

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Lawrence Cohn

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lawrence Cohn conducted by Interviewer Katy Luo on March 10, 2010. 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.

Lawrence Cohn and his neighbors founded the Central Park West Preservation Committee in the early 1980s to counter a proposal by the New-York Historical Society to build a residential tower on its landmarked property at the corner of West 77th Street and Central Park West. In this interview, Cohn details the process of building support for the organization's successful campaign to oppose the Historical Society's application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission for a certificate of appropriateness for the tower. The interview also touches on other preservation campaigns on the Upper West Side, including opposition to more recent proposals by the Historical Society.

Lawrence Cohn is a founding member of Landmark West!, a former member of the Historic Districts Council, and a co-founder of Save Our Universalist Landmark. He also helped create the Central Park West Preservation Committee, an umbrella group that came into exist in the early 1980s to fundraise for preservation campaigns around Central Park West. Cohn's work as a preservationist with the Central Park West Preservation Committee is known for fighting the New-York Historical Society's proposal to build a residential tower over property on Central Park West. A longtime resident of the Upper West Side, Cohn's love for brownstones and old buildings in the neighborhood is apparent in his preservation legacy.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Lawrence Cohn

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Katy Luo

Date: March 23, 2010

Q: This is Katy Luo conducting an interview with Doctor—

Cohn: Lawrence Cohn.

Q: At his office in New York, New York. Dr. Cohn, how long have you lived on the Upper West Side?

Cohn: I lived on the Upper West Side for forty years, but my history in brownstones goes back to 1962, when I lived in my first brownstone on the East Side.

Q: Okay, so did that start your interest in—

Cohn: I'm not sure where I got the interest. I've lived in old buildings since that time—1962 to 1964, a renovated brownstone on East 30th Street. 1964 to 1970, in a 1910 building on Riverside Drive and 116th Street, which was unrenovated. It was the original building with moldings and everything else, good old building. In 1969, I bought a brownstone on West 76th Street—renovated it, moved into it the following year, and I tried to maintain or restore as much of the old as I could, but not as much as I wanted to.

Q: If there's one block on the Upper West Side that you love, that you will walk every day if you have to—

Cohn: Well, I walk every day—my block, it's one of the only two blocks on the Upper West Side that is completely devoid of apartment houses. My block, 76th between Columbus [Avenue] and Central Park West, and West 105th between Riverside [Drive] and West End, where my associate lives.

Q: So you're very familiar with the area?

Cohn: Yes, and around.

Q: What was your role in the creation of the Upper West Side?

Cohn: Nothing in the creation of the West Side. I came there—a few years after I moved there, the block was landmarked as part of the West 76th Street part through Central Park West with one building on 77th Street, contiguous with the area. I think they call it the West 76th Street Landmark District, which I was involved in. There was a block association present at that time run by an Alice Einstein, and she became ill and passed the mantle to me, and I became president of the block association. I'd always been interested in preservation and I wanted to maintain the block as it was, especially since it was a historic, landmarked block. I was interested in keeping buildings the way they were, watching out for things, watching out for invasions.

Q: Did that lead to the creation of the Central Park West—

Cohn: Preservation Committee?

Q: Yes.

Cohn: Central Park West Preservation Committee came into being, think it was 1981, 1982, when the corner of 76th and Central Park West is anchored by the New York Historical Society on the north side and the Fourth Universalist Society on the south side. There was a—approximately, 1980, or thereabouts, the Historical Society decided to build a tower over the museum designed by Hugh Hardy, and we didn't like the idea. We banded together a bunch of neighbors, got ourselves a lawyer, and founded what is now called the Central Park West Preservation Committee, Incorporated, and I became chairman and executive officer.

We proceeded to raise money from various people who were around there, most of them NIMBYs [Not In My Back Yard], did a bunch of speeches in various localities, hired another attorney, and we went head-to-head at the Landmarks Commission hearing. Which was then led by the—oh god, what's his name. He was doing work for the Historical Society. The Historical Society at that time was a very closed organization. It started, it was founded, I think 1802, chartered by the state, and it was essentially a private club, and it was run like a private club. While I had been a member for many years, we had nothing to do with the organization, and apparently it was falling on hard times because it wasn't getting much public support.

They decided to raise some money by building this tower designed by Hugh Hardy—which I must confess, was a very elegant and contextual tower, except it was in the wrong place! Maybe nice, but it shouldn't have been there, especially in that block with that association. So we went head-to-head, and I'm trying to remember...his name begins with a "Z," He's a very prominent real estate attorney. He's still alive and still very active. He was, I remember, somewhat impaired and he had to sit throughout the entire hearing. We went to bat with—who did we get—we got *[unclear]* on our side and you know Andrew Dolkart?

Q: Yes.

L.C.: Andrew Dolkart was an architectural consultant. We had Abram, the guy who wrote the books *New York I, II, and III*—who then had an office on 72nd and Broadway—also came to our rescue. He was a grand old man of architecture—he was head of the preservation group at Columbia [University]. Marth—Marchoff, or something like that. He had the program for many years at that point.

Q: Of architecture?

Cohn: Of preservation, I think he founded the school of preservation.

Q: [James Marston] Fitch?

Cohn: It was Fitch. I'm not sure I remember. Then a bunch of other people we sort of dragged in—couples, things like that. We put people together and we beat 'em back. I had maintained the corporation as a nonprofit organization. I had gotten us a 501(c)3. I used—you know V.L.A. – Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts?

Q: Okay.

Cohn: I used Volunteer Lawyers of the Arts, some connections there, and my own work, and got the 501(c)3, which we maintained. I'm sure not sure when Landmark West! came into this whole thing. Landmark West! was probably founded about 1975, making a rough guess, and I was one of the founding members of it. Arlene Simon became head of it. I also became a member of the Historic Districts Council—at the time I was the secretary of the Historic Districts Council. Then the Universalist Church decided it wanted to perhaps sell itself and things like that, and a bunch of us got together and formed S.O.U.L.—Save Our Universalist Landmark. Then we used CPW Preservation [Central Park West Preservation] as the umbrella organization to handle the funding, the tax refunding.

We had a huge rally, collected enough money, and thanks to the building next door, the Kenilworth, got an agreement from the church not to tear it down for some number of years. I think that document was secret—we never saw it. That was about it. S.O.U.L. sort of lingered around for a while, we didn't do too much. Once the building was saved, the people involved weren't too active anymore. That's about the whole issue. I've maintained that organization and I've also established another block association on the block.

I don't know if this is any interest to you, but we decided we wanted to hire a guard. There's a problem with a lot of nocturnal—how should we say it—criminality in the block. We wanted to hire a guard. There was a question of legality and liability, so we formed another corporation called the West 76th Street Corporation. I was going to call it the West 76th Street Block Association, which is what we called it for a long time. Unfortunately for me, the block next to us had already stolen that name's corporation, so we had to incorporate it as the Park West 76th Street Corporation. I organized that one and got a 501(c)4 for that—I did my own—and we ran a guard service for maybe eight or ten years. Then the donations started falling off, the need fell off, and we stopped doing the guard service but we maintained both organizations and the tax-exempt status in case we need them. That's about it.

About two years ago the Historical Society wanted to do another building and we got ourselves going. We didn't have to do too much because they realized that the community anger was more than they wanted to handle. By that time, I had a lot of people on Community Board 7 who knew me over the years, who had worked various functions, and they folded their tank about a year ago and said they wouldn't want to do it. There may have been other factors—we found some legal problems that they accepted \$25 million from the state that prohibits them from doing what they wanted to do. They also knew I was gearing up to start after them again, and I was fully equipped with a tax-exempt status which made life very easy to do it. I don't know what made them turn their head on the whole thing, but the entire, you know, preservation community came down on it. What else—my brownstone, as I say, is fully-renovated, I saved the exterior the best I can, keep it going, all kinds of problems. The interior, I tried to maintain as much of the interiors as I could, but I could not. When you renovate a building, especially when it's been cut

up into a rooming house, and put it back together, you need to maintain some features but not all features. What else can I tell you?

Q: During the whole battle, what was the hardest part?

Cohn: Of what?

Q: Of the battle against the [New York] Historical Society?

Cohn: Which one? The one twenty years ago?

Q: The one twenty years ago or—

Cohn: No, the recent one, I pretty much did on my own, but the other, we just got people together and started going to the co-ops here from 72nd to 81st Street, hitting up for donations, making a little speech, having some boards. We had some shindigs, one at Carol's place, then we had one at my place. The money filtered in, most from buildings, from buildings nearby six and sixteen co-op, just north of it. Not too much from my block. My block primarily are brownstone-owners and much of the buildings are owned by real estate people, who are actually landlords who aren't interested and didn't seem to care. But we got enough money to hire someone from a very respectable law firm—again, you know, a number of famous people to weigh in on our side. Mary Tyler Moore was living in the San Remo at that point. She came down and stood with us for the whole thing. We had a bus to bring people down to the hearing, and I walked in there

carrying her bags saying “New-York Historical Society” because I had been a member for many years. I don’t think we had a celebration party afterwards. That’s about it.

Q: With twenty years ago—the battle twenty years ago and what is happening now, what do you think was the difference?

Cohn: What’s the difference? Well, the Historical Society has changed drastically. It opened up, it now has—the leaders of it are some Wall Street people with lots of money who liking having affairs there, having their names and things, and I had a sense that a real estate deal was in the making. There were some connections, which I’ll not go into, with various people—husbands, wives, etcetera—and connections that were not, oh, should we say, ideal? Certain lawyers had connections that they probably shouldn’t have had. They’ve had ins to certain places, and they were pushing the deals, the lawyers. In the most recent one, I did not see that lawyer’s name floating around much anymore. It was very prominent fifteen, twenty years ago. But this one wasn’t that hard, we just had meetings. There were two community board meetings—one down at the Bible Society, one at the church on the corner—and then the hearing itself, the Landmarks Commission, upstairs in in the building, room overflowing.

Q: Well, I was just there yesterday. How do you like the new façade, the entrance?

Cohn: Where?

Q: At the Historical Society.

Cohn: You mean the one on 77th Street?

Q: Yes, the ramp.

Cohn: The ramp they've always had. They've had a ramp there for about ten or fifteen years. The main reason, as far as I understand, that they wanted a new façade, was the fire wall. They needed a certain number of exits, in order—this we thought was preliminary in putting up a large building—and they currently had three, three exits...the one on 77th, the one on Central Park West, and there's another one in back leading to the garden, and according the building code, they needed four. However, if one of the entrances was sufficiently wide, it would count as two, and we think that was the push behind rebuilding the façade. This was a first step towards the building because they couldn't get the building unless they had four exits. Other than that, I'm not sure why they did it. They wanted a bigger presence on Central Park West. You know, the old one's kind of nice, I mean, what's-her-name moved in there years ago. They moved the original entrance from Central Park West to 77th Street, god only knows why. I mean, the original was a very nice entrance; beautiful doors—I think the doors are still there—huge bronze doors and you've got the coat room, everything's there. The other reason I think, behind their doing the whole business is, they wanted a coffee shop. Coffee shop is big money.

Q: Yes.

Cohn: If you look at the building, the building is symmetrical. The windows on 77th Street were

maybe halfway up the floor, and when they change it, they now have full-length windows there, and that's where they'll put the coffee shop. I said in my hearing they bastardized the symmetry of building, and I think that was to get the money for the coffee shop. I think what they're hoping is to catch people coming from the Museum of Natural History and say, "Oh gee, this looks nice," because right now it doesn't look like much. They're trying to put some banners and things up there to make it say "Come on and see us!" But the Museum of Natural History is mainly kids.

Q: I did come across an article that they are thinking of putting a children's museum in the lower level, so that might be correct?

Cohn: They are, I've heard that. That may be another issue— they're trying to bring people in. There's the entire issue of the Museum of the City of New York, which has been successful. There's been some talk over the years of merging the two institutions, and then the museum starting reconfiguring itself—and this is just my personal impression—to bring more people in, and they first had a lot of children's things going on. They also had a large outreach to the black community with some shows, you know, for black people, which I was thinking, they were just trying to be—have you visited the museum lately?

Q: I work in one *[laughs]*.

Cohn: It's not that impressive inside. I went to the Hamilton exhibit—eh. It wasn't bad, they had a hall, and a couple things in each hall, but it wasn't very interesting. I think they had some fights

with the curatorial staff, one of whom was married to a professional associate of mine—I won't talk to him anymore, I forget why. Then we had Bell there, who was the president for a long time, the chief executive officer. He'd come down from Boston, where he had run a museum. I must confess, I don't go there that often. I support it, and the Museum of Natural History, because I feel it deserves support, or the J.C.C. [Jewish Community Center], which I support, which I hardly ever walk into, but, you know, I think they deserve our support. When I was a kid I used to live in the Museum of Natural History.

Q: Really?

Cohn: What else—

Q: Besides the Historical Society, was there any other pressing issues when you were sitting as president?

Cohn: When I was sitting as president? This is just going back a ways—major issues? No.

Q: Maybe another landmark that you were trying to save, or—

Cohn: No, they can't do it; the Building Department [New York City Department of Buildings] will kill them. Had a couple of people who painted the buildings the wrong color, Landmarks came down. Landmarks was not very good about inspecting and following up on things. Number

of issues I called and complained about and they didn't touch. They were not structural issues that couldn't be undone. Nothing much else I can think of.

Q: Is there anything going on in the district or—

Cohn: In the area, right now? The Historical Society is always thinking about—it still has a very small membership, not doing too well. We used to hold holiday parties there every holiday. After about four years, we sort of gave it up, we couldn't get much support—people didn't want to come to a party. I used to hold a flower sale on the block every year, spring planting, but then the flea market opened up and the guy there undercut us, and we had to close down. We used to have the hard ball games. People who used to hate me now like me, except one guy. You know, my organization is ready to move whenever it has to. We're ready to move, we've kept it alive. Someone tried to close us down two or three years ago—I think it was the Historical Society – but all our papers were in order, so they couldn't do anything about that. We're very good about that.

Q: I was trying to look up information about your committee, is it still under the same name?

Cohn: It's not much. We're still in the same name, we've got a state registration, we're still there. Both organizations exist. We're registered with the state, we're registered with the federal government. We file our 990s and our CHAR 500 [Annual Filing for Charitable Organizations]. You know a CHAR 500? CHAR 500 is a New York state annual report for nonprofit corporations.

Q: Oh, okay.

Cohn: We've got to do that soon, and 990s are the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] form. Now technically, we fall—we receive under \$25,000 a year in contributions so we're technically exempt. But I file them anyway just to keep everyone happy.

Q: Is your location for the office or do you just gather—

Cohn: The office? You're in it!

Q: Everything happens here?

Cohn: This office and my office at home are the office and we'd have meetings—the committee itself is only five or six people.

Q: Oh, okay.

Cohn: It's a small committee, lean and mean. We did the work that had to be done. We didn't get involved in more arguments and things like that.

Q: So it's very community-based—

Cohn: We're down to about four members now. One had moved out and, you know, we exist as we do legally, and we're ready to work if we have to, to do certain issues. If something comes up, we're there, ready to go. Arlene and I are—right now we're friendly, but we've had, Arlene and I have had our ins and outs over the years. Saw her husband at Fairway a couple weeks ago, said hello. Do you know Kent Barwick, is he retiring or what?

Q: Kent?

Cohn: Kent Barwick.

Q: I do not know.

Cohn: He was head of the MAS [Municipal Art Society] for many years and he was the landmarks commissioner for a couple of years. It's alright. I'm getting to the point where many of my old friends are dying off. Me too, one of these years. I don't know what else I can tell you.

Q: Are you recruiting new people?

Cohn: No, we're not recruiting. We'll get new people as we need them. Right now, we exist as we do and when we have to move on, we will bring in people from other organizations if we have to. I have to maintain my separations from Landmark West! for obvious reasons. There's a federation of Westside Block Associations that I throw money at every year, but I'm not sure

what they do. Some other local issues that I don't want to go into, like the flea market—where the money goes—no one knows.

Q: The flea market on Columbus?

Cohn: The one on Columbus, yes. The money seems to disappear, and no one seems to know who, where, why, or when, even when I went after them.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

Cohn: Is that it?

Q: Is there something I didn't touch upon that you would like to speak about?

Cohn: The last time I did something on this, they did a video of me that started turning up on the web for years after it *[laughs]*.

[END OF INTERVIEW]