

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Bronson Binger

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Bronson Binger conducted by Interviewer Melissa Brunette on October 17, 2008. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Architect and fifth generation New Yorker, Bronson Binger, has been an influential figure in the preservation world for the past forty years. In this time, Binger has worked as a parks commissioner for the City and as the Vice President of the Municipal Arts Society, as well as being involved with various campaigns to protect the city's rich architectural history, including the Carnegie Hill, Madison Avenue, and Fifth Avenue Historic Districts. In this oral history, Binger discusses his accomplishments as well as his views on how preservation has changed over the years, the future of preservation in New York, and the relationship between planning and preservation. Binger is candid throughout the interview, discussing what he feels were his greatest accomplishments, as well as his biggest mistakes.

Bronson Binger was an architect and preservationist best known for his efforts to revitalize Union Square Park and for his decades of municipal service. Under the auspices of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Binger managed millions of dollars in city parks restoration projects. Binger is also known for his role in the Wollman Rink controversy in Central Park, a rehabilitation project that would not come to fruition until Binger resigned from the Parks Department and private developing forces completed the project. After leaving the Parks Department, Binger enjoyed new success at the Department of General Services, overseeing the successful restoration of the Municipal Building and other prominent projects. He was an original founder of the Historic Districts Council and a key member of the unsuccessful fight to preserve the old Metropolitan Opera House.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Bronson Binger

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Melissa Brunette

Date: October 17, 2008

Q: This is Melissa Brunette and it's October 17th, 2008, approximately 2 P.M. I'm here with Bronson Binger.

So, Mr. Binger, could you please inform us on where you're from and how you became involved in historic preservation in New York City?

Binger: Well, I was born in New York and I'm a fifth generation New Yorker, at least. I go back a long way. My father was born and raised in New York. My grandmother was born and raised in New York—both of them, actually. I come by preservation in several ways. My grandmother is responsible for the building of Turtle Bay Gardens. My father was so involved in preservation that when they asked him to help restore the old courthouse, he yelled at Brendan Gill, "Damn it, they tore down the finest row of federal houses in order to build that damn building!" So, I go back a long way. My father spent several years fighting [Robert] Moses over the Castle Clinton [National Monument], so it's been pretty much in my blood.

I stayed out of preservation—I was an architect—but I found myself doing only restorations. I never did any new buildings. I got more and more involved in restoration.

Then in 1965, when I started my own architectural firm, I got waylaid into trying to saving the “Old” Metropolitan Opera House, and spent the next eighteen months literally working full-time to try to do that. Obviously unsuccessfully. But in the process, I ran into the Municipal Art Society [MAS] and got them, reluctantly, to more or less endorse the idea of saving the old Metropolitan Opera House. Then they put me on the board. I then became the head of the Landmarks Committee of the Municipal Art Society and spent the next eleven years working on that aspect of it. Along the way, I testified at just about every landmarks hearing. But I got interested in several other things along the way. One was historic districts, which I had always felt were more important than individual landmark preservation because historic districts were more to do with community and the saving of—what I thought was very important—the small fabric of New York, which made it tenable.

So about that time, I was—the board of the Municipal Art Society consisted of a dozen or so people with no executive director. Joan Davidson suggested Kent Barwick, who was then at the South Street Seaport, and I organized a meeting where we all interviewed about ten candidates for the position. I had the privilege of interviewing them all ahead of time. Obviously Kent was far and above the best qualified, so we did hire him. Had a huge fight with the treasurer of the board over what we were going to pay him. But I had already agreed on the amount we were going to pay him, which was then \$18,000. One of the board members said “Well, let’s hire the girl—she’s only \$5,000” *[laughs]*. You can see what kind of a board we had.

I went to Kent right after we hired him and said I'm trying to save the Carnegie Hill Historic District, which doesn't exist. I had gone out and taken five hundred pictures of every building in this much larger district than what now exists. Decided to have a huge meeting at the Church of Avenue Rest [ph], which Kent, thank God, produced a twelve foot square screen for. I held a captive audience for an hour and half, showing five hundred slides. It was a very successful—it took several years after that—this was around 1970, I think. But we finally got it designated, and it didn't include about half of the district that I had originally intended. They have expanded it since. They're still trying to expand the Goat Hill and the 94th and 95th Street section between 3rd [Avenue] and Lexington [Avenue]. I wrote a letter last week to what's his name—[Robert B.] Tierney—about the 93rd Street lot.

Q: What were some obstacles you faced in the Carnegie Hill designation?

Binger: Obstacles. Well, the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission was not very—it was under Harmon [H.] Goldstone in those days. It wasn't very aggressive. They decided that it couldn't be designated because it was not a community—nobody identified with it. So, thanks to that big meeting, we got two things. We got hundreds of letters—as they had said on engraved stationery, they had never had more letters in favor of them in their organization. The second thing we got was two great Hunter College girls, who were trying to show why this was a community. They did a whole bunch of surveys.

Q: From a specific college? Were the girls from a specific college?

They were graduate students. Hunter College. I forget what they were graduate students in, I think sociology or something. In their interview, they did a whole bunch of surveys, and one of the surveys was how do you walk from the subway to your home. They discovered, to their amazement and my great joy, that people were walking as much as a block out of their way to go down the rowhouse blocks rather than the other blocks of the city—of the district. Finally, it just overwhelmed the Commission and under Beverly Moss Spatt, when she finally became Commissioner, we finally got that district. It was at that point, that Kent [Barwick]—I think it was Kent—who said we should start something to promulgate more historic districts. We had I think about twelve or ten—I forget how many. Very few at that point. We started a committee of the Board called the Historic Districts Council [HDC], I think it was called, or committee—I forget what. It became the Historic Districts Council, and we had about three or four meetings before I left to go to the South Street Seaport. Kent was on the board of the South Street Seaport and I was on the board of MAS. For about two and half, three years we were each other's bosses. It was very amusing.

But that started—we invited people from all the historic districts of the city. I think at that point—I know we had two—and that was Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village. I'm not sure we had any others. We certainly didn't have Carnegie Hill. I since owned buildings in Park Slope and Cobble Hill and I now live in Brooklyn Heights, so I don't own anything anymore. But I owned five buildings: two in Carnegie Hill, one in Park Slope, two in Boerum Hill. I won't buy a building and I won't buy any more anyway, but

I wouldn't buy a building unless it was in a historic district. I believe very genuinely that historic districts are very good for real estate values, which is one of the reasons I made money in real estate, although I never made enough to live on. The other is that they're very good for the tax base of the city.

I then went to work for the South Street Seaport in 1972. I only stayed there for three years. I was in charge of restoration and ended up being, more or less, in charge of planning and personnel, and just about everything else. I was, to an extent, second in command. But I got into huge fights with some members of the board, partly because South Street Seaport was broke and my job was to keep it open. Sometimes we paid staff out of cash because they didn't have anything in the bank. They finally fired me and Peter Stanford, the founder and president. To this day, they're still not out of the woods, as you probably know. However, I then went to work for a low-income housing group and stayed there for another three years. Ended up as Assistant Parks Commissioner for the [New York City] Department of Parks and Recreation, in charge of park design.

While I was there, we got heavily into restoration of city-owned historic structures, starting with the [Pieter Claesen] Wyckoff House. Then all of Central Park, and all of Prospect Park, and every other historic park in the city. We did master plans for that, mostly under Adrienne Bresnan, who was very much involved in that. She was then the Chief Architect for the Parks Department and her husband was in charge of monument restoration. We had a good team for historic preservation. I had, as I said, worked on a number of historic buildings. I had worked on the Metropolitan Museum [of Art], I

worked on the Brooklyn Museum. I was once architectural coordinator of the Brooklyn Museum, when I had my own firm. We did things—a lot of historic restorations there. I worked with two firms that had done historic restoration, both in museums and other things. So I was pretty much a hands-on architect, and I knew a great deal about 19th century construction. Also, thanks to my father being a do-it-yourselfer. He was a lousy do-it-yourselfer, but he was nevertheless very clever. I got heavily involved in learning carpentry and plastering and painting.

Q: Do you remember anything about the Castle Clinton event?

Binger: Well, I don't remember the years. It was in the early '40s. I think it went on through quite a bit of the '40s. My father, just before he left the city in 1943, I think—no, '44. Just before he left the city, he had designed and started construction on the Brooklyn/Battery underpass [Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel]. At that particular minute, Robert Moses decided he wanted to tear down Castle Clinton. There was a great deal of outcry and Ruth McAneny Loud's father, George McAneny, and—oh dear, C.C. [Charles Culp] Burlingham asked my father whether he would comment on the fact that Moses said they had to tear down Castle Clinton because it was necessary. It was going to collapse when they built the Battery underpass. My father, being an engineer, said and said publicly, that it was as difficult an engineering feat as putting your foot under a the corner of a card table. Saving it, it didn't mean anything.

They actually went to court over it and it dominated my family for quite a while. My mother actually was one of the people in court. They got an injunction against Moses to keep the parks' workers out of Castle Clinton because he was burning the doors. He had them burning the doors—to make it worth not saving—not worth saving. That was a long and nasty fight and the day before they got the federal government to take it over, the [New York] *Times* came out against it. The reason for that, was that Iphigene [O.] Sulzberger was head of the Citizens Park Commission, I think, at that point. Moses apparently said that if you don't come out against it, we won't build any more playgrounds.

So they got the *Times* to write an editorial against it. She finally came around, and the *Times* came around, and about five or six years later, the Feds gave it to the city and is now—no, excuse me, the Feds took it over from the city. It then became a national historic place. In the meanwhile, it's been very badly run. I still have a cannon ball that they was discovered when they did the Battery underpass, which is a historical artifact. Though it was never fired—never fired a shot. I still have it in my cellar somewhere, and I've offered to give it to them but nobody seems to want it. So I've still got it.

Q: Did you ever collaborate on a project with your father?

Binger: No, I never did. He was considerably older than I am. He was about forty years old when I was born. My family runs in long generations. My grandfather was born in 1811 [laughs]. He died '94 [ph] at the age of sixty-five. So we live a long time between

generations. However, I was very close to my father and I generally followed much in his footsteps. He was a Commissioner of Borough Works under Stanley [M.] Isaacs, before you were born. Before your mother was born. In any case, then when I went to the Parks Department, I lost track of historic preservation. I stayed out of it, obviously, because I was a full-time Parks Commissioner. I had to resign from the Municipal Arts Society, because it was considered somewhat of a conflict of interest. Then I went into an engineering firm, having worked at general services for three years. I worked on the Municipal Building and a number of other—we did a lot of restoration there, too.

Q: Approximately what years did you work at the Parks Department?

Binger: Well, I worked at the Parks Department from '79 to '85, I think. And '86 to '89, I think, in general services. Or '87 to '89 in general services.

Q: When you were at the Parks Department, did you come across any landmark issues? What landmark issues did you come across?

Binger: Well, while I was at MAS, we did a lot of work on the new law. I negotiated a lease with [Harry B.] Helmsley for the MAS on the old Villard House wing that we were renting. Which they are, right now, in the process of getting out of. When I was at the Parks Department, the City had no budget at all. We were able to get federal guarantee of our bonds, but the City was in no position to issue contracts because it had no staff left anyway. I had a very good staff at the Parks Department, which I completely reorganized.

We had one hundred when I came, two hundred when I left, seven years later. I took everybody off the boards and we wrote scopes of work. Within a year of my time there, I had \$250 million worth of park projects in the pipeline. A lot of those were restoration projects, including and eventually all of the city's historic houses. The Alice Austen House, the house up in the Bronx—I can't remember the name of it but I'll think of it in a while—Van Cortlandt Park, Lefferts Mansion [Lefferts Historic House], the ones in Queens, the old farmhouse. All of those went into the budget. They were finished over the next ten, or so, years in restoration.

I then got involved very much in the open space of historic parks, Prospect Park, and we did a master plan for that and started that restoration. We did a master plan for Central Park, which was just about the time the [Central Park] Conservancy was getting started. The first project we did, I think, was in an area around the Wollman Rink. Then I was in charge of the Wollman Rink, which was a disaster from the point of the rink itself. Did a great deal for the landscape around it. Thanks to Adrienne Bresnan, we did all the bridges—we restored all of the swimming pools. Anything that we could do—everything we did had a restoration aspect.

Then we started—it was basically a cultural thing. By this time, the department staff, my design staff, was so much into preservation that we made historical research, on every project we did, the first thing we did. We had to find out what the original plans were, how the park had gotten to where it was, and then decide—even if it was a fairly new park. Then decide how we would go about the redoing of the park. Since we worked on

every single one of the fifteen hundred parks in the city, this took a good deal of intelligent work. We took that same—because Adrienne then came with, not only with me, but my deputy, who was in charge of general services when I was there—my Deputy of Parks. He brought Adrienne over, so we got into general services and we got heavily into restorations, which I very much encouraged. I was in charge of the capital project part. We started a lot of projects. My last big one of the city was the Municipal Building. That I was heavily involved in, since I found a piece of granite lying on the street and recognized that it must have come from the building. Researched it and found that it did come from the twenty-fifth floor. It landed eighty feet away. Then started a restoration project. I called the architects who had been involved and they said it was going to be a \$20 million project—\$11 million project—and I said I'm going to double that. It ended up being a \$76 million project, but we did it in record time and it was a very good job.

They did a number of other projects that way. I learned a lot of that from working in Parks. The Wyckoff House was the first major restoration we'd done. That had started out as a \$125,000 restoration and it ended up as a \$1.2 million restoration, which I felt went overboard. I'm not a strict preservationist—restorationist, I'd guess you call it. I don't believe that you actually have to recreate out of original materials everything that happened. We went overboard there. There were rotten beams, dated from the 1750s, I think, or 1730s. Two ends had rotted, and so they cut off two ends, and took the rest of the lousy beam and hollowed it out, buried a piece of steel in it and put two new ends curved into it. It was about \$20,000 a beam. For fifty dollars you could go upstate and buy an 1830 barn beam and put it in *[laughs]*. It didn't make any difference.

But, then I got into huge fights. In the Wyckoff House, for instance, had beautiful new H-L hinges. I don't know if you know what an H-L hinge is, but it's a wrought-iron hinge. They put them on the door and then they painted them out with the door, painted them white, and I said, "Why are you doing this? They were black." "Oh no, they were never repainted black. They were always the original iron and then when they painted the door, they painted them over." I said, "Well, you know that's not what I call restoration." I lost that one. They just schmeared them all over with paint. I've done a lot of restorations since and restored five houses—all or part of them. Not all of them have been historic. I mean, sometimes I put new things in them, but I was always very careful about the façades. As much—if there was any of the original material like the last house that I did over—it had caving ceilings and I very carefully restored them, rather than tear them down.

Q: What inspired you to join the effort to save the old Met [Metropolitan] Opera house?

Binger: I met somebody who knew I was an architect and asked whether I would look at the thing. Before I realized it, I was the secretary of the Citizens Committee to Preserve the Old Metropolitan Opera House [Citizens Committee for the Preservation of the Metropolitan Opera House].

Q: Were you involved in conservation also? Were you interested in conserving it?

Binger: We were interested in just saving it as is, and restoring as little as possible. The idea was to keep it open. I think today, we would have had a better chance of saving it then we did then. Part of the problem then was that politically, it was not a popular thing to do. The Metropolitan was just building a new opera house and the old Met was still open. That, and its lease had—and Lincoln Center, when they sold off the old building, it was put into the contract that no other opera company could ever perform on that site. Then on top of that, they had in their new lease the thing that no opera company could ever perform in the new Metropolitan Opera house. They were so scared that somebody was going to come in and start another opera house in it. As a matter of fact, we had saw HREOC [Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission] who publicly said they would go at us if we didn't air condition it two hundred days a year. The air conditioning bill came at least at 365 days a year. He had put in La Scala [Teatro alla Scala] and all the other major European opera houses who wouldn't have production costs, so they could lease it for very little.

But my involvement was basically—I used my office for their headquarters. My involvement was to basically run that organization along with a man who was then, who was there when I came called Leonard Altman, who was at one point a partner of Leonard Bernstein in Boston—had a pianist living with him. There was a young man named Striker [ph], I think his name was. He was the treasurer who was so dangerous that we wouldn't let him sign checks. We ran it pretty well ourselves, the two of us. Then he and I were both put on the board of the new, [Mayor John V.] Lindsay-appointed—what was it called—the Old Opera House Committee, I think. Because they wouldn't let

us use the name “Metropolitan.” They sued us to prevent us from using the name Metropolitan Opera House. We lost the lawsuit and it was declared unconstitutional, so the building was torn down.

I went to the Met the day they started tearing it down. They decided to tear it down by hitting a proscenium arch with sledgehammers, the day they started, to keep anybody from wanting to get in and save it. I walked up on the stage with plaster falling all around me and sang three loud notes to say that I was the last person to sing there *[laughs]*. I miss that house. Not that I’m a great fan of opera, but—that house, when you stood on the stage the balconies went straight up and they were only about fifteen, twenty rows back. They were very short. You were sitting in this wonderful sea of faces—it was like being in a drawing room. Now you sing on the Met Opera stage and you can’t see the audience. Because they’re way the hell back—fifteen hundred or three hundred feet away from you. It’s ridiculous. Terrible house.

Q: I’ve read that, you know, a large motive for passing the 1973 amendments to New York City Landmarks [Preservation] Law was that a large motive for that passing was the fall of the Met Opera House.

Binger: Yes, that was one of the reasons—passions that we had at that point.

Q: Yes, how do you feel about that?

Binger: About the new law?

Q: Yes.

Binger: Well, I worked on it. I wasn't nearly—

Q: On the 1973 amendments?

Binger: Yes, I mean, I was still in—I was still the Vice President of the Municipal Art Society from the early '70s right through the '80s, beginning of the '80s. I was there for eleven years as Vice President. So, I very much was involved—was still head of the Landmarks Committee. We had a couple of very good lawyers and we also had Kent Barwick. I was only peripherally, I would say, involved in that actual law, but I was very much point for the fact that open space should be included in there, and that interior spaces should be included in it. Had we had the interior spaces in it there would have been no question about saving the old Met [Metropolitan Opera House]. I think it's very important that we not only kept it in place, but strengthened it.

There are a number of things I'd like to see changed in the present way the Landmarks clause is administered, but right now we have a terrible Commission—awful. Some of my good friends are on it. Roberta Gratz is the only one who really cares about landmarks, I think. I'm no longer an activist and I've decided to do other things much

more fun and let the younger people have their say. I live with Ann Gaffney, who's also a preservationist and just retired from the board of the Historic Districts Council but—

Q: Aside from the amendments, what other issues did you confront while involved with MAS?

Binger: Well, one of the last was Grand Central Station [Grand Central Terminal]. I had strongly fought to keep Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy] Onassis off the board of the Municipal Art Society [*laughs*]. Although I had talked to her while we were trying to save the old Met, I didn't think much of her as a preservationist. It was the worst mistake I ever made. She singlehandedly saved the interior of Radio City Music Hall with one phone call. None of us even knew about it. We were desperately trying to figure, because it was going to be torn down the next year. She made one phone call to some politician in Albany and that ended it. She was superb and she never spoke much at meetings, but behind the scenes she was a power. She alone, I think, was very much responsible for Grand Central being saved by the Supreme Court [Penn Central Transportation Co v. City of New York].

We all went down to Washington [D.C.] with her on a train, and the train was full of preservationists and press. She brought the press with her wherever she went. It made a big splash in Washington, and the Supreme Court realized they better not rule for the real estate industry in this case, and actually they ruled in favor of it. I testified at the Commission when they were first talking about Grand Central and testified against

Marcel Breuer's plan to build a high rise on top of it. I said, "I'm sorry to see that Marcel Breuer can't believe—can't understand or has not realized yet that he's at the second oldest profession, architecture, and he thinks he's now in the first, which is prostitution [*laughs*].

Nevertheless, I think the restoration that hired Leonard Bell did is probably the finest restoration of a major public building ever done. Absolutely—it's better than the original. They built the second staircase and it's superb. It's a wonderful, wonderful restoration. It's begun to have an effect on the Union Station in Washington and a number of other—South Station in rural Boston—a lot of them are taking a good look at their stations. Even the small town stations are being saved now as architectural work. Including Rehoboth Beach, Delaware where they just moved the station. It's become the town welcoming station or something like that, no longer a railroad. I think somebody ought to be working on the restoration of railroads now. I hope it will happen.

Q: Were you involved in—what other historic preservation projects were you involved in in the '70s?

Binger: A lot of them were in zoning. I was very much involved in Madison Avenue Special Historic District [Special Madison Avenue Preservation District] and also the Fifth Avenue Historic Special Districts [Fifth Avenue Subdistrict]—zoning district. Madison Avenue, I really did start with a number of other people. The idea there was to—we had to change the zoning or else we were going to lose the whole of Madison

Avenue, and it was very successful. I was doing that in conjunction with Carnegie Hill, because I realize that Carnegie Hill was going to be torn down for high rises. We already had one started—Rose [Associates] building on 90th—89th and 90th on Madison, and that was a disaster. They not only ruined a whole bunch of very nice buildings, but one of things I was trying to do was a historic district. But what I said was keep the setting for all the jewel, because Carnegie Hill has more individual landmarks in it than any other district. Full of great landmarks.

So, I was involved in the—I spent a lot time on the Squadron A Armory, which already had been torn down. They'd saved the façade and they had built the school more or less as a—I think Morris Ketchum did the design as kind of a fortress that looked like the old armory. All he had saved was the façade and part of the two towers. The backs of the two towers didn't exist, they were hollow. We saved that and got it restored finally. Then they wanted to tear down the façade and do something with it, I forget, to make a playground. I guess they hadn't restored it yet, and they wanted to tear it down. I led a great movement at Community Board 8 to save it.

We finally got to the Borough President's office, and that was interesting. He was of two minds. He didn't think it was really worth saving, and I was making a plea that this—we built the school because of it—not a really attractive design. Then the head of the school board, who was a non-architect, just a person involved in politics, turned around and said, "You damn fools, you want to tear down this building. Because of it you have the built the ugliest school that has ever been built in the city of New York, and the only

justification for it is that façade. You're going to tear the façade down *[laughs]*." So they restored it. Then I had followed it enough to know that the Beauté en Avon [ph] sign, which was the slogan on the corner in World War I, had been moved somewhere to Staten Island. I had found it and got it put back. Then I also got—I mapped out the South Street Seaport Historic District and I mapped out—I was on the board of the Sailor's Snug Harbor.

Q: That wasn't through the Municipal Art Society?

Binger: No, that was when I was at the Parks Department. I was ex officio, the Parks Commissioner and I said let me do that, take care of that. But we never got—as far as I'm concerned, we never got much more viable than it is. I wanted it to become a year-round resort. My idea, which they never had the guts to take on, was it should become a center of the arts for the whole city of New York—the whole region. It should have two-week segments of printing, painting, drawing, piano, quartet music, etcetera, pottery. All year long they should have segments. I said there are millions of people in New York who love to spend a week or two doing string quartets. They had all of the facilities to put the people up, and they could have been a self-supporting institution for the rest of its life and been a profit-making thing that moved. But they never went along with it, and I think it would have taken more capital than anybody—and it was true it would take a lot of capital to make it work. But while I was at Parks, we restored the whole good deal of it and we're still working on it, so I figured this was a good thing for the City to invest in.

I have always felt that the historic preservation should not always turn everything into a museum, because museums and house museums are having a hell of a time. They never have enough money to keep them going. They should be functioning—if possible, self-supporting institutions that did something else besides just being there to be looked at. When it comes to the Hamilton Grange [National Memorial], I never had anything particular to do with it. But I have always felt that what they are doing, moving it, is probably better than leaving it where it is and the disgusting place it is now. Without the proper front yard which it ought to have.

Q: What was your reaction to seeing the Carnegie Hill [Historic] District grow after its original designation?

Binger: I'd always known that Carnegie Hill was a place of the future. My uncle had lived there since the '30s. I moved there in 1958, bought my first house there in '59, and my second house in 1960. So, I had had great faith that it was an up-and-coming part of the New York real estate business. I started a block association up there and was its first president. It was interested in preventing crime because that was a big problem with the upper nineties in those days. But I knew that historic preservation was good for real estate. It was not a selfish thing at all, I just had always known that. Just like parks. Parks are neutral, but if you have a park it generally is a positive thing. If you have preservation it has to be a positive thing because you are encouraging people to maintain their buildings and upgrade them. Therefore, you can also at the same time prevent bad things from happening.

Therefore, Carnegie Hill, which in those days was very iffy—when I moved up there, it became a very positive place. Now it's got the highest square foot value of anything in New York. It's most desirable. We had twelve schools in the Carnegie Hill area—private schools. Encouraged families to move in, and people who had a lot of money to move in. So, it was nothing but positive, and it still is nothing but positive. Nobody had ever heard of Carnegie Hill. The funny thing about Carnegie Hill when I moved there—there was a group called the Carnegie Hill Neighborhood Inc. and Carnegie Hill Neighbors, which I had very quickly become on the steering committee of it. So, when I started the district, we called it the Carnegie Hill Historic District. I was involved in quite a number of other restorations up there. I was in charge of the building committee of Avenue S Church [ph] for nine years—worked on—and one of my jobs, before I had on my own office, I worked on small projects at the Rick Church [ph] and several of the schools up in that area.

Q: Was the community reaction for designation of the Carnegie Hill District—was the community generally welcoming of that idea of designation?

Binger: The community was what got it through. We had lots of letters, we had really a strong push to get it designated. Even the shop owners wanted it designated. It was not a small thing. Once the Madison Avenue Special District went through, it pretty well put a freeze on block lot front development—that helped. That was thanks to Raquel Ramati at the [New York City] Planning Commission. She was at the New York City Manhattan Office and she, and I, and Fred Papert, and a number of other people went down to talk to

her. We had a map that showed—oh, what was his name—Chairman of the Planning Commission, I'll think of it. So nobody's going to develop up there. We had a map that showed all of the assembled blockfronts and he took one look at it and his face turned white *[laughs]*. It was about fifteen blocks that had been assembled prior to being torn down. But he realized that this was a major thing. So we stopped that and—Donald Elliott [ph]—and so that was a major event along the way of the Carnegie Hill District, and there were a lot of people that realized that their whole way of life up there was going to be destroyed.

If you remember when Madison Avenue and Lexington Ave were first built, Fifth Avenue was basically private houses and Park Avenue was a railroad till 1925 or so. So Fifth Avenue, in the late '20s, and Park Avenue in the very late '20s and '30s, started getting built. Madison Avenue and Lexington Avenue, at that point, were the shops that supported those high-rise buildings and also held the people that serviced those buildings and the apartments. Without those two avenues, if everything else had gone high-rise, there would be no service areas for those two avenues. That was what made the whole area of the Upper East Side work. So it was very important to keep Lexington and Madison from being overdeveloped, or else there would be no services to make these places worth living in. This is something that the real estate industry did not understand. They said if you could build a whole blockfront and set it back from the street and put a bank in it, you'd be home free. It would just limit the number of how many banks we had, we needed. I didn't answer your question. I'm a little like Sarah Palin here *[laughs]*.

Q: You had mentioned before working with urban renewal? What groups—working in urban renewal?

Binger: Oh, it was called the—

Q: What groups had you worked with?

Binger: We did low-income HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] financed gut rehab. It was the center for housing partnerships [Center Housing Partnerships] run by a man named Bill [William N.] Hubbard [III]. There were three of us in the office. He and his brother-in-law.

Q: Where was that?

Binger: One of [Lewis] Rudin's buildings, which was very funny because I had testified against Rudin building a mid-rise building in the '60s. A midblock high-rise in the '60s and got so angry I screamed at him. We took him to court to stop the building and lost. We won all the way up to the appellate division and then lost in the court of appeals [U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit] when we let our guard down. We cost him a couple of hundred thousand dollars in legal fees and Rudin was our landlord. The Center for Housing Partnerships never had any money—we hadn't paid our rent in a year. So Lou Rudin stopped me in the hallway and he said, "When are you going to pay your rent

down there?” I said, “Whenever you drop our rent retroactively.” And he did *[laughs]*.
He lowered our rent to where we could afford it *[laughs]*.

They had done—I did a whole bunch of buildings down between Avenue C and Avenue D, that was south of 12th Street. Then another group up in the Bronx—I did a number of units up there. I don’t think I was very much involved in low-income housing at that point. I did the designs and the layouts of these apartments, got them built, and went to the Parks Department. Low-income housing was never really one of my primary interests, but it was a good training for me because I got to do a lot of heavy thinking about how to do something quickly. When you’ve got a group of buildings you couldn’t set foot in, and you didn’t know what the plans of the building were, and you had to put exactly a hundred and sixty-seven apartments in eleven buildings, no more, no less, of a certain number of rooms in each one, and view that from the street without ever seeing the building, you got pretty good at working alternative schemes once you got into the building. It was great training for me at Parks. My biggest project at Parks, that I’m most pleased with, was Union Square, which started out as \$225,000 project, which I killed.

Q: What was that? What were you to do for that project?

Binger: They originally were going to put a new flag pole up and the community objected to it, because they wanted to take the base of the flag pole out. So we killed that project. Then they got me involved because Suite 14 [ph]—a very powerful little group of people down there. They got Bobby [Robert] Zion, who had done a landscape plan for the park,

which included putting a skating rink—a temporary skating rink where the flag pole used to be. They were going to move the flag pole to another site, where Fourth Avenue comes into 14th Street. I took one look at that and I said, “That’s going to cost more than the \$225,000 that we have available, and I’m not going to allow it.” So I got into a lot of trouble there with the community. I finally said, “I’m taking this project away from them. We are going to do it in house.” I assigned Renee Grove [ph], who was then one of our chief landscape designers, to the park. I told her to go there and figure out what to do. She went down there and spent two weeks, night and day, doing nothing but observing the way the park functioned, and why it didn’t function. Came back and said, “We’ve got to do something about the way that center pathway that used to cut through the center is arranged, because all the drug dealers sit there and they can monitor all of the influences, and keep away from the police that way.”

So we decided to try to change that. I got the idea that let’s make the center around the flag pole a lawn, and nobody will go there. That’s what we did. We then turned what turned out to be a \$3.5 million project for Phase I [*laughs*]. Phase II is just about to begin. They’re of course doing it—they’re finally tackling the pavilion at the north end, which I think is probably a big mistake the way they are doing it. They’re making it into a major restaurant—I think it’s kind of a shame. It’s better than leaving it to rot, which what they were doing. I think they are losing a playground or two in the process. But I think that was a very successful organization, and I really think we can thank Renee Grove for the way it was carried out. My staff, which was—I had superb staff by this time. We had a way of doing things, which the city ought to emulate.

I had a bi-weekly or weekly meeting called “Big Brother,” and everybody on the staff was invited to it. Everybody on the staff had veto power over what was done. The result was we had the most wonderfully involved staff you could imagine. I also changed the table of organization. The table of organization had directors—some director to chairman. When you got a committee of anybody, when you wanted any part done, lots of people would walk in the room. There was a whole chain of command. When I went to the general services, they had just hired a girl named Leah Gartner, who was probably the brightest person I had ever met. Came over from Yugoslavia at the age of seventeen, and a year later had learned English and gotten a four-year scholarship to Radcliffe [College]. She was there, and then now an architect, and came about two weeks before or after I did.

Came to general services and then we got the job of doing LaGuardia High School [Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts], which had been taken away from the [New York City] Board of Education because the Board of Ed. had flubbed it so badly. They took it away and gave it to the general services, to which I had just come two weeks before. I had—no, I guess it was a very short time before that. So I took it over and I—they assigned Leah Gartner in charge of the project. I called for a meeting with her, and I had met her once before this. Twelve people walked into my office, and I said, “What are you all doing here?” They said, “Well, we’re here to help her.” Turned out the twelve people were the chain of command between Leah Gartner and me. I said, “Well, if eleven of you leave and Leah and I ever need you we’ll call for you *[laughs]*.” Two weeks later they said I was sleeping with Leah Gartner, which was

not true *[laughs]*. We did that job on a record time and under budget. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Q: So where did the community boards play in some of your preservation or restoration efforts?

Binger: Well, I had been a member before I ever went to Parks of the Community Board [8].

Q: Go as early as you can, if you can. Go back as early as you can.

Binger: Well I didn't join the Community Board until—I can't even remember why I joined it—somewhere around the '70s, early '70s. I think I was out of it by '72, so it must have been the late '60s—and I can't remember why I joined the Community Board. But I was immediately in charge of the Landmarks Committee of that—where Community Board 8 was in Upper Manhattan. Frankly, the community boards were the lowest form of community participation in government, but it was a healthy thing because you had a voice that was closer to the local communities than any of the citywide agencies or even the borough-wide agencies were. Giving the Community Board at least review power on landmarks and everything like that—planning and landmarks—was a very good thing, which I very much championed. Sometimes it was amusing, and sometimes it was ridiculous.

When I was with the Parks Department, Community Board 2—I think in Manhattan, which was Greenwich Village, was the biggest thorn in my side. We never could do a project there because there was always a group that wanted not to move that bench because a drug dealer had that bench. He had as much right to it as anybody else. It was kind of this thing that you couldn't do anything, and the result was in seven years at the Parks Department we didn't do any Community Board 2 projects. We couldn't do Washington Square Park, we couldn't do anything. To this day Washington Square Park, which the Parks Department came back to me a year and a half ago and asked me to comment on the thing, and I made a couple of small changes in it because I'm still close to them. Not very close, but once in a while they ask me for my opinion. To this day, the community's still fighting everything we are doing in Washington Square Park.

But I think in general the idea of community boards is a good one, as long as you don't give them too much power. Although, when I was at the Parks Department I gave the community boards veto power—all of them—over any project we did. If they didn't want it, we wouldn't build it. The result of that was that we were able to get all of the community boards—and the other aspect of it is if you do want it and you can raise the money, we will build it. The result of that was that our budget went from \$8 million to a \$130 million in two years. I went to every one of the fifty-nine community boards every year. I'm a great believer that they should be involved and sometimes the comments they have are very good.

Q: What about the press? Do you think they had a large influence on the preservation movement in '70s?

Binger: You know, I can't really answer that. I think the preservation movement and the community boards worked together. The fact that the—by the middle of the '70s, I think, the community boards realized that this was one way—preservation was one way to prevent urban removal, as they used to call it in those days. There was more of an advantage to historic districts than a disadvantage. Community boards became really the first line against the power of the developers. I have not been at all opposed to the community boards since the early '70s. I don't really know much about them anymore. Went to one community board meeting the other day and it was a disaster.

Q: Did you ever use newspapers or reporters to your advantage in any of your efforts?

Binger: I didn't personally. Since the Metropolitan Opera disaster, I've been leery of newspapers. I remember asking a reporter, who was writing for the *[New York] Times* in those days, a man I've long since forgotten. There were only two papers who had wrote about—Roberta Gratz was the one for the *[New York] Post* and the *Post* was on strike, while we were trying to save it. She was marvelous. The one who was writing for the *Times*, he used to write about us—used to write about us, but then he would write about the other side—the Metropolitan Opera side. [John V.] Lindsay, who was the mayor, decided that he didn't want to take a stand on it, but he would appoint an assistant to keep tabs on both sides. We discovered very quickly that this guy had a box thanks to Rudolph

Bing, who was the manager of the Met at that point. He was given a box for all the performances at the Metropolitan Opera House while he was doing this.

So he would meet with us and he would be in evening dress—a beautiful coat with a black cloak with a red lining, and he would be on his way to the opera. I didn't think that he was going to be much use to save the old Met, since Rudolph Bing wanted to tear it down. Anthony [A.] Bliss, who was the general manager, was then sleeping with one of the ballerinas. We used to have a joke, 'Which ballerina has a Tony?' I don't know if you remember, but Tony was *[unclear]*. I called the guy at the *Times* one day and I said, "Aren't you guys interested in the truth?" He said, "No, I'm interested in the news." I said, "What's in the news?" He said, "What important people say about what you are talking about." I said, "We're not important?" And he said, "You're absolutely right."
[laughs]

I've never thought that the press was a very good ally in this movement. Although, they've become much more so. We've had some good architectural critics for the *Times*. We had Ada Louise Huxtable, who was on the board of the Municipal Art Society. We even got involved in preservation up in Exeter, New Hampshire. I got called up one day and asked whether or not I would try to help them save a bank up there—save a building that the bank had just bought and was tearing down. I remember going up to Exeter and meeting with the town, with the banker and the town press and everybody else. Nobody was interested. There was just little old ladies with tennis shoes. I finally met—I went in the building they had been cut into four pieces. This three story Federal 1811 house—

with a chainsaw they cut from the roof to the thing and they had it up on jacks. They were going to move it. I was talking to one of the demolition workers and he said, “It’s a shame to tear this down. We can’t build like this anymore.” So I went back to the press told him that, and he said, “Oh my God, if it was old ladies in tennis shoes, here’s a demolition worker saying that in order to be saved.”

So, I finally got that building saved by calling the chairman of the board. He was in Philadelphia, and I was at the bank and talked to him for two hours. It turned out had been very much involved in saving Benjamin Franklin’s cream shop. An hour later he had saved the building and they sold it. Ada Louise had already written an article about it. So the press was not always bad, but sometimes very good. She was marvelous, and Roberta Gratz was one of the great people, and of course Jane Jacobs was—she was most important too. These were all people who were active back then, so I don’t want to take any of their credit.

Q: Were you—were you in close contact with them?

Binger: No, I was with Roberta and I was with Holly [William Hollingsworth] Whyte. William H. Whyte. I was a friend of his and I even went over to his house on Christmas Eve once to get his boiler working. I used him very much in the restoration of Bryant Park—trying to keep the City and the local people who were starting the Bryant Park restoration, whatever you call it now. Keeping them from doing some serious mistakes and moving the big fountain and other things like that. So, I used Holly Whyte—he had

come down. He and I had worked on a plan, which we got carried out finally, of getting handicap access and restoring the comfort station and a few other things like that. That was finally incorporated in the final drawings. But I fought the restaurant. Henry [J.] Stern was commissioner when it was built, and asked me if I could stop it, and I said, “I don’t know any way unless the mayor wants to.” Henry was pretty good, as a person, to stop development. He was very good in a couple of places where he personally saved things. He was not a preservationist. He wanted to save trees more than anything else.

Q: What were the—what do you think some of the main organizations at the time?

Obviously, the Municipal Art Society.

Binger: Well, at that time, the Municipal Art Society. Parks—I can’t even remember the name of the organization. The Historic Districts Council [HDC] was started as a committee and became an independent one. Parks Conservancy was an offshoot of the Citizens Park Commission, I think. I wouldn’t even swear to that. What was the other one that they started? I can’t even think of the name of it—it’s run by a—what are the other great preservation organizations around? You must know.

Q: [New York] Landmarks Conservancy? But that hadn’t started until later.

Binger: Landmarks Conservancy was not started yet. I don’t know.

Q: Central Park Conservancy?

Binger: No, that was that was started when I was at the Parks Department. What's her name? What is her name? Betsy Barlyle [ph]. Elizabeth Barlyle [ph].

Q: Do you think the City's financial health or troubles affected preservation in the '70s?

Binger: Well it helped it. It helped it for two reasons. 1971, '72, and '73 were the—kind of the nadir of real estate. When I got to the Parks Department, the City was in such horrendous problems it couldn't sell a bond. So just before I joined the Parks Department in July of '79, the Commissioner put me in touch with the Mayor's non-paid advisor—I can't even remember his name—and he gave me advice. He said, "Whatever you do, get as much into the pipeline as you can because the City has all this bond capacity and no ability to do anything." The staffs had been wiped out over a few years ahead of that. We didn't have any projects in the pipeline. I was able to have a tremendous influence at the Parks Department because we had a very small agency and were able to move very quickly.

So that's when I took—as I said, I took fifty people off the boards and put them into writing scopes of work. Since Adrienne Bresnan was involved in that, a lot of those scopes of work had to do with preservation *[laughs]*. She was very much a preservationist. Because I was involved in it, and had also been involved in open space preservation and interested in preserving Central Park, a lot of these projects had preservation in them. We had sensitized our staff, all our design staff, to be looking out

for a way to make—to work on historic preservation. So we very definitely had used and took advantage of the fact that anything that we got into the works could get built. The only problem was the officer, management and budget—the City’s Budget Bureau—didn’t want to put any money in the parks. But at the same time, they had to spend this capital money. Since we were the only one with projects out, they gave us funding, but there was a limited amount of funding we could get until we got back a priority. That’s when I started going to the community boards trying to sell them on parks maintenance. Which I was unable to do, because even though they at one point—we got it so that parks maintenance was the number one priority of all the community boards in the city above police and fire and sanitation. Police protection was the big thing, they wanted more police on the street. By about 1983 I think—I think we had—we became the number one priority of the City and of the community boards.

At that point getting money was no problem. We had all the money we could use. Oh, and we basically caved in and threw money into the capital budget. We spent consistently, ever since then, well over \$100 million a year on parks, which is ridiculous because half of what we’re doing is deferred maintenance. We don’t mow the lawn, we don’t preserve the lawns. Therefore, every six or seven years we have come in and dig it all up and re-sod it. It’s ludicrous. We aren’t preserving—we aren’t maintaining our parks, therefore we have to rebuild them on a very frequent basis. I’m very much against that.

Right now I'm very much involved in the Brooklyn Bridge Park, where the City got conned into getting this new park—sixty-acre park—and they decided it had to be self-sufficient, it had to support itself. So the real estate people got hold of it, and the [New York City] Economic Development Corporation got hold of it, and said, here's a great one. We'll build the real estate in the park, which they're doing, and we'll make the park self-sustaining, but not only for maintenance, but for capital projects. Therefore they could get all the security for the buildings and everything else thrown into the park maintenance and they take it that way. All of a sudden we've got a park with sixty acres with a \$15 million maintenance budget, which is more than half the size of the eight hundred and forty acres of Central Park *[laughs]*. Central Park, which has a police station in it with seventy-four people, and where Brooklyn Bridge Park, with sixty acres has thirty-one people and three squad cars and not even a road for them to drive on. A million—I think a \$15 million maintenance budget, which of course also includes rebuilding all the piers, as no capital money can go into it. Well, it's ridiculous.

So I'm fighting that because it ought to be a \$4 or \$5 million maintenance budget, and they should be paying the taxes instead of pilots, which I won't go into—I don't even know if you know what a pilot is. The buildings are going to pay payments in lieu of taxes to maintain the park. Meanwhile, they're not paying a cent for the maintenance of sanitation, police, fire, schools, and anything else which is 98% of the City budget *[laughs]*. They aren't paying that—they're paying for this one park. They are paying three times as much as they should be to maintain this beautiful front yard for the buildings. So they're saying we're not getting any recreation or what we wanted for the

park. We're getting this garden for the buildings, which is ridiculous. That's why I'm still involved in anything anymore, but—I'm sorry, I keep acting like Sarah Palin, answering the other question.

Q: *[laughs]* Where do you believe the priorities of the preservation lie, in the nation or the City of New York? Especially during an economic crisis?

Binger: I think the first priority is to strengthen the Landmarks Commission. Not to appoint new commissioners for over a year, leaving vacancies and people's terms whose terms are up—gave the mayor too much power. He appoints unqualified people, especially the chairman. The Commission is a disaster right now—it isn't designating enough. It's getting better, but it needs much stronger people on it and much more independent people on it than it has. I don't know if you are familiar with the [Citizen's Emergency] Committee to Preserve Preservation but that's one thing I am still a member of. I'm not terribly involved in it, but I am nevertheless—Mike Seymour and few other people are, and I honestly believe that that's the first priority of it. I think the second priority is to get more budget for them, which is happening slowly. But the staff of the Commission is overloaded and those two things are the two most important things that could happen for preservation. I do believe that they're still adding significantly, I think, to historic districts. How many do we have now? You know more than I do.

Q: How many historic districts? *[laughs]*

Binger: Seventy or eighty, pretty soon.

Q: It's changing all the time.

Binger: When I was there we were talking about possible or eventually having fifteen. So, it's considerably improved.

Q: You had mentioned that the Landmarks Commission, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, was different than it used to be. Why so?

Binger: Well it's changed four or five times since I've been around. When it started, it was a very—it was considered an elitist organization. It had very few landmarks, two historic districts. It was made up of socially prominent people in the city of New York, who were rich enough to be able to sit around the commission without pay, etcetera. It had a very small staff and it was not a grassroots organization. The Municipal Art Society had been somewhat involved, peripherally involved, in setting up. Before my time.

Q: Who do you think it was elitist towards? Joe Architect?

Binger: No, it was elitist because of its very nature. Nobody gave damn about preservation—it wasn't a political issue. It was started by, in that period, by a group of very erudite people in the Century Club [Association]. You had to serve without pay on the Commission. There was a lot of work. So they appointed their friends to everything.

It was a very nice organization. I used to have the commissioners up to lunch when I was trying to save Squadron A [Armory]. I knew two-thirds of them socially, and I knew all the rest anyway. But now I don't know anybody on it except for one or two people.

That's partly because I'm not involved anymore, but also because it's a more democratic, I guess, organization, but it's also very much under the auspices of the mayor. Whoever the mayor may be, and this is not a preservation mayor. Or else we wouldn't have lost Huntington Hartford's museum [Gallery of Modern Art] and built that monstrosity. The museum building is still there, but the façade has nothing to do with anything. Have you seen it recently? What's the name of the circle—Columbus Circle? Been there? Used to be there.

Q: 2 Columbus Circle, the art and design museum?

Binger: Yes. I sat in that museum the day we put—that was where we had the final board meeting of the Old Met Opera House Committee, when they voted to go out of business and we had just been sued and lost. The law setting us up was declared unconstitutional. I had promised the lawyers that had worked for us that we would—that the board itself of this organization would pay the legal fees and we were going belly up. We had a vote at the end to pay the board—the board would come up with money to pay the lawyer, which was a considerable amount of money. I was outvoted seventeen to one. We went out of business and screwed the lawyers. The man next to me asked for a match to light a cigarette and I handed him a pack of matches that said A&P, and the guy who handed

them to us was Huntington Hartford *[laughs]*. Which is where he got his money. He had voted against paying the lawyer.

I loved that old building, not because I thought it was a beautiful building. I happened to think it was a very nicely detailed building. What they built in its place is simply disgusting—out of scale. Has nothing to do with anything that I care about. Looks like a graphic design—not a very good graphic design; looks as if it was done by an amateur. Horrible—two-dimensional graphics on the fronts of building never intrigue me. If there is anything that I like about preservation, it's the fact that it harks back to an era where we had buildings with—actually hit the ground in a meaningful way. Kind what the Greeks used to call a socle—a base, not necessarily a platform, had corners, had quoins. When the building ended, it ended at a corner; when it had a roof, it had a roof. Now buildings are just so much chic unadulterated window opening—or not. I don't like it, I don't like modern architecture much. I certainly don't like buildings that don't—just free-form sculpture that doesn't mean anything as architecture to me. So I'm still an old fart.

Q: How do you feel about Hearst Tower? Have you visited the Hearst Tower?

Binger: I don't even know what you are talking about.

Q: It's near Columbus Circle? They built a new tower on top of the old Hearst Building?

Binger: I don't even know—I was in Columbus Circle the other day.

Q: It has a zig zag.

Binger: I may have said something about it but I'm not sure.

Q: Just curious. But after the city grew through the administration of Ed [Edward I.] Koch—I'm just going to backtrack a little bit more—the city grew and prospered again after a long period of general decline. Did you see any changes on the preservation front when he came to office?

Binger: Well I came in with him. He didn't but—Gordon Davis, probably. Yes, I would say that preservation became much stronger under Koch. The Commission was fairly strong in those days and I think that Beverly [Moss] Spatt was pretty good. I'm not sure exactly when she came in. I think he had a good Commission, a good Landmarks Commission—and they were tougher than some of the earlier commissioners. I got remonstrated a couple of times—that's not quite a word, is it? They told me to stop what I was doing when I was working with Parks. We lost a couple of things we proposed as landmarks, and the [New York City] Art Commission was very strong in those days. I thought that the—I enjoyed going before the Art Commission, and also Landmarks, because they had sensible things to say. They approved every project that I was involved with. I went to the Art Commission twice a month, probably, for the seven years that I was at Parks, and went to Landmarks every time we had a landmarks building. They never stood in our way of doing anything—it was much stronger than.

I think it went downhill. Certainly under [Mayor David] Dinkins, it went downhill. Under [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani it was a laughingstock. This guy is so tied into the real estate industry, it's scary. Although I did not like the idea of term limits when they put them in—not actively working when I was supporting the groups that are preventing him from getting rid of landmarks—of a term limits by the use of the [New York] City Council, I don't think it would be successful—I think it would be—get rid of them. I still think term limits are a big mistake, but not the way they are getting rid of them.

Q: How do you think preservation changed from the '70s to the '80s? Generally—citywide?

Binger: Well, I hate to say it, but between the '70s and the '80s I was more involved in other things than preservation. So I'm not really the person to comment on that. I think between the '70s and the '80s, the historic districts quantity expanded considerably. The interest in landmarks preservation as far as the Commission goes went down—no question about that. The staff of the commission is much weaker now than it was then, as far as professional qualifications go.

Q: Aside from the LPC, what other—what important issues do you think we face today?

Binger: Well I don't—I really am not the right person to comment on that because I was really not much involved. I even let my membership to the Municipal Art Society lapse.

Q: Do you think we have any challenges ahead of us?

Binger: Yes, but I don't think that there is anything that present preservation society can't handle—preservation movement can't handle. I think that the Committee to Preserve Preservation—I forget what they call themselves now—the Emergency Committee, Citizens Committee—[Citizen's] Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation, I think it's called, of which I am a member. But it isn't terribly active. It is there to make sure—I think the Municipal Art Society is somewhat still there.

Q: Preservation Action?

Binger: God knows [*laughs*]. Maybe the Preservation Action Committee. But it was called the Citizens' Emergency, the Preservation Emergency or the—it had the word emergency in it at one point.

Q: Do you have anything else to share? Other anecdotes or something you would like to share about historic preservation that I didn't get a chance to get out of you today? Yet?

Binger: I haven't thought of anything yet.

Q: Any stories? Advice maybe?

Binger: I should have thought about these ahead of time. One of the things that you haven't discussed is the misuse of preservation. It's been misused two ways.

Preservation, when I started in the business, was something we talked about, but it wasn't a profession. Preservation is has now become a profession, and that's the worst thing that could happen to a movement. We now have people that are so sure of what they are doing because they studied it at Columbia [University], that they don't know the first thing about the way buildings were built. The proof of the punch was in Bethesda Terrace.

One of the senior people and one of the senior architectural firms in the city was involved in restoring the tile ceiling in Bethesda Terrace [and Fountain]. I was still with the Parks Department. She said—thank god I don't remember her name or I would say it—that it was impossible to save the old tiles, we had to take the whole thing down. The tiles were put in on top of the cast iron, and then the whole thing was razed at one point under the thing, and then the brick arches were built. I said, “You can't possibly be serious about what you're saying because you don't anything about either brick, or cast iron, or tile, or anything else and you're the chief preservationist for a major firm that does nothing but preservation. How the hell are you talking about this?” And she said, “Well, I know what I'm talking about.” I said, “Come with me.”

They had already had a hole in the street above Bethesda Terrace. I took her down in the hole, which I had never been into either, and I said, “Now look at these brick arches that are beautifully tucked and they're that far above the arch—brick arches—above the tile ceiling. I said, “Can you imagine the size of the workman that did that brick arch above

this ceiling—he couldn't have any taller than that *[laughs]*. How do you think they did that?" She said, "Hm." I said, "Now come downstairs with me." We had a scaffold downstairs. We, the Parks Department, had also been looking at this—I hadn't gone up on the scaffold—I took her up on the scaffold and got a screwdriver, and I had a contractor with me, and we knocked one of the screws away. Chipped away at it so we could get a screw. We undid the screw and pretty soon a piece of the cast iron came down, and behind that were four more screws. This whole cast iron had been put up in layers, and when you got down to the steel, the tiles were hung on the steel with wires, and then the cast iron covered over the joint. Then she said, "Oh." I said, "You're the chief restoration architect and you have no idea about architecture or how buildings were built." I said, "The trouble with you preservationists is that you believe you know everything, but you don't."

I've been unfortunately brought up as a 19th century architect, and I had a 19th century father. I know how things are put together, and when I don't I investigate it until I've found out. The problem with people that graduate from the preservation school at Columbia [Historic Preservation Program], they were not architects. Architects don't know much about building. I have always felt, since I was at architectural school, that an architect should have first a knowledge about how to build everything that he's doing—should know every trade. I can do masonry work, I can do plastering, I can do painting, although I hate to do it. I'm very good at carpentry, and I know how a building is put together from one end to another. I was known when I worked for this engineering firm the last thirteen years of my professional career—I was known as Mr. Leak, because I

could walk into a room and look at the ceiling and know exactly where we should work on the roof. I honestly believe that you have to be able to do all the trades, or at least know how they are done.

Q: Or outsource it when necessary.

Binger: Architects don't know this, in general, and preservationists know even less of it. In order to be a preservationist, as a person who does it, you have to know how the building was originally built. One of the good things in my life was that I worked for the South Street Seaport Museum—we did restorations down there. We've taken bricks off the front of the building, reversed them, and put them back to save the bricks, which we did at South Street. At the same time, on the Wyckoff House, I was horrified at the amount of money that we were spending due to federal requirements because it was unnecessary to preserve the building. It was necessary to be a preservationist. If you are a preservationist—because if you were a preservationist, you couldn't take any of the original fabric and replace it, even with the same age fabric. Which I thought was a nice thing—philosophy—to have, but it gets to be very expensive and kind of silly after awhile.

I believe in adaptive reuse. I'm not quite the Giorgio Cavaglieri idea of preservation where you rip out all the old windows and put in cheap glass, but at the same time I think there's a great deal that can be done in preservation without having to make it a profession. The other aspect of preservation, which I don't like, and I hope never gets out

of hand, which sometimes does, is using preservation for things it was never designed to do. Like stopping something to preserve something, but not because it's worth preserving, but to stop something else. I know that's me, I've done that myself. I mean, I wanted to stop high-rise buildings from being built on Madison Avenue, so the Carnegie Hill District was very much part of that.

Q: You regret that?

Binger: No, I mean, I think it can be used that way, but only if you are there to save the old stuff. I was there to keep—I wanted to stop the high-rise buildings to keep the old stuff from being torn down *[laughs]*.

Q: That's a planning—

Binger: That's a planning issue. But at the same time, to save a building that isn't worth saving because somebody lived there or somebody wrote there—we've lost good buildings because of lack of an effort. The building that Dvorak [Dvorak House] lived in when he lived in New York was torn down. It's not a distinguished building. The preservation movement couldn't save it. Whether it should or not, I don't know, but I don't think the reason Dvorak lived there is not enough reason to save it. I think if [George] Washington had slept there then maybe, but probably not *[laughs]*. I think preservation should be used to preserve architecture or something else equivalent to it and not for other reason. It shouldn't be used to preserve a cultural heritage. For instance,

“this is where great novels are written.” So what? It has nothing to do with why that community has to maintain that particular structure. It may have interest of some sort, a plaque on a wall would do just as well. Any more than where Nathan Hale was hanged necessarily has to save the site on, which he—scaffold that was erected, I don’t think that’s necessary.

The plaque on the side of the Neo Club [ph] or whatever it is—is just as important, just as satisfactory. I think that preservation has been misused a great deal for something it wasn’t designed to do. A result of it is preservation has become a political movement in many ways, rather than an aesthetic movement. Yet I think that it’s a very good city planning tool, and that sometimes it’s hard to draw the line as to where planning starts and preservation stops. I think you have to be very careful to keep preservation both a political but not a precious—it’s not an end unto itself as far as I can see. It has ends that are broader than just preservation for preservation’s sake.

Q: Why can’t preservation and planning join hands?

Binger: They should. Planning should not go on without preservation and preservation should not go on without planning [*laughs*]. I’ve always felt that they are strongly involved, but not—preservation, I don’t think should necessarily take the lead. I don’t think preservation—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So where were we?

Binger: Oh, what was I was going to tell you when we started and stopped. I was trying to save Goat Hill and the various other parts of Eastern Park Avenue for Carnegie Hill. One of the blocks that I really wanted to try and get preserved still is not part of the district, and there are now a new movement to get 93th and 94th Streets between Lexington and Third [Avenue]. The north side of 94th and the south side of 95th happens to be a rather unique row of brownstones. I think they were built for the [Ruppert] Brewery, or something like that. Housing for the Brewery. They're probably about 1880 brownstones—they're not terribly distinguished, but there's a wonderful row of them. I was up there showing them slides of all of the buildings in Carnegie Hill and their block included.

One of the buildings that I showed them was Helen Frankenthaler, and I can't remember her husband's name—he was an even more famous artist—had done over at her house. I didn't know who owned it, I just knew the house. They had stripped the front of the building, and stuccoed it, and taken all of the moldings off of it. The cornice was a rotten piece of steel. The beautiful hand rails were taken off and pipe railings were put in. It was very modern—"moderne," as they say. I said, and this was right in the middle of a brownstone world where everything was intact except this one building. I showed them a picture of the block, and then I showed a picture of this house. I said, "This is why we are trying to start a historic district—to prevent this kind of thing from happening." There

was dead silence in the room. Then one of the women left very quickly and it turned out to be Helen Frankenthaler, and a woman came up and threw her arms around me and said, “We’ve been trying to tell her this for years.”

What I didn’t realize, at the time, when I had my own architectural firm—I moved in with another firm and I was allied with them on a couple of projects. One day, they asked me to help them design a cornice for a building. I didn’t know anything about the building, I sketched out something, and that was built. And it was Helen Frankenthaler’s house—I designed this god-awful cornice. It was quite nice as a thing in itself, but in this row of beautiful Victorian houses, it was a disgusting mess. So that was just an anecdote of you know, the handy preservationist that I am. But, I said, I had come by this honestly. Have you ever been in Turtle Bay Gardens—do you know anything about Turtle Bay? My grandmother built that. She didn’t have a place to live because they were tearing down her house on Madison Avenue. So she bought twenty brownstones *[laughs]* and then took all the fronts and unified all the façade, tore all of the backyards out, built this wonderful twenty backyards in one place with two-story walling down and around the end.

Q: And that was all her home?

Binger: All her doing, and then she sold it off—sold it off to her friends. For \$18,000 a house, which is what it actually cost her when she got all through with it.

Q: I wish you could a buy a house today for that much.

Binger: Well wouldn't you like it. When she died in '61, the houses were sold for a hundred—I think her total house was sold for \$125,000. She had two brownstones that were side by side. I mean, they are worth three or four million a piece, or something like that. She was a real bitch, but she was a good preservationist *[laughs]*.

Q: What else did she work on? What was her full name?

Binger: Her full name was Charlotte Honeywell—Charlotte Louisa Hunnewell Sorchan Martin. No excuse me, Hunnewell—Charlotte Louisa Honeywell, who married Victor Sorchan. Divorced him, married Walton Martin, so she was known as Charlotte Martin. She was a strange, old woman. Modern in many ways and, yet, she went to Paris every year for three or four months and wore Edwardian clothes. When she died, there were five people at her funeral. Three of them worked for her, and the rest were her daughter and her grandchildren, but she was an awful woman. My father's family was Jewish and my mother wanted to marry him. My grandmother forbade the marriage, and after six months of telling my mother she could not see him, at the end, she would relent and let him marry. Six months to the day later they were married. My grandmother on my father's side was not invited to the wedding because he was Jewish. Things have changed a little since then but she never changed, she—horrified at the idea that anybody—I don't know—of losing her stature, I guess. She led a very interesting life. Completely isolated from the rest of the world—totally isolated. Anyway.

Q: Well, I think that's all today. Thank you so much for coming in to speak with me.

Binger: I'm sorry I didn't have more anecdotes—interesting things. I mean, I'm not a Brendan Gill.

Q: You had plenty to share—some very good information to share

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: What was his name?

Binger: Brendan Gill. He wrote the—

Binger: He used to be the public speaker at every institution in New York, especially the Municipal Art Society. Ruth McAneny Loud, who was George McAneny's daughter, was the President of the Municipal Art Society. Charles Evans Hughes III—Charlie Hughes, who was an architect who I was very close to. I and a few other people tried to get rid of her as president of the Municipal Art Society. I had put David Prager, a lawyer, on the board of the Municipal Art Society. I was responsible for Fred Papert being on the board—Kent Barwick being on the executive committee, and number of other people being put on the board. David Prager, who was a very interesting lawyer, ended up being President of the Municipal Art Society. He was on the board but he was a nominal leader

in the movement to get rid of Ruth McAneny Loud as president. Brendan Gill was head of the nominating committee and then we nominated and elected at that meeting somebody else. Charlie Hughes got the presidency, I think. Brendan Gill—we had a number of classes on the board and David Prager’s term was up. But he could be re-nominated, but they did not re-nominate him. There was dead silence around the board. I was horrified, and David Prager was horrendously embarrassed.

So, I sat there and wondered what the hell I could do. I suddenly remembered I had put on a board, Carter Burden, who was then a City Council person—he was Amanda Burden’s husband at that point. He had never come to a board meeting. He had sent a flunky once and we sent him away—only board members can come, you can’t surrogate. Since he had never come, I had said probably a slight way of a lie, “Carter Burden had just announced resignation. Therefore, we have a vacancy and I nominate David Prager.” David was at the table—nobody wanted to say no. Brendan Gill turned white with anger and we re-elected David Prager, who subsequently became the president of the board. Therefore Brendan Gill and I were not the closest of friends, I guess, but I never let him know I had anything to do with it. There was a lot of politics in preservation, which I decried a great deal, and I still do—I don’t think there is anymore.

As there was a lot of politics in architecture. I resigned from the Century Club for many reasons. One of which is I never used it, but one of the reasons I didn’t like it was that architects used it as a way of passing business around. It was a kind of a cabal of architects who were in all of the organizations who kind of pushed each other up. Not

that they didn't deserve it. They had very fine architects in the city, but the preservation architectural cabal is still very much with us, and some of it is highly deserved, and some of it is definitely not. So, I finally decided that I had had enough of the Century Club for that reason. The amusing part was that I stayed on long enough to get women involved in it—allowed to be on it, and the last meeting I was at was just after the meeting of the Supreme Court had acted. Old farts on the Century Club decided to try one last stand to keep women out of it. One of the things they were really frightened about was that the fact that their wives might now become members. This was the one way they could get away from their wives.

Q: Were these women friends of yours specifically?

Binger: No, nobody—tried to have any women in it. I wrote a couple of letters after for them, but at the last meeting, they came up with a proposal that no two people who cohabitated could be members. Meaning if a man and his wife were members, the wife couldn't become a member. I realized what they were doing, and I got up at that same meeting and I said, "I would like to speak on this motion because it's going to be very unfair to our gay members." I said, "I mean, if you have two gay members, one of them is going to have to leave if they live together?" There was dead silence. They didn't even bother to table the motion *[laughs]*. Then I left and I resigned *[laughs]*.

But I'm not a club man. Preservation is a thing that I'm not really involved in anymore. I've been, I've spent a lot of my time in my life on building committees. I'm now

chairman of a board of a foster care agency in Queens, which happens to be the best in the city. Which I was put on because they needed new roofs and I was the only person who knew how to get this done. I have been nine years ahead of the Church of Avenue Rest [ph] building committee. I am glad to say that I ran the committee for nine years and never had a single meeting of the committee. I like to run committees that way. I'm now on the building committee. I was only allowed to be chairman for one year. The Grace Church building, I had been on it for ten years or more. But they want the committee to act before anything is done. The result is that it takes three years to get the simplest project underway. And I believe very definitely you could get done in about three weeks, if you have the right to do it. So, I'm not a great committee person, but I now do all of the work at Grace Church because they finally agreed that they can't get anything done unless it gets done by me. I have that much power over that.

In the process of this, I believe strongly in preserving the building that I'm working on. The result is that I very often go back and look at the original architect's drawings if they exist. I examine the building to find out how it was built so we don't do anything that hurts that. I never want to cheapen a building that I'm working on, including my own houses or anybody else's house. My motto, in this trade, is that nobody in fifty years has ever thanked me for saving them money [*laughs*]. Which is true. I'm not a great believer in saving money—I'm a great believer in saving buildings. I don't do much architecture anymore. I don't see well enough to draw—my brain doesn't function well enough to draw on drawings anyway anymore. I have other people to do that. One of the problems with computerized drawings—although it's marvelous to be able to work on a computer

because you can make major changes in five minutes, whereas before you used to erase the damn thing. If you spilled a cup of coffee on your drawing, you would spend three weeks redrawing it. That has happened more than once at firms that I've been working for. A guy dropped a cup of coffee on fifty drawings the day before they went out to bid—took a month to get them back in printable form again. Now you just push a button and fifty more prints come out. But the problem with computerized drawings is that the people making the drawings don't know how to put a building together. They've never actually sat down and built one, or drawn one, or anything else. So we've gotten the architect removed from building.

The result is that architects are now designing buildings on computers that other people have to try and figure out how to build. That's also done by computer. The result is that buildings have lost touch with the fact that somebody's actually building it—somebody's actually putting their heart and soul into laying the masonry, or carving the mortar, or carving the stone, or forming the wood. Everything is done by machine and computer print-out, and I think that buildings are losing because of that. The idea of scale, and structure, and texture, and everything else is getting lost and buildings are—high-rise buildings are being built as if they're graphic design on a sheet of cardboard. Any texture in the face of the building is lost. So, I think preservation, in these days, is more important than ever because it does show us what architecture should be. It's less and less happening. I don't really think that much modern architecture is really any good—which is too bad. Because I am an architect or was—nevertheless, I think that copying old architecture is immoral.

Q: That's a common architect's creed, correct?

Binger: Yes, well I have built, as I've said—three or four new buildings in my life. One of them or two of them for myself, and I did build a barn up in Maine next to an 1817 house. I wanted the building to look more or less like a building somewhere in the late 19th century. I built a barn, which my landscape architect cousin thought was horrible because it had Palladian windows in it. It was basically a studio. But a lot of the people up in Maine think that the barn is older than the house, which is a shame. I think that if had that to do it again, I would try to rethink it and not make it an older fashion looking house. Anybody who knows architecture knows that it is not an old barn but—I'm a great believer in scale, in texture, in old materials. Avi Hensley [ph], who used to be the Landmarks Commissioner, called it the "architecture of good manners" and we've forgotten that. Architecture now—we make a big splash and get it published and try to make it different from everything else. It's not my style. That's enough for one day. Thank you. I'm so sorry to take so much of your time.

Q: No, no—thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]