INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Leonore Norman

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Leonore Norman conducted by Interviewer Mario Drakos on October 15, 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.

Lenore Norman served as executive director of the Landmarks Preservation Commission from 1975 to 1985. Norman began working at the LPC as an intern and was named executive director by LPC chair Beverly Moss Spatt after serving as an assistant to the previous director, Al Shapiro. In this interview, Norman conveys the atmosphere of the LPC during her time in office, when the LPC was increasingly professionalized and its workload grew substantially. She discusses the challenges of administering the still-new Landmarks Law from a small office within the city's massive bureaucracy, which was often indifferent or hostile to landmarks. The interview was conducted in 2008 in conjunction with Pratt Institute's graduate program in preservation.

Lenore Norman served as executive director of the Landmarks Preservation Commission under three separate chiefs—Kent Barwick, Beverly Moss Spatt, and Gene Norman. Norman was instrumental in the 1983 designation of the Woolworth Building, a controversial fight to receive both interior and exterior landmark status for the building. A devoted public servant, Norman served as the director of intergovernmental affairs at the New York City Department of Buildings after leaving the Landmarks Commission. She also was co-chair of the preservation committee of Community Board 7, a particularly active board in local preservation fights.

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Interviewee: Leonore Norman | Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Marios Drakos | Date: October 15, 2008

Q: Are you originally from New York City?

Norman: Yes, I am.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about New York at the time, how was it to live there back then?

Norman: It was wonderful, a little bit more crime ridden then. But there was not a lot of development going forward, so you could pretty much count on the building that you saw yesterday being there today. I'm a very big fan of New York, so for me it was always wonderful. I was going to school at Pratt [Institute] at night, I was working at the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission, my children were struggling without me and we were moving along very nicely. New York, to me, has always been the most exciting city you could ever live in.

Q: Great. How did you become interested and eventually involved in the historic preservation field, and eventually what attracted you to the job at the Landmarks Commission [LPC]?

Norman: Well, I had gone to the New School to take a series of courses. I had children who were still at home, young, but I wanted to start feeling my way. It was not my first choice in terms of what I went to college for but—I was experimenting with a few different things. I met Beverly Moss Spatt, while she was on the [New York] City Planning Commission. We had a few volunteer projects and things like that that we were doing, and also doing a few projects that we were writing about and talking about. She wanted me to come and do some work for her or with her. Then she became the Chairperson of the Landmarks Commission and she gave me an internship.

I had been peripherally interested in architecture, urban planning, that kind of thing, but had not really focused on preservation. So for me, it was really a totally new experience which I took to like a duck to water. She started me off, really. I worked under a man by the name of Frank Gilbert, which is the name that should come up in some of your research. He was the executive director and I was really a volunteer helping him out. Then he left, and there was another executive director, and I became his assistant for pay. Not very much, but pay. We were going along, he was very smart, very bombastic—and Beverly was very exacting in what she wanted to have done and how she approached everything. He then left and I was really quite immersed in administrative things at that point. I was handling our relationship with Parks [Department] because, we were under the aegis of Parks and things of that nature. That's when she said to me. "You could be executive director." I said, "No," and she said, "Yes, you could be executive director." So I said "Okay, I'll be executive director." How many times can you say no?

So I did. I was petrified. Absolutely petrified. I needed a lot of help and I got it from Dorothy Miner, who was terrific. She scared me to death, but she was fine. We eventually pulled together programs that we were interested in doing and hiring people who could follow through on those programs. All this time, I then had gone back for my graduate degree in urban planning. It was very good for me because my teachers were also the people I sat across the conference table from *[laughs]*. So we had a very nice rapport going and I loved urban planning. I really loved it. Every part of it was interesting to me. Preservation came along with it, because you really need to have preservation as part of a planning program. So that's how I got there and that's how I became so involved in it.

Q: Do you remember when was that?

Norman: I can't remember if I came in '72.

Q: '72?

Norman: It was '72. Then it was right around there that I started to do some interesting work out in Brooklyn with a private not-for-profit group, the name of which I can't remember. Donald Moore was the head of that. He was the one who really urged me to go back to school, so I had started school and I was at the Landmarks Commission. It all sort of happened very quickly. I would say that it was like '74 – '75, something like that.

Q: So, you've been the director of a relatively new Landmarks Commission since was the '70s.

Norman: Yes, but it was about ten years old or about eight years old when I came.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the role of the Commission back then?

Norman: Well the Commission was new, relatively new. The whole idea of preservation was not something that people really understood. Of course, all of the larger institutions and buildings, for the most part, fought it. It was the communities, basically, where the grassroots sort of came through and really understood what this meant for their neighborhood like Brooklyn Heights, and Greenwich Village and that sort of thing. The Commission was a rather prestigious body, I would say. I don't remember the Commission so well under Beverly, I just remember it more as it went on to Kent Barwick. There were architects, of course, but it filled out the mandate as to what you had to have. It was lively. People who sat on the commission were really excited about this. It was prestigious. It was a lot of fun. It was the best place I ever worked in my life. At the time Alan Burnham, who may or may not be someone whose name you know.

Q: No, I don't.

Norman: Was the head of research.

Q: Okay.

Norman: Alan Burnham was really a gentleman. When we would get back from a field trip or something like that, he would say, "Let's have tea." That's a whole different world that doesn't exist anymore. The staff itself and the people heading the staff were all very experienced and knew what they were doing. But of course, we were handicapped by a very small staff and very little money. Our budget was controlled through the Parks Department, so I had to plead with them to release our money. The violations all went to the criminal court which was, of course, ridiculous. Until finally the Environmental Control Board came aboard and took care of the violations. So those were the nitty gritty little things, but it was exciting. There weren't that many landmarks yet. There weren't that many historic districts. You really felt that you were contributing to a very big thing in the city. I still feel that way about the Landmarks Commission.

Q: Do you remember what was the first preservation campaign you been involved, or challenge, and how being the first was important, if it was important to you?

Norman: Well I'm trying to think. I think one of the first things was the Villard Houses.

Q: Okay.

Norman: They were putting up this high-rise hotel, which we were trying to work on as best as possible to get it to be at least somewhat appropriate in relating to the building.

We got them to save that whole courtyard. We worked on a preservation plan for the Gold Room and for this, and for that, and Dorothy Miner really directed the whole thing. She really knew what she was doing. That was around ’76 – ’77. I don’t remember when it was built exactly. That I think was really one of the first things that we worked on.

Q: Do you remember which one was the most significant for you?

Norman: The most significant—

Q: The most significant for you. For your career there.

Norman: You know, that’s very hard. Of course Grand Central [Terminal] was the most significant. The whole idea of going up to the Supreme Court and how it was argued, how brilliantly it was argued by the city. I mean, that was really a big breakthrough. We had a lot of significant ones, [Methodist Church of] St. Paul and St. Andrew, which were tough. Churches are still tough, maybe even tougher because of the economic times and the churches are older. That was a significant win for the Commission. Then St. Bartholomew’s [Episcopal Church] was another significant win. That was a really kind of an ugly fight, because it pitched members of the church against one another. That was very sad. One of the most exciting things was the discovery of the ship. Did anyone ever tell you about this?

Q: No.

Norman: Underneath Water Street, they were putting up a new building. By that time, we had an archaeology program which we had put in. One of the things, whether it was a landmark site or you had federal funds or whatever it was, you had to do a research report on what was there. Lo and behold they found a ship, and it was very exciting. Kent Barwick, who did a grand thing for the city—he got them to stop building over a weekend so that everyone could come and look at the ship. That was really a significant preservation action but of course we couldn't save the ship. We had to bury it up, nobody, nobody wanted it. It was too expensive. So that was really a lot. I think the two most exciting and new programs we had was the archaeology program. At that point, with all federal funds, we really were able to have significant things documented and saved if necessary, and also the salvage program. Do you know what that is?

Q: No.

Norman: It was a lot of fun. We didn't make a killing *[laughs]*. The city didn't make a killing, but we did salvage a lot of interesting artifacts. We had the warehouse where the people came, who owned property in New York and who wanted to use some of those pieces. Now that's not actually all the legal and everything else parts of it, but it's what made it so significant, and so interesting as well. Let me see—what else was there? There's so much I can't remember. I mean, you have to remember that we were really feeling our way at this point. We were having problems left and right. The city wasn't

doing such wonderful things about salvaging and saving properties. For example, we did an Upper West Side historic district.

Now I don't remember when exactly that came along, and you may have heard about this already. We went around an Eidlitz Church on the corner of 86th street and Amsterdam Ave. Why? The church promised they would never knock it down. Hello? I mean, is that really going to happen? No. So now, of course, we are in a battle with the church to try to find a way to preserve it. We made mistakes, obviously, we were new. We were cautious because we were afraid. We really focused a lot on the neighborhoods and trying to pull those along. Having those particular people do their own research and photograph things and do all of that, and then come together to the Commission. We were much—first of all, we had a much less of an inventory to take care of. We didn't have what the Commission has today, which is a tremendous workload. We were very quick to bring these things to a public hearing. We did not always designate them after that, but I think that the theory was let's air it before the public, let's see what happens.

Q: What other major events do you remember from that period? Big issues outside the preservation field that may helped to advance early historic preservation in New York. What was their impact on the Commission?

Norman: Of those events?

Q: Yes.

Norman: Well it strengthened us, it made us feel emboldened. We had long discussions about everything. As we got new Commissioners, each of them with a different strength. For example, Joe Mitchell, who was the most incongruous Bowery-goer that I ever met in my life. He was a southern gentleman and he wrote these stories, *Up in the Old Hotel* [*and Other Stories]*. He was a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine. He knew a lot about the South Street Seaport, which was another big event. Unfortunately, we saved it for a bad purpose because it's really a shopping mall at this point. But we did save a lot of the buildings. That was wonderful, and then we started going into Harlem and we had Hamilton Heights. Then we went into Staten Island, so we could start preserving some of the things there. That was—all that contributed to this whole body of work, and preservation of not only spectacular buildings, but vernacular buildings as well.

I think one of the biggest challenges was trying to get the city to take us seriously. Because [the New York Department of] City Planning and all of those other agencies such as the [New York City] Board of Estimate, which we had at that time—they were only concerned about the owners' rights and things like that. To them it was a taking, no matter what the law said, it was a taking. So you really had to fight for everything. I mean, before you were designated and got it through City Planning and through the Council and to the Board of Estimate, where you stayed up till 4 o'clock in the morning to make sure you could address them and get your point across. It was a lot of work to be done, and I do credit the chairs of the Commission for really being able to steer us through all of that because it was hard.

Q: Actually these were some of my next questions. How was having to deal with the staff's commissioners, politicians, the press?

Norman: I think we had a good relationship—

Q: And the challenges?

Norman: Our own commissioners were prestigious, as I said. When you have an Elliott Willensky and a Tony Tung and some of these other people, you really have people who have had a lot to say about preservation and they're known. I think on a staff level, we had a very good relationship with the city agencies. On the concept of preservation, it was slow-going. But people began to recognize the importance of it. The importance of saving these things for tourists. Tourism was becoming bigger and bigger in New York City. When people came to New York, they wanted to see what was there when the Dutch came, or what was there when the English came, and all of what developed over time.

The biggest challenges were—for example, the Woolworth Building, which practically threw us out the door when we came to see them because they were not happy. But we finally won them over—little individual things, like the Opera Hotel up on the Upper West Side which was owned by someone whose name I won't even mention, but who was very prominent in real estate at that time. He practically threatened to throw us out

the window if we came to him again. So there were strong feelings about preservation, a lot of people saying, "You can't tell me what I can do with my property, this is a free country." It was sort of maneuvering your way through all of the different pieces and parts.

Q: You mention earlier your budget back then, and I know New York City was going through a financial problem—

Norman: Correct.

Q: To what extent those fiscal problems influenced preservation projects? Preservation efforts? The Commission?

Norman: Yes, it influenced it because we didn't have the staff to go out and survey, and bring back to us all of the things that were crowding into and trying to be designated. We had to work in a very limited way, both because we were new and because we didn't have the funds to do it. We also had a lot of problems being attached to the Parks Department, and it took a long time before we got ourselves uninvolved. Then sort of towards the beginning of the '80s, we came across a scheme where we divided the staff into—the researchers and the preservation people into teams. One team was for Brooklyn and one team was for parts of Manhattan. We thought maybe we could get more done in that way if you were only responsible for a certain amount. Because the individual staffers had a lot on their plate.

It was different, and now I'm talking from my experiences as co-chair of the preservation committee of Community Board 7. When I was there, we didn't give Certificates of No Effect to that many things. We were very cautious. We brought things to the commissioners, we didn't want to make the decisions on some of these things. Now it's different. Both because they don't have the staff and they have a large inventory to take care of. A lot of times it makes me very unhappy because I see things that I don't think should have been passed.

Q: So I'm going to play the devil's advocate now.

Norman: Okay.

Q: And ask you that—you also told me that when the Commission was founded, was staffed by people with genuine interest and passion for preservation and New York's history in architecture. But nowadays it's believed that it's just another government organization.

Norman: Well, it's a tool.

Q: They are often accused of bureaucracy and the growing professionalism of the committee.

Norman: Of the Commission.

Norman: Growing professionalism? What's wrong with that?

Q: That's not such a bad thing?

Norman: I think that's a great thing. I think that the people who involve themselves in the Commission are—first of all, they're professionals. I wouldn't want them to be anything else, but I think bureaucracy is a thing that governments run on and we're all used to that. I think that this Commission moves things along very quickly. Because there's been such a tremendous amount of development in the city in the last couple of years, people do not want anything to stand in their way. Money, money, money! That's all that they are interested in. Greed. They don't want to see anything that's preserved but the old cliché. You go to Europe, you want to everything to be there the way it was thousands of years ago. Here it has to be a modern city. There's no reason why they can't coexist. They do, and should. So, I think that's really not a valid criticism.

Q: Do you believe that role of the Commission and its goal have changed since the time you were there?

Norman: Well I think it has changed. First of all, I think they are surer of themselves. I don't feel that it's as immersed in preservation. Although I had a wonderful experience with the current chair. He came up to Manhattan Valley, or part of Manhattan Valley that I was trying to have designated as a historic district. Manhattan Avenue, actually, and I

had been working with the people. But it was a strange community. It had been promised designation years ago and never got it. He came up and actually walked it with me, and I was so grateful for that because then he eventually designated it. So I think he's very reachable, although I think most of the Commissioners were very reachable. It's so exciting to be a part of something where something gets done, that actually happens. I want to tell you another little story about when Kent Barwick was Chair. There was a Catholic church on the Lower East Side, Chinatown area and it was out of money. The Diocese wasn't going to give it any more money. The pastor was keeping it going on a wing and prayer. It was going to snow and the roof was going to cave in, so Kent got very busy, and somehow he managed to raise funds to save that church. I have to tell you one of the most thrilling days of my life was when I was there and they had a ceremony at the church. These people came up to us with tears in their eyes. It's a poor congregation and it was very important to them, and why not? There were those highlights in what we did that took it out of the bricks and mortar and put it into the more humane part of life.

I think that the Commission needs more people, needs more money. Since people think that all the big things have been designated, naturally. They think, what now? But I think that there's plenty to do and that the city, which is very development oriented, shouldn't be so quick to allow developers to knock things down. Churches are in big trouble and I don't really know the answer to that. I did have an intern for my Community Board Committee and asked her to look into what was going on in other jurisdictions in the country. She didn't come up with much, everybody's having the same problem. The

Upper West Side happens to have a lot of churches. There are churches all over the city but we're very worried. As a matter of fact, I'm going to a meeting on Friday to talk about this a little bit more and see what kind of plans we can come up with. Once the churches go, and you think of the church as really rock solid part of a community, where a community starts, around a church and grows up. So when you remove that church, you've removed a big part of history.

Q: So the different Chairman brought—

Norman: Different skills.

Q: And changes to the Commission.

Norman: Yes, right.

Q: But were those always for good?

Norman: Well, yes I think so. I think so, because we have learned more and more about the whole preservation situation. Beverly followed Harmon Goldstone, who was terrific I understand, but I did not know him. I only knew him when he came to the Commission. Beverly was planning-oriented so she really felt that preservation was an important part of the planning process. So she focused in that way. Kent, of course was Mr. Preservation. I mean, what could you say? He was involved for years and years and

years. Gene [Norman] came new to preservation, but he was an eager learner and he did very well. He relied on his staff to bring him along, which was good because he had a good staff, and that's when I left. I knew Laurie Beckelman personally but I didn't know her as the Chair. I didn't know the Chair before her whose name I can't remember. I knew Bob Tierney from City Hall, but not in preservation particularly.

Q: Okay, the next question. New York's real estate industry and Landmarks Commission. What's the relationship between them?

Norman: It was very feisty. People wanted to do what they wanted to do. The real estate industry was gung ho. It took a lot of negotiation and a lot of back and forth, trying to give a little but not too much and try to have them preserve things. Some people are very upset that at the idea that certain facades were preserved and the back of something else, would it be the way I wanted to be, no. I think it was better than nothing, and so I think that's the approach. We always try to compromise, to find a way where we could coexist.

Q: There's too much controversy about the Commission's rights and private property. What do you think about that and what was the public's attitude at the time?

Norman: Well, the public's attitude was that it was a taking for the most part. Even though it was argued in the Supreme Court and decided with the Grand Central case [Penn Central Transportation Co. v. New York City] landmark designation was legal, and even though it was argued in other places, it still remained a perception of people because

we're Americans and we have a right to our property and that kind of thing. I think little by little, there was more and more respect for historic preservation. It's an uneasy crown that sits on everybody's head. We're constantly—not fighting so much on these big issues but on small issues, like rooftop additions and rear yards encroaches, incursions, all kinds of things. I still think that the prevailing attitude is that you have no right to tell me what to do with my property, but it's better and hopefully we'll all live to see it get even more better.

Q: What were the relationships of the Commission with other preservation organizations at that time?

Norman: I thought they were very good.

Q: How did it work?

LN: We needed them and they needed us. We worked together very well. The Historic Districts Council didn't start until the '80s I think. We had a good relationship with the State Historic Preservation Office. Then the different local groups, like Brooklyn Heights group, before they formed the Historic District's Council, had their own organizations. The National Trust, which was sometimes tough but worked okay. I think we had a very good relationship. We were anxious to get them on our side for everything we did, and they needed us to some extent because we were the city body that was promoting all of this.

Q: And how about the dealings with the public?

Norman: I think the public, once it began to understand what it was all about, was very supportive. People, especially people who lived in brownstone neighborhoods, they wanted those to last and to stay there. They loved them. They didn't want any big development which was totally out of scale with what was there. That still happens. I mean you take something like [Congregation] Shearith Israel. Are you familiar with that?

Q: Not really.

Norman: Shearith Israel is a prestigious and beautiful synagogue on the West Side. It had a community house which was negligible but it was on the Landmarks site. They wanted to knock it down, build another building with a community house on the ground floor, going downstairs underground and then a luxury condominium on top. Of course, the neighborhood came out in droves, absolute droves in opposition. Norman Marcus, who at one point was counsel to the City Planning Commission, lived around the corner. He unfortunately just died. We had Bill Moyers who came—it was really great. These people had a good attorney, he didn't prove his point as far as we were concerned. Nevertheless, the Board of Standards and Appeals granted it. Now that is such a prelude to what can happen over there because Central Park West skyline, which is quite formidable—but it has these pockets of open space over institutions. Even the [New York] Historical Society behind there, were going to build. I don't know what happened, but apparently they're

not at this point in time. At any rate, these are still significant battles that have to be fought. We had the battle of the museum, the Edward Durell Stone building at Columbus Circle, where they refused to hear it, which was wrong. Those things still happen. Why did they refuse? Well, because the city wanted the museum to go there. They couldn't find another space? You know, it was ridiculous.

Q: So community had more—

Norman: More interest?

Q: Yes.

Norman: I think—

Q: More interest in the '70s, than now?

Norman: No, I think that people are scared now because there's so much development. On the Upper West Side, for example.

Q: But they were more active back then.

LN: Well, because it was new and it was all starting. There are communities that are still very active and who want to be designated. We have a group of brownstones on the

Upper West Side with some developers picking off one by one. On 86th Street and farther up West End Avenue, that community has coalesced and they are working very hard to interest the Commission. They have our interest, we've approved it and written to the Commission saying we think it should be designated. You can imagine all these buildings going up in the middle of the block. This is unfortunately still zoned rather high. At one point, one would think transferring the development rights from one to another for preservation purpose. But that was something that you used very carefully. You didn't just willy-nilly say that you could do it. Because you were then putting in something that was terribly inappropriate, for the most part.

Q: So, you used to work for the Commission and then—and now for the Community Board 7.

Norman: Well, that's a volunteer job. In between, I was at the Buildings Department [New York City Department of Buildings] with my watchful eye to see that terrible things didn't slip through the Buildings Department. I was head of their intergovernmental affairs. I put in certain procedures for the Buildings Department to keep watch, who knows if they worked.

Q: How is it different from being in a government organization? I know it was independent, but—

Norman: It's much different. First of all, we're only advisory. So we can only tell the Commission what we think.

Q: I mean, how was it to work there and then to—

Norman: It was hard working at the Commission. You felt very responsible and overworked, we had meetings till 3 o'clock in the morning, but it was great. Working for the Community Board was the only thing I could do to keep myself in the loop, so to speak. Of course it's totally different. I'm really not really responsible. I'm not being paid. It's something I'm doing out of my own conviction. It's the right thing to do. I think that we have brought our Community Board around to be much more interested in preservation. At the time I started with the Community Board, which is almost ten years now, it was sort of ha-ha-ha. But we worked at and worked at it, and we got them to visualize what the city would be like. There were always some people who always understood immediately, but there was a lot of people who didn't care. I think we've come a long way from that. I enjoy very much doing what I'm doing because it gives me an opportunity to keep my eyes on things. It's fun too.

Q: What lesson did you learn from the '70s that have stuck with you?

Norman: You have to keep at it. Keep at it. Don't be discouraged. You have to believe in what you're doing and that it finally will happen. I really believe that. I really believe

there are more and more people who feel so strongly about preservation that they're jumping on the bandwagon.

Q: Are there any issues that preservationists faced in the '70s that we no longer face and maybe are there things that we take as granted in our profession?

Norman: Well, I think that we're working more closely with zoning issues so I think that gives us more of an opportunity to preserve. Whereas before the zoning, certain zoning areas encouraged building and so obviously demolition of buildings. We have to be ever vigilant. I'm probably only one of the few people who's not so upset that the economy has taken a down turn. Maybe there won't be quite so much development in the city, because I don't want to live in a city of glass houses. I want to live in a city that has diversity, but I also want it to be reminiscent of what it was like years ago. You hear people say all the time, "I don't recognize the city anymore, what happened to this and where did that go?"

Even just walking, I walked one block up Lexington Avenue because I used to work a block up. Every store is different, it's much more upscale, there's a whole different feel to the block. That's a little microcosm, it's not a preservation thing. It's just an idea of how the city keeps changing and changing, which is good. The city has to change, it won't grow if it doesn't. Don't misunderstand, I don't believe that we are rooted in tradition to the point where nothing new can be built or there can be no modifications to

accommodate life as it is today. I think in general, there are verboten areas that we shouldn't be going into.

Q: So to close out interview, what would be your advice today, based on your experience, for the preservation professionals—the young professionals that go out into the field?

Norman: I think my advice would be to lobby for more money *[laughs]*. And more staff. Do more PR work so people really know who you are and what you stand for. Get out into the field. Just make yourself known in every way possible so that people will say, "You know the landmarks." Most people don't know what the Landmarks Commission does. They know they designate but they don't understand the whole ongoing preservation issue. "You mean I can't paint my house?" "No, you can't paint your house without permission." "How dare you!" That kind of thing. People who think they support preservation, but when it comes down to their individual home. You have to keep getting the message out. That's it.

Q: And that ends the interview.

Norman: Okay.

Q: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]