

# In the Beginning: The Creation of the Historic Districts Council

*June 21, 2011, The Players - 16 Gramercy Park*

Panel Participants:

**Simeon Bankoff**, Executive Director of the Historic Districts Council

**Kent Barwick**, President Emeritus of the Municipal Art Society

**Bronson Binger**, former President of the Historic Districts Council

**Michael Gruen**, former President of the Historic Districts Council

**Lorna Nowve**, former Municipal Art Society staff member

**Anthony C. Wood**, Chair Emeritus of the Historic Districts Council & Founder of the New York Preservation Archive Project

**Simeon Bankoff:** My name is Simeon Bankoff; I'm the executive director of the Historic Districts Council. It's a pleasure to welcome you all here, on our continuing 40<sup>th</sup> birthday's festivities. Well, you're all here because you know what HDC does. And you're here to find out where we actually came from. A few sort of pieces of business first before I get going, which is first of all, I'd like to thank both my Board, without whom nothing would be possible. And also a special thanks to my staff, Frampton Tolbert, Sara Romanoski, Michele Arbulu, and Nadezhda Williams, without whom also nothing would be possible. Again, I just wear black clothes and stand up and talk in front of you; they do all the work. It is now my pleasure to introduce the people who you really are here to listen to. I'll let Tony make the introductions, but it is my extreme pleasure to introduce Tony Wood, a man who needs little introduction, yet I'm doing it anyway, our HDC Lion, chair emeritus, guiding spirit, and a really irreplaceable resource, Tony.

**Anthony C. Wood:** Thank you Simeon. The one mystery that will not be revealed tonight is why Simeon always wears black. And I don't think we're ready for the full answer, so we're saving that for another birthday. Well welcome. All creation stories seem to have a mythic quality, whether it is, "in the beginning was the word," or "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Tonight we turn to the creation of the Historic Districts Council. With its birth a mere 40 years ago, we are in the rare position of having with us tonight those present at its conception. Our goal this evening is threefold: to get on the record the creation story of the Historic Districts Council; to understand the period of its early years, through its adolescence--that's when it grew up, so to speak, and left home by morphing from the committee of the MAS into its own independent 501(c)(3); and lastly, to get some thoughts from those involved in HDC's earliest days, on where it has come, preservation today, and thoughts about what the future might hold. I'm not sure we'll get to the future, because there's a lot of the past we want to do tonight. Before turning to our panel, let me set the stage with the information gleaned from research. Our panelists may then want to correct it with information gleaned from what they actually experienced. As we all know, after decades of efforts, painful losses of important buildings and the erosion of beloved historic neighborhoods, on April 19, 1965, Mayor Wagner signed the Landmarks Law. Though this was a great victory, and an incredible accomplishment, it did not result in an instantly empowered preservation movement. Nor did it open a floodgate of preservation. At the bill's signing, referencing the controversy behind the bill, Mayor Wagner stressed that if the law was found to be "too restrictive on property rights or did not meet the problems of landmark owners," the City Council would immediately move to amend the law. Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but we did get the law. The current creation myth of the Historic Districts Council places its birth in the year 1971. This puts its creation in what I call the early modern period of preservation's history, the modern period beginning with the passage of the law.

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By the end of 1970, when tonight's story I believe begins, there were only 16 historic districts. Not so long a list it's not worth mentioning who they were, or where they are: Brooklyn Heights, Sniffen Court, Turtle Bay Gardens, Charlton-King-Vandam, Gramercy Park, St. Nicholas, MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens, Treadwell Farm, Hunters Point, St. Mark's, Henderson Place, Greenwich Village, Mott Haven, Cobble Hill, Jumel Terrace, and Chelsea. Today we have 102, a list too long to read. Well by 1971, Mayor Lindsay had begun his second term. The excitement of his first term was beginning to be replaced by disillusionment with the seemingly intractable problems facing New York City. We all remember by the late 60s, New York was beginning to experience a significant loss of jobs to the Sun Belt and a myriad of other issues. But by all accounts, Lindsay was supportive of preservation. He once said, "I don't interfere with the designation of landmarks, any more than I do with teachers and policemen. But when in any doubt on landmarks, I say designate." Now that's the type of mayor we're looking for again. In 1971, Harmon Goldstone was the Chair of the Landmarks Commission. He'd become Chair in 1968, following the Commission's first Chair, Geoffrey Platt. Goldstone would be the Chair until 1974. The primary concern of the Commission in those days, according to its early two Chairs, was the preservation of the new untested Landmarks Law itself. At the same time, by 1971, some of the weaknesses inherent in the law were beginning to show. The moratorium provision of the law was still in existence and coming into play. The loss of the Metropolitan Opera House was a painful reminder of the fact that the law as original drafted did not protect interiors. The planned expansion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art into Central Park was a reminder of the failure to include scenic landmarks within the first version of the law. And as early as the spring of 1970, the Municipal Art Society had begun discussions around the idea of amending the law to make it stronger and address those problems. That would not happen until the passage of the 1973 amendments, strengthening the Landmarks Law. In 1971, with a greater understanding of the hardship provision of the law, and the realization that some buildings would be lost if creative alternatives were not found, the New York Landmarks Conservancy was founded. So that kind of sets the stage for where preservation was in 1970. So tonight we have the preservation equivalent of sitting down with the founding fathers, and asking them questions about the Declaration of Independence and the early days of the new republic. All our panelists have had distinguished careers and made significant contributions to preservation in New York City. Because our focus is the past, I'm going to ask each panelist to introduce themselves by way of telling us where they were, and what they were doing, either prior to the founding of HDC, or in Lorna's case, where they were when they first encountered the HDC. So I'm just going to begin to get that set of facts established. So Kent, why don't we start with you? Kent Barwick.

Kent Barwick: Well thank you. Well I was confused in 1971. I was employed at the Municipal Art Society of New York, and I'm not sure of the dates. Your history sounded plausible to me, and I assume that they hang together. That made me feel how lucky we all are to be here and still looking so young, and you know, intelligent. What I couldn't remember was the, and we can easily find out by asking Roberta Gratz, what once were those articles published in that ...

Anthony: In 1973 I think.

Kent: '73, okay.

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Anthony: It was January of '73.

Kent: So the HDC's birth, in my memory at least, was little to do with the limitations of law as they were revealed, that I think you summarized accurately. I do think in '71 my memory is that there was attention to have read much about it, that I recall, between ... not so much in the law, but in the practice of the law, in the opinion and the regulatory work of the Commission. And I think in some ways the Commission's early work was quite sophisticated, particularly in terms of recognizing the value of contemporary, infill architecture, maintaining scale. I think some of the work that was done in Brooklyn Heights epitomized both the, I think, the aspirations of the generation of architects trained prior to that time, in terms of building good new against, side by side with, preserved buildings. I think where the tensions were that I think they were—my memory, and Bronson will, who was present for all this, and a little bit more alert, and will be able to fill in—my memory is that the tensions were really in the regulation of the historic properties. I think that perhaps because, don't forget this is before the Grand Central decision; this is at a time, as Tony said, when the leadership was being very, very careful to avoid problems. And they were deferring, where they could, fights; they couldn't have been more reasonable. And I think that, some of the persons who worked very hard to get the Landmarks Law, were really not as enthusiastic about having historic districts for a number of reasons. One of those reasons, I think, simply had to do with the workload and the enormous burden. You had to make a lot of decisions in a neighborhood. So in any case my memory, I remember these clandestine meetings, staged generally in Bronson's cellar, and Ed Mullvan's house in Brooklyn Heights, we had involved some members of the Commission who were appearing off the record, and activists from Brooklyn Heights. We were very concerned about the quality of decisions that were being made in terms of the historic buildings, in terms of paint colors, in terms of appropriate sash, in terms of modifications to roof lines. I think there was a feeling in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, somewhat reflected in Greenwich Village, that the Commission wasn't on top of the regulations of historic properties. Isn't that enough for now, and we'll come back to this.

Anthony: That's a very good introduction of where you were at the time, and what you were doing. And I want to hold, you're answering all my questions at once, and that's just not fair. So that's a good start ...

Kent: My time is tight here.

Anthony: I know, I know, we only want you for an hour. We're going to be quick here. Michael Gruen, where were you at that time, and what were you doing?

Michael Gruen: Well I was trying to think. First of all, if I had known that I would be introduced tonight as something equivalent to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, I would have worn an appropriate wig. And I would look an awful lot better than I do now.

Anthony: I'm sure we have one in the back, can somebody bring it in?

Michael: I had come to New York to live here permanently in 1966. And not very long after, a few years after, I managed to buy a house on 105<sup>th</sup> Street off of Riverside Drive in a really beautiful neighborhood with standard row houses, Beaux-arts style, and just exquisite. And I had a background of architecture and design through my parents, and

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became very interested in getting these, the buildings on this street, designated, which involved a lot of research. And I along the way, it seems to me, my then-wife was doing some kind of volunteer work at the Municipal Art Society, and I met Kent, and those were the days when one could reach Kent by telephone. And so I consulted with him about this, and that somehow or other led to my becoming involved in the Historic Districts Council, which seemed at the time a wonderful answer to broadening the power base of the Municipal Art Society by enrolling groups from historic districts with readymade address lists and telephone numbers and so on. And which is a brilliant idea, we'll probably come back to that. I did want to pick up a moment on what Kent said about the legal issues of the time seemingly concerning more individual landmarks than the historic districts. And I think what's going on then, was the historic district concept had become fairly well-established through litigation in New Orleans. And there was a fairly well-accepted idea that one could have a district, like a zoning district, and deal with it for the purpose of protecting the tout-ensemble. And it was more difficult from a theoretical point of view, to recognize that one didn't have to have things collected in distinct zones in order to be able to treat them under the equivalent of zoning. One could decide that a comprehensive plan for zoning could also involve protecting individual buildings, scattered around the city, for the purpose of building up the entire city, not just zones. So I thought that was very interesting. The other thing I wanted to observe is that the HDC was an early representation of what I think of as the great genius of the MAS over the 30 years or so of Kent's regime there. But you don't have to blush at this, but it was perhaps the earliest of a whole spring of organizations that were nurtured by the Municipal Art Society, developed within the Municipal Art Society, and then liberated at an appropriate time, on the theory that they could do more good being independent and focusing exclusively on one area of concern. And that worked just brilliantly well with the HDC, which when I first encountered it, I didn't have anybody on our Board meeting with us, half as well-dressed as any person in this room. It was a motley group, other than of course for Bronson.

Anthony: Michael, you've brilliantly captured the Municipal Art Society as a civic rabbit that produced endless progeny that passed around. I think it's a very good description of its role, but I think we'll put down in the books. I'm going to move us on, only because there are other questions I want to get to. Miss Nowve, Lorna Nowve, your memories. Where were you living?

Lorna Nowve: In Woodstock, no. (Laughter) I kind of joined the staff of the Municipal Art Society around 1976. And at that point it had a very small staff, Marne Willington was the executive director, Laurie Beckelman was the deputy. And there were maybe three or four other people, so I was basically, you know, the low person on the totem pole. But it was a wonderful organization at that time. Anyway this is before the Urban Center, we had a tiny office in 30 Rock. And at that point, it was a very strong advocacy group, even with the small staff, because our Board, Bronson, Kent, it was an incredible collection of people who really were involved. They didn't just come to meetings and eat sandwiches from Zabar's, they actually signed up, and they did things.

Anthony: But there were sandwiches from Zabar's?

Lorna: There were sandwiches from Zabar's, yes. Because we're all Upper West Siders, what else were we going to do? But we became the voice for a number of members, and in a way the strongest voices came from the members of the Historic

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Districts Council. We could serve as a conduit to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. And there were times when I think we also felt like shrinks; people would call us up and complain about an alteration that was going on in their neighbor's windows, things like that. And they really needed a stronger voice, and that's what the Historic Districts Council offered them. Now you have to remember this was before the internet. How did you get information out? How did people get to know each other? We had meetings, but a lot of times we literally had a rolodex that was falling apart. And you would grab a card from the rolodex and say, "Well there's an interesting situation at Jumel Terrace, maybe you should talk to these people, because they've had a similar experience. They know an architect who perhaps could help you. There's a sympathetic member of the landmarks staff, maybe you should talk to them." So there was this growing network, very, very grassroots when you think about it, of people who needed help, who needed to sort of figure out that if they were in an existing historic district, just what it meant and what they needed to do to protect it. And then of course more and more people were contacting us, because they wanted their districts to be considered. So we had to help them define what a district was, come up with a realistic series of criteria to define that. I think the biggest challenge early on was the Upper East Side Historic District. And that was a huge challenge, in terms of how you would define that initial area, how to get people to understand that Madison Avenue could be a historic district, and Holly Whyte helped people understand the whole notion of second story. That you could have a store front, but it was also what was going on above this store front. And of course that lingo helped people in Park Slope, Brooklyn Heights, etc. learn from each other. So that's basically what we were doing before the Urban Center began it. Once we moved into the Urban Center, of course, we had more meeting space, I remember mounting a photo exhibit of probably all the existing districts at that time. It was literally just a huge representational photograph, and a blurb about the history of the district. We also had walking tours, and those are very interesting because people, I think, went not just to see areas perhaps they've never explored, but I think they're checking out the real estate, also. So it was a very, very vibrant, exciting time.

Anthony: Bronson, where were you then?

Bronson Binger: I go back to 1966, the beginning of 1966, when somebody got me involved in trying to save the Metropolitan Opera House. And not being a fan of opera, and not knowing anything about historic districts, I wasn't very useful. But I at the same time got the idea of trying to make Carnegie Hill a historic district, because Carnegie Hill has a unique property of having more historic districts, more designated landmarks than any other historic district. Before it was designated, the Landmarks Commission said, "We don't need it up there, we've designated everything worth doing." And I was a little put out by that, because I wasn't in a landmarked house. And so I went to the Municipal Art Society, which I just learned about during the fight for the Metropolitan Opera House, they were the people to talk to. So I took it up there, and it was very interesting that they didn't have a Landmarks Committee, and I very quickly got on the Board of the Municipal Art Society. And was then the Landmarks Chair of the Landmarks Committee. And so I decided to have a meeting to try to get all the historic districts together, and we invited everybody who was designated, which at that point I think was just, what's the name of the place down there?

Anthony: You have several choices.

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Bronson: Thank you. It was Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village, and they didn't seem to think they had ever designated another historic district. So we got 15 potential historic districts together in one place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, I think it was, in 1970. And it was very exciting. I called, I was desperately trying to get historic district for a part there, I'm getting old, back in Carnegie Hill. And the problem up there was that the Landmarks Commission, the Commissioners, didn't really think there was any reason to have that district, it was already covered by them in their designation. So I took the odd chance, since I knew most of these people, of inviting the entire Landmarks Commission up one at a time and thinking we're on Carnegie Hill. And then we had this meeting with 500 people and the rest, and the Landmarks Commission told me there after, they had never had more letters, all of them on engraved embossed stationary. And I think they finally decided to do it, but it took two more Commissioners to get two more Chairmen to get it actually designated. I found that the early Commission was so terrified of all the problems that they were going to have, that they were scared to do anything. And the thing that's best about the historic district movement, to me, is that it completely democratized the whole process of the Landmark Committee. And the beauty of it today is that with 102, and I'm really astounded at that figure because it was only two when I started there—

Anthony: So is the Real Estate Board of New York? They're astounded too.

Bronson: It has now gotten to the point where almost everything is going to be designated before I die. I think it was probably a good thing. Otis Pearsall is still trying to get a design review committee for any building, and I think the beauty of the Landmarks law is there is a design review of everything in the historic district. And it, the beauty of the historic districts to me is that they're eclectic, un-homogenous group of buildings in many cases that somehow have a special quality, both historically and from a point of view of neighborhood, that brings the population awareness to more than just a pretty building here and a pretty building there. There's something that even gains architecture of good manners. And that's something architects and I, and I am one of them, or was. The architects are forgotten, in many cases you get buildings that are here and saying, "Look at me, I'm a unique building." The beauty of landmarks is that it, "Look at me, I'm part of the whole." And this is what I think is, and thought back then, that it's one thing to have a landmark, it's another thing to have a setting in which the landmark is comfortable. And that's where we're very good with the historic districts. And I think that's enough for now.

Anthony: Great, well we've been ... (Applause). It seems to be a friendly crowd tonight. (Laughter). I want to dig a little deeper now on the actual kind of creation of the Historic Districts Council. And it's always fun to work backwards from oral tradition, so I'm going to give you the story I learned when I first came to New York back in 1978. How I somehow learned the story, I'm not sure who told me, how I picked it up. And I'm going to give my creation myth, I'll then ask Lorna to give what she always thought was the origins of how the council actually got started. And then we will go to those who actually did it, to see if any of what we thought was the story over the years bears any reality to what they think actually happened at the time. But I always was under this, the story that somehow I heard, or made up in my mind, was that the Historic Districts Council was basically an invention of Mr. Barwick. Then it was initiated, or initially focused, around the perennial problem of the Landmarks Commission not getting enough funding. And the realization, and I think at that time the Landmarks budget was part of the Parks

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Department budget, because it was one of those combined agencies, so there was a line you couldn't even find in the City budget. And that Kent had realized that if you wanted to impact the members of the City Council, you needed to have their constituency talk about this and ask for money. And where was that constituency found: in the historic districts, and in the potential historic districts. So somehow the myth that was created in my mind was that was the motivation for the Historic Districts Council. Now so that's what I picked up starting in 1978. Now Ms. Nowve, you were there earlier, so what did you think was the creation, the motivation behind the Historic Districts Council? And then we'll get to those who know what the motivation was, and we learned a little of it, but Lorna.

Lorna: I thought there always was a Historic Districts Council.

(Laughter)

Anthony: That's the correct answer.

Lorna: But you're right. When I think about the early meetings at MAS, some of the people who kept coming to our events and kept writing or calling were residents in the Historic Districts Council. And I also had been told—vicious rumor, who knows—but it's true that that was one way to give voice to the Landmarks movement, because it became a voice not just for individual buildings, but a community. And as Bronson said, this really made it of the people, rather than, "Oh you're just going to landmark some incredible building." "No, we're going to protect your neighborhood and then help people see their street in a different context." And I think that we basically, I don't want to say it was a tool, but it was, for the bigger preservation movement. And that's what I just came to believe. Margot probably told me that.

Anthony: So that's kind of how some of the oral history evolves, since you were early staff, I then became staff, and what we thought was... We've heard some hints of other things that happened even before that. Bronson, it sounds like the gathering of historic districts that you brought together, maybe that was the first 12-step meeting of all the historic district people in the City. But you three guys were there at the time, so correct the myth that I've lived with for years. Or affirm it, or offer us another one. Kent do you want to?

Kent: I was saying something about the creation ... closer? I'll just speak up a little. It seems to me that, as Harold Macmillan once said to somebody about what causes history, he said, "Events, dear boy." Certainly not a master plan. There was an effort on the part of the Landmarks Preservation Commission to add a lawyer to its staff. The price of a lawyer, plus healthcare and dental and you know, deduction for union dues was, I don't know, about \$58,000. And nobody thought it could be obtained, and my memory, Bronson, is that we went to the Board of Estimates, to City Council, and them being pretty much a comic organization, and we had thought, understanding the dynamic of the politics of the Board of Estimate, which there were three citywide officials that had three votes and five presidents that had one vote. And it was going to be necessary to get anything, you really had to have more than the Manhattan constituency. And I think what Tony's recitation at the beginning of the evening of the Historic Districts, then you saw something that they might have had in common was that most of them—Cobble Hill had just been added—but most of them were in Manhattan.

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And so we determined, Mr. Binger and I and a few others, that it would be a good idea to have people come from districts around the City— some were historic districts and some were aspiring historic districts—and testify as to why the Landmarks Commission would need a lawyer. And we, I don't know, had seven or eight people maybe, I've forgotten, maybe you can fill that in. Ruth Wittenberg was one I remember. And at the end of this, Percy Sutton's assistant, a very interesting woman named Jolie Hammer, whose mother had in fact been the head of the Committee to save the Old Metropolitan Opera, Jolie came down to the Board of Estimates chamber where we were, and said, "What a brilliant move that was." And we thought about it for a while, I guess we thought it was a brilliant move, 'cause we got the \$58,000. So I think we then, the idea was maybe you would get further if you had a citywide alliance pressing for historic districts. And at least that's what I think.

Anthony: Well that's believable certainly, I think that's great. Bronson can you add, did that stir any additional thoughts from your life experience there?

Bronson: I go back to the end of 1966, when we finally got going and started having meetings. At this point I was going to South Street Seaport, working 24/7, so Michael Gruen is actually the guy who deserves the credit for this being an organization. Because he not only stepped in at the leadership of it, but he created in a sense that this was an organization, not just a few people. And it's really thanks to Michael that the Historic Districts Council became an actual organization. In the end much larger than the Municipal Art Society. (Laughter). And much more important at that point. But I'm glad to say that the movement was very quickly recognized by not only the people that were in already a landmark, but that it gave everybody in the City an ally in their battle to save their area. And we went from two to fifteen right away, and the Commissioners were basically kept aware of this by all of us meeting with them continuously. So I still credit Michael Gruen with the creation of this organization.

Kent: Among many other organizations.

Anthony: Michael the blame is now seemingly been put on your shoulders, and ... in your own defense, do you wish to add to that?

Michael: I'm just totally astonished, because I relate this to the hiring of a lawyer, which Kent tells us by the Landmarks Commission, which Kent tells us was an accomplishment of the early HDC. And my distinct memory that I had never been involved in any way with landmarks in this city, without Dorothy Miner being there. (Laughter)

Kent: Dorothy Miner would have been there, but it was Frank Gilbert...

Michael: That's right... The other thing is, I am quite sure that I was only the second or third Chairman of the Historic Districts Council. I was preceded, I believe, by Bronson and then by Dick somebody from Brooklyn.

Anthony: Dick Haines? Richard Haines?

Michael: Haines, yes. I think that's right. And ...

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Anthony: So we think the chronology, since we're trying to actually get this on the record, so we think Richard Haines was maybe the first Chair? Then Bronson, then ...? But you're still rooting for him as a first Chair? Okay.

Michael: Well that I can guarantee you I wasn't. And ...

Anthony: No you see it was never incorporated until much later, because it was a committee of MAS, so.

Michael: No I incorporated the Conservancy. Oh the, it was fairly well-formed by the time I got there. There were three or four people who regularly attending meetings, and what I think happened during the short period that I was involved, is that we got interested in trying to, first of all, generate more historic districts, help people in making applications. And then setting up guidelines for, as I remember, painting and windows. And I'm sure we did it very, very naively at the time, but it was at least a start. So it may have, the organization may have advanced somewhat over my chairmanship, but I can't take credit for what it is today.

Anthony: Well then we might note just for the record, because it was nice to show how far HDC has gone, that from a group that had really none of its own staff, but MAS staff, it has grown to an organization as of today, assuming they're still all employed at the end of today, of five full-time and part-time and an annual budget of over \$400,000, which explains your large speaker fees tonight. (Laughter) Twenty-three Board members and forty advisors, so that's quite an accomplishment from where it began. Lorna, you staffed HDC after its initial period. What was going on when you took on that role, and what HDC began to deal with and other good stuff?

Lorna: It was struggling also with how to enforce, there was even an issue back then of course, and it was helping the Landmarks staff respond and getting certificates of appropriateness sort of streamlined and to show people that the Landmarks Commission would actually work with them. So we really worked very hard to sort of create and encourage that dialogue between Landmarks staff and the residents. The biggest issue at that point also, it was I guess the Upper East Side was the biggest one that we tackled as, you know, the council was growing. But we were getting contacted by people all over the City, in Staten Island, in the Bronx. I have a feeling it probably took many years for some of them to actually get it together, as it were, because they had to do a lot of the research. We really helped people be in touch with students at Columbia, who would help do the research to strengthen their case for their district. We really did many, many things, I mean in sort of my mind. But I also remember public education was a very big thing, of course which the MAS was employed with on many, many levels. But I think one of the most tangible, most tangible proof of our work was really getting the districts to be defined. And it also, I think, helped Landmarks' staff a lot, because they needed help, and they needed the advocacy. Not only MAS providing the hearings as such, but also they created a dialogue. They got to know, literally, the people who were living in historic buildings, whether they were recognized as such at that point or not. And we worked very hard at that. And I know I would get calls at the weekends from people, who said, "So and so is trying to change a window or demolish a building." And, you know, we were sort of the preservation police on one level, because we were so visible. And I know you and I used to sit around at breakfast saying, "How do we grow this thing?" You know? "Can we take it over?" And we did. (Laughter)

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Anthony: We'll get to that story in a little bit maybe. Back, to particularly, maybe, of Michael, Bronson, and Kent, what ... we've talked, so many issues that HDC was involved in kind of all along, but I'm wondering if there are any particular ones that haven't come up in the conversation that were, that you'd like to kind of help us become aware of those early days. The type of things that HDC was dealing with?

Bronson: I think one of the things we had to fight at the very beginning, was that it was going to lower property values, it was going to be out of control on your own building. You had to go to anonymous committee, and then fight with your neighbors who didn't want this. And I remember Harmon Goldstone, when we returned by Carnegie Hill, said, "That isn't even a community, nobody believes in living in that community." So fortunately, we found two young women from Hunter College, and they did a survey of Carnegie Hill, including a survey of all the shop owners and all of the people that were coming to meetings. And then people on the street, they polled, an actual physical polling from all the people that they met. They then discovered that people were walking three blocks out of their way to go by the historic buildings, in order to go home. They actually traced it past, the people walking on the streets, and it showed meaning. Especially I was flabbergasted by the fact that they, unknowingly, people were going out of their way to go by historic buildings, rather than new buildings. And that realization, I think, was something that the Landmarks Commission itself didn't understand. That the public in general is very much in favor of this, and it was a very significant moment in my life to learn this. So I think the other thing is that they've now discovered that actually property values go up in historic districts. It had become, what everybody feared, had become exclusive, they had become gentrified and something we have to keep an eye out, that we don't wipe out the existing population when we designate. And I think that's more or less under control now. So I think the movement has become, I think astounding when you get it good, you know. We have 102 historic districts; I can't believe there aren't more in the wings at this point.

Anthony: Well like last time I asked Simeon, and he had a list of, I think, over 40 neighborhoods or pieces of neighborhoods that were aspiring to become historic districts, or hoping to someday achieve that. So indeed, the popularity still exists on the street. Kent, do you want to join in, a final ...?

Bronson: The thing is, more and more, happening more and more these days, is that historic districts which were originally designated, a very small section of what we wanted, finally today we're getting, historic districts are expanding once, and twice, and Carnegie Hill is now three times the size it was when it was designated. And what it means is that not only are the people understanding the value of designation, but so is the Landmarks Commission. And so I'm delighted to say that historic districts are not only expanding by adding more, but they're expanding within the same area. So I think it's a very good organization.

Michael: Can I interrupt briefly to ask Bronson a question? Was it by any chance the work of Holly Whyte, of the discovery that people go out of their way from that, to seek the historic buildings?

Bronson: Holly was probably the most important person in the whole movement of historic districts without even realizing it, with his book. I walked several districts with

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Holly when we were talking about this, and ... I'm sorry I'm not speaking in the mic. Holly Whyte, William H. Whyte, was a person who wrote, what is the name? A great book he wrote?

Anthony: "The Organization".

Bronson: "The Organization." He was then, somebody got involved, he was a neighbor of ours and lived in Carnegie Hill. And he very definitely was, recognized that people were going, not only out of their ways to walk good blocks, but the real power of the historic districts came from the people within the district who wanted, recognized very early on that this was an important thing. And I think he did a lot to convince me, and a lot of other people, that it wasn't just the aesthetes who wanted historic districts and preservation. It was a way of life that was being saved.

Anthony: Kent, you have the mic.

Kent: Well there are a couple of things I want to say. One of which is just, a very nice compliment that Michael made earlier ... I wonder where I've lost my voice. Michael, nicely, I want to just refer to Michael Gruen's nice compliment to the MAS during the years that, many of the years that I worked there, actually the idea of inventing entities at the MAS was present from the very beginning. The first zoning resolution, the first clean air act, the establishment of the City Planning Commission. The notion that a civic group would create instruments to help guide the growth of the City, was not born in the lifetime of Kent Barwick. It was there and hopefully will continue. I think we should remember where we were in '71, not just precisely the day of the birth. The world ... '71 isn't very long after World War II, the so-called '61 Zoning, even being affected in the 1950s, is a reflection of the feeling around the world that cities were going to change, probably for the better, but were going to change very dramatically. And I think the generation of people having Goldstone's age and Geoffrey Platt's age were in a way forward-looking. Because they saw, yes, as the world was going to be transformed, as America was going to voluntarily do to its cities what war had done to Europe, that a few gems ought to be rescued. I think that's the Landmarks Law that they were creating, and they certainly could not have imagined, I think, that it would have been a good idea for as much of the existing City to concerned, as the public came to see as very, very necessary and desirable. The public didn't come to see it all by itself; the public saw it through a variety of things that changed public opinion from what educated architects and architectural historians thought. The, in '61 I think, the AIA Guide—architects from all over the country, came to New York. And Elliot Willensky and Norval White published then, I don't know, less than a half-inch-thick guide, that was given out, for a buck or something I bought mine, and you could walk around the City. And I remember going to Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and thinking, my God, what a place. Who could believe that such a place exists in the City? This is when Ada Louise Huxtable, a lonely voice, was writing in *The New York Times*, a time which is now—not only brought urban design but architecture criticism, even—was bringing people's attention to the need, the value of conserving the existing City, that Bronson spoke so eloquently about. Gordon Hyatt, who is sitting in aisle three, was producing documentaries for CBS that were making these same arguments, a very dramatic use of film, to sort of get people thinking about what cities were. So this, the political possibilities that were, we were able to realize in 19, whenever it was, 71, weren't working because we were so smart; it was because that the world had changed, the world that Harmon and Geoffrey grew up in had changed

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dramatically. There was some story, which I'm going to mangle, about, I remember there was a plan, the Rockefeller administration had a plan to do scatter site housing, it wasn't scatter site housing that was ... to take an area, I think they were going to start with Floyd Bennett Field. And they were going to build many, many blocks of housing, and they were going to move people from another area, let's say Bedford-Stuyvesant, to Floyd Bennett Field, and then they would level that section of Bedford-Stuyvesant. And go through that pattern until a new city could be built. And Rockefeller said, "Well, yeah, I would sort of like that brownstone I used to live in, on 55<sup>th</sup> Street..." Even Rockefeller got it, but his housing experts assured him, "No, governor, that's not the kind of block you would have lived on." But all that had begun to change, happily with Bronson and what Michael and Lorna said about the, oh really what Tony said, the 12 step thing isn't a bad analog for this, because people were beginning to discover that while they were outside the politics, outside of architecture, outside of academia that they were, they otherwise knew how to earn a living, either doctors and lawyers and teachers and people who were able to, you know, come to New York and do well, or grew up in New York and do well, and damn it they were going to use what tools they could to make sense out of the neighborhood. Of course I'm remembering Holly, and Gordon, and Elliot, we don't want to overlook Jane Jacobs, because probably nobody did more to get people to think about ordinary urban neighborhoods, not beautiful places, but ordinary urban neighborhoods and how they work. And we're so lucky in New York that we have the ineptitude of our government in periods of time when there's a lot of money to demolish everything, that we never quite got it together to do it. (Laughter) If you visit other American cities, there is almost no way for them to go back, and we didn't make those mistakes. And then through the genius of the people that were living here, that we were sort of youngsters watching, we realized, "Hey, we could change the politics. We could really take advantage of this." And the HDC has been probably the most significant change agent in the five boroughs for doing this, as any I can think of. And, more power to whoever is, these days.

Anthony: Michael, did you want to ...

Kent: Rebut that?

Michael: I'm certainly going to rebut Kent's modesty, it may be true that the MAS before was involved with major issues like the original 1916 zoning, and the rezoning in 1961, but these were issues. Organizing a group of people as a body, whether it's HDC or the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, or the Committees, professional committees of the Municipal Art Society, are Kent's work, and he deserves a lot of credit for it. Another person who ought to be mentioned is Roberta Gratz, who contributed to all the theory of the neighborhood and its value, and she might say that my father had something to do with it, too. But the other thing that sparked some thought was what Bronson said about the concern about value. I do remember that at the beginning of my experience with HDC, one of the big issues, especially because of our interest in expanding the historic district movement, was that there were so many owners who were reluctant because of fear of losing value of their homes. And this was a huge impediment to getting districts designated, because of course the Landmarks Commission wanted to make sure that at least a majority of the residents, landowners, in the area backed the formation of the district. In fact it may be that they wanted it substantially uniform, I'm not sure. But it was important to convince people that there was value to being part of an historic district, that there was reciprocity of regulation that contributed. That if my building was designated,

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and I had to suffer under the regulation of it, what I got in return would be that every other building in the area was also regulated. And so we did do some work in trying to back that up with economic data, which was hard to find in those days. But it was one of the things that we did then.

Anthony: I want to take this to, just to another chapter more briefly, and maybe this is kind of a teaser for yet another program. This year, HDC is celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but it's also another anniversary in a sense, because when HDC turned 15, in its adolescence in 1986, it morphed from a committee of the Municipal Art Society into its own 501(c)(3) organization. Which I think is another, which is now 25 years old, so it's kind of another anniversary. And I think we should just talk about that a little, because I think it shows some of the kind of strategic evolution of HDC. And Lorna was involved in that at that moment in time, Kent was involved in that. And I think its one of those interesting stories where HDC evolved, and I think it was a reflection of where people saw the potential, where it could go next. And actually the fact that because of all the work that had been done, it had evolved to the point where it could have its own voice, and perhaps at some point would need to be able to have an independent voice. And I think what was interesting in 1986 was, my memory of that evolution of HDC, was that, because at that time, MAS and HDC had such a good working partnership, it was the perfect time for HDC to evolve into its next entity. Because as leadership changed over time, there was no guarantee that the Municipal Art Society would remain comfortable with this growing, feisty, pushy, potentially litigious group. And so that in essence it was the perfect time to let it grow to its next iteration and have its own independent status. But that's kind of a key, another key moment in the evolution of this group. And Lorna you were there for that, Kent, can I just get your thoughts on that briefly, and maybe that can become a teaser for a celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. (Laughter).

Lorna: I was gone by then.

Anthony: I thought you were still there.

Lorna: I wish I had been still there.

Anthony: Well you were part of the initial thinking, though?

Lorna: In my heart I was. Exactly. So I was thrilled to hear that it happened, and incredibly growing by leaps and bounds. But it's something that we had always thought about, at first in a way we were a little timid earlier on, thinking you know, do we dare, at that point. And maybe we were still afraid that it couldn't support itself or the membership base would be, financially. So we were a bit hesitant toward the late '70s, but obviously somebody had guts to do it.

Kent: But there was, up to some extent, a strategic idea. I was asking Michael when was the Landmarks Conservancy incorporated. And there was a time when there was enough oomph politically in the landmarks preservation movement that one could see that there were things that could be achieved, and things that couldn't be achieved. A number of organizations were created consciously then, to try to address these opportunities, and on the one hand, the Municipal Art Society as a centrist popular group, whose historical partners have been the AIA, which was always conservative

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about public policy, or with the Society of Architectural Historians, which were indispensable in terms of identifying what was important, but again not adept—it was the MAS that had the writers and the filmmakers, the people who knew how to persuade other people historically over from the very moment of its birth in the late part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But if you looked at the MAS, even as it now, at the age of Pericles, it didn't have the energy or the breadth to imagine working on behalf of the entire City. It's not that it didn't take up issues; it took saving the greenway in Staten Island the first year I worked with them. But it was a conscious idea that there'd be a group of people who would be not afraid in the least to lie down in front of the bulldozer. Because they could see the handwriting on the wall that, the Municipal Art Society was not going to lie down in front of the bulldozer all over the five boroughs. At the same time, you could see at that time was imagined, also thinking back, that people didn't, weren't sure that historic buildings would have any use. And in fact the MAS had done a show called "New Life for Old Buildings," which I think Giorgio used it to store in Bronson's basement; I don't know who actually did this show before. But it tried to show people that yes, these aren't just white elephants, you can stick a library into the old courthouse, you could stick a Shakespearian theatre into the old library. There are things that you can do, and he said, "Well that's a kind of a new set of ideas." And in those days, it was particularly thought that white elephants were incapable of being rescued. And there was a big white elephant on the table, which is the U.S. Customs House, Bowling Green, by Cass Gilbert. And the MAS and the AIA and the Society of Architectural Historians didn't have the business sense, or the brains, or the credit worthiness to be involved in what he imagined being an extremely difficult set of processes to save such a big white elephant. And so that's why the Conservancy was born to provide conservative, austere, credit-worthy entity that was way to the right of the MAS, just as the HDC was way to the left. You could go on with this, but the other obvious one was at Albany, he didn't have any influence at Albany before the Preservation League was invented. Pretty much like the HDC going, "Let's get Rochester and New York and Long Island," and Buffalo didn't exist then in terms of historic preservation. Albany got together and said, "Hey we've got to be represented here in Albany, nobody's paying attention to our interest." So in this period, this short period of time, which is exactly as Tony set it up, there's enough power to think, "Well, maybe we should have some plans." The public was behind it, but the instruments weren't there. So these instruments were invented more or less simultaneously, and they more or less acted as they should. I mean, the HDC is fuelled by the energy and the love that people to have for their own neighborhoods. And that works generation after generation. There are, of those 100 and how many? Five?

Anthony: 102.

Kent: 102?

Anthony: I think, unless something happened today or this week that I don't know, but I think its 102.

Kent: Probably the early organizers, Bronson and the HDC, couldn't identify about 70 of those districts.

Anthony: That was great Kent, because I think it also helps us understand the beginnings of kind of the architecture of the preservation movement as it's kind of unfolded to today. And I think, I love the description of the political stuff, because in a

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sense the Historic Districts Council has always helped moved center left, in a sense, by having a much more progressive voice, it makes them middle ground a lot closer to where many of us would like it to be, than where it tends to be. So, I think, beginning to understand those political relationships that historically helps.

Kent: It works two ways.

Anthony: Yeah.

Kent: It drags the center to the left, it affects the center [inaudible].

Anthony: It works. Well we've, I know we promised Kent that we'll free him from the stage, and it's getting late. But I want to make just a, tonight's program is both the Historic Districts Council and the New York Preservation Archive Project. And part of what the Archive Project does, is try to capture the type of history we've begun to hear tonight. And these are not the only wisdom bearers of that history, and so we've been doing oral histories with other people, there are other people in this room who have incredible stories to tell. Some of them we've captured on tape, some we've encouraged other groups to capture. In fact I just heard a story today from someone who I won't, I won't out him yet, but he was a staff member working for James Felt at a very incredibly important moment of time, so we're going to get him on tape. But in essence, this gathering, this history and this story is an ongoing process. And so we've gotten good chunks tonight. There are other people in the audience with stories to tell, some we've captured, some we haven't. So in a sense I think we're all part of an effort to capture our shared history, because this isn't just for the record. I think this really helps us better understand where we are today and how we got here, but it also is instructive in terms of where we may need to be going. You know, preservation probably needs to continue to think about, how do we reinvent how we do preservation as advocates. How do we look at the present arrangement of organizations as they've evolved, and we look to the needs of the future. And I think we're much better positioned to do that when we have a good sense of how we got to where we are, and how the HDC was born and turned 40. And boy, it doesn't look too old. But anyway I want to thank everybody on the panel.

(Applause)