LEADING THE MOVEMENT:

INTERVIEWS WITH PRESERVATIONIST LEADERS IN NEW YORK'S CIVIC SECTOR

The Reminiscences of

Charles A. Platt

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Charles A. Platt conducted by Interviewer Benjamin Baccash on February 9, 2012 and on an unknown date, 2012. This interview is part of the Leading the Movement: Interviews with Preservationist Leaders in New York's Civic Sector oral history project.

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.

Charles A. Platt is former member of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, as well as many historical societies. He joined the Landmark Preservation Commission in the 1970s and served until 1984. He discusses his family's involvement in historical preservation in New York City. He speaks about how historical preservation has changed depending on the current administrations, relationships between the Landmarks Preservation Commission and various interest groups, and how his background as an architect informed his decisions on the Commission. He also discusses how the Landmarks Law came into being and how it's been applied and interpreted over the years.

Charles A. Platt, FAIA, is a partner at Platt Byard Dovell White Architects, LLP. His firm has received numerous design awards and has established a reputation for the design of strikingly new additions to historic buildings and original designs in historic contexts, as well as for the restoration of major historic landmarks. A graduate of Harvard College and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, he began practicing in 1960. During the early and mid-1960s, he worked in the office of William and Geoffrey Platt (his father and uncle, respectively). He formed Smotrich & Platt, Architects in 1965. Throughout his career, Mr. Platt has been active in public affairs related to architecture and preservation. The nephew of Geoffrey Platt, the founding chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Charles Platt served as a Commissioner from 1979 to 1984.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe Session: 1

Interviewee: Charles A. Platt Location:

Interviewer: Benjamin Baccash Date: February 9, 2012

Q: Okay. So we're recording. Ben [Benjamin] Baccash with Mr. Charles [A.] Platt. So first, I want to tell you that I tried to go to the Appellate Court to see the mural, which you wrote me about, but I couldn't get in. I did find a picture of it online, so it was good to finally see, but I really appreciated your letter. And I showed it to Frank Gilbert as well and he loved it.

Platt: The figure of wisdom, my grandmother, is right opposite the middle of the justice's bench. So she's looking straight at them.

Q: Sure. It's amazing that she posed for it, but that also it's still there.

Platt: The Appellate Court building related to a lot of artists who were involved with the artist's colony in Cornish, New Hampshire. H.O. [Henry Oliver] Walker, who was the mural painter, being one of them. Walker's house was within three hundred yards of my grandfather's house.

Q: No kidding.

Platt: So they're very close. My grandmother was a very handsome woman modeled for a number of artists of that time.

Q: Wow! So it goes all the way back to New Hampshire, which your wife was telling me you still have a house there.

Platt: Yes.

Q: Amazing.

Platt: Augustus Saint-Gaudens was invited up there by Charles [C.] Beaman and he then attracted a number of other artists to the place. They were all attracted not only by Saint-Gaudens and his presence but by the landscape, which reminded them of Italy. It was pretty well cropped by cattle at the time, so there were these beautifully rolling, semi-bare hills. No longer. All the hills have grown back up.

Q: Sure. So I take it that that spurred your involvement eventually with the Saint-Gaudens Memorial.

Platt: Yes, it did. After all it's a family legacy and its accidental, related to the fact that the family has a house there, we're connected. So the family retained its connection and relationship with the Saint-Gaudens site. Being on the board it was something I felt I had to do. It was just something that I did. That I felt responsible to do, to become involved.

And because I'm an architect, I cared about those things, I was there and understood the history and knew the artists and their work.

Q: Would you say that's also why you became involved in preservation generally, because of the legacy aspect of it and you felt responsible?

Platt: No. That really had nothing to do with it.

Q: Okay.

Platt: It had to do with Kent Barwick and it's a long connection, because I got on the board of the Municipal Art Society [MAS] through my uncle Geoffrey [Platt] who said, this is something you ought to get involved with, you'd be interested. I went to a couple of meetings before I was on the board. In those days he could send me to stand in for him if he couldn't go, which I did. I thought it was interesting. It had to do not just with preservation, but it had to do with the design and the physical aspects of the city in general.

Q: So this is early 1960s.

Platt: This is early 1960s. I was interested and then got on the board. The Municipal Art Society began to expand. It had been just a few members of the board who administered the society. There was a part-time treasurer who was paid something, but there was no

permanent staff. Later it was decided that a full-time director needed to be hired. So we set out to find somebody and I, became the chair of the search committee. Partly, I think, because I was young and they wanted to find somebody young and bring more people along. I interviewed a number of people with some other members of the committee. I can't remember who else was on the committee. Along came Kent Barwick and he was so far above everybody else that there was no question that he would be hired.

Some years later—there's a lot of stuff in between—in the late '70s or mid '70s, Kent, by then, was the chairman of the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission and he, I don't think for any particularly good reason, fingered me and said would I serve on the commission, if approved. It didn't have anything particular to do with my uncle. We didn't say do it or not. I don't think he knew. Kent may have spoken to him, but it never was conveyed to me that there was any particular connection between Kent and my uncle Geoffrey.

Q: Interesting.

Platt: So Kent asked would I serve on it but I didn't even talk to my uncle about it. I didn't consult him. The person I consulted was Bill [William J.] Conklin who was then the vice chair and I said, "What's involved with this?" He said, "Oh, nothing. It's one day a month or maybe half a day ever two weeks." Which was an absolute distortion of the fact.

Q: Now you were a commissioner or you were vice chair?

Platt: No, I was a commissioner.

Q: You were a commissioner. And you found it to be a time consuming endeavor.

Platt: I found it to be a fascinating, interesting, rewarding, time-consuming endeavor.

Q: Did you have involvement beyond the hearings? Was there involvement in the day-to-day operation of the commission?

Platt: No. The commissioners were not involved with the day-to-day operation. But what we were involved with wasn't just hearings. I mean, there were a lot of policy decisions. Should we have meetings in the boroughs? How should we conduct ourselves? But that was before the sunshine law, so we were able to have private meetings, they usually were at lunch, where the commissioners sat around and we would talk about things. Are the hearings too long? Should we have them earlier? Should we have more? All those sort of administrative things. There wasn't much discussion of the construction of the Commission itself not of applications handling. The conversations we had had more to do with the use of the commissioners themselves.

Q: Do any of those conversations stand out in your mind?

Platt: Well, I know there were some, but I can't think of any off hand.

Q: Okay. So these are big picture things and the role of the commission as opposed to the nitty-gritty of its function.

Platt: Yes. Even though the sunshine law was not then in effect, I think we felt rather constrained not to talk about the issues that were before the commission, that we do that in a more public arena. At least I felt that way.

Q: Sure. Did you, for the most part, get along with the other commissioners?

Platt: Oh, yes.

Q: It was a good group.

Platt: There was an incident at the beginning. Beverly Moss Spatt had been the chair before Kent. She was still smarting, I think, from the fact that she was being deposed as the chair. Although it was quite expected that whoever was the mayor would be able and would appoint their own chair. That was written into the law. The commissioners served a term, but the chair served, as chair, at the pleasure of the mayor. When I was at the hearing at the [New York] City Council, Beverly was there and she came up to me and said, “Your uncle wrote me the most horrible letter.” But she didn’t testify against me. Geoffrey later showed me a copy of the letter, which simply said “Beverly, you have done a wonderful job and

have served as the chair for X years. It is now time for you to step down and let somebody else to do that job." And that was the horrible letter that he wrote.

Q: That's a pretty soft letter.

Platt: It was a very soft letter. I think, it was even more gentle than that and it closed cordially.

Q: Right, right, right. I just want to rewind a bit—your uncle's involvement in the commission's establishment. Do you remember when that was going on and were you consulted in that process?

Platt: Yes. I do remember it and I was consulted.

Q: On what kind of things, I'm curious.

Platt: First of all, I was working in my uncle and my father's office, William & Geoffrey Platt, at the time. I graduated in 1960 from architectural school. I went to work for them. I worked for them for a few years. During that time, 1962 specifically, Geoffrey began working with Harmon Goldstone and the James Felt, then Mayor [Robert F.] Wagner [Jr.]'s City Planning [Commission] chair to form the law. And he would consult me occasionally, because I was a younger architect who was more with it so to speak. He was interested in what were somewhat younger people thinking about preservation and such things. So I

would talk to him occasionally about that. Also, he would ask me some specific things about the law. It's hard to exactly which. If we looked at the law, I could tell you yes, he said this about that.

A couple of things he did say that kind of bothered me, because they've come up now. One is that—and this relates to something that I designed and was built, so I have a selfish interest in this—that once something had been approved by Certificate of Appropriateness, it would receive the same protection as the rest of a district or the rest of that part of the building or whatever it was. This is no longer how the law is being applied.

Q: But the law itself hasn't been changed, just its administration.

Platt: Right. It's being applied differently. The legal interpretation is now different. And I think that interpretation is wrong and is not in accordance with the intentions of the drafters of the law.

Q: I would agree.

Platt: But nevertheless, that's what is being done. Anyway, that and another issue that has come up. I'm mentioning these two things because they have come up with respect to the museum at Columbus Circle.

Q: Sure. The Museum of Art and Design.

Platt: The Museum of Art and Design. Huntington Hartford Museum, as it once was called. There was a lot of back and forth and I was sent something as an affidavit to fill out or to testify on, which related to the terms of service of the commissioners. And I can remember my uncle Geoffrey saying, "We have solved a political problem by having overlapping terms, having commissioners serve three-year terms no mayor would ever be able to remove all commissioners at the same time, as they had staggered terms."

I don't think it was ever done to any ill effect particularly, but it was certainly flying in the face of the intent of the law, which was that some subsequent mayor would not reappoint people. So their terms were up but they were just hanging out there. If you did that for long enough, you could then appoint an entirely new commissioner. That was definitely against the intent of the founders. I remember Geoffrey coming into my office and saying we've solved the problem of the politics and terms.

Q: What was the relationship between the mayor and your commission?

Platt: Ed [Edward I.] Koch. It was very good. Ed Koch was mainly hands-off. I think he respected Kent. He did not interfere politically. We were all aware of the realities of the world. It affected us I'm sure. We tried to be sensible about what was real in the world and what was possible. But, to my knowledge, Ed Koch never interfered politically in an issue before the Landmarks Commission. He may have wanted to, but he didn't. And we felt completely free to say or do whatever we thought was right. That is no longer true.

Q: I was going to ask if you thought that.

Platt: And I would say it began very much with—I don't know when it began, but Jennifer Raab—under Jennifer Raab it became quite political.

Q: I've heard people say that Jennifer Raab's tenure at the commission was when the relationship between the preservation community and the Landmarks Commission was fractured.

Platt: Right. Kent Barwick had called it a virgin Commission. It had never been tampered with. That, at some point—and I hate to carry the image on, but you can draw the conclusion.

Q: So from what you're saying, you agree that Kent Barwick's term at the commission was kind of its golden era. It was its golden age. It was a high-functioning commission. People were not concerned with political pressure or sway.

Platt: I would say that's definitely the case I would say yes, it was a burgeoning commission by then in terms of its work, the applications that came before us, the designations that were carried out, all of that.

One of the things that I saw, because of my perspective through my uncle, was the increased confidence in and of the commission.

I remember Geoffrey saying at one point maybe someday we'll even be able to designate a high-rise building. If you think of how many high-rise buildings have now been designated.

Q: Sure. There's a good number.

Platt: Yes, including the Empire State Building and including the Chrysler [Building].

Q: Right. So you mentioned that Mayor Koch was supportive of the commission or at least didn't tamper with it let's say.

Platt: Yes. I think he was supportive. I think mainly through Diane [M.] Coffey, who I came to know later on quite well. I did not know her while I was serving on the commission, but I did later on. I did at the tail end, but not until later.

Q: She was from the mayor's office?

Platt: She was Mayor Koch's chief of staff.

Q: Okay. That's a new name to me. Coffey, interesting. And how about the City Council overall at that time?

Platt: I would say that other than the appointments to the Commission, where you had to appear before the committee, the City Council had exercised no influence or very little at that time.

Q: So it doesn't sound nearly as political as it is now.

Platt: No.

Q: Well, at least much more—it's insulated.

Platt: If it was political it was political through let's call it common, civic sense not because there was actual interference.

Q: So there was more influence from the advocacy community than there was from the political body at that time.

Platt: Yes. But the advocacy community was not very active either. There weren't a lot of people screaming out there, those who I call preservation crazies, like me.

Q: So even the Municipal Art Society wasn't very active at that point. I would think that they would have—

Platt: Not particularly.

Q: Huh. This is kind of a broad question, but what was the culture of the commission like at that time? You said there was confidence in it. What was it like for people who worked there? What was it like when you were there at meetings and things like that? Were the people there confident in themselves and what they were doing?

Platt: I think they were. I think they were excited and interested because it was still new and they felt it was sort of a crusade. We were doing something that was good civically and everybody felt heroic in doing it. There may have been people who had complaints about their particular job on the staff, but those were not things the commissioners heard about particularly. I don't even remember rumors of disaffection.

There were some disagreements, but none of them were anything but artistic or philosophical disagreements. There was a very good staff head at the time of the permitting application side of things. Margaret Tuft, her name was. She was extremely good. And there was a woman named Marjorie Pearson who did the designation part. She went on for much longer. Margaret Tuft moved away. Even though Bill Conklin was there, I think she felt that—she welcomed me because she felt the presence of an additional like-minded architect helped her in her decision-making and helped the commission.

Q: Were people aware of the *Penn Central [Transportation Co. v. City of New York]* decision, how much of an affect that had on everybody?

Platt: Oh, sure.

Q: Was that something that was brought up regularly?

Platt: Well, I had gone out and picketed. We all knew about it, sure. It was still in the air.

Q: So do you think that had something to do with the golden era, Kent Barwick being so—

Platt: No. The golden era came much later. But the Penn [Pennsylvania] Station issue was the thing that led to the creation of the law.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm talking about the Grand Central [Terminal] case.

Platt: Oh, the Grand Central decision. I don't think so. I'm maybe only speaking for myself, but it was a great relief. And it may have been for some people who were really worried, who were more legally minded. Maybe I was just oblivious more than I should have been to the consequences, but I was confident. I believed in what the case was and was, I interested in Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] getting on the train and all the rest of that, but I thought it was more show. We were all concerned about the decision. It would have been horrible if it hadn't—

Q: But it was more of a relief than not a—it wasn't a coup.

Platt: No. To me, it was a relief.

Q: Sure. In terms of resources, both staffing and financially, you felt that the commission was well supported at that time.

Platt: At the time.

Q: At the time.

Platt: Now some issues came up later in my work at the Municipal Art Society as chair of the Preservation Committee, we were very much concerned with staffing and we initiated a number of studies of the financing of the Commission. We worked to increase the City Council's allocation of money. That's all documented.

Q: What was the relationship between the commission and the real estate community at the time? Was it contentious like it is now?

Platt: As it is again, you should say.

Q: As it is again.

Platt: Yes, it was, but, contentious is not the right word exactly—the real estate community felt it was a civic wrong I think as a community and wanted to have it done away with, but it wasn't particularly angry, at least openly

Q: So they were dealing with it.

Platt: Well, they weren't dealing with it. They didn't like it. They would have liked to remove it and I'm sure they agitated to do that with the politicians, with the mayor, and so forth. You know, at that time, the actions of the commission were small enough so that yes they had tremendous effect only on relatively individual situations. People may have been against it, as a broad thing, but it hadn't begun to effect the industry strongly yet. In fact, more people more directly, there's no question. But also I think the real estate industry found that, in many cases, as we said to them, it will improve the value of certain properties and in fact their life. I always compared it to topography. If you're a developer and there's a cliff in the property or you own or a riverbed, you have to deal with that. You can't remove it.

Q: So it's just a fact of life.

Platt: A fact of development.

Q: You were talking about specific staff members and I'm just curious about one that comes to mind. I wrote my graduate thesis on the enforcement of the Landmarks law and the first enforcement officer was Tom [Thomas F.] Reynolds and he was hired in about '81.

Platt: Yeah.

Q: Do you remember him?

Platt: Vaguely.

Q: Vaguely.

Platt: I got off the Commission is '84.

Q: Right. What spurred your leaving the Commission?

Platt: Work.

Q: Work.

Platt: It was simple.

Q: It had become too much of a time commitment?

Platt: I really enjoyed it. I would have been happy to go on, but I was having some partnership problems and I felt that I shouldn't.

Q: Sure. Do you have any particularly proud moments from your time there or maybe regrets, or challenges?

Platt: No. There was maybe an opportunity to go back on the commission much later, at the beginning of [Michael R.] Bloomberg's reign. In a way I'm sorry I didn't say yes. I said no. Earlier, I can't say that I was asked directly to become the chair, but I can say that I was asked to consider whether I would accept being the chair, and I said no. I said I couldn't do it.

Q: Because of time commitment issues.

Platt: David [F.M] Todd took the place that I was asked to consider.

Q: You said Bloomberg's reign.

Platt: That was later and I was back on that commission as a possibility then.

Q: This is just a personal curiosity. While at the commission, did you ever designate any buildings designed by your—I know your grandfather was an architect?

Platt: No. Because whenever it was considered, I stepped aside. I don't even remember if any of them came up while I was on the commission, but I would not have voted on them. There were some buildings that came up that one of them was the place that my family lived in, which was Turtle Bay Gardens. We were still living there I guess and we sold the place just about '84, so it would have been just about when I got off the commission. I'm trying to think of any other things.

The designation of the National Academy up here, which included the school wing on Eighty-Ninth Street, designed by the firm, William & Geoffrey Platt, mainly by my father I think. The only thing I had ever seen Marjorie Pearson get cross about was that there were two buildings on Lexington Avenue, one at Sixty-Sixth [Street] and one at Sixty-Seventh [Street]. The one at Sixty-Sixth was designed by my grandfather. The one at Sixty-Seventh Street was, I would say, inspired and influenced by him but he was not the architect. It's a dead ringer in some ways. The commission first listed them as both being designed by Charles [A.] Platt, my grandfather, Marjorie had made a mistake. My uncle was then off the commission and I was on it and he said, "Please tell Marjorie that your grandfather really didn't like that other building. He thought everything about it was just a little bit wrong. Everything was just a little bit wrong."

Q: Because it was kind of a knock-off?

Platt: No. But if you look at it—I had the same discussion with Christopher Gray of *The New York Times*. We had been carrying on an exchange about it. Christopher said, "Why? What is it about it?" So we got photographs and I pointed things out to him. I said, "The cornice is pinched, the between the windows, the proportion isn't right. If you look at these two buildings that way you will see that the north building on Sixty-Seventh Street is just not as good."

Q: Sure. So I take it then because you were—

Platt: Anyway, the point was that Geoffrey made me convey that to Marjorie Pearson and she didn't like being told that she was wrong.

Q: I take it then from having apprenticed with your father and uncle you agreed with them design-wise.

Platt: No, I didn't at all.

Q: Not at all. There were conflicts.

Platt: I'm a modern architect. I'm not a preservationist by birth. I understood why they were doing what they were doing, but I didn't agree with doing it, not for me There were a couple of conflicts that came later actually, but we all got along very well. If any of the three of us, my father, my uncle, or I, looked at a project to make a judgment about it, we would

possibly agree or we would agree to disagree, but it wasn't a philosophical difference. We'd say well, he hasn't got the proportions right, the windows are too big, this or that, whatever. You can do that with architecture regardless of the period. I mean, I could look at a gothic cathedral and say these buttresses are wrong. This is not right.

Q: So even though you didn't agree with them and preservation didn't come naturally to you, you still picketed for Penn Station.

Platt: Yeah, because it was a beautiful piece of architecture that needed to be saved. I always believed in saving great buildings and great architecture. I didn't believe in tearing it down and was well aware that a lot of what was being done in the '50s, in early architecture, was perfectly terrible. I mean, that whole business with Pruitt-Igoe [Wendell O. Pruitt Homes and William Igoe Apartments] in St. Louis and all that stuff—Igoe or whatever it's called—was very much in the air. We were aware already of the failures that were being created even as we were learning to be architects.

Q: Sure. It's interesting, I think a lot of people often brand modernist architects as totally rejecting the past, whereas there's definitely a middle ground, which is appreciating the great buildings and finding room for the ones that aren't so great.

Platt: You don't go around a museum and tear down a painting just because you want to paint another one.

Q: Oh, absolutely. I agree.

Platt: When I was in architectural school—remember I graduated in ’60—we used to joke because we studied city planning, urban planning at the time, as well; it was all part of the same program. That when a neighborhood was being redesigned the city planners would save certain historic buildings and those are the ones that they ended up living in themselves.

Q: Sure. Do you remember the actual day of picketing at Penn Station?

Platt: Vaguely.

Q: Vaguely.

Platt: I picketed twice in my life. It was not all in the cause of preservation. I remember picketing but I can’t even remember where it was now. Philip Johnson was not there that day. The other time was when the World Trade Center was being designed.

Q: And what was the objection there?

Platt: It was a horrible building. They were both horrible buildings. It was a very bad piece of urban—not urban design but of city planning in that case.

Q: It's an interesting commentary that for one time you picketed a building being torn down. The other time it was a building being built.

Platt: Yes. Well, it was wrong. We felt it was wrong. It was a terrible thing because after the disaster of the World Trade Center so many people came to me and said isn't this a horrible tragedy. And of course it was in that sense, but in terms of architecture—

Q: Sure.

Platt: You know it's somewhar like the story of a young man who worked in my office who had a house in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans that was completely destroyed. I told him that I was so sorry to hear about his house and its destruction. "It doesn't matter." He said. "My father designed it. It was horrible architecture."

Q: Opportunity. Before I go back to your involvement at the Municipal Art Society, before you had interviewed Kent Barwick, had you met him?

Platt: No.

Q: Never before.

Platt: No.

Q: So that was your introduction to Kent.

Platt: Yes.

Q: And I take it from there you worked closely with him.

Platt: Well, fairly, yes.

Q: Who else was on the committee at that point?

Platt: I can't remember. No. I have been there for so many years I can't remember who was on at one time or another. I'm, I believe, the longest—I'm not necessarily the oldest, but I'm the longest-serving director of the Municipal Art Society. I began in '65 or '66 I think.

Q: Maybe we can talk about some of the significant projects or efforts over the years there.

Platt: Yeah, I think I probably need some prodding. I can say one thing that Kent and I joked about, and I think rather accurately, in poking fun at ourselves that we ought to have an exhibit of the buildings that the Municipal Art Society had supported and the buildings that it had protested against. And people would then have to guess which was which.

Q: I think it would be very good. And there's still time, why don't we do it? So Place Matters, that's one of the initiatives I think you were involved with.

Platt: Yeah, after I got off the commission and came back to the Municipal Art Society—I left the Municipal Art Society while I was on the commission. I didn't feel it was right to serve as a commissioner and be on the board. Other people have not always agreed.

Q: And there's no rule about that.

Platt: No, there's no rule. Anyway, when I got off the commission, I felt that the other aspects of designation, the historic, the social, you know, the other categories of designation and protection—didn't have their proper place in terms of the commission's regulations and activities. So I felt that that side of the designation process was neglected, places which had social significance or historic significance, That that neglect needed to be corrected. And at the time, the Municipal Art Society had been kind of helping to create other organizations. I think that some of those organizations wouldn't agree that they had been spun off, that they may have forgotten, but many were.

Q: Like the—

Platt: HDC.

Q:—the Historic District Council.

Platt: Yeah. So in terms of Place Matters, all I can say is that I encouraged it personally. I remember going to a conference at the Museum of the City of New York where the whole issue was discussed, and I guess I was on the panel, and I told a story. I said when I was on the commission I felt very strongly that the place where Babe [George Herman] Ruth [Jr.] had pointed and hit the home run should be designated. I said I admit that I wasn't a Yankee fan, but I felt that that was of great significance and should be protected. And I later found out that it was in Detroit!

Q: They are iconic things though. Maybe not iconic in terms of design, but visually, culturally.

Platt: Well, that was it. That was my point. Even though I was an architect, maybe because I'm an architect, I was aware that we were neglecting other aspects of the Landmarks law and the intention of the law to protect and preserve.

Q: Do you think that aspect of protection and preservation has gotten better?

Platt: I think it has gotten better. I think it's been a bit of a curve, it got better and I think now it's sort of tapered off. I think it's much more difficult to designate under those categories than to point at a building or a district and say we want to save it.

Q: Sure, to designate and also to regulate then.

Platt: If [George] Washington slept there, it’s easy to designate, but more complicated social, cultural, historic issues are difficult.

Q: Right. So you started at MAS in ’65. Is that right?

Platt: Right, ‘65 pr *[phonetic]* ‘66.

Q: You left in ’79 and you came back in ’84 and you’ve been there since. You’ve seen a lot of leadership come and go. How has the organization and its effectiveness fared with the vacillation of leadership?

Platt: I think it has fared well. I don’t think there’s been a lot of vacillation because I think when Kent came in under Ruth McAneny Loud who was the president. You probably don’t even know her name.

Q: I haven’t heard the name, I’ll admit.

Platt: I can’t think who was the president while Kent was chair of the commission and I was there, because I wasn’t paying much attention to Municipal Art then. I’m embarrassed to say I don’t remember exactly, David [A.] Prager, Fred Papert?

Q: Let’s consider today’s Municipal Art Society and the Municipal Art Society that you joined in ’65, they must be different.

Platt: It's a little bit controversial. I'm not sure I—I'm not sure I should or will comment.

Q: Okay.

Platt: I could say a couple of things that when I joined it, it was, as I had said, completely a group of thoughtful, do-good citizens who cared and thought about the Municipal Art Society's aspects or interests in the city. The thoughts and conversations were not all that different from what the committees talk about today. It was different because it was just served by a small staff. First of all in the beginning, when Kent got there, there was nobody else, really. I don't know who kept minutes. And I was still sort of an innocent kid on the board.

Q: So you didn't exactly know what you were getting yourself into.

Platt: No.

Q: Or maybe nobody.

Platt: Well, I think the people who had been there, Ruth McAneny Loud. Her father, I think, Mr. [George] McAneny, was a civic figure and she was always interested in the city and there were others. It was the Arts Council, Fine Arts Council, those things were there and were in place, and people understood them. Kent was the person who really, to my

knowledge, expanded the Municipal Art Society and I think quite rightly. You remember that the Landmarks law really did come out of the Municipal Art Society. The whole idea of it. Harmon Goldstone and Geoffrey Platt were then on the board and helped create the [New York City] Landmarks Law. It was just a group of people who met to further things that they thought should be done for the physical benefit of the city. I'm not talking about subways and buses, but the physical aspects of the city.

Kent was very much respected. Everybody liked Kent, he was charming, I'm really fond of him. We assumed we were cousins because his middle name was my mother's name, Littell. His name is Kent Littell Barwick. My mother was Margaret Littell *[phonetic]*. He and I assumed that we must be related somehow. There was a kind of friendly, joking relationship. And Kent went on the board at Saint-Gaudens at my request; I had gone on the commission at his request. There was even a moment when an architect named Emlen [T.] Littel, who had designed a church on Madison [Avenue] and I think Thirty-Third [Street] or Thirty-Second Street. The building came up for designation and I sort of winked at Kent and I asked should we recuse ourselves? And he said, no, no. Neither of us had ever heard of Emlen Littel, at that point.

Q: Sure. And have you investigated the lineage between you and he, if there is one? I mean, there must be.

Platt: Yes. I did up to a point. I have a cousin who is interested in lineage and passed it onto her and she sent some stuff, which I forward to Kent, but I think both of us got bored with it.

Q: Frankly, even if it's not true, it's a great story at the end of the day. The fact that you would be, or even could be, is fantastic.

Platt: No, I think we probably are.

Q: I'm sure you are. Do you have siblings that are involved in the—?

Platt: No.

Q: No. You don't have siblings, period?

Platt: I had two sisters. Both have died.

Q: And they never pursued design careers?

Platt: No.

Q: No. Did you grow up in New York?

Platt: I did.

Q: You did.

Platt: I grew up in Turtle Bay Gardens.

Q: Right. You mentioned Turtle Bay.

Platt: It's a designated landmark; it was a wonderful place to grow up. It's very fancy now and was probably always a little fancy, but when I was a kid there it was a wonderful place to play games like war, to have snow fights. I can remember playing in a sandbox, which became somebody's beautiful flowers and later we were hardly allowed to even look at them much less play in them. I can remember throwing a baseball through a window that I think belonged to, Dorothy [C.] Thompson, the writer, who was married to [Harry] Sinclair Lewis.

Q: Your wife told me a story about Turtle Bay and how it became Turtle Bay Gardens that somebody had spread a rumor. Would you mind recounting that?

Platt: Mrs. Walton Martin, who was a—I can't remember the family name, but it's well known. She had two daughters, one married Carl [A.L.] Binger, the other his brother Walter Binger. Anyway, Mrs. Walton Martin assembled the property, which was ten or eleven buildings on Forty-Ninth Street and the equivalent on Forty-Eighth Street. One of the ways she did it was to—she was quite ruthless; I guess people were much less sensitive then—she spread the rumor that she was assembling this to build a slaughterhouse. Slaughterhouses, really, really stink. They are horrible. The site of the United Nations was where there was a

great group of slaughterhouses I believe. I remember as a child if the wind blew from the southeast, which luckily, it didn't often, in other words coming up the East River, and it was a hot summer day, it really stank.

Q: Wow! So then her rumor well, it would have been true. It would have been terrible—

Platt: Nobody would have believed it today. They'd know it was a real estate trick and so on, but in those days people were innocent, apparently.

Q: People bought it.

Platt: A lot of them sold saying we better get out of here. Our house had been a convent, a Dominican convent. When I was young I remember rolling back the carpet and seeing how the floor was different in the living room at one part because that was where the alter had been.

Q: Oh, wow! Have you been to the house since?

Platt: No.

Q: I wonder who lives there.

Platt: We lived in it for years. I grew up in it. And we kept it from—I think the family bought in 1916 or ’17 and we sold it in ’84, so it was quite a few years.

Q: Oh, wow! That’s a long stretch. Amazing. So I think this is a good place for us to stop for tonight, if that’s okay with you.

Platt: Okay. Good.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe Session: 2

Interviewee: Charles A. Platt Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Benjamin Baccash Date: Unknown date, 2012

Q: So last time we met, you had said that if you were to look at the Landmarks Law, you might be able to pick out things, which your uncle had influenced or ideas which you supported.

Platt: Well, yes. I'm having troubles with names again. He working with the then counsel, the lawyer to the city—I can't remember who it was—and James Felt, who was advising the mayor and was the chair of the City Planning Commission, so he and Harmon Goldstone, really the three of them with the city's attorney, were working on the law. I mentioned last time one of the things was—they were involved in all of it, but one of the things that they were puzzled about was first of all how to deal with the terms of service, which they worked out very simply actually, but for some reason it took them a while to get to the solution. It was simply to have groups, classes so to speak, with overlapping terms so there never would be a time, supposedly, when a very politically inclined mayor could appoint an entire commission. Of course, the way around that was not to renew or to replace commissioners whose terms had expired so that those people who then remained, even though their official term had expired, could be replaced. So theoretically that thing of which he and Harmon I think were proud was actually a fallacy.

Q: Right. I hadn’t thought of that.

Platt: Nobody has ever done it quite that way, but I think Giuliani might have been in a position, to do, not the entire commission, by any means, but to appoint a majority if he wanted. And it was really it was really under Giuliani that the commission became political.

Q: With Jennifer Raab?

Platt: With Jennifer. Right. And it had under Kent and Gene Norman had been what Kent described as a virgin commission.

Q: Right.

Platt: Now what else was he particularly proud of? I may have thought of some things last time, but we were just generally pleased and very proud of the Landmarks Law in general. It was quite a thing to come up with. I don’t know where or who said we should have a landmarks law. I think it came from the Municipal Art Society, but I don’t know although the destruction of Pennsylvania Station certainly was the catalyst. I can’t attribute it to anybody nor could I attribute the original back in the early days of creation of the zoning ordinance, which also originated at the Municipal Art Society.

Q: You mentioned the lawyer at the time that your uncle was working with, with Harmon Goldstone and James Felt. Would that be Frank Gilbert?

Platt: Well, they were working with Frank Gilbert. Yes, definitely. And Geoffrey worked with Frank a great deal afterwards, because he remained as the counsel to the commission. It was the corporation counsel's office with whom they checked the terms of the law as they worked on them, especially in terms of the language. Frank may have helped very much in creating it and coming up with the ideas, but it was vetted with the city.

Q: So there was some serious cooperation going on.

Platt: Yes, definitely. Wagner had asked for this. I guess it came—I'm now thinking it may have been proposed to him and then he said yes, I want it and then let's get going.

Q: It's kind of curious to think about the Landmarks Law coming under Wagner and it's sort of drastically different in terms of administration now under a very different mayor. You had said something the last time about the difference between the intent of the law and how the law is actually carried out.

Platt: Yes. Geoffrey and Harmon were very much opposed to having many rules. They felt the beauty of the law—the thing I guess Geoffrey was most proud of, I don't know whether he originated it or who originated it, was the word appropriate. That the

judgment, the basic judgment, should be the appropriateness of whatever was proposed. Now I'm talking in this case about proposals to regulate not necessarily to designate, although you could extrapolate and include appropriateness as a reason for designation as well, but this is more in terms of the regulatory part of the commission's activities. They were very proud of the use of the word appropriate and it is, to my mind, in any case, never been surpassed as a criterion.

Q: It's such a malleable term. That's the beauty of it.

Platt: It's malleable. They understood that things would change over time. That people's understanding and appreciation especially would change with time. They wanted very much to create something flexible enough to accommodate reasonable change.

Q: It's very much a visionary act to have done that.

Platt: The reasons they were opposed to regulations was that they wanted to leave it open for judgment as to what was appropriate. Not if it's sixty-one feet it's not appropriate, if it's sixty feet it is appropriate, that kind of thing was I believe an anathema to them. That was exactly what they were trying to avoid. And I've had some arguments with people since who have wanted to impose those strict sorts of height limits in certain districts. "Thou shalt not create something more than sixty feet." That kind of thinking happens to come to mind. They felt that it could be sixty-one feet, one hundred feet, or two hundred feet if it was found to be appropriate.

Q: So they very much believed not in proscription but in the system that they were creating. That there were going to be Commissioners that had judgments and it was to be left for the experts to decide—

Platt: Exactly.

Q: —on a case-by-case basis.

Platt: Completely. And the word is experts, expertise, and a representative expertise, because of the way the commission was constituted with borough representation and certain disciplines, architecture, planning, so forth as well.

Q: I have some loose ends and then we're going to jump around probably a bit as we did last time.

Platt: Sure.

Q: Fast forwarding to I guess it was the late '80s, the Historic City Committee. You were a part of that.

Platt: Yes.

Q: Why was the committee formed?

Platt: Well, there are various interpretations, but actually, immodestly, or modestly, depending on what you're thinking of the committee, it was my idea. Gene Norman was under attack and I thought that the way to fend off the attacks really was to create some kind of a committee to explore to the positive aspects of what was going on and not the negative aspects and to deal with criticisms in that way. It was really to deflect the criticism. That I think is the proper word in my mind that it was created to deflect. Now, of course the minute it was created it began to be something else. It wasn't just the shield to deflect that I had imagined. It went way beyond anything I thought of and it became an instrument in itself for examining the commission, for bringing it up to date, for making certain reforms. There were a lot of administrative reforms, which David Todd carried out later.

Q: When you say Gene Norman was under attack.

A: People were attacking him for not designating enough, for designated the wrong things. Everything you can think of. The usual stuff for getting the certificates of appropriateness wrong, but I think most of it had to do with the designation process. I mean I believe that Gene's record as a designator, so to speak, was rather good. I think a great deal was designated under his chairmanship, but I don't know what the statistics are.

Q: There was another committee at that time formed by a different constituency.

Platt: Right.

Q: Right. I want to say it was called the Cooper Committee.

Platt: Yeah. Well, this was another reason why the Conklin Committee was important. I mean I thought the Cooper Committee was frankly full of it. It was completely wrong. It started in the wrong premise. I believe it had people who were behind it who actually wanted to do away with the whole landmarks idea or put it all under the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation]. In other words, get control of it because the Landmarks Commission was a rather independent body, independence with any kind of authority and stature is an anathema to a lot of politicians, and people who like to run things on their own terms.

Q: Sure.

Platt: It was too bad because there were some distinguished peopled involved. [Alexander] Cooper himself was smart and knowledgeable. I think Kent was also a part of that and in fact, signed on to some aspects of it. I think to this day if he was confronted with it, he would be embarrassed, but he had his reasons, I guess. I can't remember who else was on that committee.

Q: I couldn't say off hand. What community would you say the Cooper Committee represented? That might not be a fair question. My perception was that the Cooper Committee represented real estate interests.

Platt: It represented their interests and it was encouraged by them. Was it their creation? I don't really know.

Q: Okay. I mentioned last time that I wrote my grad thesis on enforcement of the Landmarks Law and in doing a bunch of research I compared some of the recommendations made by the Cooper Committee and some of the recommendations made by the Historic City Committee. The ones that stand out in my mind have to do with enforcement, just because that was what I was focusing on. Both had the same recommendation in terms of enforcement, which I thought was interesting. That the law needed to be enforced more or at least need more resources to be enforced. So while maybe these things have different interests, there were some universal truths between them, which I thought was interesting.

Platt: Well, that is interesting. I don't think I noticed that at the time. I was more interested in what the differences were than what any similarities were, so I was more troubled by the differences I should say.

Getting back to the formation of the History City Committee, not only was it mainly my idea, I was supposed to be the chair of the committee. I felt I could not do it at the time, I didn't want to, and asked wonderful Bill Conklin who said yes, he would do it.

Q: How did you choose the other members?

Platt: I think they, in many ways, sort of chose themselves, because they represented certain interests and were obvious names to be on a list. We were all concerned that they be reasonable people. That their main motive was the Landmarks Commission not some ulterior motive. In other words, they were fair-minded people. Now, of course everybody disagrees what fair-minded is. We had a list and I think not only were there categories, not official categories, but we knew how to be representative, but that we looked at the people on the list as well as individuals with sound judgment and some knowledge of what things were. I believe that all the members were vetted with the city.

Q: So did you care to meet regularly?

Platt: We met regularly. You've read the report from that obviously.

Q: I have.

Platt: Another thing I'm so grateful to Bill Conklin for is that he knew how to and was willing to organize things, that records would be kept with the idea that there would be a

published report at the end of it, all of that. I was too involved at the time with a lot of other things to do that.

Q: Sure.

Platt: Gene Norman felt threatened by this committee as well. It was a little hard at the beginning to persuade him that it was in his defense that it had been formed. It was very important to me, and I think to Bill Conklin, that there be representatives of the commission itself on the committee, which happened in the form of David Todd.

Q: Was that a matter of making sure that the recommendations or the opinions were grounded in reality?

Platt: Well, I wouldn't say that. Both Bill and I had served on the commission. David Todd was serving. There was no paucity of actual practical knowledge of how the commission was run. Who else? I mean, Dorothy Miner was. I'm trying to think who was a part of this.

Q: Cesar Pelli?

Platt: He was seldom there, if ever.

Q: Could be. Tony [Anthony C.] Wood?

Platt: Yes.

Q: Carol Clark.

Platt: Yes.

Q: Jack Kerr.

Platt: Yes.

Q: David Todd you mentioned. Those are the names that come to mind.

Platt: Yeah. I'm sorry again, you know, I have all this at the office.

Q: So you have a copy of the report. There are a few of them around. They're not in any libraries as far as I can tell, but it's good to know that there are. I know Tony has a copy.

Platt: Well, it should be in an archive, certainly.

Q: Absolutely. So now looking back on the Historic City Committee, do you think it had an effect?

Platt: Oh, sure. I think it did deflect. I think it was effective and, for some reason, it was rather extensive. We had hearings to which any number of people or anybody was invited who wanted to come and that made it much more legitimate. The Cooper Committee didn't really reach out that way. At least my impression was that it sort of met privately and came up with some policy. I guess we were funded by the [J.M.] Kaplan Fund and others?

But anyway, it was very important that we had funding and that we were able to have some secretarial help, set up those hearings and invite people, take notes and the rest of that. So it became much more of a real entity. Much more so than, I think, the Cooper Committee, and that lent the committee a lot of weight. At that particular time with the first major swing of the pendulum, as a reaction against the Landmarks Commission was taking place, Gene Norman became the target. And it did come, much of it, from the real estate world, which one didn't understand so much at the time.

Q: I think you can probably still say that.

Platt: Well, you could still, but I think there is a great deal more acceptance now. The Real Estate Board [of New York].

Q: Steven Spinola?

Platt: With, Spinola and Rick [Richard M.] Rosan. They weren't dumb and they weren't entirely sympathetic and they did see that it was certainly inevitable at the time and that there could be benefits to the real estate world. I mean I've had countless developers tell me that it increased the value of a lot of their properties.

Q: Sure. I mean, there are definitely strategic things that the Landmarks Law does for real estate developers, no question. It controls supply, drives up the price of developments in historic districts, that kind of thing.

Platt: I think they, at the time, the thinking was much more in terms of specific projects being thwarted rather than the general. There were specific places in their activities where they felt they would be thwarted, not threatened but thwarted, that they wouldn't be able to develop X, Y, or Z. Now as an architect, I've worked with many developers so I was very conscious of what their interests were and I felt—and I think I was able to be a moderately, reasonable voice in that—that their problems could be accommodated.

Q: Where did you physically meet with the committee?

Platt: We met at the Municipal Art Society, generally.

Q: And did members of the public actually show up?

Platt: At these hearings? Oh, yes there were a lot of them. I think there were a whole lot of notes. I think it was all recorded.

Q: Really?

Platt: I believe a lot of the testimony was recorded. Bill Conklin is around. You ought to talk to him.

Q: Yeah. I'm sure he is on the list actually of people to interview. I'll have to ask Tony about that. Do you remember any conversations or situations that stand out in your mind from those meetings or from dealing with other committee members?

Platt: No. I don't think there were many side discussions. We had these hearings, we had the meetings, which were recorded. Other than what we said at the meetings, I didn't have outside discussions. I think I talked to—was I vice chair of the committee? I don't even remember.

Q: That sounds right.

Platt: I think I was. Anyway, Bill and I would talk, but it was generally about sort of functional things. Should we have two meetings, should we have one meeting, you know.

Q: Ah. I'm definitely going to look into those recordings.

Platt: The public testimony, the invited public testimony, I think was recorded.

Q: Okay. Could be.

Platt: We certainly talked about it. Whether it ended up being that way or not. It's terrible I have such a weak memory of the past.

Q: Well, it's a long time ago.

Q: Jumping around again, the Gracie Mansion Conservancy.

Platt: Yes.

Q: When did you become involved with that organization?

Platt: I'm trying to think was I still on the commission at the time. I believe I was, which would mean it was around '80, '81. Koch was mayor. Joan [K.] Davidson was the mover behind the conservancy with both energy and money. What was your question beyond that?

Q: Generally, what was your involvement?

Platt: Well, I was on the commission, so it was difficult for me to become the architect, so called architect, for the renovation. I don't think I was the right person to do it anyway.

Q: Why do you say that?

Platt: Because a lot of it had to—I'm a judge about historic preservation and restoration, but I wasn't then, an active practitioner. In other words, I didn't know what labs to go to, to have things tested. I wasn't educated technically as a preservationist. So I didn't know the sort of professional thinking about what should be done. Bob [Robert E.] Meadows was hired to be the design/preservation architect.

Anyway, what I decided to do was to become kind of a supervising architect because we had a whole lot of different entities involved there. We ended up with decorators and others, but there were city people, there [was] Meadows, there were engineers, historians, parks, and police, and it needed somehow to be coordinated. So I was able to become the, I think the term is, supervising architect. Also at various times maybe I was called coordinating architect. And it was my job really to see that everybody was doing the right thing and so on, but I was really sort of a critic. I had a certain amount of authority so actually I had to pass on everything.

Q: Uh-huh. So you weren't necessarily—there weren't any new design aspects.

Platt: I didn’t make new designs. I may have, working with Bob Meadows, sometimes, because we were both architects, use my pencil and say, why don’t you do it this way or that way. But he really was the one who was responsible for designing the changes and creating the documents to get the contractors to do the work.

Q: Okay. Shifting gears again, same time period. You mentioned last time Diane Coffey.

Platt: Yes.

Q: And you said you didn’t know her while she was Koch’s chief of staff, but you came to know her later.

Platt: I got to know her while she was Koch’s chief of staff through Gracie Mansion.

Q: Oh.

Platt: There was no question, on the team, she represented the mayor.

Q: Okay. Did she have a political career after being Koch’s chief of staff?

Platt: She’s always had a political career. She started out working for him when he was a congressman in Washington [D.C.] and then went on and became his chief of staff in the

city and has gone on to be, I would think, an influential person in administrations ever since; maybe with the exception of Giuliani.

Q: Okay. Yeah, that was a new name to me last time, so it's good to have it. Another person, which we touched on, was Margaret Tuft, who was at the commission.

Platt: Right. Margaret, she was the director of the regulation side of the commission. Marjorie Pearson was the director of the designation side. I forget what the two sides were called at the time, but one was regulating and the other was designating/research. Margaret Tuft was the person who was there when I was first on the commission. She later left and went out west. She was very dedicated and very knowledgeable, a quite wonderful person, and had a nice even hand. She was able to deal with—she cared a lot about buildings—and was also able to deal with people quite well, at least I thought so.

Q: Which can be a tough balance, especially in the position of the commission.

Platt: Yes. I got along with her very well because she needed help from time to time from an additional practical and practicing architect.

Q: Okay.

Platt: Bill Conklin was a practical and practicing architect, but I got to be, quite close to her for a while anyway. I don't know what Bill's relationship with her was. She would come to me for advice and maybe him too.

Q: So speaking of regulating the law or regulating in the name of the law, we were talking about how its difficult to designate culturally and historically significant buildings, landscapes, that sort of thing, and how, even in the law today, there's no perfect way of doing it. How would you improve that process of regulating culturally—

Platt: Regulating or designating?

Q: Designating and regulating. I think both.

Platt: I wouldn't want to improve it beyond the way it exists. It requires thought. It requires study to find historical data and to understand it, to research it. But to make a process or impose regulations—basically I agree with the founders of the law that that's to be avoided. I agree very much.

Q: So it needs that malleability.

Platt: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: That makes sense to me. Again, we're going from topic to topic.

Platt: Yes. That's fine.

Q: A few weeks ago, I read an article in a local newspaper about a man named Peter Detmold. Is that a familiar name to you?

Platt: Yes.

Q: Maybe you can tell me about him, if you knew him, his role in preservation.

Platt: I don't know what his role in preservation was. I know him for an entirely different reason. I grew up in a place called Turtle Bay Gardens. Do you know where that is?

Q: I do.

Platt: His mother, who, because I was a child at the time, I only knew as Mrs. Detmold, ran the Gardens for the Turtle Bay Association, which was an actual body, incorporated, it had meetings. I remember my mother going to those meetings. But Mrs. Detmold ruled the place with an iron hand and Peter was her son. Now I don't know what his—as I said, I don't know what his role in preservation was. I remember that he was murdered. And I remember his being involved very much in the preservation of Turtle Bay Gardens and the environment. I knew that he became involved in preservation as such, but other than

that, that's all I know. And my memory of him really is completely related to the Gardens and to his murder.

Q: The article that I was—

Platt: I know exactly where he was murdered, the spot.

Q: It was on his doorstep, right?

Platt: Yes, on Forty-Eighth Street.

Q: The article suggested that—or the article interviewed somebody that suggested that his murder had to do with his opposition of a development in the area. I don't know how far fetched that is or how accurate that could be. I'm gathering that's not your sense.

Platt: It certainly isn't my sense, no, it was more general. He was murdered at a time, it was one of the worst times certainly in the modern world in the city when crime was all over. In this building where we're sitting today, people came in and attacked people in the hallways, in the elevator, they were attacked on the street. I was held up at gunpoint, tied to a radiator, threatened with strangulation, and that all happened at about that time. So the idea that he was murdered, it's pretty far fetched to attach it to his thwarting some development. It never occurred to me that it was anything but just general problems of crime in the city.

Q: This isn’t really related to our conversation now, but just because you mentioned, you experienced a home invasion of sorts in this apartment?

Platt: No.

Q: No. Elsewhere?

Platt: It was in my office.

Q: Wow! It was a random—?

Platt: Yeah. There were a couple of guys who were addicts probably. They came into the building, a twenty-five-story building, and they apparently took one of the elevators, went to the top, and began walking down through the building and trying doors and our door was open.

Q: Gees. Terrifying!

Platt: Well, it was a little scary, yeah.

Q: A little. I would have been terrified.

Platt: Well, you don't—you're not terrified at the moment, because you're trying to figure out how to deal with what's happening.

Q: Right.

Platt: It's a funny thing. Your behavior is odd. We were architects, we didn't have anything. We had forty-four dollars worth of postage stamps that was it. And these two guys, they came in, the situation was—I don't remember what day of the week it was, I think it was a Monday. This was before everybody carpeted everything, we had kind of grubby old tile, asbestos tile floors, which needed to be waxed every once in a while or buffed and waxed, and we had asked the building for a waxing so we were expecting some guys to come.

The door opened and these two guys appeared and we thought oh, well, here are the guys to do the floor. They came in and then we noticed, or I noticed, that they were coming with a purpose way beyond somebody who was there to do the floors. Our office was one hundred feet long and open. The entrance door was at one end, my then partner and I were sitting at the other end of the office. They came part way down and then they began to walk fast. One of them was holding a paper bag. He reached into the paper bag, took out a gun, and pointed it right at my forehead and said, "Put up your hands." He didn't say, stick em' up. He said, "Put up your hands and don't do anything and you won't get hurt." Both of us said "We won't do anything."

Q: Right. Who was your partner at the time?

Platt: David Smotrich. He's dead now. They then took us down to the entry end of the office and tied us up, tied us to each other, tied our hands and tied us to a radiator, and then they began to ask questions. They said, "Okay. Where's the box?" Of course neither of us knew immediately what they meant by the box. They meant the cash box. And we didn't have a cash box. We had the postage stamps. That was it. And then one of them said, "Okay. Where's the camera?" And my partner said, "Oh, I think it's over in that thing." I said, "No, no, no, it's over there," and then we began to argue with each other. We suddenly realized that that wasn't the right thing to do *[laughs]*.

Q: Right. Right.

Platt: Then it got a little bit tense. It's instinctive you don't think I need to break the ice, you just do it. So instinctively, I felt that I had to break the ice. So I looked at one of these guys and I said, "Don't take the typewriter." Which was a huge, big, gray, old-fashioned IBM Selectric typewriter. It was a big, bulky thing. They couldn't have taken it anyway. I said, "Please don't take the typewriter, we need it. We have to get a report out tonight." That was why we were there in fact. And this guy looked at me as if I was crazy, but that was the point. And he said to his partner, "Let's get out of here." This was after a while, because they had been looking around at various things and that was when they found the stamps and the rest of it.

Q: What report did you have to get out?

Platt: I don't remember. And they left. We were able to untie ourselves pretty quickly. We were a little reluctant to do it because we were afraid they might be coming back and if we had untied ourselves that that might create a problem, but we did it. And of course then we went and locked the door successfully and I guess we both got untied and we were a little shaken. We didn't have any money. My office was on Forty-Fifth Street. My family lived at Turtle Bay on Forty-Ninth Street. My wife and children—it was summer—were away in New Hampshire and I was supposed to go to my parents for supper that night. I can remember calling them and I said, "I'm sorry. I'm going to be late. I've been tied up." *[Laughs]* I had enough sense left to treat it with some humor.

Q: Yeah *[laughs]*.

Platt: Anyway, I went to my parents and I had a really strong drink. One really strong drink of whiskey at dinner, went home, went to bed, immediately went to sleep, and then suddenly woke up, and there was that guy pointing at me again, I thought.

Q: Oh, god!

Platt: And then I couldn't get back to sleep. That was when it hit me.

Q: Oh! I thought he was actually there. Wow!

Platt: That's when it hit me. I thought he was there too.

Q: I bet.

Platt: For a minute or two.

Q: I bet. That's quite the story.

Platt: I felt like—you feel like—you realize how fragile you are. So I remember walking around the city as if I were an eggshell. An eggshell, I felt so vulnerable.

Q: Yeah. It's a rattling experience. I remember—not that it was nearly as traumatic—but in my last year of grad school my apartment was robbed. I was at the library and they just kicked in my door and ransacked everything. It was such a violation.

Platt: They did that here too, in the apartment.

Q: It's the kind of thing you don't realize how much that would bother you until it happens.

Platt: Yeah.

Q: Getting back to preservation and what other people might call a crime of a different sort. You had mentioned you had a strong opinion about the Manufacturer's Hanover Bank case, 510 Fifth Avenue.

Platt: Well, I can't say I had a strong opinion. I had an opinion, which was that the design, as proposed by the developer of it, wasn't as necessary as they portrayed it for the way they wanted it to function. I was not convinced by their rationale, at all convinced by it, particularly to change the escalators from the beautiful way they were originally.

It was interesting to me because I got to appreciate how finely tuned that design was. Even though you're an architect, you don't often—unless you're really thinking about something—understand how, Gordon Bunshaft in this case, had worked things out and how he wanted them to be—the entrances, the escalators, the Bertoia screen at the back, all of that, the location of the vault door facing Fifth Avenue. I just felt that Skidmore [Owings & Merrill]'s recent design for it wasn't all necessary. I'm sure it was asked for, but I'm sure they could have done just almost as well by preserving the escalators and it was worthy of being preserved.

If you ask an architect to do something then they feel they have to do something. I only once in my career, we were just doing some office planning for the New York State Urban Development Corporation and they came and complained that it wasn't working right. And I said, "Well, rather than redesign it, why don't you just move this guy over here and put someone by that window over there and then it will work better." And talked

myself out of a job. But that rarely happens and I think Skidmore was a little bit swept up in having to do something and having to do it well, which they tried very hard to do.

I didn't like the replacement for the Bertoia screen. I thought it wasn't anywhere near as good. I understood it was a heartfelt attempt to do a contemporary piece of wall sculpture of a kind. I also thought there was something very fine about the way the original entry had been done with the drapes. I thought too that there was a way of accommodating the division at the back rather than at the right angles to Fifth Avenue. The second floor the way it overhung a little bit related it to the first floor, I think they did come around to handling that better but their original design was not the right approach.

The Preservation Committee at the Municipal Art Society is a pretty good critic. There are a lot of thoughtful people there.

Q: Oh, sure. Absolutely. What are your feelings about the settlement that's been reached, the agreement?

Platt: I lost track of it. I don't really know what the final agreement was or is.

Q: They have agreed not to build a tower on top of the building.

Platt: Are we talking about Manufactures at Forty-Third Street?

Q: Yeah. And Fifth.

Platt: And Fifth.

Q: Right.

Platt: Well, that went by the board rather early I think.

Q: They agreed to petition the Landmarks Commission to expand the interior designation. They're going to return the Bertoia sculpture, and then there was also a cash settlement paid to the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation, which I was surprised by.

Platt: I'm surprised too. I didn't know. I never knew about the terms. I mean, all I knew how was it was physically going to go ahead. I knew the Bertoia screen was coming back up.

Q: I mean, I thought it was shocking that, you know, a large company, a company with, I think, a lot of influence, decided to settle with a small community group basically, a small group of people.

Platt: In looking back, it was amazing. Actually, it was amazing.

Q: Yes. Now I have two broad questions, kind of spanning the decades. Who would you say have been the greatest contributors to preservation over the years in your recollection?

Platt: God, what a question. It's like who is your favorite painter. I think Giorgio Cavaglieri had a tremendous influence because he undertook things, as the Landmarks Commission later would have architects do; he did it on his own. I don't think he was always the most brilliant designer, but I think he was very influential in creating the right approach.

Q: So he was ahead of his time in a sense.

Platt: I think he was ahead of his time.

Q: Are there others?

Platt: At one point—Giorgio never forgave me, I thought he understood, but he never forgave me—when I was on the commission, I voted against a project of his, which was a redoing of a building on Madison Avenue, because I thought it could be better and I knew it would be approved anyway. So I just thought it might help him, it might give him a little more freedom. He didn't take it that way at all. He didn't take it that way. He took it as an insult and he never—we were friendly, but he never quite forgave me.

Harmon Goldstone, definitely was a great contributor, as was, I think, my Uncle Geoffrey. I think Harmon was more born a preservationist. I think Geoffrey had preservation thrust upon him. Although because of his family inheritance and architectural tradition, he probably was born partly that way. I'm in the same family, but I was not.

Q: To continue with the broad strokes here, in the evolution of the civic sector—

Platt: Wait a minute. I did tell you about interviewing Mayor Wagner last time, didn't I?

Q: No.

Platt: Well, as part of our work at Gracie Mansion, Diane Coffey and I interviewed all the past mayors who were still alive, except for John Lindsay who wanted to have his wife interviewed instead. I guess he thought the subject unworthy.

Q: Interesting.

Platt: Anyway, in interviewing Wagner, he didn't know that my uncle was Geoffrey Platt. We sat down, we began to talk about things, and we were talking about preservation of Gracie Mansion. And he said, "You know, I think the most lasting or importantly lasting effect of my administration is going to be the Landmarks Law." That was quite a statement.

Q: Absolutely. And this is in the early '80s when you were involved.

Platt: Yeah.

Q: And did you tell him then that your uncle—and he remembered?

Platt: Yeah. Sure.

Q: And what was his reaction?

Platt: Well, he said, “I remember your uncle well. Fine man”

Q: Are those interviews recorded?

Platt: I wrote them up, but they’re just as memoranda not as official minutes. The Gracie Mansion Conservancy has them somewhere.

Q: Okay. That’s good to know. What are some of the high and low points of the evolution of the civic sector in New York?

Platt: What do you mean?

Q: Groups like MAS and the advocacy community, what were some of their more and less effective times? Things which you saw as successes. Others which were perhaps failures.

Issues which maybe should not have become as big as they did or things which people should not have become involved in and they did.

Platt: That's tough. You know, I think that's something I need to think about. I can't shoot from the hip on that one.

Q: Sure.

Platt: There certainly were eras. The '80s were a very good time for the Municipal Art Society. I go so far back with the Municipal Art Society that I first began working with it in 1962, I became a director in 1965, and except for the period when I was on the Landmarks Commission, I have been a director ever since. I would say that I've seen it go from a staff of two half people, maybe, to a huge staff. I don't know what it is at the moment, its down, but it was up to forty people or so. Certainly, its enlargement, its increase, as a civic group, reflects what was happening in the city as a whole and what people were taking as important.

Q: Is that—are you saying just in terms of numbers or—?

Platt: Yeah, pretty much. Certainly money and numbers.

Q: Or ideology?

Platt: I like very much what's happening now. Would I do it exactly this way? No. Would I have done it exactly the way it was done in the past? No.

Q: Okay. And then the last question is you've mentioned having all of these papers. You have the memos of your interviews with the different mayors. Do you have plans for them?

Platt: I don't think I have a lot of stuff that other people don't have. As I've said, I've made a point of making sure the Conservancy had that memo. I'm very much a member of my family who we're famous for never writing letters and never writing anything down. So there is a lot of stuff that was never written.

Q: Sure. Well, that's my last question.

Platt: There was a famous time in the family when—I had rarely gotten a letter from my father and there was a time I was away at school and I got a letter from him on his office stationary. It was a little piece of office memo paper. It said, William Geoffrey Platt Architects at the top. And it simply said, "Why haven't you written your mother?"

Q: I think that says it all. I don't know if you have anything you would want to talk about that we haven't touched on.

Platt: No, in terms of sort of archives and history, no. I have various complaints about the current behavior of the Landmarks Commission, but it's all friendly.

Q: That’s welcome.

Platt: I think maybe at the outset of our conversation I mentioned these things. I think that there is a major mistake—and I happen to have suffered from this personally, so it’s very much on my mind—in the fact that I believe that Geoffrey and Harmon they believed that once something was approved in the regulation process as appropriate, it was then regulated as if it were a landmark or part of a district or whatever it was. And the commission does not seem to act that way now. The case in point was a little building that we designed on Seventh Avenue. It was a little triangular building. At the time, it had quite a bit of attention and it was very well thought of by many people, including the Landmarks commissioners and the staff. I remember Brian Hogg, former director of preservation, saying it was his favorite building that had ever come before the Commission.

Q: Seventh Avenue and what street?

Platt: Christopher Street. It’s a little triangular building. It’s gone now.

Q: Okay.

Platt: And I confronted Bob Tierney the other day about it. I think that Mark Silberman’s current thinking is completely wrong. The law intended, and the founders intended, that if it

was found to be appropriate, as part of a district or a building, it was then supposed to be protected and regulated the same way.

Q: So what happened to the triangular building at Seventh Avenue and Christopher?

Platt: I've just been told, I've never seen it—this is all within the last few weeks or a couple of months—it was completely changed.

Q: Okay. Oh. I haven't been over there in some time so I couldn't say.

Platt: When I originally presented—I was off the commission. I presented it, Gene Norman was the chair, and I was a little bit naughty because I made a diagram, both sides of Seventh Avenue for several blocks. It was coded and the details were coded in color and so on, so you could make comparisons to doorways, to windows, to cornices, to architraves, to all kinds of things up and down the avenue.

Q: Sure.

Platt: I snuck the design of the new building in. And when I presented it to the commission, I said, "The new building is in here, but you have to find out which one it is. I'm not going to tell you."

Q: What was their response?

Platt: They laughed but they couldn’t find it.

Q: Appropriate. That’s great. Well, I’m all out of questions I think. This has been good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]