INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Joseph Rosenberg

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Joseph Rosenberg conducted by Interviewer Portia Dyrenforth on October 17, 2007. 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.

Joseph Rosenberg first became involved in preservation in his spare time as a Brooklyn Heights resident and soon became one of the city's most dedicated preservationists. In this 2007 interview with Pratt graduate student Portia Dyrenforth, Rosenberg discusses his leadership of the Historic Districts Council (HDC) and involvement in the campaign to preserve Midtown theaters. Tapped by then-Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) chair Kent Barwick to lead the HDC in the late 1970s, Rosenberg first details the major aspects of the HDC's work in that era, the factors behind its split from the Municipal Art Society in 1985, and the evolving relationship of the HDC and the LPC. Rosenberg then describes his work on the campaigns to win landmark designation for Radio City Music Hall and the historic Broadway theaters. The conversation addresses the dynamics involved in designating theaters as interior landmarks and the impact that these designations had on the later development of "New 42nd Street" and the theater district.

Joseph Rosenberg, a former biochemist turned preservationist, parlayed his love for architecture into several successful campaigns to save New York's historic sites. Founding the Showpeople's Committee to Save Radio City Music Hall to defend the proposed destruction of several Broadway theaters, including Radio City Music Hall, Rosenberg defended the existing landscape of Midtown and Times Square against encroaching redevelopment. Rosenberg also is the former head of the Brooklyn Heights Association's Landmarks Preservation Committee and led the Historic Districts Council (HDC) in the late 1970s. Leading the Council through a vibrant period for historic district designations, Rosenberg was instrumental in the designation of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, the Fort Greene Historic District, and the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, among almost eighty others. Rosenberg received the Historic District Council's Grassroots Preservation Award in 2004.

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Interviewee: Joseph Rosenberg | Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Portia Dyrenforth | Date: October 17, 2007

Q: This is Portia Dyrenforth interviewing Joe [Joseph] Rosenberg and we'll get started. The date is Wednesday October 17th. The interview is taking place at the Neighborhood Preservation Center located at 232 East 11th Street, New York, New York.

Rosenberg: Okay.

Q: I read that you moved to New York after receiving a PhD in biochemical research at Temple U [University] Penn, and then you went to the Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

Rosenberg: Right, right.

Q: So of course I was curious, what lead you to historic preservation?

Rosenberg: Well actually, it was moving to New York. Which was a fluke, because I originally was supposed to accept a postdoctoral research position in Davis, California, at the University of California at Davis. Then I was called for an interview for someone at the Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx and he was more prestigious. As it turns

out, the guy at California won the Nobel Prize, but not at that point. So I came to New York to be with him at Einstein, not to come to New York.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: When I was coming from Philadelphia, I had no interest in architecture at all. At least I didn't think I did. Then I came to New York. I think I was here for three days and I knew that this was where I wanted to live forever. That said, I was living in the Bronx for the first year and a half, near Einstein. When that was finished I moved to Brooklyn Heights. Something about the architecture in Brooklyn Heights, it did something to me and I got very interested in architecture. I started getting involved with Brooklyn Heights Association and Otis Pearsall from their Landmarks Preservation Committee. Eventually, I was asked to be head of the committee, so one thing just led to another. I started by being head of the Landmarks Preservation Committee at the Brooklyn Heights Association. I started working along with the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC], and that's what got me interested. I just got more and more interested in architecture and New York, and less and less interested in medical biochemistry.

Q: I see. So what was your first preservation battle?

Rosenberg: Well, the first preservation battle was in Brooklyn Heights on Meineke Street. There was a restaurant that was, until just recently, a Greek restaurant. They had

an outdoor café and they wanted to enclose it. This was at a time when the Landmarks Preservation Commission was very lenient at issuing permits to enclose outdoor cafes. It was happening all over the [Grennwich] Village, but this was the first application in Brooklyn Heights. This was actually before I became involved in the Brooklyn Heights Association, but as an individual I went down to the landmarks hearing and I gave a very impassioned speech about why the outdoor café should be left open. Meanwhile, someone from the Brooklyn Heights Association came up to me and said, "Look, you really gave a good speech, but I just want to tell you that the Landmarks Commission has always approved such permits, so don't be to discouraged if you don't win. Okay?" It turns out that they turned down the application. That's when the Brooklyn Heights Association asked me to become the head of their preservation committee. So that was the first battle.

Q: I read that you were the co-chair of the Historic Districts Council [HDC]. I was wondering how it was first organized and how you first got involved?

Rosenberg: Sure. Well, the Historic Districts Council—this was way before I got involved—was started by Kent Barwick the first time when he first became head of the Municipal Art Society [MAS]. The original purpose was to get members of historic districts together to go down to landmarks hearings and to support the commission for a higher budget. Apparently, over the years it had become inactive. I had never heard of it. Kent, I don't even know now what I was doing or why he would come to me. I know what happened, okay. Kent became the commissioner, the chairman of Landmarks

Commission. He was no longer with MAS. I got to know him through dealing with the Landmarks Commission for the Brooklyn Heights Association. I don't know why but, Kent pulled me aside and told me that he had started this Historic Districts Council. He explained that it had become inactive and he asked if I would reactivate it. He said the reason he wanted that was that he wanted to have an organization that was a thorn in his side that would help him—I mean, the original purpose was just for budgetary to help the commission get more money. Well, he wanted that but he said, "The real reason I want this is I want a group to make sure we're doing—we the commission, is doing a good job with the historic districts." So would I reactivate it? So I reactivated it.

Q: Can you describe the atmosphere at that time at the Historic District Council; the attitudes and the focuses?

Rosenberg: I would say in the early stages there were far fewer historic districts, so I think our focus at that time was to do what Kent wanted. When it was reactivated, we were part of the Municipal Art Society. I think that's the way it was when Kent started it. It was a part of the Municipal Art Society and then Kent was chairman of the commission. Margot Wellington was head of the Municipal Art Society. We were trying to help districts that want to be designated landmarks. Districts that hadn't yet been designated or maybe hadn't even thought about it. It was twofold—the original thing was budgetary.

Then, we took on working with designating historic districts and being a thorn in the side of the Landmarks Commission, which is what Kent wanted. We also took on trying to get additional districts designated. There definitely was resistance from the commission to do that. There was also resistance from people living in the districts. We weren't sure—the Municipal Art Society seemed to be becoming less and less interested in preservation, and more and more interested in the city of New York as a whole. So the Historic Districts Council decided to split and become independent. I think after that happened that the Municipal Art Society became as I think of it is today. Less and less preservation oriented and more and more just New York.

Q: I read in 1983 that you talked to a *New York Times* reporter, Tom Jackman, regarding your involvement in HDC. You said, "We talk problems over with the commission and set up specific programs." What kind of programs did you—

Rosenberg: Isn't that funny. The major program we set up with them was to help them with the bottlenecks in getting neighborhoods designated as historic districts. One of the bottlenecks was the commission just had so many personnel. They couldn't really do the designation reports. They just couldn't. So we set up a system where people living in a historic district would be taught how to do designation reports, and then would do the designation reports under the guidance of the commission. Basically, they—the people living in historic districts would do the time-consuming work and they would just be getting less time-consuming guidance from the commission. So I would say that, from

what I remember, that's the major program that came out of our working with the commission. The major collaborative program.

Q: As an advocate, when you were setting up—what were some of your frustrations with some, maybe some of the community groups that were setting up districts?

Rosenberg: I think first of all the frustration with the neighborhood towards the Historic Districts Council is the Historic Districts Council didn't always feel a neighborhood who wanted to be designated a landmark would be worthy of it. So that was reverse frustration. Our frustration—oh, another program we set up with the commission was to formally keep after the commission when there were violations. The HDC put pressure on the commission, with the commission knowing we were doing this to deal with the designation and violations. One of the frustrations was having to deal with people in a community that didn't want designation. It was one thing not wanting designation but not wanting it for reasons that we knew weren't right but, then some were right.

Q: I've read a lot about the Cooper Committee. Do you have any memory of it?

Rosenberg: Oh my god.

Q: What was the atmosphere like during this time?

Rosenberg: I hadn't thought of that for a long time. *[crosstalk]*

Q: What I read is basically, it was right after the Coty and Rizzoli buildings were landmarked. There was also a building that the façade that had been torn down at night—

Rosenberg: On 40th Street.

Q: Yes. I guess there was a lot of controversy about the landmarking of those buildings and the stained glass.

Rosenberg: That's an empty lot to this day.

Q: Really?

Rosenberg: Yes. They never built on that. They tore it down and they never built.

Q: I guess Mayor Koch appointed the Cooper Committee headed by Peter Cooper to reevaluate the Landmarks Commission's decisions. A lot of people felt that Landmarks [Preservation Law] was really in danger. What had been done so far was going to be in danger again.

Rosenberg: You're absolutely right. You know, I completely forgot about it and I still don't remember the details. There were two things, one occurred later. That building on 40th Street, and then the Mayfair Hotel on Central Park West. They stripped the façade where Fifteen Central Park West is going up right now. They did it so that they would be

able to tear it down. I don't think that was a part of—that was just another indication. I remember when that happened, and I just—I don't remember details.

Q: That's okay. When the HDC separated as a separate entity from the Municipal Art Society, post-1986, how did things change? What spurred HDC going independent?

Rosenberg: The spurring was not feeling that the Municipal Art Society was as interested in preservation. When we broke away, I think our biggest problem was changing our attitude and having to raise money, which took a very long time. I'm not even so sure that that it was the best move. I think that might still be a problem, but that was a big problem then. We had an independent board. Getting the independent board was no problem. One of the problems was—and I think still is—is that everyone on the board is a preservationist and there's no money on the board. The people who are preservationists don't have contacts for money. It's more of a board to run the organization, and less of a board to support the organization.

That's the way it was, only it was bigger problem then. It was an all-volunteer committee, we didn't have any executive director or anything. Now, that was a big step and it took a few years to realize that we if we were going to be really be effective, we had to have an executive director. It couldn't be just a pure volunteer committee, but it took a while to come to that. It was big. I remember when the first executive director was hired, it was a just such a shock that we had to pay a salary. Even though it wasn't a

high—I mean, it was a high salary for the organization, but it wasn't a high salary for an executive director.

Q: Did you feel like once you were independent of MAS you could exert more influence?

Rosenberg: I don't remember MAS holding us back from anything, so I don't know. I do know that the organization became more effective. The reason it became more effective was MAS was getting less and less involved in preservation, and the Historic Districts Council realized that they were the only game in town. They had become the only game in town because MAS wasn't. The Landmarks Conservancy had already started but they were going on a different track. They were more interested in getting preservation renovation projects done and they weren't keeping after the Landmarks Commission. Once we realized that we were the only organization that was going to keep after the Landmarks Commission—actually, then things started changing between the Landmarks Commission and HDC.

The programs for designation that we had set up, the teaching programs worked well for a lot of designations. I mean, we went from having a handful of districts to having you know, maybe fifty at the time, sixty. During this period there was a big spurt and part of it was because this program. Then the program started dying out and the Landmarks Commission started doing more of the work again. Personally, I think they found that it

took them as much time to teach people how to do the designation then to do the designations themselves *[laughs]*.

Q: Yes.

Rosenberg: I think what happened there was the HDC was becoming more and more an adversary of the commission than a friend. I don't think that would have happened with Municipal Art Society, had they been a part of the Municipal Art Society still. Once they realized they were the only name in the game, then they realized that they there were certain things they had to keep after the commission about. Because they were the only ones that were going to do it.

The commission, you know likes the HDC, and I think they still do—they sent people before every hearing. They would go down to the commission and the people in the commission would explain everything that was coming up in the hearing, so the HDC could have an opinion at the hearing. Then they would always have an opinion. Of course, very often the opinion didn't sit well with members of the commission. I think what was happening was that HDC would not necessarily comment positively but would comment negatively. As far as the commission was concerned, they were just a negative organization. I also think that as time went on, they started listening less and less to the HDC.

But one time, in the beginning, when the HDC appeared at every hearing, they would really listen to them. If you're the one being talked to and someone's always saying negative things, you're going to stop listening. I think that's what happened.

Q: Right.

Rosenberg: It's not that they weren't influential and I think they still are, but the relationship changed.

Q: I understand. I found it very exciting—that you were a large part responsible for the feat of designating over thirty-six Broadway theaters. Which is very incredible. I was curious, what drew you to the cause?

Rosenberg: Actually, it was Kent [Barwick]. I was always interested in movie theaters, movie palaces, like the big ornate type. I was always interested in it. I was in an organization called the Theater Historical Society, that basically didn't try to save the theaters, but it tried to take pictures and record the theaters. Then I was in an organization called the League of Historic American Theaters, which were mostly executive directors of historic theaters around the country. They were actually interested in saving theaters. I was in both groups and Kent knew it. This was at the time I was beginning at the Historic District Council.

Rockefeller Center announced that they were going to demolish Radio City Music Hall. A theater had never been designated a landmark, either interior or exterior. Except maybe Carnegie Hall, which is not theater but an auditorium. The Landmarks Commission had never done anything. Though he never said, it, keep in mind that Nelson Rockefeller, governor vice president, was one of the major Rockefeller brothers and he wanted the thing to go. This was never said, but reading between the lines I have a feeling that Rockefeller went to [Mayor Edward I.] Koch and said, "Make sure Radio City is not designated a landmark, because we want to tear it down." I have a feeling, I was never told this, that Koch went to Kent, who was head of the commission, and said, "Lay off Radio City if you want to have a budget." I have a feeling that Kent—I know that Kent came to me because he was told to lay off. However, he wanted outsiders to put so much pressure on him that he would have to tell Koch, "I can't, you know. I have to hold a hearing. I just have to do it." He came to me and he told me. He said, would I help with the designation report and would I get publicity to put pressure on them.

So I organized a Peoples' Committee to Save Radio City [Showpeople's Committee to Save Radio City Music Hall]. The reason for the publicity was that we realized in the Grand Central case that publicity was very important. That was with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. I had gone to Jacqueline and she was not interested in getting involved with Radio City Music Hall. It wasn't her thing. She took Grand Central apart and later on she took St. Bart's apart, but Radio City wasn't in it. We knew the importance of publicity. I just figured getting the press together—if it's not Jackie, it could be the Rockettes. Anyway, Radio City was designated a landmark. Then as soon as Radio City was

designated a landmark, the owner of the New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street announced that he was going to demolish that theater. Kent told me and I worked on that designation.

Q: Was this the late ‘80s?

Rosenberg: No, this was in the—Radio City Music Hall was in the late ‘70s. Grand Central I think was ’77, and Radio City might have been ’79.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: Then a little bit after that was the New Amsterdam. We got the New Amsterdam—that was designated a landmark. A few years later it was announced—no, almost eight years earlier, but that was before anyone really woke up. It was announced that five theaters would be demolished for a new hotel.

Q: The Marriott Hotel?

Rosenberg: Marriott, what’s now the Marriott Marquis. No one listened, no one did anything about it. They had eight years to do it, including me. Finally, it looks like it’s really going to happen. When it finally looks like it’s really going to happen, after doing nothing for eight years, we start. I go over to Actors’ Equity [Actors’ Equity Association], and I said, “We have to save these theaters. Let’s start.” We started an

organization called Save the Theaters Inc. Our initial mission was to prevent the demolition of the five theaters. It was three Broadway theaters, a movie theater, and another theater that was used as a store but it still looked like a theater. We lost. Kent was chairman of the commission and he did nothing to save the theaters. Mainly because he was told by Koch to lay off. It was an urban development project and the City felt it was very important to stop the decline of Times Square, which was really declining. In retrospect, he was right. That's in retrospect. We try to stop the demolition of the theaters and we fail. The theaters are demolished. Kent is really unhappy, because he knew—from my perspective, that he couldn't have done anything differently. I mean, I am sure Koch said, "You cannot stop the demolition of the theaters." These plans were in the working for eight years and no one said anything. Then suddenly, right before it's going to happen, we can't break promises, we can't. We had promised that this was going to happen. If people had demonstrated eight years ago, then maybe we could have changed our mind or altered things, but we couldn't now.

Kent knew that the commission should have done something different—should have tried to save the theaters. He was embarrassed. There was a lot of bad publicity for the City for allowing it to happen. In retrospect, it made it easier for us. I mean, we were furious with Kent. We were furious and I am sure a few four letter words passed by our lips. Anyway, Kent really wanted to make up for it. He really did, so we started our committee when we had just lost. We stayed in existence and our next thing is we went to Kent and we said, "Look, you can make up for it by allowing us to help you do the designation reports for the remaining Broadway theaters. So that this will not happen again." At that time,

public sentiment had really changed, and people realized there are only so many times you could lose seven theaters when you have thirty-five. Seven more times and you're done. Not that they were all Broadway theaters. We did the designation reports. There was a lot of opposition from the theater owners. He was very supportive and that's how it the designations developed.

Q: Who else rallied around the theaters?

Rosenberg: Initially, to try to prevent the demolition, it was Tony Randall, Liza Minelli, Joe Papp, who started the Public Theater, Colleen Dewhurst, and Christopher Reeves. I think those were the most active to prevent demolition. To get designation, we got very little help from the theater community, because the Shubert Organization was very much against what we were doing. They spread the word that if anyone helps us, they'll be lucky if they ever appear in a Shubert Theater again.

Q: Wow.

Rosenberg: Stephen Sondheim was opening "Sweeney Todd" at the time, and he was going to help us until the Shuberts got to him first. Then Mary Henderson, who wrote *The City and the Theatre*, same thing. She was going to help us. The Shubert Organization was funding her theater museum that started and ended up folding. So she dropped out. Everyone started dropping out.

Q: I read something that you stated in *New York Times* in 2005 that I thought was particularly beautiful.

"Theater architecture generally was designed so the show would begin before the curtain went up. It's like walking to church, you walk into a church and you get a certain feeling and a certain warmth and certain expectations of what's going to follow."

I thought that was really incredible.

Rosenberg: Actually, I remember that interview. That reporter called me. The interview was over the phone. It's really true, and you can't see it now, but there was one interior that we purposely did not designate a landmark. That is what is now the August Wilson Theater, which is now very nice looking. But in the 1960's, it had been stripped of everything. The envelope was the same, it was an old theater, but it had nothing. It was just white walls, and they had stripped everything. It was a perfect example of the importance of ornamentation in a theater. Here, you had an old theater but no ornamentation and it was different. It was no different than the Gershwin Theater, which is nothing. You know, the Minskoff Theater. The way theaters were built they were like churches and if you stripped them, they lose what they had. Even though the shape is the same.

Q: I like that, just how the show begins before the curtains went up. That's such a great statement. It's true, as soon as you walk in you feel such excitement. It's terrific. What type of strategies did you use to organize?

Rosenberg: By the way, I'm very impressed with your preparation.

Q: Thank you. When you were gathering people together, did you use the press to call attention or did you do fundraisers?

Rosenberg: No, we didn't fundraise. After the theaters were designated, we hired an executive director. [Actors'] Equity was paying the bill. We didn't have to fundraise because Equity was supporting the committee. It was publicity and doing the research for the report. For Radio City Music Hall, it was all publicity. In fact, now when I think about it, I don't know who funded us. I think everything was volunteer.

Q: How would you describe the effect of the designation on the entire area? Did the designation deliver what you had hoped?

Rosenberg: It's hard to say what would have happened without designation. Designation came when the world of theater was in a really bad state. In the 1980's, there were thirty-five Broadway Theaters. At any one time, seventeen had no shows. They were dark. Now shows are circling and can't wait for a show to close so that a theater appears.

I guess what that means is that designation assured that the theaters would not be demolished in times when they weren't needed. So they're still here at times when they are needed. As far as the effect of designation on the renaissance of Times Square, I think it's more that that. I mean part of it is just what's happened to the increased quality of life in New York. When I was working on the designation report, women were afraid to walk around Times Square at night. Now, if there was woman who was afraid to walk around Times Square at night, they would be placed in a loony bin.

Q: Right.

Rosenberg: It's just nothing now, but it was the case then. People would see a show and they would never just stroll around and go to restaurants. There were very few good restaurants. It's a whole different animal. It's not just because the designation of theaters. Nevertheless, if more theaters had disappeared, but you don't know if they would have. What the designation of the theaters has done directly has changed Eighth Avenue. Part of the deal to appease the theater owners was that they could sell their air rights. Instead of just using them next door or across the street, they could transfer them to Eighth Avenue. A lot of the tall buildings going up on Eighth Avenue are because of that. It transformed Eighth Avenue.

Landmarks designation I really feel was essential for 42nd Street to be the way it was in the past. The 42nd Street theaters were not designated landmarks. We had to make a deal. We designated the New Amsterdam Theater. We wanted to designate all the 42nd Street

theaters. A deal was made when New 42nd Street was formed. We wouldn't officially designate the theaters, but that New 42nd Street would have to abide by the designation rules as if they were designated. They wouldn't be designated. This really gave them the leeway of doing some things that the Landmarks Preservation Commission wouldn't allow, and not be taken to task for it. There were a few theaters that were demolished that shouldn't have been demolished. Okay, two of them. It was the theaters themselves that are still standing. That was very important for 42nd Street to become what it is today. It wasn't actually designation that was responsible. It was the mood of designation and the saving of at least most of the theaters.

Q: I've read a little bit about the interior designation of theaters. Could you discuss how you feel about interior designation?

Rosenberg: First of all, an interior can only be designated if it's open to the public. Now, when you think about it, Landmarks Commission were almost taken to court, in the case of Radio City Music Hall. Their argument was that Radio City Music Hall cannot be designated on the interior because it's not open to the public. It's only open to people who can buy tickets. It's not like the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], well even now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art you have to pay at least five cents.

According to that argument. That was the argument. Exterior designations, I feel, are very important. The way things are, they don't they don't ensure that the building will be used as a theater. Mainly, I always wanted the seats to be designated as landmarks. Not

necessarily the actual seats, but the idea of rows of seats. Because as long as you can't take out the rows of seats than it has to be used as a theater. As soon as you can take out the rows of seats it can become a disco, it can become a restaurant, it could become like the movie theater on Times Square, a tourist information center. It looks like a theater. There were two Broadway Theaters and two non-Broadway Theaters that I wanted designated as landmarks. There are actually four, but two were pornographic movie houses. The Landmarks Commission said no. They didn't want it to seem that they were preserving pornography. My argument was, you're preserving a building. Pornography is a fad, and when pornography dies away, you'll still have a theater.

The only other non-Broadway interiors were the Ed Sullivan Theater, David Letterman Show, and the Embassy Theater, where there was tourist information was. When we designated the Beacon Theater, over on 75th and Broadway, which was also going to be demolished, it was turned into a disco and all the seats were taken out. Later the seats were put back in.

So I feel that an interior designation is important. I would love to see the seats designated but I don't have a chance. No one will landmark the rows. I just know they won't. Never. So you have interior designation, but it doesn't assure that it will be used as a theater. It just assures it will look like a theater.

Q: Things were so kind of tawdry back in the '80s when Times Square was in flux—I find it pretty incredible that you even got the theaters designated. How difficult was it to

make your argument when owners had these empty spaces, as you said, when there were no shows?

Rosenberg: When I was working on the designation of the New Amsterdam Theater, I was putting a lot of work into it, and I was asking myself, "Why am I doing this? There's no hope." There wasn't resistance. There wasn't—on 42nd Street, there wasn't resistance to designation. Everyone was just saying, "You're foolish. You're spending energy doing something that's not going to be mean anything." I felt the same way. I looked around 42nd Street, and I said, "There's no hope." I mean, the New Amsterdam Theater is just going to fall down. Later on, as time went on, we couldn't get the City to put on a new roof, water kept on coming down. By that time, it was already a designated landmark. Not only was it falling down, but the whole street was a wreck. This was at a time when Times Square was already coming up for the designation of the Broadway Theaters. It was a lot of resistance from the theater owners. A lot and a lot of threats.

That said, one of the leader of the threats was Jerry Shoenfeld and the Shubert Organization. There was a time when we first started Save the Theaters [Inc.]. I wanted to have a town meeting to discuss this, but I needed a space. Jerry had already made it known that he was dead set against saving any theaters. Mainly because the theaters that were coming down were his competition. I guess I must have been naive or something. I went to him and I said, "I would like to have a town meeting to try to save these theaters. Can I use one, would you give me one of your theaters?" He looked at me and he said, "You know, I can't tell you how much I am against what you're doing," he said, "but I'll

give you the Lyceum Theater. Not only that, but I'll pay for all the security. I'll pay for all the unions and all that stuff." And he did.

Q: Why? Was he just open-minded?

Rosenberg: He was just being a good guy and it just changed. He still fought our organization tooth and nail, but he was just a mensch.

Q: Wow. I read that in 2004 the appellate division ruled to uphold the as-of air rights in the theater district. I could see what you meant back in the day when you were talking about Eighth Avenue, it being kind of a negotiation. How do you feel now when that happened now, to uphold it again?

Rosenberg: You want to know something? I'm not so sure I remember when it came up again.

Q: In 2004 it was on the table again. They did rule to uphold it.

Rosenberg: It was an organization from Hell's Kitchen who didn't want the air rights transferred because the air rights could be transferred was either side of Eighth Avenue. I think up to a half a block down towards 9th Avenue, or maybe a quarter of a block. Hell's Kitchen didn't like it because it could mean tearing down some of the low-rise Hell's Kitchen buildings closer to Eighth Avenue. They wanted—it wasn't the idea of the

air rights that they were trying to stop, it was the transfer of the air rights to the west side of Eighth Avenue.

Q: Which is your favorite theater accomplishment? Is there a particular—

Rosenberg: Well, my favorite theater accomplishment is Radio City Music Hall, mainly because it's my first. The funny thing is I wasn't crazy about art deco when I started on the project. Of course I was by the end. Also because that was the one theater that came so close to being demolished, so close. It came even after designation. They were going to close it and just leave it empty—I mean, this is what they threatened. Then the union contracts expired at twelve midnight one day. The State of New York, Rockefeller Center, the City of New York were negotiating. We were downstairs with the last show and the Rockettes were there. Everyone was crying.

Meanwhile, upstairs, they were negotiating. At twelve o'clock, and meanwhile we had planned for a farewell—either a celebration party or some kind of party. We didn't know what we were going to celebrate up at the Rainbow Room. This was before cell phones, so we honestly didn't know what was going on up there. It turns out that at twelve o'clock midnight, they stopped the clock at eleven fifty-nine. They stopped the clock because at twelve midnight everything would have disappeared. They stopped the clock, and then around twelve-thirty, the State of New York agreed to take over the music hall. That that never happened, but they agreed to it. That kept it open and we had a celebration party. But that's how close it came to closing.

Q: Now I'm going to move on to Historic Districts. I understand you're instrumental in establishing over eighty historic districts in New York City.

Rosenberg: Right.

Q: Can you describe a challenging campaign you worked on?

Rosenberg: Can I describe?

Q: One of the more challenging neighborhoods that you had to designate.

Rosenberg: As I think about that, let me just say that when the Historic Districts Council started becoming involved in historic district designations, our first major project was Fort Greene.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: Okay, which doesn't mean it was the biggest challenge.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: It was the first thing we did and it was—it's where we learned a lot. Then we did SoHo. You know, it's hard to believe that SoHo and Fort Greene haven't always been landmarks. Then SoHo, and then I remember Prospect Park South, and the adjoining—Ditmas Park. I think probably the biggest problem with designation was way after my time. I wasn't involved in it, but what I hear it is Jackson Heights. Jackson Heights had a large contingent who were against designation. I think the same thing is happening now with Sunnyside Gardens.

Q: I've heard about that.

Rosenberg: Yes. I think that the bigger fights are now and weren't necessarily then. I think then, though there was opposition, I think it was much more muted. I can't think of any.

Q: When I think of historic districts, I first think of Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village. Do you think they're ideal models for historic districts?

Rosenberg: Well I think they're ideal. Brooklyn Heights is an ideal model. The reason Brooklyn Heights—that was the first one designated. The reason was because of Otis [P.] Pearsall and other people that had the most clout. Then Greenwich Village had the most leaders, so it was all political. Greenwich Village is less ideal than Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn Heights is an area where the entire area's been designated. There's no room and no need for an expansion of the district. Greenwich Village there's a core that's been

designated, but there could be a surrounding core that the historic district can be extended. Greenwich Village, I would say that's less ideal.

I think the two together show that you can have areas designated for a long time. They're not museums and they're living organisms. I think the biggest success story was Ladies' Mile. Ladies' Mile was a dead area when it was designated and now it's completely different. That all happened after it was designated, so that just is absolute proof that an area doesn't become a museum. An area isn't frozen by designation. I mean, that was a perfect example.

Q: So what did you learn about working with people, neighborhoods and people especially in historic districts with community boards? Would you have any advice for a preservationist going to a community meeting?

Rosenberg: I'll tell you, I think the people working in preservation are very special people. I do feel—but maybe this is necessary—I do feel they protest too much sometimes. Then again, they're picking their fights every time they protest because they have a fight. All they things they agree with, they just let alone and let it happen. But the things where they become verbal are things that they don't agree with. Actually, they have to always be negative if they're going to be like that because all the positive things they're letting happen. It's the negative things they're trying to stop. Therefore, they're always complaining. It's not like they're like that in everyday life, because they're happy about the other things. They're just not saying anything positive. But then people look at

them as always being negative. I was saying, on the surface a lot of preservationists I work with are always negative, but there's a reason for it. People get the wrong impression of them.

I think the people who live in historic districts and enjoy it. First of all, at a time when it was really hard living in New York, they were dyed-in-the-wool New Yorkers. They were very loyal. You know, now ''ts very easy being a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker because there's no reason not to be. I mean if you want to live in the city, there's no reason why this shouldn't be your city. Twenty years ago, there were a lot of reasons why this should not be your city and why it should be another city. These people really were really dedicated to New York at a time when it wasn't the thing to do. So I've always had very high impressions, which is why I enjoy being a part of this.

Q: Do you have any advice for someone working on historic districts or saving buildings? How to fight the fight?

Rosenberg: I don't know if I have anything, actually. No, I don't think so.

Q: How do you see the Landmarks Commission today?

Rosenberg: I think I'm sort of out of the loop. The reason I got out of the loop was I'm a one-man business. I bring groups to New York, and I custom design theater and

architecture tours for them. The business is going so good, I really don't have time to give to the HDC. So I'm out of the loop.

Q: Yes.

Rosenberg: From what I understand, and I could be totally wrong, is that [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani didn't support the commission. I mean, he didn't hurt the commission, but he didn't support the commission. I thought that [Mayor Michael R.] Bloomberg would be different, but from what I'm hearing is he's not. That surprises me because he's such a different animal. He's certainly more cultural. I just thought that he would, and maybe he does, maybe I just don't know. But from what I know it surprises me. Again, this is just as a far away outsider—I'd say that there are fewer people on the Landmarks Commission that seem to me to have very strong pro-landmark personalities. That whole, be willing to fight the rest of the commission, or something like that. I think they seem to be a blander group then before. Before you had some real fighters, and also some people who shouldn't even be on that commission. But I'm sort of surprised, if I'm getting things right, that Bloomberg isn't more supportive of the commission. What are you finding?

Q: I'm so new to preservation. This is just my first semester in school. As far as my job with the [New York City] Parks Department, Bloomberg is very supportive to parks obviously. He's just been incredible. I know he's involved in the Municipal Art Society.

I'm going to read up on it a little bit more. But it is hard to believe. He is very pro-development.

Rosenberg: Well he's pro-development, I mean, but he's pro-culture.

Q: Yes.

Rosenberg: I mean, I just, I don't know.

Q: Do you think that it's easier to get things preserved today and get districts designated because of all the success stories, like Ladies' Mile?

Rosenberg: I think in most cases, yes. I think—actually, you had asked about resistance. We always had a lot of resistance from the real estate industry. Up until Ladies' Mile. Ladies' Mile sort of changed it, because I really think people saw with Ladies' Mile that the neighborhood, actually business-wise and real estate-wise, is so much better now.

Q: Yes.

Rosenberg: This all happened after the designation. In people's eyes because of designation. I think since then, there's less resistance from the real estate world. I think most of the resistance now comes from residents within residential districts. It's not the business people.

Q: That's pretty exciting. What you did saved New York's character.

Rosenberg: Yes. I mean, part of it is the times. I think what happened was what we were doing was—it saved a number of things. We were maybe ten or fifteen years ahead of our time. In those ten or fifteen years, more could have been lost. Like, I think with Radio City Music Hall, if we had been around—instead of 1977, if we had been around in 1960, we would still have the Paramount Theater, Metropolitan Opera House, and a lot of movie theaters. The Roxy Theater—magnificent, magnificent, theaters. Had we been thirty years ahead of our time. But we weren't, so we lost—I'm including Pennsylvania Station. So, I agree that we were fifteen years ahead of our time. Now it's much easier in a lot of places to save buildings. We were doing it before it was being done in most cities. It was easy, you know. New York is different. First of all, as it turns out, New York has stronger Landmarks Preservation Law than anyplace else, so that was helpful. Even though in our eyes and especially in activists' eyes it's not perfect, far from perfect. It still is much better than in other cities.

Q: I read about the Playpen Theater. Are you still involved in current things like that?

Rosenberg: You know, they turned to a number of people involved for their opinions and they signed petitions. That was one of the theaters. I didn't want the interior designated a landmark, but I wanted the exterior. There were two theaters, two non-Broadway Theaters besides the Ed Sullivan and the Embassy that I wanted designated. One was a

magnificent, magnificent theater one block north of Worldwide Plaza on Eighth Avenue, and it was beautiful. But it was a gay porno house. The Playpen was a porno house, but all the stuff was missing, at least within the fake four walls. I don't know what was behind the walls. I wanted the façade and the commission said no to both. It turns out that the Tivoli Theater, which was on Eighth Avenue north of World Financial Center, was torn down for an apartment house. That should not have happened. The Playpen, I had strong feelings for the façade, but not from a theater point of view. I don't know if you know it, but the new Bank of America building that's being built on Sixth Avenue and 42nd, 43rd—

Q: Yes, I know where that is.

Rosenberg: They are saving a façade of an old theater.

Q: The Miller Theater?

Rosenberg: The Henry Miller Theater.

Q: Yes.

Rosenberg: Then they're building a new theater in back of the façade and Roundabouts [Theater Company] is going to manage it. That's what I think, and that's what I had suggested for the Playpen. The thing is you can't stop development. There's probably

nothing much left of the old theater, so keep the façade. Build a new theater in back of it, and get a lot of good PR. That would be the only off Broadway Theater in the Theater District that's visible with the marquee that looks like a theater. All the other Broadway and off-Broadway theaters don't look like theaters. They weren't theaters. I would like to see it saved, but I don't have strong feelings that if it's not saved, I'm really going to be upset.

Q: How has it been working in like L.A. [Los Angeles] and other cities where you've been consulting?

Rosenberg: The closest thing to 42nd—L.A. has is a street called Broadway that has more magnificent theaters on it today than 42nd Street does. They're all closed except one. They make their money from film shoots, and the problem is that white people will never go there. It's all Hispanic. The reason the theaters closed was the INS [Immigration & Naturalization Services] was doing sweeps of the theaters to get illegal immigrants. So people, the whites, won't go down to the area because they're afraid. The Hispanics won't go into the theaters because they're afraid of the sweeps. So all the theaters went out of business. Now it's so obvious that the theater should be saved, but it's in L.A. It's white power and white money that will save it, and they don't even know those theaters exist because they haven't gone down there in years. I talk to people in L.A. and I ask, "Do you know that there are some absolutely magnificent theaters on Broadway?" and they'll say, "Where's Broadway?"

Q: I actually lived in L.A. and I don't know where Broadway is.

Rosenberg: I would like to say that the same thing will happen on Broadway's as 42nd Street, but I'm not so sure. We even tried to convince [Lillian] Disney, Mrs. Disney, to take over the most ornate movie theater on Broadway. It would have made a perfect concert hall, and she wouldn't do it. She said, and truthfully she said, "Look, the people who go to hear the New York Philharmonic are not going to go to Broadway. They're going to go to the music center." That's where she built Disney Hall [Walt Disney Concert Hall]. Okay, so that's not a good story.

Q: You worked on San Francisco too?

Rosenberg: In San Francisco, all the theaters are already saved that are going to be saved. One woman owns all of them so they're not in danger. In most cities, every theater except one's been demolished. It's pretty easy to save the remaining theater, but it's not easy to save a theater if there's more than one.

Q: Interesting. Do you have any papers or letters from your days at the Historic District Council and maybe in the beginning of the Brooklyn Heights Association?

Rosenberg: I don't think I do. I was never the type of person who saved anything.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: I was never one for correspondence.

Q: Okay.

Rosenberg: Yes.

Q: All right, well thank you very much.

Rosenberg: Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]