and was offered the job in June, and I told my museum in Columbus in June that I was leaving at the end of the year and coming to Gainesville at the beginning of 1987. So I gave Columbus six months notice.

Prior to that we were going to have this deadline of losing state funding in Florida if we did not get the building underway, under contract, by a certain date, and that was going to mean a very short design period. So while I was still in Columbus and not working for Florida yet I completely involved myself in the program of the building. The program is an almost 300-page document that details every space, every space need, the relationship between all the spaces, and ideal museum arrangement. That program had to be written out very carefully—how much storage, how much exhibit space, how much office space—in advance before an architect could know what to do with the design. If I had waited until I got to Florida and took that much time to do that program, we might have missed our deadline for getting the building finished, so I went ahead and worked on that even while I was still in Columbus. I sent that back down here before I even arrived. When I got here that was done, and we were able to move quickly then on hiring an architect and getting into the design phase. So that was my first priority, I would say: the imposed deadlines that would have jeopardized our funding, and so therefore we jumped into it.

M: I noticed a project schedule proposal in the files that LeJene [Normann, Bishop's secretary] gave me, and it includes the architect selection in June and a nineteen-month schedule for museum construction. Did things proceed within this time frame?
B: Yes, but the nineteen-month projection was off by about five months, so I would say we exceeded our schedule by about five months. A good deal of that can be attributed to what I would say was inadequate site preparation. This was a completely raw site. Nothing had ever been built here, so the soil samples, the tests of the site, did not reveal the extent of the problem. When we got into actual construction we had to stop construction and spend more time on preparation of the site than we thought we would have to. That delayed [the project] two or three months right there.

M: Who were your closest and most supportive colleagues while planning the museum's early development?

B: Some of my staff in Columbus helped at first. I consulted my curators and preparators at Columbus about what they would consider ideal in the way of exhibit space, storage areas, and work space. I took all of their suggestions and incorporated those. I also talked to the staff of facilities planning here at the University of Florida, who are trained architects themselves; the architect, who was very responsive to working in a collaborative way; and our consultants. The lighting consultant and the security consultant were people that I admired. They came in and worked well with me.

But this project was really designed to be responsive to a very unique situation at the University of Florida—not at the University of Alabama or not at the University of Georgia—so I used all of the comments and records, all of the hopes and dreams written down by whomever had been involved up to that point. Remember, they started in 1981, and I was here in 1987, so there were six years of history already that had gone by. I looked at all of that material and tried to use what I saw in that as what might be part of a collective dream. I tried to respond to what I had seen University people hoping they would get. I tried to respond to what community people seemed to hope they would get. I tried to respond to artists that I knew who felt that this was the kind of thing they would want, and art historians and so forth. So it is not my idea as much as it is a collective impression of what all was wanted here, and also what would work for this specific situation, this specific University, and this particular region. So that is how it has turned out.

M: Did the idea of a cultural complex including the Center for the Performing Arts and the natural history museum evolve over time, or was it intended from the start?

B: It evolved. In fact, it happened almost unexpectedly. The Santa Fe Community College was in conversation with the legislature about getting funding for a performing arts center to be on their campus. The museum was already planned and was going to be built with only private money on a site on SW 13th Street, very near the College of Fine Arts. The [Florida] Museum of Natural History had no idea
yet that they were going to move or build a new facility. They are not going to move; they are just going to build a new facility and use two facilities.

About 1986 Jon Mills, who was from Gainesville and was speaker of the [Florida] House of Representatives, said to Santa Fe and to the University of Florida: "If you will get together with all of these things you are doing and put them in one place, we can probably get more funding collectively than we could get for individual projects. If you put them together in a joint-use activity, they may bring more attention and draw more support." So Santa Fe agreed to put their facility on University of Florida property. The property was promised by the University for Santa Fe's building. The museum then received matching funds from the state to move out to the same site and expand its size. We would not have had as big a museum if we had stayed where we were. So all of this was encouraged by the promise of funding, which then did come through. So we went ahead with the first two buildings.

In the meantime, the state changed its rules for the way it matches construction funds. Now they require that you raise all of your money in advance before they will give you the match, so the [Florida] Museum of Natural History is still in the process of raising its necessary funds to get its match before it can start construction. But that, I think, is just a minor delay.

M: What did it take to persuade the University to commit itself to supporting the museum the way it has?

B: Well, this group of citizens was out trying to raise the money to pay for the museum. They accepted the responsibility. The University was willing to accept a gift to the museum, but it was not going to spend any money on it. So a Gainesville family responded to the campaign by offering a gift of more than $3 million toward a budget of $4 million, and that convinced the University that the project was very much doable. So they were going to build a $4 million private museum with private contributions exclusively. That was the only way the University was really interested in getting into it. But then, of course, the state provided another $4 million match, which just gave the University more incentive because it was getting an even more important museum. What the University had to put up was the operating expenses, and that is what it did.

M: How did the local community contribute to the early development?

B: They were the active instigators. They were the ones who made the appeal and carried out the campaign and pushed for action. Then they got support from Roy Craven, who was director of the University Gallery [and a professor of art at UF], and Joe Sabatella, who was the dean of the College of Fine Arts. They agreed with them that a new museum was needed. But it came really from the community with community money.
M: During the initial fund raising, who were among the first contributors?

B: Dr. William Hadley assumed responsibility for the first campaign, and Mrs. Caroline Richardson was an active worker in that. Then, of course, Dr. and Mrs. David Cofrin made the $3 million commitment, which of course made the whole thing possible. All of that happened in a fairly short period of time.

M: How were the membership dues established?

B: Very arbitrarily. We looked at the dues of maybe fifty comparable kinds of institutions and just sort of took an average that we thought was appropriate. We did not want to set the membership dues too high to discourage participation. We started at a point where we could always raise them if we found they were not adequate. We started at the relatively low end of the scale in order to test the waters, because it was a new experiment in Gainesville and we did not know how the community would respond. But all museums share information with each other, so we know how much they charge in California and Texas and Illinois and what the averages are. There are lots of guidelines for that.

M: Do they contribute substantially to the museum?

B: Membership dues do two things. One is they give you a primary audience, which is very important. They provide what we call an advocacy group, which is important in terms of your national standing. When you are being assessed for exhibitions or when you are being assessed for accreditation or those kinds of things, the way you are supported by the community shows through membership. It shows how much you are trying to reach out to a public, and it is an important measure of your effectiveness. The basic membership really is just a wash. It costs as much to service a membership as it brings in, so it is really a wash. You can just forget income from that part of it. But the participation by that member is very important. The head count is important.

[Two is income support in the higher categories.] As the memberships rise in contributions, we have graduated categories. The higher categories certainly do contribute to the museum's basic operation. All of the surplus income from the memberships goes directly into the education programs, which in turn go right back into the community, which in turn, hopefully, produces more memberships.

M: What is the current membership?

B: It is a little over 1,000 units--that is a family or an individual or a business or whatever. We have about 1,000 individual memberships.
M: How many people have been to the museum since it has opened?

B: That is a hard question to answer, because we are keeping our records by annual attendance. We reached a figure of 91,000 in our first twelve months, so if you just take the month-by-month averages and look at how long we have been open, you could say how many have come. I guess from September to January adds five more months to the twelve-month total. I would say we have had over 100,000, but I cannot say precisely. We are looking at our weekly and monthly averages and are projecting an attendance between 75,000 and 80,000 in a year as normal rate. The 91,000 for the first twelve months was heavily influenced by the huge turnout at the grand opening weekend. There were over 6,000 people in one weekend, so that really was abnormal. Normal attendance is going to be somewhere between 75,000 and 80,000 a year, which, by the way, is extremely high for this size community and the population base of this area.

M: Speaking for myself, that sounds exceptional.

B: It is very high. I would say that among university museums we are in the top ten in attendance in percentage of the total population, and we are in the top thirty in attendance in the total population probably for all museums. There are many large cities in Florida with museums that do not have attendance greater than ours.

M: How did the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] contribute to the museum?

B: In an interesting way. I cannot give the precise dates, but they are in the records. After the first community campaign was held and the museum looked like it was going to succeed in raising $4 million and was going to be built on 13th Street, the University formed a committee made up of citizens and faculty and University administrators, and they formed a jury. They invited some outside consultants to come on the jury, and they held a national competition for the design of the building. The NEA provided the funds for that national competition. There was a winner, and that was going to be the winning design that was going to be built on 13th Street.

But at the same time this whole development out here at the cultural complex [on SW 34th Street] came along. When we received state funding all the bets were off because the state requires you to go through a specific procedure to select an architect, and they would not accept the previous competition as a satisfactory solution. So we had to go through the whole process again to select an architect. This time the architect who won that [first] competition came in second, so we wound up with a different architect for the ultimate building.

M: How did you choose the architect?
B: It is a very elaborate process that involves several steps. There are numerical judgings as well as subjective judgings. There is a jury that is appointed by the University, by the Board of Regents, [and] by the user, and this jury sits and looks at the credentials of a huge number. I think there were twenty-eight firms that were competing. We narrowed that to six finalists who came and made specific presentations to the jury in person. After interviewing each of those six individually, we narrowed it to a couple. Then the final decision was based on both a subjective choice and a numerical grading of their ability to do the job. The Board of Regents and the state have a very complex numerical system, so it is kind of like doing SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Tests] and also taking an exam and also doing an interview so that there are both objective and subjective ways of selecting. The people that won scored the highest in both categories.

M: That was?

B: Kha Le-Huu from Orlando, who formed a partnership with Jackson-Reeeger here in Gainesville.

M: To what extent were your personal desires, design ideas, and tastes woven into the initial phases of development?

B: My personal taste in architecture had nothing to do with it. The impact I had in design, based on my personal taste, was trying to clarify the relationships of the functions, trying to put the right things in the right place in the building, trying to keep it open, simple, and clean, not cluttering it up with a lot of unnecessary details and complications. We kept coming back to that concept. Of course, the budget also dictated it stay simple, because if we had gotten into a lot of elaborate design we could have spent a lot of money that we did not have. I emphasized that I wanted the maximum amount of space rather than more elegance. Of course, a good architect can give you the maximum amount of space with a certain amount of elegance as well, and that is what we got. So my role was one of trying to get a functional building, one that truly worked, one that would make the work easier for the staff, would make the work safer for the art, and would make a lot of things possible that I could not even imagine. I had to make the building have a great deal of potential for the unknown so that if someone surprised us with the gift of a collection that we would not have imagined, it might still fit in some way; we could make it fit. We tried to keep it very fluid and open in that sense.

That was my biggest contribution. Every time they would try to pin it down too early or make it too specific, I would say: "Well, let's just keep moving along here. Why make these little doorways when we can have big openings?" We would just try to keep it as functional as possible. Of course, it has just been a dream from a functional standpoint.
M: I have one last question before we close. The museum has been dubbed "Miracle on 34th Street."

B: That is the whole complex. The whole complex of the three institutions is what they really referred to when they called it that.

M: I see. To you, what has been the biggest miracle?

B: The response. I think that is the one [thing] that I could not predict. I knew we were going to produce a decent building. I knew it was going to be wonderfully workable because we got to that point very early, and it was going to do. We had the money to pay for it, so I was not worried about that. And I knew with my experience I would be able to put together a staff that I hoped would really be the right staff for this project. I did not count on the amazing amount of talent in Gainesville that we were able to draw on, so it was easier than I expected. But I knew we could do it.

What I did not expect and what has surprised me constantly and what has been the greatest joy in the project has been the response. I did not expect that kind of attendance, I did not expect that kind of membership support, [and] I did not expect the enthusiasm for the museum. I thought we would have to build that up over time. There is not a similar thing in this region, but I had no idea how much pent-up desire there was for it.

Also the art community, the national museum community, has been extremely responsive. They are impressed with our publications, they are impressed with our exhibitions program, so they have responded with a tremendous amount of support, offering us top-rated shows, cooperating by taking our shows, making it possible for us to function as a mature institution in our first year.

I think the thing that has been the most wonderful has been the response from every quarter. The staff loves the building, the morale is very high, the experts who see it are envious of it and are admiring of it, the people who have worked with us on exhibitions are amazed at how well it works, how efficient it is, how economically we can do things, and how dramatically things exhibit in the space. Everybody loves working [here]. Artists are thrilled with what happens to their work in the building. If you would measure anything by any success, the response to this museum is just astounding. That has been the most rewarding part.

M: Thank you very much.

B: You are welcome.