INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Jack Taylor

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Taylor conducted by Interviewer Karen Mathiasen on October 13, 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.

Jack Taylor's preservation activism began in the early 1980s, when he joined the Union Square Community Coalition, an organization dedicated to revitalizing Union Square Park and the surrounding neighborhood. In this 2007 interview with Pratt graduate student Karen Mathiasen, Taylor reviews several important preservation fights that he championed, including the successful designation of the Ladies' Mile Historic District and the unsuccessful efforts to save Lüchow's Restaurant and the Dvorak House. Taylor also discusses the landmark designation of other buildings in the Union Square area and makes observations about New York City's attitude toward preserving its architectural and cultural heritage.

Jack Taylor is chairman of the historic preservation committee of the Union Square Community Coalition and the founder and president of the Drive to Protect the Ladies' Mile District. Taylor was central to the fights to save numerous prominent New York sites—the Dvorak House, Lüchow's, the former Tammany Hall, and others—and his career as a preservationist has been marked by an extreme mix of successes and failures. While the Dvorak House and Lüchow's were both ultimately demolished, Taylor's efforts have led to landmark designation for countless other sites, including ten individual buildings around Union Square Park. Taylor received the Historic District Council's Landmarks Lion Award in 1992 and the Victorian Society NY Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014, among numerous other accolades.

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Interviewee: Jack Taylor | Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Karen Mathiasen | Date: October 13, 2007

Q: Okay, this is Karen Mathiasen. I'm here with Jack Taylor interviewing him for the New York Preservation Archive Project on October 13, 2007, at the Neighborhood Preservation Center at 232 East Eleventh Street in Manhattan, New York City. So Jack, when did your advocacy efforts start? What was the first preservation campaign [you were involved with]?

Taylor: Lüchow's

Q: Lüchow's. How were you drawn into that?

Taylor: Well, should I start by saying I'm a native Manhattanite? I was born in Greenwich Village and have moved all of ten blocks north of it since—in all that time. Specifically, where I live now I have lived for forty-nine years, same place, same apartment and so forth—in a neighborhood that's roughly equidistant from Union Square, Ladies' Mile, Gramercy Park, Stuyvesant Square. So you might say I'm a long-time resident and worker in a part of Manhattan that's pretty close to Fourteenth Street and Union Square.

In my childhood, I can't remember how many times my parents took themselves with me to Lüchow's *[laughs],* which was famous especially at holiday time, Christmas, New Year's, Thanksgiving, as the place to eat in very wonderful glamorous surroundings. And to come to the

mid-Twentieth century—Lüchow's was started in 1882, the same year as the first Labor Day Parade, at Union Square in its North Plaza.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: I had just quit my job—this was the early 1980's—and gone freelance. I'm a copy editor and proofreader and had a lot of time on my hands. The offers didn't come through the transom as quickly as I thought they would but I quit a magazine I was managing editor of. So the deterioration of Lüchow's coincided really with the deterioration of Union Square and Union Square Park and the whole neighborhood. Indeed the City of New York at the time was fiscally ill. Lüchow's on its one hundredth birthday, 1982, decided to abandon its historic property and move uptown. We all thought that was not a good sign for Union Square and Fourteenth Street, to say nothing of Lüchow's itself. It did move uptown to the Broadway/Times Square area and failed within two years.

So we had this abandoned building, temporarily as it turned out, because it was rented briefly to other bars. And the prospect of this, to me, cultural and social landmark that was not landmarked and its demise, were not good signs of how the neighborhood was going. I didn't know the first thing about landmarking. I have no architectural training, but I felt—admittedly I had some time on my hands—I just felt we ought to do something to save this building. I was then part of and still am a member of the Union Square Community Coalition, which was founded in 1980, just at about this time to help in the effort to reclaim the whole Union Square area. We all felt that

historic preservation and landmarking were one way to do it and we all felt Lüchow's should be the first goal.

Incidentally, at the same time, after I learned the ropes, so to speak, of historic preservation and landmarking, we did propose to the [New York City] Landmarks Preservation Commission a Union Square Historic District. The boundaries of which would have included Lüchow's, but the commission in its wisdom felt there was no argument for a Union Square Historic District as such—there were too many gaps, too many parking lots, too many new buildings and the sense of place that you need for a designated historic district was really not there.

So we decided to zero in on individual landmark efforts and Lüchow's was the first, I think. We decided to get a lot of famous people involved if we could, because the history of Lüchow's was that it was the watering hole and gourmand spot for any number of celebrities over more than a century. ASCAP was founded there, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. Any number of famous people dined there and drank there. So we thought we ought to get the famous people of the time involved and we went to Joe Papp—Joseph Papp, of the New York Shakespeare Festival—who was a powerful force at the time, and he couldn't have agreed with us more and he said he would help. We went to Woody Allen, who said the same thing.

So we had demonstrations, we had speeches and that sort of thing. Well, all of this produced a little bit: the Landmarks Commission did give Lüchow's, I think, a total of three public hearings, which is the first step in the landmarking process. One of the hearings was for the exterior

designation of the building and then another was for the interior and I think the third was for both and they came to nothing for reasons that I can explain in a minute if you'd like?

Q: Sure *[laughter]*.

Taylor: So this was my getting my big toe wet in the landmarking and historic preservation waters. I found I had a lot to learn. And a lot of people still do have a lot to learn.

Q: Oh, definitely.

Taylor: So I think that answers your first question.

Q: Yes. I mean at the same time you were also involved with Dvorak [House] and they all overlapped?

Taylor: No, Dvorak came later.

Q: That came in much later? Oh that was the '90's.

Taylor: And Ladies' Mile [Historic District] came in between.

Q: In between? So how did it evolve that you became active in like other campaigns while you were—?

Taylor: Well, the end of the Lüchow's story was a very sad one, as I guess you know.

Q: Right.

Taylor: It had a number of very temporary tenants, bars and cheapo places and it went physically downhill quickly and it was finally abandoned entirely and subject to the elements and, to what the city claimed were homeless people, living in it and fires broke out and so forth. Well, the end of it all was 1995 when a big fire happened and the effort to put it out was meager in spite of the fact that there was a firehouse right opposite it on Thirteenth Street. Investigations have never come to any real reckoning. The [New York] City Fire Department washed its hands of the whole thing, obviously under pressure from the city administration.

Concurrently with the effort to reclaim Union Square and Union Square Park, the city proposed new zoning for the area, which in the main was not too bad but when it came to Fourteenth Street—a great artery, the longest east-west street in Manhattan—they had very definite ideas that were not so benign—tall buildings. The fact that Lüchow's was a three-story building, and was in the path, in the way, of the rezoning proposal. So it took a lot of the learning curve, eventually, we began to understand the way the city works. The Landmarks Commission wasn't going to fight with the [New York City] Planning Commission and provide an obstacle in the shape of a designated low-rise building in a spot where they wanted high-rises. So the whole thing was probably doomed from the start, the effort to save Lüchow's, for that reason.

Curiously enough the effort to save Lüchow's had started, unbeknown to us, a lot earlier when it was a going concern, but it was essentially—and this is true with Dvorak House too—it was essentially a cultural landmark, a social landmark, not an architectural one, although it had its merits architecturally too. But it was essentially a social/cultural thing, which the New York City Landmarks Law provides for, but which has happened relatively seldom.

During the chairmanship of the Landmarks Commission of Kent Barwick, now of the Municipal Art Society—he had a chance to try to designate Lüchow's, but for probably the same pressures that happened later when the new zoning was proposed, he never got around to it. After Lüchow's was something of the past and a shell, he wrote me a note, which I received on January 17, 1995, when Lüchow's was ashes. "Dear Jack, I can't tell you how badly I feel about Lüchow's. I always thought that if I'd stayed on at the commission it would not have happened—" Meaning the demolition. "This is not meant to be a criticism of my successor as much as anger with myself. It's a real loss to New York. Kent Barwick."

So I felt justified in the whole thing after getting that. We all did. And it happened that after the restaurant moved up to Midtown, the site was bought by a developer who was then pretty well known and with deep pockets named Jeffrey Glick.

Q: Right, I was going to ask you about—

Taylor: Oh, am I getting ahead of myself?

Q: Oh no, no, no that's fine. You're pretty much covering a few of them [questions] at once.

Taylor: After much pressure and we talked to Glick and we said short of getting it landmarked, can you do something to save it? At least the Fourteenth Street façade or so, and in the end, yes, he said he would. He redesigned. He had the high-rise that the city would have allowed under the new zoning. He had it all designed, but he did say he promised he would save at least the façade and incorporate it into the new building. Well, I'm not one for so-called façade-ism and I think most preservationists are not but—

Q: He was going to—?

Taylor: Then he, sorry—

Q: He was going to incorporate it into a high-rise?

Taylor: Yeah.

Q: Like built into it? Okay.

Taylor: Yes. He saved the façade, the famous Fourteenth Street façade. The building went through the block to Thirteenth Street, but the famous Fourteenth Street façade—and incorporated it in the design of his new building. And that was the famous Fourteenth Street

façade. But then he went belly-up financially and the whole project was abandoned and eventually of course there now it's NYU [New York University] and the octopus.

Q: Right. You can see them all around here.

Taylor: All community facilities are octopuses. Hospitals, schools, universities—all so-called community facilities—and I mean it's no secret that NYU is still at it. But it's got a foothold at Union Square and Fourteenth Street, as does Beth Israel Hospital, which was the villain of the piece in the Dvorak House story, and they're given preference by the city planners under the rubric of public benefit—teachers, doctors, etc. So that's roughly the story of Lüchow's as far as my involvement is concerned.

Q: So you think if Glick had stayed involved, if he hadn't gone belly-up, that he would have—

Taylor: I think he would have saved some of it. But again, it's façade-ism and we have several examples of that in the city. I don't think they really work—but they do save some things at least, the shell of something. Some examples are the Rizzoli Building on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Fourth, Fifty-Fifth, I think.

Q: Oh, the [Charles] Scribner's Sons [Building]?

Taylor: No, the building has etched glass windows by [Rene] Lalique, the famous French glassmaker. The commission, Landmarks Commission, felt they were worth saving but they

were reluctant to impede a Fifth Avenue project. So the end of it all was that the developer, I forget who it was, got his building but he also saved the Lalique windows and the façade of what had been the, I think the Rizzoli Bookstore and Publisher. And there are other examples. There's one on Park Avenue South and Twentieth Street, the old bank building. Now I can't remember which bank building.

Q: Can't picture it.

Taylor: But they saved the façade and there's huge high-rise behind it. So façade-ism, you know, is window dressing.

Q: Right.

Taylor: And not much else.

Q: So you think the main reason Lüchow's was lost was due to the zoning?

Taylor: Yes, I think that the idea of landmarking it was at odds—the idea of landmarking it—with the city planners' plans for a major Manhattan thoroughfare at Fourteenth Street. But I for one didn't know what those plans were at the time. But looking back on it, two city agencies are not going to fight over it, are they?

Q: So do you think anything could have been done different by advocates or—?

Taylor: Well, you've heard what the former chair of the Landmarks Commission said.

Q: Right.

Taylor: He wished he'd done something when he was chair but he didn't.

Q: So if the right people were—

Taylor: I think it—it's speculation, really. Probably given the fervor of development, over-development, overbuilding—at least in Manhattan—nothing could have saved it probably. Unless it were still a going restaurant concern and the operators didn't want to sell it.

Q: Right.

Taylor: Short of that, I don't think anything could have saved it given the circumstances.

Q: So it's a financial viability and *[unclear]*.

Taylor: Well, the then proprietor of Lüchow's just had no faith in the future of Union Square and Fourteenth Street, which indeed were at the bottom at the time, and he felt that he could move it and the name, the famous name that went with it, to an area that was thriving, the Times Square area. It turned out he lost there too.

Q: Is that about the time that Times Square was beginning to be redeveloped?

Taylor: It was beginning to come back, yeah. Right. But not enough so to make Lüchow's—which was too posh for Times Square.

Q: At that point, yeah.

Taylor: I mean the Astor Hotel—

Q: Probably even now it would be.

Taylor: It might work now, yeah. But its fame had rested on Union Square so much and the wonderful things and people who patronized it—that it just lost that aura in moving to a more, dare I say it, plebian setting *[laughs]*.

Q: Yeah, that's it, I don't know if it would work now because it's still kind of, how to say it, kind of honky-tonk and very family-oriented.

Taylor: Well, very deliberately. I mean the city wants it to be honky-tonk. But not in the way it had been with streetwalkers and dope peddling and all that.

Q: Yeah, no, it's very family-friendly now.

Taylor: Now it's very tourist-friendly, but gaudy and it was the gaudiness they wanted to keep. Just last week, there was an example of that but you don't want me to get into that. Maybe Joyce [Matz] did because it concerned [Manhattan] Community Board Five, which she and I are on. Did she mention the I. Miller Shoe Building?

Q: That was—I didn't—

Taylor: Oh yeah that wasn't you, sorry.

Q: I didn't talk to her. I'll find out.

Taylor: But it's an example of the problem with a designated building in an area that the city wants to redevelop. It happened with the Paramount Building [1501 Broadway] and the Paramount Theatre that was there and the reinvention of the famous marquis on the Paramount Theatre and that wavy design and they've reproduced it but not quite the way it was. And it has digital lighting, which certainly wasn't around when the Paramount Building was built, but they wanted to jazz up Times Square and Forty-Second Street and the same problem with the I. Miller Shoe Building is now resurfacing, but that's another story.

Q: Did you have a favorite item on the menu at Lüchow's?

Taylor: *[Laughs]*. When I was first taken there I was in knee pants. I can't remember back that far. Goose, they had wonderful goose, venison. I'm told the beer was wonderful *[laughs]*.

Q: You never got to try that?

Taylor: I don't like beer to start with.

Q: Okay.

Taylor: The atmosphere was so joyous, festive and German it's true. They had their problems in two World Wars and the anti-German sentiment that developed, but they kept in the main their German menu and German oom-pah bands. But the surroundings were so festive that the food was sometimes irrelevant.

Q: There's still, I can't remember—I don't know if its still there. There's a place that's on Third Avenue.

Taylor: Rolf's [German Restaurant].

Q: Yeah.

Taylor: Yeah, it's crazy.

Q: It always had crazy lights and displays in the window. It's not the same now.

Taylor: They used to have waiters and waitresses in dirndls and alpine shorts and all that. They've given that up. But they still have the German beer hall décor. Ironically, there was a German beer hall that I was involved in actually getting landmarked. Am I—?

Q: No, go ahead.

Taylor: Okay, it's called Scheffel Hall S-C-H-E-F-F-E-L or was. It's on Third Avenue on the west side of it between Seventeenth and Eighteenth just a block from where I live. It was built as a German beer hall and in a baroque German architectural style both inside and out. And we did get that landmarked, strangely enough.

Q: Wow, so that's still there?

Taylor: It's still there. It's now a yoga and movement salon and all that. But they're maintaining the exterior very nicely. A little bit of the interior is left, but it wasn't designated an interior landmark, only exterior. But it does recall the same aura that Lüchow's had on a much larger scale, if that's any consolation.

Q: Do you see any link or common thread, theme to the campaigns that you've chosen to be involved with?

Taylor: Other than the obvious one of getting things landmarked you mean?

Q: I guess.

Taylor: Common thread.

Q: I mean if there's something personal about each of them or a particular style of architecture or story, common story to—

Taylor: Well, the New York City Landmarks Law is pretty liberal in the main. I mean, it provides not only for architecture but for social, cultural, in other words the American heritage, or the New York heritage anyway. That's a pretty broad brush, and in the minds of, I guess, most of the city administrations, landmark preservation stops after architecture in the main. And it takes a great deal of courage for whoever is running the Landmarks Commission at the time, to recognize what is essentially a cultural or social landmark. So the emphasis has been in the main on architecture and that's fine but that's not all our heritage, and the Landmarks Law acknowledges that. It's just that economics and development get in the way of preservation, in my view.

Q: So you felt more of a need to get involved in the cultural things that were being lost?

Taylor: No, it just turned out that way, really. Because I've been involved in purely architectural things as well, but I guess my three main concerns and involvement have been Lüchow's, which

started everything for me, and then Ladies' Mile, which is a story in itself, and finally Dvorak House. But I have been involved in other efforts in my parochial domain and I always have to apologize for being parochial, really, but after all we look out for our own surrounds. Don't we? Or try to.

Q: Sure, yeah I'll probably stay in New York.

Taylor: I mentioned a minute ago that we did try for a Union Square Historic District and then the commission didn't buy it for the reason that they claimed there were too many gaps. They were right in a way, because designated historic districts have to exhibit a sense of place, which is Tony [Anthony C.] Wood's I think, favorite phrase and a good one. And with too many gaps, the sense of place is lost and we had to agree with the commission for once*, [laughs],* that they were right. They moreover though—they did say they weren't going to do a Ladies Mile [Union Square] Historic District. But, they did promise in the future to designate individual landmarks in and around Union Square and by and large they've done that. We have nine individual landmarks at Union Square now, or just off of it and we're struggling to get at least two more, one of which has already had a public hearing but it's still not voted on, however.

Q: Which one is that?

Taylor: For me it's a departure, because it's the Guardian Life Insurance Company [of America]'s Annex on Seventeenth Street between Union Square and Irving Place. It's a low-rise 1962 Skidmore Owings & Merrill-designed modern building attached to the tower of what used

to be Guardian Life and is now the W [New York]-Union Square Hotel, which is one of the nine individual landmarks we got. But we didn't get the Annex along with the tower. But a lot of people, who know far more about contemporary or Twentieth Century architecture than I do, think that the Annex is a good example of post-World War II architecture. In scale it's low-rise, at three stories or four, and it fits in with its midblock neighbors which are largely Nineteenth Century row houses. And as modern architects or advocates of saving significant mid and late Twentieth Century architecture think it's a good building, I'll buy that.

So we've lobbied for that. It had a public hearing about two years ago and [the Commission] still hasn't voted to designate but it's in the cards hopefully. One of the buildings that we have not got designated on Union Square is the former Tammany Hall, which is right opposite the Guardian Life Annex, at the northeast corner of the square at Seventeenth Street. It's a neo-Federal designed building, built in 1928, actually. But modeled after the original Federal Hall at Wall Street.

Q: Is that where the New York Film Academy is?

Taylor: Exactly. That's the building. And so far we have had no luck persuading the commission to even give it a public hearing. So that's one of our remaining crusades, at least one of mine, in the Union Square area.

Q: Yeah, that building stands out. I'm surprised they wouldn't be more open to giving that a hearing.

Taylor: It's not only a good copy—yes, it's a copy of a Federal or Georgian building. It's a good copy too, if you compare engravings of the original building where [George] Washington took the oath of office and the Tammany Hall building, it's a carbon copy almost. And it has a history of Tammany Hall, the corrupt political machine. Well, that's part of our history, too, right?

Q: Right—*[crosstalk]*.

Taylor: Fortunately or unfortunately, and they built—Tammany Hall—built it. Their original building had been on Fourteenth Street near Lüchow's but was demolished a long time ago. So in many ways they designed the 1928 Tammany Hall in the neo-Federalist style to improve their image, which had been badly tarnished by Boss [William M.] Tweed and all of the corruption. One of our colleagues who's been helping us try to get the Tammany Hall Building designated is somebody who used to work for the Department of Investigation in New York City and says that if we ever get it landmarked, he's going to try to turn it into a museum of corruption *[laughter]*.

Q: That would be good.

Taylor: Not a bad idea, you know. So that's in—that's something I am fully determined to try to get done. There's also another Union Square area building which has also had a public hearing, now four years ago, and they still haven't done anything, and they, the commission, and the reason for this is just like Lüchow's. It's owned by another community facility, the New School, and it has part of its Parsons School of Design in it. It's an 1880—something or other—cast iron

fronted building and it's lovely, even though it has been ruined on the ground floor, but those things can always be changed. And it's a great example of cast iron architecture and it, as I said, had a public hearing but nothing's happened. We think for political reasons. The New School has its eyes on it.

Q: Right.

Taylor: I mean, they own it, but they'd probably like to demolish it or build on top of it or something like that, which they couldn't do if it were designated.

Q: Right.

Taylor: Theoretically.

Q: Yeah, the New School buildings have been mostly modern. I don't know that they've gone into—older buildings—*[unclear]*.

Taylor: Yeah, well, their own building is art deco and at least part of the interior is designated.

Q: Part of it is landmarked.

Taylor: The auditorium, I believe. I don't know whether the exterior is or not.

Q: I remember Eric Allison mentioning it on a class walking tour.

Taylor: That's right.

Q: Well, the auditorium definitely was.

Taylor: I think he's right—it's only the auditorium. But they're just as much of an octopus as NYU or Beth Israel or some religious organizations I could mention but won't. Unless you press me *[laughter]*.

Q: Well, growing up in Greenwich Village, living there for so long, how did that influence you as an advocate? What were your awareness of issues and things going on in the '60's and '70's there?

Taylor: Well, I was born in a building that was a hotel, and still is, under a different name, but my parents moved shortly after I was born to—but still to another Greenwich Village building. Both of which, the hotel and the second building, are now within the Greenwich Village Historic District, but you know I simply wasn't aware of all this architecture stuff until the Lüchow's incident. Besides, I had a nine-to-five job and was more interested in that. Ironically I worked for a magazine that was eventually bought by *The New York Times* and moved into a Ladies' Mile building, as it turned out.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: Eighty-five thousand years later, *[laughs]*. But no, I don't think I was aware of such things then. I may have been aware of the bohemian atmosphere of Greenwich Village in the 1920's, because my mother came from a little hick town in northwestern New Jersey and all she wanted to do was be a flapper and move to Manhattan and be amongst the bohemians—so-called. I think I was aware of that. It was also the day of speakeasies during Prohibition. There may have been something of that social background, but the architectural part of it and the cultural part of it, I wasn't aware of. And then we began moving uptown all the way to Eighteenth Street.

Q: Like Chelsea or—?

Taylor: No, I forget where we lived but it was sort of upper Greenwich Village and then became Gramercy Park, Union Square.

Q: So your preservation involvement was really after you left *Family Circle*?

Taylor: Oh, you know about that?

Q: Yes.

Taylor: Did I say that?

Q: You mentioned the magazine; I know that it was *Family Circle*, yeah.

Taylor: Oh, that was it. Yeah, you're right. Did I tell Vanessa [phonetic] that? I guess I did. Well it was—I've only had two corporate jobs in my life. The first one after World War II, which I was in, and may have got a bit indoctrinated in architecture because of World War II. Because I was stationed in England, in London mainly and also in Germany as the war drew to a close, so I got exposed to at least architecture that didn't look like New York.

Q: Right.

Taylor: But my second nine to five job was that magazine which I was with for twenty years and then I decided twenty years was enough. And you don't want to hear all the rest of it.

Q: I believe the advocacy efforts for Ladies' Mile began in the mid-'70's. When did you get involved with that?

Taylor: I got involved in it in the mid '80's, after Lüchow's.

Q: But then am I right, it had started some time back?

Taylor: It may have. I honestly don't know if there was a serious effort to have a designated historic district. There were efforts to designate some individual buildings like the Flatiron [Building], which is within Ladies' Mile, but is an individual landmark. Actually, there are five

individual landmarks within the Ladies' Mile Historic District. No, there are six, pardon me, including the sidewalk clock.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: At Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Third Street. The Flatiron, of course. The former Church of the Holy Communion, which has been the infamous Limelight nightclub.

Q: Yeah, that's a shame; every time I pass by that I'm wishing something could be done.

Taylor: And the former Lord & Taylor building, and the former Gorham Silver Company building, both on Broadway, and the Scribner building on Fifth Avenue and the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace, which is a reconstruction, it's not the original building, but it's also a National Historic Landmark. And then the Sidewalk Clock. So I guess you could say there was an early effort to think of Ladies' Mile. Also there are buildings south of Fourteenth Street like the Wanamaker Building, part of which is still there, that were the original Ladies' Mile, which originally was an almost literal mile running on Broadway from roughly Ninth Street to Twenty-Third Street and that was the original Ladies' Mile. But to answer your question about lobbying for the Ladies' Mile Historic District in the '70's, I'm not aware of it as such; there may have been.

Q: When you began to get involved with it, were there other people that had been involved longer that you came in contact with?

Taylor: Well, one of them of course was Tony Wood. Almost every preservationist—I'm trying to think of a kind word—considers him their mentor. There are no unkind words I can give Tony—he's fantastic. And he got me involved. After Lüchow's he came to one of our demonstrations and called me and said, "Do you want to be part of a new group called the Historic Districts Council [HDC]?" That's how I really got involved because I said yes. But Tony and several others, one of whom is—I'm sure you will be interviewing for this project—Christabel Gough, were already involved.

Q: I don't know everybody on the list.

Taylor: She and another woman named Margaret Moore. She and Tony kind of started the effort, as far as I was aware of, started the serious effort for a Ladies' Mile Historic District and then dragged me into it *[laughter]*. Not kicking and screaming. I was delighted to be asked, but you know all of that for me started after Lüchow's and I would say I got involved in the Ladies' Mile effort in 1984 perhaps, '84, '85. Because it took us about six years to get the Ladies' Mile Historic District and not in the—with the boundaries we had proposed, of course, which is not an uncommon story. You generally get a historic district that's less than you wanted and that was certainly true of Ladies' Mile, because we got nothing below Fourteenth Street. Although we may be trying to get a new effort to get an extension to the district.

Q: So what were the original proposed boundaries?

Taylor: Well, they went along Broadway south of Fourteenth to Ninth Street and it's still, I think, something we could legitimately work for if we get the strength and the money. And the Greenwich Village people, since a lot of that part is almost Greenwich Village, might help, at least so Andrew Berman tells me. We have all the research done or most of it, but the only thing that's designated along that strip is Grace Church. There were other things left out, especially on the west, and on the east, too, for that matter. There are some wonderful buildings on Park Avenue South that should have been part of the district. But we're lucky to get what we got, I suppose, to look at it that way.

Q: How much time was spent arguing or negotiating what the boundaries would be?

Taylor: Well, there was—that was it.

Q: But who was mostly involved?

Taylor: Tony Wood, Christabel Gough and Peg Moore, as we called her—Margaret Moore—were really the frontrunners and then they got me, then a lot of others got involved too and with me came the Union Square Community Coalition, which I'm still with. Also what's so important in all of these designation efforts is getting the press with you. And on September 8, 1986, much to our astonishment came *The New York Times* editorial "Loving Ladies' Mile" and that was a kick start if ever there was one. It still took three years after that, but we were a consortium of seven groups including the Historic Districts Council and the Union Square Community Coalition. And *The Times* wound up its editorial by saying, "The group that banded together for

Ladies' Mile should be congratulated on being among the best friends a neighborhood can have." How's that?

Q: Wow.

Taylor: Then they did the editorial on Dvorak House, that's another story.

Q: Yeah, I've read that too *[laughs]*.

Taylor: So the press and the media are all important. I think probably this editorial was the best thing that happened, because there was a lot of public support, grassroots support, a lot. But amongst the people whose buildings are in what is now Ladies' Mile Historic District, most of the property owners and the Real Estate Board of New York were just terrible. They fought us tooth and nail, but at least two property owners were very much for us and helpful and one of them is the head of ABC Carpet, whose building is the original W&J Sloane building on Broadway and Nineteenth, and also they own the original Arnold Constable [& Company] building on the opposite side of the Sloane building. And the man who owns the former B. Altman building [& Co.] in Ladies' Mile and the building that was called Adams Dry Goods, a store nobody remembers, but is one of the greatest buildings. And this guy, whose name is Israel Taub, was extremely helpful and even testified in favor of designation. Here's his letter in 1986: "I've learned that those real estate owners who intend to restore their buildings properly will get all the cooperation from the commission they want."

And he was very helpful and he still is. There were others, but these are the two big-ticket retailers were for us in spite of having almost been drummed out of the Real Estate Board of New York.

Q: Can you make any generalizations about who is fitting comfortably into the district or who's been the most amenable to working within the preservation guidelines? Like among the big chains like Barnes & Noble and Old Navy that have gone to there, and the landlords and the developers?

Taylor: Well, the two I just mentioned certainly. The Barnes and Noble's bookshop is within one of Israel Taub's buildings, the Adam's Dry Goods, but the one you're probably referring to is the one on Union Square?

Q: Well, there's that, yes. I was also thinking of the Sixth Avenue superstore, too.

Taylor: That's the one in the former Adams Dry Goods, in Israel Taub's building. But the one on Union Square—which is not within the Ladies' Mile Historic District, but just a few feet from it, and is probably I guess the most prominent Barnes & Noble bookshop now simply because of the building and where it's located. It was abandoned. It had originally—it was built in 1883, I think, and the architect was pretty well known at the time, [J.] William Schickel, and it was built in his signature design, Queen Anne style. It was built for the famous Century Association—I'm sorry—Century Publishing Company. Association is another building. The Century Publishing Company, which built the building with Schickel as the architect, was the original publisher of

[J.] Rudyard Kipling and Edith Wharton and Mark Twain [Samuel Langhorne Clemens]; and a very famous publisher of magazines as well like a magazine called *St. Nicholas* and the *Century Magazine*.

But by the time, at least I came along, like Lüchow's it was abandoned. There had been a carpet or drapery company in it, which had moved out and the owner of the building was a crazy lady who didn't—couldn't have cared less. She didn't even care about the income she was losing. She just wanted out, but she didn't want to sell it either. So the building was in really sad shape, really sad shape, but it turned out to be the first of the individual landmarks that the Commission designated, as promised, in 1986. The minute it got designated, Barnes & Noble got interested and they restored it. That's to their credit and they're maintaining it nicely, with a few ill advised signage problems that the commission has unfortunately permitted. So does that answer your question about current owners or retailers or—?

Q: Yeah, I guess part of it was who seemed interested in adaptively reusing the buildings and—

Taylor: You could certainly say Barnes & Noble.

Q: Yeah, they were and—

Taylor: I think a lot are.

Q: And why do you think that is some are more open to—jump at the idea of doing it and others turn away?

Taylor: Well, it's—

Q: 'Cause haven't there been—like I read an article about Apple that they had been interested.

Taylor: Oh.

Q: In something around there, and then I don't know if that's what led to them going up to Fifty-Ninth or—

Taylor: I didn't bring that with me. It was a fairly recent *New York Times* article, which quoted me and one of my colleagues. Well, that was in Ladies' Mile, but it was a building that was built as the result of a fire that had destroyed some low-rise, two low-rise buildings in the early '80s. A coffee shop chain came along, Andrew's Coffee Shop, and built a nondescript, certainly non-contributing building on the site and then they went—I don't know if they went belly-up—but they sold it to Apple Computer. They wanted to change it, which it certainly needed, but they wanted to change it drastically to an all-glass building of the same height actually, which wasn't bad. But it was just what they proposed was just totally inappropriate and the commission turned them down and quite a lot was made of that. Eventually the building as it is now was bought, or is occupied—I don't know who really owns it now—is occupied by a clothing chain, which is appropriate for Ladies' Mile and it's not bad.

However, funny you should ask, they are coming before the Landmarks Commission next week. I think it is for a change in signage. Signage that has already been approved two years ago, and now they want to change the signage to digital lighting, which is a no-no. And I hope they won't get away with it because they're in complete violation of the Landmarks Commission's signage rules for Ladies' Mile. Why they even bothered applying is beyond me, but who knows, anything could happen. But that—I think Apple felt that their image would be burnished if they were in the now very prosperous Ladies' Mile Historic District and on the Fifth Avenue part of it. But they just wouldn't settle for a design the Commission would approve, so they went elsewhere.

Q: Yeah, its seems odd because they have that building, their first building in New York was in that one on Prince Street.

Taylor: Yeah.

Q: That's an old post office and they fit in very well.

Taylor: Well, this site is a much smaller property. I don't know what the thinking was. I don't have a computer, how would I know?

Q: Are you concerned about the impact of residential buildings on the sense of place in the area? Like I know Hugh MacNeill [Hugh O'Neill Building], and they're are putting condos in and—

Taylor: O'Neill.

Q: O'Neill, why did I think it was MacNeill?

Taylor: Says so right on the top, still.

Q: What are your concerns with a different use other than shopping?

Taylor: Well, I mean there has to be a certain amount of realism I think in all this, too. The object—the main object—was to save the architecture in the case of Ladies' Mile. The fact that it was also saving an era in the city's economic life was a big consideration, of course. But everything now is being built for residential—everything. Where are people going to work?

I guess the answer is they need fewer office spaces because there's less need for—everything's so automated now, there's less need for huge staffs. I don't know what the reason is. But yeah, I suppose you could say it's inappropriate to have so much conversion from commercial or retail to residential, but the City Planning Commission doesn't feel that way obviously because, I don't know if it's on your list there, but a couple years—three, four, five years ago the Planning Commission, proposed to rezone a portion of the Ladies' Mile Historic District with zoning that would permit residential new construction, residential as of right rather than going through the special permit process. So that's the wave of the future, I guess.

You could say it troubles me to the extent that some of the new buildings that have been built on these sites—mostly vacant parking lot sites, so they're entirely new construction—the amount of storefront on the new buildings is really not designed for retail or commercial or fashion *[unclear]*. Which is a disappointment in a way and sometimes the new design of the storefronts actually reflects that and they have to be criticized for it and sometimes the commission does that, saying that the storefronts of the new buildings don't look like the storefronts that were there when there were buildings on the site. So I guess it's disappointing but everything is chain store now, you know. There's no B. Altman. There's no W&J Sloane. There's no Arnold Constable. There's just barely a Lord & Taylor—they're one of the last left in their building on midtown Fifth Avenue—which incidentally is up for designation itself, but no longer in Ladies' Mile but at Thirty-Eighth and Fifth. So there are exceptions, for example the old Stern Brothers building in Ladies' Mile on Twenty-Third is now a Home Depot, which I guess you could say is something from a shopping era.

Q: Something like what used to be, yeah.

Taylor: There are some other examples, but in the main there are not the specialty shops or the great department stores for which Ladies' Mile is famous historically. Because the whole concept of the department store basically started in Ladies' Mile. It was a little before that—downtown. To quote *The Times* editorial again: "'All America goes to New York for its shopping when it can,' reads a 1893 handbook." That's what it was and there's still shopping there, but not quite the same kind.

Q: How much of an impact do you think the selling of that term for that area again, Ladies' Mile, had on the campaign?

Taylor: Say that again, sorry.

Q: I think this sort of came from Tony Wood. He mentioned something about coining or selling the term Ladies' Mile.

Taylor: Yeah that—

Q: To the press and I guess the media in general.

Taylor: It has—

Q: So I was just wondering what impact you thought that had.

Taylor: It's really, I think, been a bit of a diversion, because the real-estate people still call it the Flatiron District. There is no Flatiron District, uppercased D. But it takes advantage of the name of the most famous building in the area and it provides an alternative that's more recognizable to the public at large then Ladies' Mile is, which requires some explanation.

Q: Right.

Taylor: So they don't really market it as such.

Q: Is it marketed to developers and landlords as the Ladies' Mile? Like is the history of the area really pushed to those interests?

Taylor: To the extent that the rezoning makes it easy for residential, or easier to construct new residential buildings, without having to go through a tortuous special permit process. I don't know, I'm not that much of a market person, but I don't think that the coinage Ladies' Mile Historic District is one that's helpful, if that's what you're implying, to current sales or—

Q: Well, more in terms of the campaign, like giving that, I guess that flavor, that sense of history.

Taylor: Well, they know when they move in what they're getting into, and it's called Ladies' Mile because they have to go to the Landmarks Commission first for any new exterior work. But I wouldn't say it's something that a magnet, shall we say. I think that the real-estate agencies coinage unfortunately is more descriptive simply because of the name Flatiron and more enticing. It's a good question, which I've never really parsed. Don't tell Tony.

Q: I know the efforts had gone on for quite a while. Were you aware of any sort of change in tide at any point of the campaign, where it went from, you know, going down hill or—? *[Taylor holds up copy of Times editorial]* Oh, with *The Times* article.

Taylor: That changed the tide. It wasn't an article; it was an editorial. There were a lot of articles but this was an editorial. Naturally the articles helped too.

Q: Were there ever any changes in strategy as far what advocates did to push the campaign?

Taylor: Well, as I've said, I think getting celebrities involved didn't hurt. Like where is, where is it? Where is it? I think this did a lot of good. There it is *[shows copy of article with photo]*. Guess who?

Q: Oh, Woody Allen.

Taylor: And Joe Papp is mentioned and Diana Vreeland. We did get some famous retailer's names involved.

Q: Retailers who had agreed to and liked the idea of designation?

Taylor: I can't really answer that. You know, we just took every tack we could think of. We had an exhibition, which was mounted mainly by Bill [William] Conklin, the prominent architect.

[INTERRUPTION]

Taylor: We had a wonderful exhibition, which was mounted at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which is not in Ladies' Mile but said fashion—right?

Q: Right.

Taylor: And it was so popular that we ended up moving it five times to different venues including ABC Carpet, which gave half a floor to it. Then we moved it to what was then the existing B. Altman store at Thirty-Fourth and Fifth, before B. Altman went under. Of course that's an individual landmark, that building, and is now occupied by the public library and others. So we—it was a dog-and-pony show, really. By the time of our last mounting of it, it was so threadbare that the boards were practically falling apart.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: I think it helped a lot that—and we had lots of walking tours, which we still do once in awhile and we had all kinds of support from most—all the preservation groups certainly. So all these things are thrown into the hopper and they help.

Q: So all in all has designation achieved what you hoped for? For the Ladies' Mile Historic District?

Taylor: I think everybody would agree—and this is true not only of Ladies' Mile, but of every historic district—it's a constant battle. Once you've won the battle, just getting the district, that's only the beginning of the struggle. The rest of it is monitoring it, A, and regulating it on the part of the commission. The effort to monitor is largely up to the public, because until recently the

Commission didn't have the money, the budget or the staff. So I mean we regularly turn in violation reports—two just yesterday, I think. Most of the time it turns out they are violations, but some of it is speculative. You don't know whether it's really violation or not but you have to say that something looks wrong. Is it wrong? So I think it's a constant watchdog effort and we do that and we testify at every Certificate of Appropriateness hearing and that keeps us busy.

Q: But the overall, I mean do you think the overall sense of place has been preserved and—legacy?

Taylor: By and large, yes.

Q: Of the district?

Taylor: There are some things about the new construction I could do without and occasionally they're controversial in themselves. Mainly involving rooftop additions—the new construction. The rule of thumb at the Landmarks Commission is it's ok if you can't see it from the public way. One of the new buildings got its comeuppance because they swore the rooftop addition would not be visible and they built it, at least the skeleton of it, and it turned out it was eminently visible, so they had to shave off some of it.

But in the main it's gratifying that a lot of the reason for which the designation was awarded is saved, is improved, is appropriate. It's a very long program and there are some buildings where you think it's hopeless; they'll never be brought up to snuff even though they are designated. But

sooner or later, especially involving a storefront, sooner or later somebody comes along and proposes—as they must—a design for the storefront and the commission either approves it or improves it with our help. But it's a very long process and now Ladies' Mile is seventeen years old. We had a big celebration on our tenth anniversary. And gradually, very gradually the improvements are there. And it doesn't happen overnight, that's for sure. You save it, then it's up to maintain it.

Oh here's one. One of the things that got us going—am I am I interrupting your—?

Q: No, no, no.

Taylor: It was sort of the last straw—was the demolition on Fifth Avenue of the building that was called the Athenaeum Club. It was a private club. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, really, because it was a sign of the future and that's what really got us galvanized. The site was bought by a developer, who at least was willing to talk to the public, to the neighborhood group, to us when we got organized. And I guess we were responsible for criticizing the design of his proposed new building. It certainly deserved it. Well, as I recall we had two or three meetings and we said, "Couldn't you at least do something with the upper reaches of this building to make it look sympathetic to a traditional building?" He said, "Okay, I'll put on a mansard roof." So he put on the mansard roof and there it is and there's the rest of it. So you win some, if you call that winning, sometimes.

Q: Yeah, it's a peaked roof.

Taylor: But most of them are—and that was true of the biggest project of all, the vacant lot at Twenty-Third Street and Sixth Avenue, which was vacant for decades, and the struggle to put a decent building there was endless. I'm not saying the result is perfect, but it's a lot better than it was when they made their first proposal. So it isn't just the commission who leads them into more appropriate ways; it's also the public, if they can. You didn't ask me about Dvorak *[laughs]*.

Q: Oh yeah, I'm getting to that now.

Taylor: Oh, you are. Is that the end of Ladies' Mile?

Q: I wasn't sure if we were leading into other directions or if I should go ahead with that, but yeah we can talk about Dvorak *[laughs]*.

Taylor: Well, here's the Ladies' Mile packet as we—and here's the Lüchow's one. I guess we're—for that.

Q: Ok great. Do you need copies of these or—

Taylor: No, those are copies.

Q: Oh, these are copies. Even the letters? I can pass these on? You don't need copies made?

Taylor: No, no.

Q: Okay.

Taylor: These are for whatever you want to do with them.

Q: Ok, great.

Taylor: That's what Vanessa said. I hope. Relevant materials.

Q: Yeah. Oh especially the letters and things like that. They'll be very—

Taylor: Well—

Q: —happy with that.

Taylor: I didn't bring too many of them; I mean the letters are just endless. I suppose I could have brought them all. But I thought what I brought told the story. I mean I think it goes without saying that almost all of these efforts involved a lot of response from the public. Not only the celebrities or the elected officials or the preservationists, but the grassroots public. And yeah, we got a lot of those but you know which ones to choose to illustrate what?

Q: Yeah, I don't know how many letters there are.

Taylor: So I didn't really bring all of them.

Q: I guess they could make copies or whatever.

Taylor: Well yeah, I can, sure, but I—

Q: Let them decide what's relevant.

Taylor: I mean some of these people are probably dead by now. Maybe most of them.

Q: Okay, well getting to Dvorak House—you know, many famous people have lived in New York City and landmark status isn't sought for every place a famous person has lived in. So why did you believe it was important to save the Dvorak House in particular?

Taylor: Where do I start? I think the best way to start is to answer it the way Brendan Gill did. Do you know who Brendan Gill was?

Q: The name sounds familiar. I'm not sure.

Taylor: Well, he was a mainstay of preservationists. He was the architecture—theater critic for *The New Yorker* magazine. He was also an architecture critic. He was a mainstay of the

Municipal Art Society. When this horrible editorial—here's *The New York Times* doing a horrible editorial this time—which posed that question exactly, the one you were just asking—

Q: Right.

Taylor: And Brendan's answer in his letter to *The Times*—this is hard to digest so I'll just read it, if I may.

Q: Okay, sure.

Taylor: Some of it. "Your editorial "Dvorak Doesn't Live Here Anymore" is a matter protesting the designation as a historic landmark of a row house on East Seventeenth Street in which Antonin Dvorak lived for three years and in which he composed his "New World Symphony" [Symphony No. 9, "From the New World"]. You object that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has designated the building, 'not for its physical attributes but as a kind of, historical memory bank.'

What on earth is wrong with that? It is one of the duties that the commission came into existence to perform. London, Paris, Vienna, Budapest—" I mean he could have gone on, especially mentioning Prague, where Dvorak came from. "—have taken care to preserve just such memory banks, nearly always in the form of a house or a building that is without intrinsic architectural merit but nevertheless evokes what our own American Henry James, speaking on this very topic,

called the ‘great lost spirits’ of an earlier time. Self-obliterating New York has the sorriest of records in this respect and you propose that the record be made even worse.

Dvorak doesn’t live here anymore? Mozart doesn’t live in Salzburg anymore: should the house in which he lived be torn down? Should we tear down the Jumel Mansion in Manhattan—” Meaning, do you know the Jumel? “—because Washington doesn’t live in it anymore? You pretend to fear that the city will be ‘dotted with shrines because a celebrity passed through.’ Is Dvorak to you merely a celebrity? Is three years passing through?

We possess (and have designated as landmarks) only a handful of houses of the sort that would be cherished elsewhere by the score: [Giuseppe] Garibaldi’s house on Staten Island, Louis Armstrong’s house in Queens, the house in Harlem that sheltered [James Mercer] Langston Hughes. Your bizarre suspicion of landmarking leads you to argue that a plaque will be every bit as emotionally nourishing in New York as a building. Let me again quote Henry James, born and raised in New York City and of whose presence scarcely a trace remains.

In his book The American Scene, James tells of returning to this country after many years of absence; he journeys down to Washington Place, just east of Washington Square, to visit the house where he was born. To his dismay, it had long since been thrown down, and in its place stood ‘a high, square, impersonal structure, proclaiming its lack of interest with a crudity all its own’ and having the effect upon James of his ‘having been amputated of half my history.’ As for plaques, James says, ‘Where, in fact, is the point of inserting a mural tablet, at any legible height, in a building certain to be destroyed to make room for a skyscraper?’”

So I think Brendan Gill struck the right chord there. So does that help answer your question?

Q: Yeah *[laughter]*.

Taylor: Sorry I had to resort to somebody else to answer it. But he's right, I mean. The few buildings he mentioned there—Garibaldi's on Staten Island, Garibaldi lived there only one year; Langston Hughes's house in Harlem, that's the black poet. Louis Armstrong we all know, he was a musician who lived in Queens. He doesn't mention Edgar Allan Poe's cottage in the Bronx, which is designated. He lived there only five years, but he wrote "Annabel Lee" there and "Eureka" and some of his best work. And of course there was the big fight with NYU over his house in Greenwich Village, where he wrote I forget what. But you know, they said okay, they'd leave the façade—façade-ism at its worst.

So I mean our own justification for Dvorak was that A, he was a world-famous composer before he came here. He was invited here by an American millionairess to head a music conservatory that she called the National Conservatory of Music of America. She felt this country did not have its own music and that it should have and that what music it did have came from its indigenous population that were then called the Negros and the American Indian, who each had their own music but nobody knew about it, nobody in the outer world celebrated it. Dvorak was famous for incorporating in his music, the folk music of the Czechs and Slovaks in his own country. So that's why this millionaire lady brought Dvorak over to head her National Conservatory of Music

of America. It was also on Seventeenth Street, where the house was, and it's where Washington Irving High School is now.

So this was a very farsighted lady who was also a millionairess and loved music and she had in her conservatory black students, women students, which was unheard of in music at the turn of the Twentieth century, and American Indians, Native Americans. Dvorak didn't really know anything about what he faced here. Suddenly he found himself with black students. He had never even seen a black man before or American Indians, Native Americans.

It was they who introduced Dvorak to their kind of music, and he was so impressed with it. I wish I had brought a lot of the quotes of Dvorak. But he said the music—the plantation songs and what were then called Negro spirituals, and the American Indian chants and dances was the basis for a great world of music, a new world of music. So in the compositions he wrote in this house, in Seventeenth Street, it was all his own music, his own composition but based on what he learned from his own students. So probably the most popular symphony ever written for classical music, the "New World Symphony," they're all his own themes but they're based on the music his students exposed him to.

It seems to me—also he wrote in that house what Yo-Yo Ma, the cellist, calls the greatest piece for the cello ever written, his "Concerto for Cello and Orchestra"—also written in that house. He arranged the—it wasn't a spiritual, but a folk song called "Old Folks at Home" for full orchestra, soloists and chorus. An American theme. All of this was completely unheard of in the music world and he did it all in this admittedly typical Nineteenth Century row house, architecturally

perhaps undistinguished but typical of a period, and yes, [he lived there] only three years. And isn't this something to celebrate?

Q: Right.

Taylor: Anyway, the property was in the path of another community facility, in this case a hospital.

Q: Right, Beth Israel.

Taylor: Which had bought the building. And our problem was not so much that a hospital wanted to buy it, but what it wanted to do with it. It had just gotten a million dollar bequest from the estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, the gay photographer.

It couldn't resist the million dollars and that's exactly what the house, the Dvorak House, was being sold for, roughly. They wanted to put in it a perhaps worthy hospice for homeless AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] patients. The AIDS epidemic was just really starting then. Great. Were there alternatives? Yes, plenty of them right in the same neighborhood, right at Stuyvesant Square. A property owned by the Salvation Army, which wanted to sell it, would have been perfect. It was a half-block away from the hospital. There were others, but the hospital wanted that site. Not so much for an AIDS hospice, but just to own it because it was the key to getting the rest of the properties on that particular block. It was a real-estate consideration more that anything.

But, of course, try to explain that to a public that is frightened of the AIDS epidemic. You feel almost heartless doing it and doing it for the sake of somebody who only lived there for three years. It was a pure real estate deal and nevertheless we got it landmarked, thanks to the then chair of the commission, Laurie Beckelman. But then—this was just after the period of the new [New York] City Charter, which gave the power of approving or disapproving landmark designations away from the disbanded [New York City] Board of Estimate, which was declared unconstitutional, and gave the power to the [New York] City Council. So for the first time the City Council had the power to overturn a landmark and they did it, not by any means unanimous. It was a close vote, really. But they exercised that power and before you could turn over, the hospital had demolished the Dvorak House and started building something else.

So we were handicapped A, by this editorial, this horrible editorial, as opposed to that wonderful editorial for Ladies' Mile, and we were handicapped by the AIDS issue. Even so, at several hearings about it, we got AIDS advocacy groups to approve the landmarking, to try to persuade Beth Israel Hospital to buy another property because they claimed the Dvorak House was insufficient for treating the AIDS patients, which is true. It was too small. Even their new building is too small. So we had even some of the AIDS advocates with us and against the hospital, but don't think they didn't suffer from condemnation by their own. All because people were mislead deliberately by—

Q: By that editorial?

Taylor: Yes. And speaking of letters, I should have brought, *[laughs]*. We had President [Vaclav] Havel of —

Q: Right.

Taylor: Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic. We had the Archbishop of Prague, we had Yo-Yo Ma, we had all, with one horrible exception, all the great musical people on board.

Q: I saw the names of a couple people that were opposed to landmarking that was kind of surprising.

Taylor: Isaac Stern was one of them.

Q: Itzhak Perlman, I think, was another. Itzhak Perlman?

Taylor: Itzhak Perlman was another. But as it turned out Isaac Stern had—never mind, I don't want to be subject to slander or libel. He was misguided and it was the irony of ironies because it was he who had saved Carnegie Hall from demolition. That was the irony of that. And the greatest cellist in the world, Yo-Yo Ma. Laurie Beckelman said that when she got a letter from the Archbishop of Prague, what else could she do?

Q: Right *[laughter]*. So you don't think there was, I mean do you think there were any compromises that could've been made with Beth Israel?

Taylor: She, sorry.

Q: No, go ahead.

Taylor: Laurie did try very hard to compromise just to keep the façade—speaking of façade-ism—of the house, but they wouldn't move. They wouldn't budge. They made a show, which was obviously insincere, of buying the Salvation Army building that I mentioned, which was half-block away, and then they said, "No it was inappropriate, it was too far from the hospital." It was half a block away from the hospital. The Dvorak House was right opposite the hospital, which of course was true but was just real estate. But yes, Laurie tried very hard for a compromise. As did we, but they weren't compromising.

They hired Howard Rubenstein to their cause, you know the biggest PR guy in the city, and they had pretty powerful people on their hospital board, of course. Of course the irony, in the intervening years the hospital itself is now in trouble financially and it had to merge with another hospital and their dreams of their real-estate expansion dissolved. So it was all for naught in the end.

Q: Right. This, you were saying, that this was all mainly about them getting a foothold in that particular area.

Taylor: Well, they have not expanded the way they had planned.

Q: Right.

Taylor: They haven't expanded period. Well, they did by means of a merger with another hospital. They did expand, but not in that area.

Q: Right.

Taylor: In Stuyvesant Square. They had already ruined Stuyvesant Square anyway.

Q: What sort of citywide support was there for Lüchow's and the Dvorak House versus the Ladies' Mile campaign?

Taylor: Well—

Q: Was it mainly local concern for Lüchow's and Dvorak or—?

Taylor: Oh, no, we had worldwide support for Dvorak House.

Q: Well worldwide, yeah yeah.

Taylor: And enormous support for Lüchow's—ASCAP, the leadership of ASCAP, the Steinway [& Sons] piano people because the original Steinway Hall was just opposite Lüchow's, and

William Steinway was head of the firm at the time of Lüchow's prominence. Now I'm combining Lüchow's and the Dvorak House. Henry [Z.] Steinway is the current Steinway, who got involved because when his grandfather, William Steinway, was running the firm and the firm was right opposite Lüchow's and the Steinways would eat at Lüchow's, but mainly because when Dvorak moved into the house on Seventeenth Street, he was presented gratis with a Steinway piano. So we got the Steinway people behind us for Dvorak and Lüchow's, for that matter. To me, there's always been—generally—been more of an attraction for individual landmarks, or easier to build a constituency for them, than for historic districts because there are so many people who have axes to grind in a larger area. But I don't know, I—to try to answer your question—I think we had equal supportive force behind us for all three of these things that I was involved in and others as well.

Q: Even from citywide landmarks agencies?

Taylor: Yeah, sure, yeah. Yeah, and in most cases we had the political support, too, which really counts. And, except for Lüchow's, we had the commission's support as well and you read the letter from the former chair of the Landmarks Commission that he wishes he had done something about Lüchow's after the fact. So a lot of all this is getting as much support from every single corner you can think of, that's relevant at least.

Q: Were there any times you felt like you couldn't clash with the commission, like there was a conflict, like politically they didn't think it was worth pursuing something?

Taylor: Well, I suppose you could say we clashed over Lüchow's. In fairness, though, as I guess I said, they did give it three public hearings; one for an exterior designation, one for an interior designation and one for both. But by that time the rezoning idea had come along and they weren't going to fight the Planning Commission and have a battle between city agencies. I mean all the fighting in the world wouldn't have changed that. In fact we did at one point. One of us said some very nasty things about the commission, which we had to retract.

Q: Okay, we won't have that on the record, but—

Taylor: Yeah, you are going to be editing this, right?

Q: Yeah, well, there'll be a transcript made that you'll be able to approve that, look it over.

Taylor: And including omissions if I think it wise?

Q: I guess you'll have to talk to Tony and Vanessa and other people with the Preservation Archive.

Taylor: Poor Tony has to go through all of this, and Vanessa, too.

Q: Have you seen any change in developers' attitudes towards designation over the time you've been involved? No?

Taylor: Not really, not really.

Q: They either see—

Taylor: Maybe there have been some.

Q: They either see benefits, or they don't?

Taylor: They're congenitally opposed to what the Supreme Court has declared is legal, it's that simple. It's a handicap. Now, sometimes, as in the case of Mr. Taub in Ladies' Mile, he finds it a blessing, but there aren't many in my experience. Especially if they are so-called community facilities like hospitals, colleges, schools, etc. And of course the religious community is something else again, which is also not easy to deal with, and is very difficult for the Commission to deal with, and so they try to avoid dealing with it.

Q: Do you think it's harder to argue for designation based on cultural than on the architectural value?

Taylor: Sorry, what?

Q: Do you think it's harder to argue for designation more based on the cultural value than architectural value?

Taylor: Oh undoubtedly, undoubtedly.

Q: Yeah?

Taylor: This country—I'm sorry to sound so critical of my own country, but that's what we're up to these days. I don't think Americans—they are only slowly, slowly, slowly coming around, but I don't think Americans appreciate their heritage in a tangible form as much as other cultures do. I think it's a gradual process, but when you consider that just given the City of New York and its five boroughs, only three percent of all of the properties in New York City are landmarked. Three percent, when we have one of the greatest cities in the world. That would be outrageous in other metropolises. So it's the almighty dollar, as they used to call it. I am expecting to be disagreed with by a lot of people. And I'm eager to hear what they are, what they say, but some people may not feel that that answer was a good one at all. But then I suggest they look at this [holds up article, "Goodbye to All That," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2005], which shows that after they're [historic properties] gone, people miss them, by which time it's too late. Oh, you said you have that.

Q: Yeah.

Taylor: Well, I have loads of them; take them. You know about the Collyer Brothers [Homer L. Collyer and Langley W. Collyer]?

Q: Collyer—I feel like I have but I couldn't tell you what —

Taylor: You're not a New Yorker, are you?

Q: I am actually, yes.

Taylor: Oh you are, I'm sorry.

Q: I grew up on Staten Island and I've lived in Manhattan for the past dozen years or so.

Taylor: I'm sorry. You don't sound like a New Yorker.

Q: Oh, thanks, I think *[laughs]*.

Taylor: I know. That was supposed to be a compliment *[laughs]*.

Q: Yeah, especially coming from Staten Island *[laughs]*.

Taylor: Oh, no, I think they know how to speak English out there, *[laughs]*. Well, where was I?

Q: Collyer Brothers.

Taylor: Oh, the Collyer *[laughs]*—long before your time and even before mine, there were a couple of very wealthy brothers, both bachelors, who shared a house, a mansion that they inherited from their parents. It was a mansion on Fifth Avenue in what is now, or what was then, Harlem, but it wasn't African-American Harlem then. They were both nuts and they collected everything.

Q: Oh, yeah, I remember this story now.

Taylor: One of them was found dead under a pile of papers. That's the way my apartment is beginning to look *[laughter]*. So if I'm missing by the time you edit this, tell them to—

Q: To look under—yeah.

Taylor: Knock on my door and look under the papers.

Q: So what has your involvement with HDC been and how have you seen that organization evolve?

Taylor: Well, it all started with Tony Wood, as most things do in this city *[laughs]*. He, after the Lüchow's thing, I guess he asked me if I'd like to join. I'm sure it was. We were then in a basement on the Upper West Side under the sufferance of the West Side preservation group called Landmark West!, run by, I'm sure somebody who will be interviewing in your oral history, Arlene Simon? Is she one of your candidates?

Q: I'm not that involved with the project. I'm just doing this through the class.

Taylor: Oh, Okay. Well, she should be. She's a marvelous person, marvelous, but controversial. Aren't we all? But she had a developer friend, who owned a building and still does, and admired her, and her work in preservation, and gave her a basement free of charge and that's where HDC started, thanks to Arlene. And she's still in the basement, we moved to the second floor here. *[laughs].* So I think that's when I first got involved with HDC, but I'm almost sure it was Tony who talked me into it *[laughs],* willingly.

Q: Has the Council changed over the time that you've been with it?

Taylor: Oh, grown immensely, immensely. I mean, we had one half-time executive director, barely paid at all, and now we have four full-time staff. And we've made a name for ourselves, I think. I'm on the board, which is why I say our, O-U-R. In fact, I'll go farther than that, I think we do now more for advocacy for designations than the other two citywide groups of note do, including the Municipal Art Society where we came from, and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. This is not a criticism of them, it's just that I think it's fair to say they've branched off in other civic-minded ways, leaving to us the advocacy work with the grassroots and designations.

I wish that the Historic Districts Council were named something differently. It's too confining. It says only historic districts. What about Lüchow's? What about Dvorak? What about any number

of individual landmarks which we support, but I don't think have the fire in the belly for as much as we do for historic districts? If that's a criticism, so be it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So what were the key disappointments for you or key accomplishments?

Taylor: Well, key disappointments are two, and they're right there *[laughs] [points to material on Lüchow's and Dvorak]*.

Q: Right, those *[laughs]*.

Taylor: Well, I'm proud of Ladies' Mile. I think everybody concerned with it is. It was a fight worth fighting and by the standards of some of the fights that others have been involved in. Actually there's one I should tell you about in addition to that. But we published a book. I never even mentioned that, did I? Called *End of the Road for Ladies' Mile?*

Q: Oh, yeah. They gave me a copy of that.

Taylor: You got a copy?

Q: Well, it's a Xerox copy, but I don't know if it's all of it.

Taylor: Oh, perhaps you should check on that. Well, we're down to they're being collector's items. We sold out. I mean, I have four left.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: Others of us have some, but the book is now a rarity. Anyway, we published the book, we had the exhibition, the walking tours, all of these things help, and by the standards of the time it takes some designations to get voted on affirmatively, Ladies' Mile was relatively quick, I think about six years; at least in my participation it was. I don't think, frankly I don't think there was anything done in an organized way in the '70s that you mentioned.

Q: Yeah, I think someone had said that it had already been going on for several years. It was sort of a comment [I read] that implied that it had started a bit earlier, but—

Taylor: Well, if—

Q: It wasn't an exact date.

Taylor: It may have been thought of—I hope—but in an organized way I don't think so. Anyway, by the time I got into it, it was sort of underway, but it was just beginning—I think—from my recollection. And it took six years to get it. By the same token, I don't think I mentioned it, but in the same block as the Guardian Life Annex building which I did mention, and the Tammany Hall building which we're still working on, there is the rest of the block of

Seventeenth Street on the south side between Union Square and Irving Place, and around the corner on Irving Place, are ten contiguous buildings. Most of them are Nineteenth Century and the key one is at the corner of Irving Place and Seventeenth, southwest corner. We started—people really did start trying to get those designated, or at least the key building which was the so-called Washington Irving House, but it has always been debated historically whether he actually lived there or not. But somebody who actually did live there and was famous was the creator of the interior design professions, Elsie de Wolfe. Anyway, it took fourteen years to get those ten buildings, contiguous, all owned by the same *[unclear]*. You can wipe that out, cut that out. But then he shot himself in the foot, the owner. There was a side-street bay window on the Elsie de Wolfe's house, which was in very bad condition, as were all ten buildings were in horrible shape. But this one was especially bad and especially the bay window. So he just waited for a summer weekend in the middle of the night on a Saturday and just shaved it off, the whole bay window, and put it in a dumpster. That did it! That got the Commission active.

Q: Wow.

Taylor: Immediately it designated the whole ten buildings. So he really shot himself in the foot, but it took fourteen years to get that. So that's another. It's a small historic district. But I'm very pleased to have been involved in that campaign. I don't know if that's in your script there or not.

Q: Oh, no, whatever you want to, whatever you want to mention. Did any campaign in particular mean more to you personally? I mean, I guess that one, maybe?

Taylor: Did any what?

Q: Did any mean more to you personally, of the campaigns that you've been involved with?

Taylor: Well, it's hard to say because most of them have been in my area, so sure I take them personally.

Q: Yeah, they've all meant something.

Taylor: Mattered. I suppose Lüchow's mostly, or mainly, but I love music, so Dvorak was important to me too. But I think maybe Lüchow's was most gratifying, most gratifying to be apart of trying to get it designated. Is that an answer?

Q: Yeah. Well, looking back, what particular strengths, talents, or perspectives maybe, have you brought to the campaigns you've been involved with?

Taylor: I'm glad I have a non-electric manual typewriter—that helped most of all, *[laughs]* and, of course, postage stamps. Well, I think you'd better repeat that question *[laughs]*.

Q: What particular strengths, talents or perspectives have you brought to the campaigns that you've been involved with? Point of view, perspective—

Taylor: Well, I suppose the fact that I play around with the English language helps a little bit. I'm, by professional, a copy editor, proofreader. I guess that helped. I wish I could say I'm a researcher. I'm not, really. I mean in terms of down deep and dirty research, the hard stuff—I rely on others, *[laughs]*. I suppose a certain amount of bulldog quality, maybe. A lot of scotch *[laughter],* the liquid, that is. Staying in one place for half my life maybe. And the only reason for that is I'm rent-regulated, *[laughs]*. Otherwise I'd have moved years ago, or out of New York entirely, the way it's going. I don't know, a certain amount of respect for our American, and especially New York, heritage. Architecturally, though I'm not an architect, or a historian—culturally or socially. I just hate to see good stuff go the way of all flesh. Better leave it at that.

Q: You think it's easier to get things preserved today then maybe a decade or two ago?

Taylor: Not in Manhattan, no. The Commission has been criticized and rightly so for, until recently, being Manhattan-centric, ignoring the so-called outer boroughs, and they deserve that criticism. But now they are paying more attention and that's fine. But the other side is that they are ignoring Manhattan by and large, which of course has the most designations, but nonetheless—

Q: Needs to be preserved too.

Taylor: Who wrote this new book *The Island at the Center of the World*?

Q: Oh, yeah, I just finished it.

Taylor: Like it or not, this silly island is.

Q: Is there a direction that you see preservation going next? Or where you think it should go in the future?

Taylor: Down the tube would be one answer. I don't know, I think I once said ill-advisedly and in one of the few times I've ever actually been interviewed, I mean at length like this, other than newspaper stuff, is that most people are preservationists at heart, only they don't know it until they realize they've lost something that's near and dear to them in one way or another—then they show their preservation colors. The problem is they should show them earlier than that, but the whole thing is so political that most people don't have the time or energy or expertise to get involved. I think a lot of them would if things were a little different and if New York were not so obsessed with over-development, at least in this borough.

Q: Is there anything I haven't asked that you think is important to talk about? That you'd like to—

Taylor: Is there what?

Q: Is there anything that I haven't asked?

Taylor: Oh.

Q: That you'd like to talk about?

Taylor: Oh, well, how about Union Square, *[laughs]*. Marci [Reaven] will kill me for that, won't she?

Q: Why?

Taylor: Well, because Union Square is not a municipal city landmark. So it's really outside the parameters of what I guess we're supposed to be talking about. But it is, however, a National Historic Landmark and is listed in the National and State Registers of Historic Places, which doesn't give it much protection, but is a status symbol if nothing else. And a lot of us fought to get that level of designation as well, which we finally got in 1997. We had no help whatsoever from the Union Square Partnership, the [Union Square] BID, Business Improvement District, nor have they ever supported any landmark designation in Union Square or nearby—ever.

But what's at risk at Union Square now, apart from just purely on the historic-preservation level, there are other things at risk, but for our purposes—is the famous North Plaza. The site of soapbox orators, parades, rallies, demonstrations, every kind of political and social protest including at the 2004 Republican National Convention, when the [New York City] Parks Department wouldn't allow the demonstrators into Central Park on the theory it would ruin the landscaping.

Q: Landscaping?

Taylor: So where did they come? Exactly where they should: Union Square. There are many good things about the [Michael R.] Bloomberg administration—I don't want to get political here—but he has not to me appeared to be sympathetic to preservation or landmarking. His so-called plaNYC 2030, you know—

Q: Yeah.

Taylor: It's his look down the road.

Q: I can't remember the name either.

Taylor: PlaNYC 2030. It covers every subject you can think of except historic preservation and landmarking. The other failure of his administration has been in the civil-rights arena and that brings up the North Plaza of Union Square, where it's my view that the plan to beautify it or gentrify it by planting trees and by installing an elaborate, incomprehensibly designed pavement are not for beautification at all but to discourage public assembly. And I'd like to go on the record about that. Actually *The New York Times* quoted me that way. I should have brought that article too *[laughter]*.

So that's what I think is most at risk in the plans for Union Square. Much of what they've done already is okay. I'm not wildly enthusiastic about the redesign of the whole thing, but it makes

some sense. It's amongst other reasons why the park is not a city landmark as Stuyvesant Square Park is, because there's nothing left from the historical—anything before 1930, except the space, the vacant space [of the North Plaza]. But for others there are more important things that are wrong, although they admit the whole thing is wrong in many ways, but they think the playground issue is more ill-advised. Mostly we all think the pavilion use is the worst part of it. The commercialization and privatization of a public building in a public park—it's unneeded, it's undemocratic. My feeling is that the worst element though, is in the North Plaza plans. And that behind it all is a deliberate attempt to hinder public assembly, for which the space is famous and for which it was federally landmarked.

It's almost six o'clock and you probably want to get home.

Q: Yeah, I should probably wrap things up. Well, thank you very much.

Taylor: Well, thank you, I'm flattered.

[END OF INTERVIEW]