Interview with Gay Talese, former New York Times writer and author of *The Bridge*, for Program Three: "Bridging New York"

Note: This transcript is from a videotaped interview for the "Bridging New York" segment of "Great Projects." It has been edited lightly for readability.

Gay Talese (GT): My assumption about Mr. Ammann—I met him a few times as you know, but did not ever get to know him—my assumption is that he was a, a very private person who expressed himself as an artist on this grand scale that is characteristic of builders of bridges. He was a great designer whose concept was outlined against the sky. He found in New York, Mr. Ammann did, he found in New York the perfect setting for his artistic expression where his works could span masses of land but be written across the sky in steel and cables. And so he was in the great tradition of all great art, a large thinking man with more of a sense of what he was doing than in a sense of who he, himself, was.

He was, in terms of his own private form of communication, practically mum. He said very little and he didn't expect much to be said in his own behalf by those who admired him. He was very self-effacing. I doubt that that's characteristic of many great artists but it was certainly true of Mr. Ammann. His work, however, which he saw in its grandest scale represents art as we see it and also a functioning form of the great engineer's sense of space and time in measurement. And it's also enduring, it was all great art. It's an enduring expression. It is lasting from one generation to the other, to the other, and we now have more than a half a century of Ammann's representations around the city of New York and other places in this country.

My meeting with him, however, was never one that was very revelatory on any level. He had a withdrawn, old-century manner about him. His English was never spoken with such clarity that I felt through the verbal expression, I was getting much of what was inside his mind. But, of course, his mind was a mathematical mind as well as the artistic expression I refer to. And it was in the work that he sought to speak, not in what he might have told an interviewer such as I had been on a couple of occasions. I think I think he was maybe even a man who did not know how to tell people what he was doing. He did it in this, in this, in the equations of his brain but did not exactly know how to translate that into something that would be quotable. He would not have fit into the age of the sound bite.

GT: Ammann was an antiquated man who, in this modern time, did enduring things. But he was really by his very nature contrary to calling attention to himself. We are in an age of designer achievements. Everyone who designs a pair of blue jeans wants his name on there. Everyone who builds a building would like his name up there. It's, it's not only the entertainment factor, it's the celebrity age that I think, we are very much epitomizing as we go into this new century.

Ammann was an old-century fellow who believed not in recognizing what he, by his own nature did, but rather recognizing what his concept through his art was. And I believe he would have probably not made a very good television interview if you had the

opportunity, were he alive today to be on this show. But, of course, we're here because of what he did, not what he said, not what he might of said of himself or others would have said of him if they knew him. We have the disadvantage, all of us, in not having too many contemporaries of Ammann around to speak for him. But his work has majestical proportions and there's no doubt that he was within his own private domain, a majestic thinker.

I had, on two occasions, a chance to sit with him as you're sitting with me now. One of those was, was in his penthouse apartment at the Carlyle Hotel in Manhattan. And when I was there, and his wife was also present, when I was there, he would look up, out on the porch of this penthouse and he could, by moving around within the porch area, he could see parts of the city that was connected to the bridges that he had built. He could look uptown Manhattan and see the George Washington and he could look down, and this was in the mid '60s that I saw him, he could down see the, he could see the Verrazano Bridge that wasn't, at that point, open. But it, in terms of structure, it was completed. And, of course, he could look over to the East River and see all those other bridges that he built, including a footbridge which name does not even exist in my mind.

But he was a man who could see the result of his talent and I'm sure that that was a source of private, quiet gratification as it is to all of us who appreciate beautiful things. And so the greatness of the bridge builder is the capacity to build beautiful things that also have, quite incidentally, a functional purpose. But the bridge stands on its own, regardless of how functioning the purpose. I remember seeing the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which is the bridge, of course, that I'm most familiar with because I saw it in it, in its period of innovation. I saw it actually coming up from under the water, the first levels of steel that were shooting up, for what would be the formation of the towers, I saw this. I was there. I was witnessing it. And I saw that bridge as it, going from that, from that infantile state of steel to the very completion three years later.

And it was for about six months, in its completed form, but with not yet the cement connecting that steel which would link Brooklyn to Staten Island. It was sitting there as a work of art. It wasn't even yet painted. It wasn't painted the current gray but rather it had the rust-colored steel, original. And it just stood there for about four or five months as a grand gateway to New York, as a real form of art that did not have any, in terms of scale at least, any comparable, comparable measure. And it was what he lived for. Mr. Ammann lived to see that sort of thing out of his head, go into the sky and stay there. And it does today.

GT: The bridge engineer is, of course, the central artist at work. But, in order to achieve his art, in order to have the final fulfillment that is necessary to deal quite intimately with a large number of other personages who range from the fundraisers which, in this case of Mr. Ammann, would have been the late Robert Moses who incidentally was like a producer if you're thinking of it in the theatrical sense. If you're thinking of the bridge as a stage of a great expansive form that has to be filled with functioning parts when it's completed.

But you think first stage is the producer, the man who, who's out to sell the product, to sell the idea of the product, to garner the income that will allow the product to be constructed. So Mr. Ammann really, in the beginning, having done his own paperwork, his design on paper, measuring everything including, in his case, the curvature of the earth because the two spans of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge were so widely distributed that they had to take into shape the dip in the earth on either side of it. But first there is the money-raising to support the cost of steel, to support the cost of labor, to support, not only that, but the cost of removing people whose homes, whose lives are in the way of the approach-ways to a bridge.

So the relocation costs, the damage costs, there is so much that precedes the edifice that we see and call a bridge. And all of this is taking place behind the scenes and it's taking place in series of offices by people like the late Robert Moses as the premiere person.

Then there is the vast cast of characters who do all the heavy work of toting steel on barges to the bridge site. The men who actually will climb to high altitudes to put these pieces in place, this great jigsaw puzzle that Ammann had put on paper. But it requires others than Ammann to put it in place, to rivet it, to swing it, to do all sorts of heavy and risky, risky endeavors to make this look like a bridge is supposed to look. And the final part, of course, is the not-so-artistic but, nevertheless, necessary work of paving it all and building those roads that will lead people in motor vehicles to support the bridge with their money to pay off the investment that, years before, a Robert Moses had sold to investors as a useful and necessary force to connect two parts of New York City.

In this case, Brooklyn and Staten Island, that had had to be connected –so Moses thought. Not that the people who lived there necessarily wanted a bridge because a bridge has a destructive element as well. Not only does a bridge, in its early stages of concept cause people to be moved forcibly from their homes as whole neighborhoods are eradicated, are destroyed like a bomb destroys, like a war destroys, like Dresden was destroyed by bombs, you have that. You had Brooklyn and Staten Island to administer to in a Dresden-fashion of destruction. Then you have the relocation of these people, forcibly relocated, losing, for them, what is familiar and loved, their homes.

And all of this is done for the practical purpose of connecting two parts of, of New York City that in, in the representation of those who did many of the outcries and led many of the protests didn't want to have done. But Moses believed, and many others believed, it was an essential part of the growth of the city to have these two boroughs, Brooklyn and Staten Island connected through the Verrazano Bridge. And it fell to Mr. Ammann, joyfully in his case, to design what would connect the bridge. … It is the bridge itself that we recognize, that we look upon as a great achievement and do not think of the return on the investment as really a factor. But, of course, it is.

GT: Mr. Ammann, having designed a bridge, in this case the Verrazano, as I'm talking about, [was] in a kind of staging position of waiting and watching for long period. We know that other great bridge builders—the father and son that built the Brooklyn Bridge—go through a period of waiting and watching while what they have in their

conceptual sense in mind, they wait years sometimes for it to actually transpire and to take shape in the sky, over the water.

In the case of Mr. Ammann,--and I knew him a little bit as I interviewed him periodically during the construction that took three and a half years, from 1962 to 1965--I knew him as a man who was, not only watching eagerly but sometimes with anxiety because there's always the possibility, and not only the possibility but the reality of a lot of wrong moves, of a lot of accidents that do occur. I'm specifically referring to deaths, the inevitably of deaths that are part of every great bridge, that are part of every great construction effort because every great construction effort is connected to inherent danger.

And so the bridge is a great center of risk during these formative stages and people do fall off or they fall on the bridge and are injured beyond repair. They are no longer able to function as bridge construction crewmembers. And Ammann is well aware of all this. Every day he gets like a football coach, the injury report of the game or the practice. And so this is, is not a very comforting time for a man who's concerned.

GT: There must be some parallels between what Mr. Ammann went through as a designer and what a writer, like myself, goes through. You first have a sense of what you want to do and you stake out a kind of area, a territory in which you're going to have your story evolve—in this case, a territory in which his art will rise. And then you go through that period of creativity. You have to do what is done in solitude.

Mr. Ammann designed in solitude. All of the factors that would be the component parts of a bridge and how they interrelated to one another and how they had to be in balance with one another as well as in balance with the vibrations of the earth and the expected vibrations of moving traffic. Not only the moving traffic but the weather's effect on moving steel, the wind moving in and out of cables, the fact that in cold weather and in warm weather, steel contracts, rises; all of these factors are part of the balance that a great designer must bring to his work. And Ammann, of course, did.

The form of a writer, you know, you must also do similar things in terms of balance. You must know where you're going. You must have a kind of outline. You must see the road ahead of you before you try or dare go there. And, and then when you finally have a kind of beginning and then another progressive turn in the story, you must know where you're going. And then when you're finally there, or you think you're there, you must go back and check. And Ammann had to constantly check and recheck his own balances

GT: There's an awful long period in every creative person's life of self-doubt, of self-examination, wonderment as to whether or not you're doing the right thing. Ammann surely had, in all the bridges, the modern-sized great ones and the great, great ones, he must have had a kind of, not skepticism, but a healthy self-doubt as to a sense of scrutiny as to what he was doing. Having been aware, as any historian of bridges is aware, that there have been disasters in the bridge business. Not only the disasters I referred to before, in terms of the injury and death to people who assist in the building of a bridge

but the out, the utter of collapse of some bridges. I mean, the famous one, of course, is the “Galloping Gertie” in Spokane. And we have pictures and newsreel film that many of us grew up seeing of this, this bridge that literally fell apart and fell into the sea. And Ammann surely knew what caused that and was so cautious about avoiding those miscalculations.

But a writer, a painter, a choreographer, the steps of, of a Balanchine, the steps of anybody that has a sense of progression in art, has to take into account the … creative, yes, but also pragmatic movement. And that’s true of anybody who builds anything, whether it’s a work in steel or whether it’s a work in words. It has many of the same progressive concerns that see it from the beginning, through the middle, to the end.

GT: An opening of a bridge is almost like an opening night show of any kind. It can be a Broadway opening. It could be an inauguration of a president which is really to bring to one place a focal point—a president, a Broadway star, a bridge, anything that is worth attention and it also brings to it a lot of attention-getting people. But the bridge in New York, when I saw the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows was a very festive occasion. The city had waited five years and we’d read a lot about it in the process of its being created. But finally, on the opening day, you had, in residence, you had on the parade stands, you had on the platforms, the principals who had something to do with the bridge and also had something to do with this city that was the center of the bridge, the New York political force.

The business authorities, the investors, people who just were celebrities of a sort that would seize on the occasion to get their names in the paper, their pictures in the paper. You always have those people who are drawn to the light of whoever brings the light but they are drawn to the light. They’re like moths that find a way to get there. And there was a lot of that on the opening occasion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

The leader of the business establishment, of course, was Robert Moses, Head of the Bridge and Tunnel Authority and had been the, probably the strongest force in terms of getting this as a political project through the legislature in New York and through the business community who would invest in it—and through the opposition, which was considerable, that opposed it. The opposition being not only those people who lived in the areas that … had to be destroyed because of the roads that led to the bridge on both sides, Brooklyn, Staten Island, but those who also thought that it was a detriment to some of the isolation that those boroughs enjoyed. And the beauty of the water that separated them—the Narrows, the Narrows part of the Hudson River.

There’s always a difference of opinion on a work of art. There’s always a difference of opinion as to whether it is art, and if it *is* art, is it *necessary* art? But anyway, on the occasion of the opening, all that is in the background because it’s no longer debatable anymore. It’s a foregone conclusion. It’s worthless discussion. And here you have opening day, limousines, people waving, people standing in front of photographers and the people who were most prominent were Robert Moses and others that worked with him.

Least prominent, surprisingly, maybe not surprisingly knowing the demure nature of Mr. Ammann, was himself. I remember, when introductions were made by Robert Moses, among those who were called upon to take a bow, of course, was Mr. Ammann. And while Moses was rather expansive in his description of the bridge engineer that was responsible, he never quite got around to mentioning the name of Mr. Ammann. And it was so, I think it was so typical of the life and times of that great artist, Mr. Ammann, that he would be sitting in the shadow of his great achievement and not have his name echoed on the loudspeaker that Robert Moses was bellowing into on this bridge, this great, expansive stage with all these people watching. His moment in the sun, Mr. Ammann was not really acknowledged.

And, of course, all great bridge builders share in that rather self-effacing sentiment of having the bridge speak for their work rather than their names. There's no name of an engineer; I mean, the names of the designers and creators of the Brooklyn Bridge or any bridge. But it didn't matter, I don't believe, to Ammann whether or not his name was mentioned because his name was that bridge in its real spirit. And he was the spirit in the creation of that bridge. And everybody knew it. And he knew it. And he didn't need to be acknowledged by Robert Moses or anyone else. And when he died I am sure he had in his mind the fact that he was leaving behind like an imperishable family, all those bridges that linked their lives to him as the creator. And that's a most gratifying time, I think, to think about a life well spent. And when he died, I have no doubt that he knew that his life had been a time well spent.

GT: I arrived in New York as a full time resident in the middle 1950s. And the city's bridges did not look then as they do now in all instances. I particularly remember the Queensboro Bridge having interesting towers, that are now not there because of one of them being a bit shaky and they had to remove all of them. But there were these wonderful spikes in the sky above the Queensboro Bridge.

And the George Washington Bridge, in those days when I arrived, had a very thin, thin span. It was only a single span, not the double span we see today. And it was so much more like a rainbow creation in those days as it went through the Palisades to the Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan. And I think, in those days, that the bridge was, the George Washington Bridge was more beautiful, more spectacular sight than it is now. … I think [Ammann] probably liked the single span more than this because this double span was clearly the result of the financial need for a expanding population that used Manhattan as its work site more than had been the case when, when Ammann first saw it completed in the 1930s. But bridges must make concessions to changing life as so many other forms of expression and I guess what you have now is still a beautiful bridge but not the one I remember when I first moved to New York in the mid '50s.

GT: We never know how the future's going to affect the usefulness of [a] project. And so Moses, in saying that this bridge would solve this traffic problem and another bridge would mean we don't have as much traffic or another tunnel or another road, is just merely a reflection of his lack of skill in prognosticating and it's really not a lack of skill

but really it is impossible to prognosticate how the future is going to change life. So the bridge that was in the mind of Ammann when he built and designed the George Washington is not the bridge that, thirty years later, would be with its second deck. It was a different looking bridge. And the new bridge that we now have in George Washington with its twin roadways does not mean that we do not have traffic jams because with this growing population and the growing economy, there are more cars and more identity with being a driver rather than being a user of public transportation.

But the usefulness of a Robert Moses, in many forms, is really an essential component to the creative personage such as Mr. Ammann. One cannot exist without the other. They are director, producers, I might have said before. They are part of the same artistic equation, although one has to build the stage and the other has to put something on it that is worthy of the stage. So the Ammann-Moses combination—and there are many other parallels to those two gentlemen in other forms of necessary and creative endeavor—they are essential partners.

GT: In 1959, and I'd lived in New York for about four years at the time, I was aware as a reporter of the New York Times … that there was this building in the middle of the river between Staten Island and Brooklyn, what would be called the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. And I'm a very curious person. I come from a small town. I come from an island actually in the Southern part of New Jersey, surrounded by bridges. So I'd always had a curiosity about bridges but, of course, never had an idea that bridges could be so magnificent as what was being planned at that time and it would be called the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. So, out of curiosity, not much else, I went out and watched as the bridge was slowly coming up out of the ocean, out of the river. And in subsequent months and then later years, I continued to go to that place and watch its further development. And in its stages when men in great numbers would be swinging from the cable and swinging from the catwalks that, that went the full extension from one tower to the other … it looked like spiders working up on these cables. These men were so hard to see; their bare silhouettes against the sky.

And I actually saw them too as an ongoing force almost like there was something military about it because they were very regimented and they were very structured. And when I wrote one of these chapters of the book, I try to make that point. It's from a book called, *Bridge* that I published a year after the bridge was opened in 1965. And I write, "Building a bridge is like combat. The language is of the barracks and the men are organized along the lines of a non-commissioned officer's caste. At the very bottom, comparable to an army recruit, are the apprentices, called punks. They climb catwalks with buckets of bolts. They climb catwalks with buckets of bolts learned through observation and turns on the tools. And occasionally are sent down for coffee and water, and seldom hear thanks. Within two or three years, most punks have become full-fledged bridge men. And they're qualified to heat and catch and drive rivets and to raise and weld and connect steel but it is the last job, connecting the steel that most captures their fancy. The steel connectors stand highest in the sky, their sweat taking minutes to hit the ground. And when the derricks hoist up new steel, the connectors reach out and grab it

with their hands, swing it into position, bang it with bolts and mallets and link it temporarily to the steel already in place and leave the rest for the riveting gangs."

GT: We are sometimes inconvenienced by a bridge undergoing repair and I think sometimes it might be the opinion of many of us that the bridge should've been maintained more properly. And if it had been, we would've found less need for inconvenience such as traffic jams because of sections of a bridge unavailable to us. I don't think this is necessarily true. I think a bridge is like a living thing and at times it just needs repair. It's the stress—the function on a bridge is so enormous and ongoing through the seasons and the day and the night, that there's simply times when it has to be ministered to as almost if it's a form undergoing medical treatment.

Also there are times when a bridge is considered obsolete. It should be moved to a different place. It no longer caters to the population that necessitated it in the beginning. But that's true of all great buildings. I mean, we have had in the city of skyscrapers, which is New York, some of the great edifices that were the wonderment of the 1890s no longer with us, or the early 1900s. And there's, you know, there's always some part of a monument to a certain generation removed by a subsequent generation because it outlived its usefulness or so it is believed. And this is the ongoing process of evolution, the ongoing process of birth and death. And you find it in bridges sometimes and in buildings, of course, all the time.

[Reading from his book, *Bridge*]

GT: He is a lean, elderly man in a high starched collar. Briefly he sits in the window of his apartment, 32 stories up in the Carlyle Hotel, and seems restless. Then he fetches his telescope, points it out the window, and soon it is focusing on the tall, red tower 12 miles away— a tower of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, a tower of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. From the bedroom window of his five-room apartment he can see the George Washington Bridge, which he considers his greatest achievement, and from another window, he can still see other bridges that he designed—the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, the Throgs Neck, the Triborough, the Hell Gate. From his living room window he can see parts of the Bayonne Bridge and the Verrazano-Narrows. But somehow it is the George Washington Bridge, completed in 1931, that still gives him his biggest thrill. "That bridge was his first born, and it was a difficult bridge," a friend explained. "And he'll always love it best." When asked yesterday to explain the feelings that the George Washington evokes in him, Mr. Ammann thought for a second, and then said, "It is as if you have a beautiful daughter, and you are the father." Throughout his career, his bridges have known no tragedy through his own engineering miscalculations, and yesterday he conceded that he was "lucky." "Lucky!" snapped his wife, disagreeing with him. "Lucky," he repeated, silencing her with a quiet, gentle authority.

The sun shone, the sky was cloudless; bands played, cannons echoed up and down the harbor, flags waved, and thousands of motorists yesterday became part of the first—and probably the only—blissful traffic jam on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The bridge, which took more than five years to build and which reaches like a rainbow across the

Brooklyn, and which reaches like a rainbow over the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island, was officially opened to traffic at 3 P.M.; 1,500 guests gathered to witness the ribbon-cutting ceremony. They arrived in 52 black limousines—a line of cars that moved as slowly as a funeral procession over the smooth white highway that links the entrance to the bridge.

In the first car was Robert Moses, wearing his battered gray fedora. In the 18th car behind Mr. Moses' limousine sat the 85-year-old designer of the bridge, O. H. Ammann. A quiet and modest man, he was barely recognizable by the politicians and other dignitaries at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. He stood in the crowd without a word, he stood in the crowd without a word, although occasionally, as inconspicuously as he could, sneaked a peak at the bridge looming in the distance, sharply outlined in the cloudless sky.

Mr. Moses was the master of ceremonies. He introduced Mr. Ammann. "I now take, I now ask that one of the great, I now ask that one of the significant great men of our time—modest, unassuming and too often overlooked on such grandiose occasions, on such grandiose occasions—stand and be recognized." Mr. Ammann, removing his hat, his brown hair flowing back in the breeze, stood and looked at the crowd of about 1,000 guests seated and standing before him. "It may be that in the midst of so many celebrities, you don't even know who he is," Mr. Moses continued, as the crowd applauded. "My friends, I ask that you now look upon the greatest living bridge engineer, perhaps the greatest of all time—a Swiss who has lived and labored magnificently for 60 years in this country and is still active, the designer of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, respected throughout the world and regarded here with deep affection." There was more applause, but Mr. Moses forgot to mention his name. Mr. Ammann sat quietly down, again lost in the second row of the grandstand.