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Interview by  
Nicholas Callaway

# Bob Rubin

## Building Bridges

Bob Rubin is a doctoral candidate and teaching fellow in Theory and History of Architecture at Columbia. For his summer job he runs The Bridge, which opened in 2002. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Jean Prouvé: a Tropical House," which opens at the U.C.L.A. Hammer Museum in October; and "Jean Prouvé: Three Nomadic Structures," currently on view at LA MOCA. He divides his time between New York, Paris, and Wainscott.

Nicholas Callaway: Tell us about the history of The Bridge.

**Bob Rubin:** The Lions Club of Bridgehampton used to sponsor the Bridgehampton Road Races through the streets of the hamlet, on a roughly four-mile circuit. In 1953, after a serious fatal accident, the participants raised [money] to buy more than seventy separate tracts of land in Noyack—remote woodlots granted to the earliest settlers of Southampton by the King of England. They paid a couple of dollars an acre for just under 600 acres.

The race-track, which opened in 1957, was a stunner. Over the next twenty years it became a major international venue, especially in the "Can Am" years — the late '60s until the energy crisis of the early '70s. Stirling Moss, Dan Gurney, Bruce McLaren and Mario Andretti were among the many great drivers who barreled fearlessly under the "Bridge" at 200 miles per hour. Unfortunately, as the Hamptons grew, so did the number of new and unfriendly neighbors, and eventually the track was put out of business.

In 1992, we invited Rees Jones to transform the circuit into a great golf course while protecting the sanctuary-like feel of the property against any trace of suburban encroachment. At nearly 500 acres today, The Bridge, and its surrounding open spaces, remain one of the largest unbroken natural tracts in the area.

Why did you buy The Bridge in the first place? I was a passionate vintage racer and collector of old racing cars. I ran it as a racetrack for twenty years. After the town shut down racing, I was looking for an alternative to selling to a developer and moving on, as I had grown quite attached to the site. I didn't even play golf, but I knew the property intimately and loved it.

It takes a mature designer not to gild the lily when you have a piece of property like The Bridge to work with. I started with a great golf course architect, Rees Jones, someone regularly engaged by the U.S.G.A. to update the classic courses the U.S. Open

is played on. Rees started asking me what kind of golf course I wanted. [The architect] Louis Kahn used to hold up a brick before his students and tell them to ask the brick what kind of building it wants to be; I told Reese to ask the land what kind of golf course it wanted to be. I doubt he ever heard that before, but he certainly responded to it. The Bridge doesn't resemble any other golf course on Long Island, primarily because the property doesn't resemble anything else in the area either.

We are unusual in that, apart from the fairways tees and greens, we have planted only stuff that is already there — none of this instant-golf-course-in-a-can look. We left remnants of the racetrack as a gentle ruin. The entrance road is about a mile of the old track — the first four turns, in fact, as well as the famous bridge. To some it may border on theme park, but it beats these generic courses.

The fact that I didn't play golf when I started allowed me to have a more open mind to what kind of a club The Bridge ought to be. I find it disappointing that most new clubs are built by people who tend to wish to ape the rituals and aesthetics of the clubs they can't get into in the first place. I thought it would be more fun to do something more relaxed and less self-important: no white overall uniforms on the caddies; you can play golf with your shirt out or, for that matter, wear face piercings.

The clubhouse is a contemporary design. I told the architect, Roger Ferris to make it look like it morphed up out of the site, to think comfortable gymnasium rather than country club. It looks so different from various places on the course; it anchors the course from wherever you are. It's monumental, when you are near or inside it. The scale is intimate and welcoming. What is it you love about [architect and designer] Jean Prouvé's work?

Prouvé is about making what you design, and about an engagement with industrial processes in making architecture — the two processes are inseparable in his work. He was a committed modernist, so it's quite ironic the way he has been "post-modernized" into decorative collectibility by the contemporary art world.

What connects golf, racing, and architecture in your mind?

Cars are industrial objects, or at least racing cars are artisanal prototypes of industrial objects. This was key to my understanding of how to restore Prouvé's Tropical House, which is not an art object but rather an industrial prototype.

Furniture is an *hors d'oeuvre* for architecture. One day back in 1990 I went to an auction of furniture in Paris because they were selling some Dadaesque pieces of furniture by Ettore Bugatti. I have a Bugatti pasta machine made of car parts. He was an Italian stuck in Alsace-Lorraine and felt homesick for Italian cuisine. There was a lot of furniture by Pierre Chareau in the same auction. From Chareau to Prouvé is easy.

I bought The Bridge to go racing and ended up playing golf. Golf is about landscape architecture and a certain theatricality of space — the picturesque promenade. Racing is a sport that depends

on its real estate, like skiing or golf. In this case the elevation changes that made it a great track also make it a wonderful golf course. I go where these things take me. You made a large fortune relatively early in life. What motivates you now?

I wanted to go to graduate school in the '70s and then teach history, but I was afraid of adding to the debt I had run up to get through college, so I got a real job instead. Now, almost thirty years later, I am finally doing what I always wanted.

What gives you the greatest pleasure or satisfaction?

Making a birdie on the fifth hole of the Bridge. It's where I got married. It's a spot where you can sometimes see all the way to Connecticut, plus the shadow of a big part of the old track. That pretty well ties together everything that makes me happy in one moment.

Is your uncanny foresight a gift? A learned skill? I follow connections and juxtapositions that are not obvious, and I am very stubborn, sometimes to the point of being reckless. What sane person would have bought an operating racetrack in the United States of Liability? The Bridge is more my reward for sticking to my guns over twenty-five years than an example of foresight. When I used to try to justify my acquisition by telling people it would be valuable land at some point, I didn't believe it. It was just the sort of stuff you make up to make yourself feel better about these kinds of irresponsible purchases. What is your next obsession?

I don't know. They come in random sequence. When I was eighteen and in the fog of the '60s, if you told me I'd work on Wall Street for twenty-five years and then build a golf course, I would have blown my brains out. To paraphrase William Gaddis, life is what happens while you're making other plans.

Can you explain the essence of the game of golf? The essence of the game is the simplicity of the golf swing — which is what makes it so hard. When you make a great shot, life suddenly has meaning — at least until the next shot.

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