

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

**ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to the Slice of MIT podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

**JOE** And this is the MIT Alumni Books podcast. Joe McGonegal. I'm the director of Alumni

**MCGONEGAL:** Education. I'm talking with Robert Coles, a class of 1955 master of architecture. Coles is the author of *Architecture and Advocacy* edited by William Siener with Sylvia Coles and published this winter by Buffalo Arts Publishing. After earning his degree from MIT, Coles went on to a 50-year career as an architect opening his own firm in 1963 and leading to senior positions in the American Institute of Architects and the AIA College of Fellows.

His new book documents his 50-year career in the field and his architectural legacy as a leading civic figure in the city of Buffalo. As one colleague put it, Coles has unmistakably woven his drive for equality, opportunity, and love and concern into the social and architectural fabric of Buffalo. He has done it with sensitivity, care, and commitment few architects could equal. Well, Robert Coles, it's a pleasure to talk with you. Tell me about the writing of this book. It's kind of a story unto itself.

**ROBERT COLES:** Yes, it is. About two or three years ago, I decided I would close my practice. I had a lot of material that I had accumulated over 50 years and just trying to decide on what to do with it. Then my friend Bill Siener, who I had done some silly words and talking words came with this idea that why not do a book. So that was the beginning of the book.

**MCGONEGAL:** It's a strange industry these days, the publishing industry. Tell me about, you did some fund raising for the book project and about picking a publisher.

**ROBERT COLES:** The publisher actually was the publisher that my wife used for a book that she did. Buffalo Arts Publisher was selected as the publisher for the book and so forth. And we worked with them. We also were included a funding group that assisted in raising funds for us, Kickstarter, you probably know that.

**MCGONEGAL:** Yes.

**ROBERT COLES:** Yeah. And with Kickstarter's we raised about \$6,000. And that effort came towards the end of our publishing effort and all. We had done a lot of work before we brought in Kickstarter.

**MCGONEGAL:** Well kudos to you. I don't know a lot of alumni from the 1950s who use Kickstarter.

**ROBERT COLES:** Well, it works you know. Yeah. Surprisingly to us at all. We didn't know what it was either. And our publisher came up with the idea of using Kickstarter. And that's how we went to that organization.

**MCGONEGAL:** We're also joined by William Siener, who edited the book with Robert Coles. William, I wonder if you could tell us about the experience of writing this and what were the biggest obstacles in getting this all down on paper?

**WILLIAM SIENER:** Actually getting it done on paper was fairly straightforward. Bob had kept good records and had actually assembled a lot of the material in a sort of a scrapbook. We started with that. And part of my role was to then go a little bit on those records and talk to some other architects who had a sense of Bob's work and incorporated some of their comments. Actually it was a nice exercise. I thought it was important for Bob to be able to tell his own story, rather than to be an analyst of historical context. That was what the aim was for me to help Bob get his story down as he hoped it would be remembered.

**MCGONEGAL:** Sylvia Coles, tell me what you're most proud of about this book.

**SYLVIA COLES:** I feel it portrays Bob's character and personality, ambitions, aims, very well indeed. I can't imagine a better job. Bill Siener deserves a lot of credit for doing the text. All the people who worked on it including the publisher, it was very satisfying for me to see the final product.

**MCGONEGAL:** And Robert, talk about responses you've had to the book so far.

**ROBERT COLES:** They have been great. We had one book signing party. We had about 40 or 50 people there. They were all very enthusiastic.

**MCGONEGAL:** The book takes us through your life story. It's a memoir, after all. It has these two pillars guiding your work throughout *Architecture and Advocacy*. And chapter by chapter, we learn about your evolving philosophy as an architect and your evolving philosophy as an advocate for African-American architects and the field. You described, very early on, almost 50 years ago, African-American architects as an endangered species. I'm wondering if you still consider that the case in 2017?

**ROBERT COLES:** Yes, I do. There are probably, in that country, no more than 1,000 African-American architects. In the country, there are probably 100,000 white architects. In my own city of

Buffalo, we have perhaps five or six registered architects. So we are, indeed, an endangered species.

**MCGONEGAL:** In the book you tell the story of attending the 1968 American Institute of Architects convention. Whitney Young Jr. Spoke and charged the profession with getting its act together in a year of race riots and after the assassination of Dr. King. Talk about his influence on you over the years.

**ROBERT COLES:** For the first time, the American Institute of Architects had a speaker who challenged them to look at the social problems that we in the country were facing and asked the architects to take a leading role in doing something about that problem, really. I remember him saying, you are leaders, or you should be leaders, and you are not leaders, you're followers. And after the 1986, the convention, a group of architects, black architects, got together and began to advocate for efforts that the full body of the AIA should take.

**MCGONEGAL:** You wrote in an AIA memo in 1993 that your concern was that the inner cities of our nation, and I'm quoting you, are becoming more and more isolated and that the population increasingly black, brown, now yellow are becoming more estranged from the mainstream of society. And you called for, among your peers, architects to rethink their tendency to seek solutions to urban problems in massive infrastructure projects, instead to rebuild the human spirit through small individual initiatives. You write. Has that call been heeded?

**ROBERT COLES:** I would say only partially. Unfortunately, many who were in the advocacy movement lost their will to continue on. And so they have gone on to other areas. In Buffalo, we had a Community Planning Assistance Center for about 10 years. But that center did not continue. Many of the people who were involved in advocacy went on to public positions with the state and with the city. We're trying to essentially start that all over again. In fact, I had a meeting with the Dean of the School of Architecture less than a week ago and proposed that we restart the community Planning Assistance Center, which was the name of the group.

**MCGONEGAL:** When you hear about the racial unrest in Baltimore, in Ferguson, in Dallas over the last decade, do you think about that charge you made in 1993 and how architecture and better urban planning might inform social justice?

**ROBERT COLES:** My feeling is that architects, because they have the ability to see things as they can be as opposed to as they are, have a responsibility to lead in many of these planning and social issues really. Unfortunately, this is not taking place. I think many of my white colleagues are

focused only on the architecture and not the social issues that are involved in that as well.

**MCGONEGAL:** Give us an example of one project in the city of Buffalo that you're most proud of in terms of combining your architectural talents and your work at achieving more social accord in the city.

**ROBERT COLES:** Well, I think one of the most significant projects that I worked on was the John F. Kennedy Recreation Center. It was the result of a thesis that I did at MIT in 1955 and became a real project in Buffalo in 1960. That project came about because I developed a relationship with the head of the community organization who was being urbaned out of his facility. And I said to him, let me design a facility for you that you can move into.

And I actually had, or assisted in the commission, in 1960 and in 1963. We had a building, the John F. Kennedy Recreation Center. The building stands today. And that's what, 50 years ago, 60 years ago. It's really one of the most significant buildings in the inner city.

**MCGONEGAL:** You also write about the Frank E. Merriweather Jr. Branch Library as one of your most satisfying projects.

**ROBERT COLES:** That is the most recent project that I did, which is a library also in the inner city, which is designed like an African village. We had a very demanding client who said he wanted a building that was more representative of African architecture than traditional American architecture.

And so I came up with a building that has seven different rooms. Each room has a space for the library versus circulation. There's this one senior citizens, another children's area another. And it is a magnet for all kinds of activities in the community. In fact, we had, I think it was about two or three weeks ago, the first book signing for our book. And we had 40 or 50 people there. And it was a very significant event.

**MCGONEGAL:** Well, we'll encourage alumni listening to visit either building in their travels to Buffalo, or those who live in Buffalo. I do have to ask you about your studies at MIT. I thought it was funny to read that you and your classmates got sick of studying Frederick Law Olmsted and all of his work at the Back Bay Fens and demanded a little bit more from the department head. And tell me the result of that.

**ROBERT COLES:** Well, we had a Christmas party in about 19-- yeah 54. We had a Christmas party. And we invited the dean of the school, Dean Pietro Belluschi, Lawrence Anderson, who was chairman

of the architecture department, and we invited them to this party. We had liquor to sort of soothe them up. And we said, we are tired of studying this Back Bay Fens and all. We want to deal with more significant architecture.

And so we gave them a list of about 30 architects. I had them pick six architects. And we really had the top of line. We had [INAUDIBLE] and Paul Rudolph, we had Minoru Yamasaki and they all came in for about two to four weeks. And we sat at their foos, you might say, and listened to them and were really absorbed in their teachings and all. It was a very great experience.

**MCGONEGAL:** Thanks to your advocacy, you actually were part of designing your own education.

**ROBERT COLES:** That is correct. And all of us will remember that.

**MCGONEGAL:** Tell me what else needs to be written on the subject of architecture and advocacy. What do you think, what work needs to be done in this area?

**ROBERT COLES:** Well, I think the educational institutions need to take the lead. Because they have the people who could be involved. And we need the schools to take a lead in terms of the planning and development that's going on in our own city really. What's happening now is such a flourish of activity that nobody's looking at the urban design or planning issues. And we need the schools, as well as a profession, working together to do something about it.

**MCGONEGAL:** Tell me what else you're reading right now.

**ROBERT COLES:** I'm reading about the Smithsonian African-American Museum that's just opened up. And I'm looking at all the journals that have come out about it, the *Smithsonian* and others really. And I think that's one of the most significant things has happened in the most recent years really.

**MCGONEGAL:** The book is *Architecture and Advocacy* by Robert Coles, master of architecture 1955, edited by William Siener with Sylvia Coles and published this winter by Buffalo Arts Publishing. Robert Coles, thanks so much for joining me.

**ROBERT COLES:** Thank you very much.

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