

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of  
Genie Rice

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Genie Rice conducted by Interviewer Laura Casas Fortuno on April 10, 2012. 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.

Former President and co-founder of CIVITAS, Genie Rice's interest in preservation was sparked by the push to landmark the Felix M. Warburg House. She then co-founded CIVITAS with August Heckscher in 1981 to protest the development of the Ruppert Brewery site. CIVITAS's focus has been on city planning and Genie Rice speaks about the efforts to down-zone East Side Avenues. Part of the effort involved a film, *No More Tall Stories*, featuring Paul Newman, to illustrate the need for contextual zoning. She also speaks about the efforts to rezone and preserve lower scale East Harlem. Many of the community efforts she's worked on have dealt with development heights, affordable housing, and the livability of the neighborhoods.

Genie Rice became involved with historic preservation as an advocate for Upper East Side residential life in the 1970s. Co-founding the group CIVITAS with August Heckscher in 1981, Rice was president of the organization until 2003. CIVITAS' preservation victories include the 2003 rezoning of East Harlem and spearheading a campaign to preserve the Ruppert Brewery site. Rice advocated for city zoning regulations to be strictly enforced, as evidenced by her fight to cut twelve illegal stories from an Upper East Side apartment building in 1991. Rice is currently a board member of the Park Avenue Armory Conservancy, the chairman of CIVITAS, and a sponsor of the Genie and Donald Rice Charitable Trust.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Genie Rice

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Laura Casas Fortuno

Date: April 10, 2012

Q: So I'm going to start with kind of the force of the *[unclear]*, because we want to know more about your life. So what led you to New York City? Did you grow up here, or did you move here after college?

Rice: I moved here after working in Washington, DC. I worked at WETA Television as a receptionist and secretary to the business manager. I wasn't very happy there and one of the people working there, a wonderful person, introduced me to the Smithsonian [Institution's] Traveling Exhibition Service. I worked there for a couple of years putting together art and other exhibitions and circulating them around the country. It was a soup to nuts operation where you actually went to different departments within the Smithsonian, put the exhibition together with a curator, and packaged it up, and then actually booked it with other museums, or libraries, or art galleries, all over the country. It was a dream made in heaven. I just loved that job.

Then my husband—I got married—wanted to move to New York. I didn't want to move to New York, I thought that sounded daunting. But I was lucky and I got a job at the New York State Council on the Arts and working for Allon Schoener who was very involved with community arts programs. I got to know the city through working with Allon and working all over the city with different projects. That's sort of the beginning when we went to New York.

Q: So what led you to participate in neighborhood activism, particularly in planning and neighborhood preservation issues?

Rice: Okay. After I worked for Allon, I had children, and then I was at the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] running a mother/child workshop [UN-US Mother Child Workshop] for United Nations mothers and American mothers as a volunteer, and did that for nine years. We would have different projects for children and for the mothers. My children got older and it became time to do something different. There was a neighborhood battle and I just volunteered to help out. The Jewish Museum trustees wanted to tear down the List Pavilion [List Building] of the Warburg Mansion on Fifth Avenue. It was a modern entrance and they wanted to tear that down and, very much like the Museum of Modern Art, put an apartment building that would cantilever out over the Warburg Mansion, and we thought was terrible.

I just became a volunteer to help with the effort of getting it landmarked. It was eligible for landmark status, because it was thirty years old. The trustees didn't want landmark status, because they wanted to be free to do whatever they wanted, which was to put up the apartment building. It turned out no one really wanted to take responsibility so I became the coordinator of the Alliance to Preserve the Warburg Mansion. A good friend who understood how community boards worked and how the [New York City] Board of Estimate at that time worked told me what I needed to do to try to get the building landmarked, which we were successful in doing.

There was a wonderful result. The trustees then came up with a terrific solution, which was an extension similar to the style of the Warburg Mansion designed by Kevin Roche. They used the

stonemasons from [Cathedral of] St. John the Divine and they used Eli Massim, who did the interior, and they did a fabulous job. So that got me hooked.

Then, August Heckscher, who was Parks Commissioner under Mayor [John V.] Lindsay, was very concerned about what was happening with the Ruppert Brewery, between Third and Second Avenues in the '90s. There had been one parcel of land left that was supposed to have been Park East High School, with open space surrounding it, and grass on the roof. At the time, there had been something called The Muse, which were buildings lining Third Avenue with gardens behind, adjacent to the open space designated for the high school. The city—decided that it needed to increase its tax base and in order to do so, demolish and The Muse, scrap the high school plan and realize the revenue from a developer of a residential building. In order to sweeten the deal, it was decided to include a senior citizen housing center.

So Augie Heckscher came to me and said, “Let’s form CIVITAS. Let’s try to address this issue,” He became chairman and I became president. He had already some people who were there in the beginning, especially a man named Frank Lichtensteiger, who was very important to CIVITAS. There were a number of people I knew who we put on the board to address the issue of the Ruppert Urban Renewal Site

We sued for an environmental impact statement and tried to have the building looked at in comparison to what was originally was planned for that area in terms of building density. Subsequently, we participated in negotiations and came up with a smaller plan. There were volunteers, Elise Frick and architect Mac Gordon who created a model, which we took to

different meetings, including the Community Board, and to the Board of Estimate. We lost the lawsuit. However the building design was smaller than what had been originally offered and one which we thought was acceptable. It was the result of the settlement discussions.

Q: So you had an environmental impact statement and—

Rice: We asked that there be an environment impact statement and they didn't have one.

Q: All right. On the basis of what—it's going to affect the neighborhood or—?

Rice: Affect the neighborhood and the whole area. It was very, very dense.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So how it would relate to the area, affect the sunlight, and—?

Rice: Well, really population and sunlight and open space. That's what we felt should happen and, as I say, they did reduce the size of the development. They did put the senior citizen housing halfway down the hill although we had suggested that they be up on Third Avenue so seniors could get public transportation more easily without walking up and down a hill. After that, we decided to be proactive and do something ahead of developers coming in and coming up with a plan and not be too late. We did a study of East 96th Street, looking at 96th Street from the East River to Central Park. We hired consultants who gave us an urban planning course so to speak.

Paul Buckhurst, of Buckhurst, Fish and Katz [Inc.], and Geoffrey Roesch. There were about ten of us from East Harlem and the Upper East Side that met weekly. We looked at the building heights and density for two blocks on either side of 96th Street as well. We looked at the open space, trees, development potential, and transportation. We also looked at how easy it was to have access to the waterfront, as well as to Central Park. We presented our findings to [Manhattan] Community Board 8 on the Upper East Side, [Manhattan] Community Board 11 in East Harlem, where they really hadn't been in communication with each other. We had a community meeting at St. Francis de Sales Church, which is the Catholic Church on 96th Street. We invited the larger community to come and join a committee that would work on these issues.

Q: So CIVITAS focus is urban planning and zoning, that's the main focus.

Rice: Right.

Q: Why was this focus chosen? Was there a particular, did you say a gap in other groups at the time?

Rice: At the time, I think Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts was just starting as we were, and they really focus on preservation. We felt that urban planning was something that we were concerned about. At this juncture, we became directly involved with reviewing a developer's plans for Normandie Court on 96th street. Because the developers were using state financing, they were required to meet with the community and CIVITAS was designated. Paul Buckhurst worked with CIVITAS in suggesting physical modifications as well as suggestions for

the disposition and size of affordable apartments, which was part of the financing. The building structure was designed to have access only from 95th Street. Paul and the CIVITAS team suggested having entrances/access also on 96th Street. 96th Street was kind of a DMZ line, which turned its back on 96th Street and East Harlem. The intent was to integrate into both streets.

The developers fulfilled their requirements in meeting with us. They did—and played a game every time we suggested an access improvement, which Paul Buckhurst and his wonderful staff came up with, they would say, “Well, that solves one problem, but then it creates this problem,” so then we would have to solve the next problem.

In the end, we accomplished some minor modifications to the building. As far as the affordable housing component was concerned, the developers proposed that they be available to personnel from Mt. Sinai and Metropolitan Hospitals and contained in smaller units on the first two floors. We proposed that the surrounding community have access as well, and that all the units be various sizes and spread throughout the building. I think they did that. They also planted some street trees so that was positive.

The next thing that happened as a result of our East 96th Street study was discovery of a building overbuilt by twelve stories on Park Avenue.

Q: Yeah, that was my next question.

Rice: Oh, I'm sorry [*laughter*]. That was because of the study we had done.

Q: So how did you—do you want to talk about that—?

Rice: Absolutely.

Q: —and how you managed to—?

Rice: Absolutely. Well, because we had done the study of 96th Street, we were working with different committees and the community boards were working on various issues, contained in the study. A woman who lived in one of the townhouses on 95th Street, called up and said they were excavating behind her property for a big building and she wanted to know how large it might be. Well CIVITAS was supposed to be the resource. We go down to the Buildings Department [New York City Department of Buildings] to research it.

At the Buildings Department, I looked at the map, had some questions and requested to meet with an inspector. And when looking at the map it appeared as though the building was in something called a Special Park Improvement District. This zoning designation runs up and down Park Avenue from 59th Street up to 96th Street. It is also on Fifth Avenue, where it stretches from 59th Street up to 110th Street. And there was a height limit of 110 feet—excuse me, 210 feet, about twelve stories, I mean, nineteen stories. And this building was definitely going to be a lot larger than 210 feet.

So we went to the [New York City] Department of City Planning and had them check out the map and they said that, in their opinion, this building was being overbuilt. Then Councilwoman Carolyn [B.] Maloney also gave us a little backbone in having it examined and a stop work order was issued to discontinue work on the building. The building's developer made an appeal to the [New York City] Board of Standards and Appeals [BSA], which took a couple of months to schedule a hearing. During the time period before the hearing, the developer was able to continue with construction. For several months, he ended up building from the top down. The lower nineteen stories were completely disregarded as they tried to fill in the top stories, which they did quickly and efficiently.

When the BSA hearing took place, we were successful. In the interim the developer and his team tried to make a deal along the lines of "We want to keep these illegal twelve stories and we want to put teachers in them." They went around to different non-profits to try to persuade us to keep these stories and sort of make a deal to benefit the non-profits in exchange. And we said, "No, it is a zoning violation and should have a zoning solution, you know, removal of the illegal twelve stories."

Then it went to court and with several appeals, even to the U.S. [United States] Supreme Court. Eventually it landed at New York's highest court, NYS Court of Appeals, which held that the top twelve stories were illegal and must be torn down. It took I think it was six years and finally they had to dismantle the twelve illegal stories. Some people were, I think, very upset about that, even though it meant that there were construction jobs for the people dismantling the building. We showed how Gimbels [Department Store] on 86th Street had been a department store and they

had to dismantle that to put up an apartment building. So that was an example of how you could do that. It was safely done and I think it sort of gave us some gravitas and meant that the other studies that we did—

Q: Taken—

Rice: —you know, had some teeth.

Q: Yes. So in this case, the city illegally gave a permit, the Buildings Department illegally gave the permit for construction or—?

Rice: Well, I don't want to—well, I don't quite know whether it was a mistake. It was a mistake.

Q: A mistake.

Rice: How you want to characterize the mistake, I don't know.

Q: Do you think these kinds of mistakes happen frequently?

Rice: I think they do happen. And I know that maybe about four or five years ago there was a rash of over-building by one or two stories in Brooklyn and in other places. So I do think it has to be looked at carefully. People are concerned about what's happening.

Q: Is the city ever held responsible for giving permits that shouldn't be, or is it kind of they revoke it and—?

Rice: Well, I think it is a case-by-case basis. I think they try to revoke it, then there's litigation, and so forth.

Q: So when I was browsing through the website, I found the 1985 film, *No More Tall Stories*, the Paul Newman film.

Rice: Yes.

Q: So I kind of wanted to hear how this film came to be and if any other films were made like this.

Rice: Well, we, trying to be proactive, we decided that the zoning on Third, Second, First, and York Avenues was permitting very, very tall buildings that just dominate the street. Much taller than other areas in the city and certainly the west side had a different kind of contextual configuration and also, I think, a little bit lower zoning. At the time, there was a bonus that developers could take advantage of, which meant that if they were building in a designated area, R10 [Residence District: R10] area, and they put in a plaza, which was often a VIP driveway—they could get a twenty percent larger building. We felt strongly that—and also the zoning designation along these avenues is 125 feet deep measured from the avenue into the mid block.

And in other avenues, it's usually one hundred feet, so they had an extra twenty-five feet, at the higher zoning designation resulting in big, tall towers.

We wanted to have these avenues rezoned so the buildings would not be as large. We wanted to have them reconfigured so that they would match up with their adjacent neighbors, and we wanted to eliminate the plaza bonus, because it was often just used for a glorified entrance and not really a park-like space for people.

We decided to approach it very much in the light of Holly [William Hollingsworth] Whyte, and how people use streets and Project for Public Space, which includes light and shade studies from a point-of-view of people who live in the neighborhood. We felt it important to understand what it is like to live around these buildings. We hired Peter Bosselman from the University of California Berkeley, whose modeling technique was able to illustrate different zoning or building scenarios. Peter Bosselman constructed little models of Second Avenue in the present, another if built out under current zoning and a third under our suggested changes. He had a camera which went down Second Avenue, illustrating building size, and in addition from a fish-eye lens, so you could see how much sky you could see under different scenarios. Project of Public Space worked with Peter Bosselman, which included light and wind studies. While we felt that it was interesting research, we wondered who was going to understand it and what were they going to do with it?

We thought the best thing to do was to have a movie. So Jim [James T.B.] Tripp, a vice president who worked at the Environmental Defense Fund, offered the Fund's conference room for us to

meet and work on a script. A group of us including Marcia Fowle and Chuck [Charles S.] Warren wrote a script and then we decided we wanted someone to narrate it. We decided that Paul Newman might be a good idea.

Paul Newman agreed to read the script and called me to state that the script was terrible despite having interesting information. So I asked, “Well, what do we do about terrible?” He answered, “Ed [Edward] Levy.” And hung up the phone. Immediately. I called up all the Ed Levy’s in the telephone book and on the third try found the Ed Levy who was a scriptwriter for Paul Newman.

Before the meeting with Ed Levy, I spoke with Jim, about offering to take him out for lunch. “Jim.” I said, “Ed Levy may be a fancy guy and we might need to take him out for lunch somewhere and not have a homemade sandwich in the conference room.” And Jim said, “Oh, all right. I can offer to take him to the Yale Club,” But when I called him, Ed Levy, and invited him for lunch, sandwich in the conference room or out somewhere, he replied that a conference room lunch would work if I could bring him a salad.

Double Duck Deli, a generous neighborhood supporter of our benefits, was happy to provide a salad and bottle of Newman’s Own Dressing for our paper bag lunch. Ed Levy met us, was interested, wrote a wonderful script and was creative and generous with alternative arrangements to save money. We used Jim Tripp’s van to pick up the cameraman in Brooklyn. Ed trained several of us to function as crowd control when he was filming Paul Newman on Second Avenue. He agreed to using a back room at Cronies Bar to have Paul Newman made up rather than rent a van. The film’s editor was also generous with his time, not to mention the star, Paul

Newman. It was a labor of love It demonstrated in an easy way what we were trying to do and why were trying to do it. Our target was to rezone Third, Second, First and York Avenues from 59th Street to 96th Streets.

As a result of that work, we received a grant, to participate with a group representing different viewpoints at The New School's recently established Simulation Center where they just had just began working with new computers and programming I became chairman of a working group consisting of representatives from City Planning, Oculus, a sub-committee of the American Institute of Architects, the Real Estate Board [of New York], Community Board 8 and the Manhattan Borough President's Office. The purpose was to model different zoning scenarios suggested by each group.

Over a period of months, we met, took tours around the city and examined different buildings, inside and out, and discussed the merits of various structures. The Real Estate Board wanted very tall buildings that would benefit the developer easily without a lot of setbacks. Oculus wanted something that was esthetically pleasing. CIVITAS advocated shorter contextual buildings with a lower street wall while City Planning became a mediator. Bruce Fowle representing Oculus was the practical member of the group who drew models when the computer programming ran into glitches.

Eventually, a new zoning was passed, sponsored by Community Board 8 for Third, Second, First, York Avenues from 59th to 96th Streets. It included many improvements suggested by the group and was fine tuned by an additional study conducted by Craig Whitaker to retool the high

density avenue zoning designation. That suggestion diminished the zoning bulk allocated to many eastside avenues from 125 feet to one hundred feet. This meant that there was parity with Avenues on the west side and elsewhere in the city. The rezoning eliminated the plaza bonus—the allowance for a twenty percent larger structure for creation of some open space at the building's base i.e. VIP driveways—in exchange for creating some affordable housing units. It also had provisions for matching the initial building set backs with neighboring buildings along the street for a more pleasant pedestrian experience.

Q: So also in the movie, in the film, Paul Newman describes the Upper East Side in a way that I would today think of Brooklyn because I live in Brooklyn. How has the neighborhood and how has New York City changed since then?

Rice: Oh, wow. I think a lot of the neighborhoods in Brooklyn are now what used to be the Upper East Side. There used to be a lot of ma and pa shops. There used to be, certainly on 86th Street and in the east 80s, a lot of wonderful stores that were part of German Yorkville. In Harlem, also, there were different kinds of shops, La Marketa [*phonetic*] was thriving. The attraction for people, living there, is having small neighborhoods and people that you knew at the stores, and kind of active street life. It was knit together in a very friendly way. It is more impersonal now. The economics make it more homogeneous because only big box stores can afford the rents that some of the owners are asking.

In Brooklyn I think now is a wonderful place to live because it has many of those special neighborhood aspects.

Q: Yeah. I also read that CIVITAS promotes affordable housing. Do you want to talk about some of the initiatives that have been successful?

Rice: Well, as I've said earlier, we wanted to be proactive and we felt that our board members in East Harlem—were concerned about developers interest in East Harlem, but it was really before there was such intense interest. To examine the zoning, we hired George Calvert who started Hope Community [Inc.]. He was very concerned about keeping the village feel, rebuilding main street in the village of East Harlem. He conducted a wonderful study aimed at keeping people in their neighborhoods but examining how new development could be planned to be complimentary and not out of scale.

We obtained all the tax information of all the lots in East Harlem. We worked with the Zoning Committee of Community Board 11, a CIVITAS committee and George Calvert, and then eventually Richard Bass became a consultant. We analyzed the existing fabric as well as soft sites to try to suggest a possible rezoning. East Harlem has a blanket zone, R7-2 [Zoning District], which means that there is no differentiation between the avenue and mid-block permitted heights. It also means that a developer can amass a whole block of development rights and put up a huge monolithic building because there is no height limitation. The CIVITAS team, now with [T.] Gorman Reilly as President, and Community Board 11 representatives met with the Department of City Planning and shared the study.

At this point, Mayor Michael [R.] Bloomberg was in office and had appointed Amanda Burden to chair the City Planning Commission. Chairman Burden was intent on rezoning many city neighborhoods and the East Harlem initiative—96th to 125th Streets, Lexington Ave. to the Harlem/East River—was ready to go with staff improvements. It went through in a record three years.

Q: I also read about the *ABC of Zoning*. So how did the idea for this publication come to be and who was involved?

Rice: Well, zoning is very complicated and not particularly interesting. We thought we should educate ourselves, but we should also, in educating ourselves, create a booklet and make it a little more interesting. We found a wonderful man, Jack Huberman, who volunteered his time to work with a CIVITAS committee. Jack not only was an excellent writer, but a talented illustrator of technical drawing and also imaginative cartoons. *The ABC of Zoning* became quite a resource in the city, as well as some cities outside and even in Russia.

Q: So I also read that the 2003 rezoning took some of the recommendations that CIVITAS had given.

Rice: You mean for East Harlem?

Q: Yeah, for East Harlem. Yeah.

Rice: Yes. Actually—

Q: Do you want to talk about that?

Rice: There was committee consisting of representatives from Community Board 11, CIVITAS, and other people in the area who were involved with non-profits. Richard Bass was the consultant who worked well with everyone, educated us, and presented different options, which were realistic options.

When the study was turned over to City Planning, the staff at first wanted to divide the project into two separate parts over a longer period of time. The first would extend from 96th to 116th Streets and the second from 116th up to 125th Streets and have it split off at 116th Street.

Thankfully the group said, “No, we want the whole thing. We’re not going to kill ourselves and not come up with very much.”

I have to tell you a funny story that has to do with the East Harlem community we were working with. Two of us went to make arrangements to provide food for an evening community meeting planned at the Julia de Burgos [Performance and Arts] Center on Lexington and 106th Street. Carolyn Greenberg and I decided that we would go a Mexican restaurant, which was a block and a half away from the Center. Before we left the office, the phone rang and Cora Shelton, a longtime board member and lifelong East Harlem resident was on the line. Cora had been Councilwoman Carolyn Maloney’s assistant in her East Harlem office. When we described going to a Mexican restaurant to order food for the meeting, she forcefully objected. She stated

that the restaurant was owned by knee-Spanish and she didn't want us buying food there. We replied, "Cora, what do you mean?" She explained how she had been humiliated when working for Carolyn Maloney—she had sent Spanish-speaking constituents to apply for jobs at a downtown office where it turned out that they couldn't write or read Spanish. They had learned to speak on the knee of a grandmother.

"O.K. Cora, where shall we buy food?" She suggested a cafe nearby which I recognized because my daughter, who was a social worker in the neighborhood, had spoken highly of it. Again, the phone rang and another East Harlem board member was on the line. When I explained we were leaving to go to that cafe to order food, he stated that he didn't like the owner and that he and the present councilman would not attend the evening event if we purchased food from the cafe.

So I said, "Okay, so where should we go?" A pizza place was the reply. We knew from the tax records that there were some lots that never paid taxes in the area. But we ended up ordering pizza, which was fine. It illustrated the pitfalls of becoming familiar in a different dimension with various neighborhoods and it added a little color to an evening of a zoning discussion.

Q: Yeah [*laughs*]. So I wanted to ask you about the Second Avenue Subway. It's supposed to open partially in 2016. So what do you think this will mean for the Upper East Side and for CIVITAS?

Rice: I think in the long run it's absolutely essential to have people be able to have efficient, fast transportation. People who live on the far east, right now, the Lexington Avenue subway is just

so crowded and it's a real hike if you live on the East End Avenue or York Avenue to go over and get on the subway.

I think it's miserable for some of the people who are living through the process of it. Not easy for the merchants. I just ache for the merchants because that's their lives and their livelihoods that have been disrupted and it's been very difficult for them. It's difficult for neighbors who are living through it. But in the long run, I think it's a wonderful and essential thing. I think one of the positive aspects is that CIVITAS has been doing a lot of good and hard work. You should interview Gorman Reilly and Hunter [F.] Armstrong and Jim Tripp about this because they've been on the forefront, working on this. There is a feeling that we can learn from some of the pitfalls of what has happened on the Upper East Side when construction starts again in East Harlem. Felipe Ventegeat, who is the president of CIVITAS now, has been involved and is providing fabulous leadership on all different fronts, and is trying to get some funding that will help the merchants and try to make things smoother when it moves up there.

Q: And get them to stay there.

Rice: Yes.

Q: Obviously, that's important. I wanted to talk to you about the citywide civic groups, other ones that CIVITAS may have been involved with.

Rice: Right.

Q: Which ones got involved in east side issues and which ones didn't and the relationship between?

Rice: I think there are wonderful east side groups that are terrific. I think Carnegie Hill Neighbors has been very good for its catchment area. It's been great with historic buildings and beautification. They've done a great job with Trees New York. Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts has been fabulous with their preservation efforts and we've often worked together on certain issues. The East 79th [Street Neighborhood] Association and Betty Cooper Wallerstein has been involved with saving City and Suburban housing, where CIVITAS has played a supportive role. Defenders of the [Historic] Upper East Side is another effective organization as well as Hope Community in East Harlem.

Q: Do you think that these groups have gotten stronger over time or weaker over time?

Rice: I think each one has its own mission and I think within its mission they have gotten stronger. There probably can be more. I know that with the heating oil issue and air pollution, we've been working with Carnegie Hill Neighbors, so there is overlap and sharing. I think we don't necessarily emphasize the same things, which is good, because that would be a waste of resources.

Q: Yes. So how have the local elected officials—I hear you've mentioned a few, and you mentioned Amanda Burden—so how have they been on issues over time and who have been like the most important players in the planning issues?

Rice: The staff at City Planning are wonderful, particularly the people covering East Harlem, such as Edwin Marshall. Others involved with the rezoning of east side avenues have been helpful. It is an impressive staff involved with looking at neighborhoods for added growth in a smart and nuanced way. It's a question of looking at each neighborhood. I know the approach is different in different neighborhoods. I know in Brooklyn it's been very controversial and a lot of rezonings there are not so good, or are very difficult. I think the overall idea of it was positive. How you accomplish it is something else. But I think it's important to have the community input so that it really does work.

We have a fantastic transportation system. I was taking my grandson home from school the other day on the subway, telling him how I got to know the city when I got here, with Allon Schoener, going all over the city. It is a fantastic subway system and it has had smart growth, where all these stops are, larger buildings there, but then trying to keep the neighborhood somewhat contextual in a combination of zoning designations. It would be desirable to better knit together, zoning regulations and tax laws so that neighborhoods could be viable in the next ten, twenty, fifty years. I feel that's what we need to do. In addition, City regulators need to focus and feed into legislation the desires and sensibilities of the people living in the neighborhoods so that they're genuinely included. Neighborhood livability is very important.

Q: So with your experience working during various mayoral administrations, were any more supportive on community involvement issues than others?

Rice: Well, I think this administration is a pretty good one. The only thing that I am concerned about—and maybe I just haven't done enough research—is infrastructure. When Mayor Bloomberg announced that Commissioner [Luis M.] Tormenta was going to be head of an infrastructure initiative I felt heartened. I don't know what's really happened with that. Historically, what city engineers planned and are doing for systems, which deliver water, electricity, plus the subway, the bridges, and tunnels, is quite extraordinary, but it needs coordinated updating.

Also, we have this wonderful East River esplanade, which requires being—reinvented. The entire stretch of the East River esplanade requires attention. CIVITAS is doing that under the guidance of Felipe Ventegat, president, and Hunter Armstrong, executive director. They and a committee of professional volunteers have created a juried design contest, which is being held with the Museum of the City of New York. I understand that there are over ninety submissions including twenty from other countries examining the East River from an historical, topographical and from the point of view of climate change predictions. I think it's so important to have the Esplanade revitalized so that people can get to the waterfront to walk, bike and enjoy the whole area. There are so many wonderful things that can happen.

We also should look at Randall's Island, which is a terrific resource. The Randall's Island Park is designated as open space for people of East Harlem as part of a city planning ratio of required

open space to a local population. It is very much like the designation of Central Park open space for people on the Upper East Side. Unlike Central Park where the Upper Eastside residents can easily walk to that park, East Harlem citizens are not able to access their open space because of the Harlem/East River. CIVITAS did a study of possible pedestrian bridges that could be sited at two different locations, either 116th or 120th Streets, based on information and requirements from city, state and federal agencies. Eventually, a pedestrian bridge could be a part of also the East River Esplanade plan.

Q: Yeah, that would be great. So you mentioned briefly the community boards. So how integral were they in these issues?

Rice: Oh, I think they're very important, but they only have an advisory role. So it's really kind of a way of educating the community about various issues that are important to everyone in the city, and having them become knowledgeable and having them go to the appropriate agency and weigh in. I think it is terribly important to do that. At one point, I know that there was hope that there would be money to assign an urban planner to each community board to review development issues. They would have the possibility of working with a planner who could present zoning options contrasted with the usual application from a developer who comes along and wants to change the zoning to what he would like to personally accommodate. In many cases the proposal could be good, but if you have to change an entire zoning designation, that's not a good thing.

An example is what happened with the Special Park Improvement District on Fifth Avenue. A developer wanted to change all the zoning in the Special Park Improvement District [59th to 110th Streets which had a height cap of 210 feet or nineteen stories]. That developer's proposal was to do away with that restriction in order to construct a taller skyscraper. So that's not a good thing. If the community board had had an urban planner as a resource, it probably wouldn't have become an application. Because of community and CIVITAS objections where board member, Marcia Fowle led our effort, the zoning did not change.

So getting back to the usefulness of community board, it's a good idea. How effective they are, it depends on the appointed members and what the issues are.

Q: Do you feel that the community is more incentivized to these issues?

Rice: People are more knowledgeable now.

Q: More knowledgeable.

Rice: I think. Yeah.

Q: So how has the philosophy and approach of CIVITAS evolved and adapted over the years?

Has there been, like, a major shift of thinking or has it been steady?

Rice: I think we've always been—tried to be—proactive and trying to educate ourselves and educate others and come up with a plan that we think would improve a neighborhood, and do it in a way which involves people at the grassroots level. We hire consultants where we needed expertise; zoning or financial, whatever was required. It's kind of a project-based approach, which I think has been successful over the years and I think continues to be. It can be copied elsewhere, it has been in other cities. The formula is to try to make it small enough so you can do it, but with a model that can be copied and can be used elsewhere.

Q: I also read some of the more recent programs and they seemed to be oriented towards sustainability and intention of buildings, which is great, which is something that is definitely emphasized in school. Do you want to talk about how CIVITAS has led—do you want to start with that?

Rice: Well, the heating oil issue, is something that is very important and I think people haven't been as aware of how damaging it is to have number six heating oil burning and how much asthma it causes. That project is different. We have always been concerned about affordable housing and being able to keep people in affordable housing. The East Harlem rezoning was conducted hoping to not have too much gentrification so people can live there still. If you had huge rezoning, you know, a lot of buildings would be demolished and completely replaced by as-of-right monolithic buildings. A result would be that many residents wouldn't be able to stay in the village of East Harlem so to speak. We are certainly concerned about sustainable development, using solar panels as well as open space, and parks.

Q: So you've had a lot of wins over the years that I've read from at least. Can you speak about some other ones that particularly stick out in your mind as important or do you think we've covered—?

Rice: I think what has been difficult is that some of the institutions, for instance hospitals, health institutions, and schools as well, provide very important services to the local and larger communities, but create development plans which adversely impact the immediate community. That's been difficult because it's sort of a balancing act.

A challenging example was a school, which was quite arrogant about how it tried to force its expansion plan through the community. After an extensive expansion, which was needed, the school came back with an additional plan a few years later. But it hadn't completed mitigation measures promised to neighbors who were negatively impacted by the original construction. That bothered me a lot because it meant that the school wasn't really illustrating or teaching its students how to be responsible. It sent a message, our way is right and we don't really care what it does or how it impacts the surrounding people and we're going to ask for more. That's disappointing. It's always a difficult balance because these schools need more facilities because they want to be better and they want to be more competitive. And the same thing with the hospitals, they want to be the top hospital.

Q: And they provide a good service, but you also don't want to—

Rice: No, you have to realize that you're in a neighborhood. Some of them can really do a great job at doing both, have expansion, but be sensible.

Q: Okay. So you retired in 2003 from being president and now you're—

Rice: In-chief bottle washer *[laughter]*. That's what I sort of think of it.

Q: So now you're the chairman of the board.

Rice: Which means I don't do very much. I help fundraise. I sit on the zoning committee. I do some things but really, the leadership is with a wonderful team. Felipe Ventegeat, president, Gorman Reilly and Joe Walsh, prior presidents. Hunter Armstrong, executive director and Tali Canter, assistant and staff are just amazing. They have incredible energy and they're really good. There are more young people coming along, as it should be, but very difficult, because as a young persons it's hard (A) to find a job, (B) to do all your work, and if you're married, look after your kids. If you decide to volunteer time, you might volunteer for a school, your kid's school. So it's very hard to find volunteers that have the time.

Q: Yeah. Definitely. So what is the biggest legacy you want to leave with CIVITAS and the Upper East Side and New York City as a whole?

Rice: Probably that we've worked in Upper East Side, and East Harlem and worked together on projects that benefited all areas of the city. That we have a model where citizens in

neighborhoods combined with professional consultants study and produce a practical and thoughtful plan. We advocate and follow that plan through the city process, which eventually results in positive change for the neighborhoods and city.

Q: Well, thank you. That's actually all the questions that I have.

Rice: You were amazing that you did that. You had a lot of questions.

Q: Yes.

Rice: It went very quickly. That's great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]