SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:
DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHS

The Reminiscences of

Ronald Melichar

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ronald Melichar conducted by Interviewer Leyla Vural on August 4th, 2015. This interview is part of the Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs oral history project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Harlem is an area of Manhattan with a rich history, and many architectural gems worthy of preservation and landmark status. However, until relatively recently, the area has gained little recognition or attention for its historic buildings and neighborhoods. This interview with Ronald Melichar, president of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization, covers his life in historic preservation in Harlem since the 80s. Interviewer and oral historian, Leyla Vural, discusses with him the renovation of his historic brownstone house in Harlem, and his community involvement in the neighborhood as it built its way out of the financial struggles of the '70s and '80s. He was active in expanding the Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Historic District in the early 2000s. In 2008 he also helped to secure a new location for the Hamilton Grange.

Ronald Melichar is the current president of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization and a long-time resident of the greater Harlem area. After purchasing his Hamilton Heights home through a city housing lottery in 1982, Melichar became a leader in grassroots neighborhood preservation and a vocal advocate for revitalization. As president of the Community Preservation Organization, Melichar fought for Landmarks Preservation Commission designation for the Sugar Hill Historic Districts in 2001-2002 and for the expansion of the Hamilton Heights Historic District boundaries in 2000.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe Session: 1

Interviewee: Ronald Melichar Location: Harlem, Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Leyla Vural (Q1) Anthony Bellov (Q2) Date: August 4, 2015

Q: It's Tuesday, August 4, 2015. I'm in the home of Ron Melichar to talk with him about historic preservation in Hamilton Heights and Sugar Hill and his home. Thank you so much for letting me be here with you today.

Melichar: You're welcome.

Q: I wanted to start by asking you where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life.

Melichar: Sure. I was born December 18, 1946 in Dodge City, Kansas, which I just recently learned was the terminus of the Santa Fe Trail and was more important than I ever realized because the long cattle drives met the railroad here. At five, my parents and my sister, Nancy, moved to Denver, Colorado, where my father joined his brother's utility trailer manufacturing and rental business as an accountant. So my early life really was spent largely in Colorado. I went to Colorado College, graduated in 1969 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science.

While in college I found a perfect summer job as a tour manager for a bus company taking people on trips, first in the Canadian Rockies, then Alaska, finally across Canada and United States. These tours lasted anywhere from 20 to 36 days. Then I was lucky enough to find a position with another travel company and was transferred to Hawaii, where I spent three-and-a-half years. I got to love it even though I had no interest in going there in the beginning. But after three-and-a-half years, I find myself wanting to go back as often as I can, and I do. I've never been to the Caribbean, even though it's easier to get to, but you can't go to the Caribbean when you're thinking about Hawaii and your friends there.

But, anyway, I was just there after coming back from China. I'm returning to a lot of traveling as I did in my college years. I went to Russia four years ago and China was three years and on my way back, and I spent about a month in Hawaii with some friends. I made a trip for June to Kentucky for a Thomas Merchant conference. After that I did some research on my own interest, Artus Van Briggle, who worked as an artist/designer at the Rookwood Pottery Company in Cincinnati, which was just over the border from where I was in Kentucky. And I have just come back from the Opera at Santa Fe, which I have done for the last few years. I take my 93-year-old former pastor from my pre-teen years to the opera in Santa Fe where he retired. I enjoy doing that, and now that his wife has died, I think he looks forward to the company.

Q: That's lovely. I wonder what brought you to New York.

Melichar: Actually, after my three-and-a-years in Hawaii I decided I never spent the year abroad like so many did during their junior year in college, so I went to Paris, spent a year, and I applied

in Paris to the Columbia Historic Preservation Program, which had just begun offering a Masters Degree. And I was fortunate enough, just coincidentally, to be told that James Marston Fitch, who was the "dean" of American preservation education and who had started the Columbia program, was going to be in Paris that summer. I was able to hook up with him in Paris and start the program, not even having applied to the summer program, but he took me in. It's probably good he did because he ended up tripping at the Cour Carrée of the Louvre, and I had to put him in an ambulance and get him to the American Hospital of Paris and answer all kinds of questions about the man I just met. And I wasn't the best one to answer even the most simple questions, like "How old is he," and what's his medical history of illnesses and issues except that he tripped and sprained his leg.

Anyway, I joined up with James Marston Fitch in Paris for the summer program. And at that point, I was still waiting to hear whether I had be admitted, but since he took me on in the summer program, I figured I would be *[laughs]*, and I was. We travelled around and outside of Paris on many excursions and field trips. He was a fabulous role model but also a great educator for what I was wanting to do. He even took me on as his personal assistant the following summer, and I worked for him as part of a requisite summer internship. So that's what brought me to New York. I came to the Preservation Program in 1976, graduated in 1978 with a Masters in Science and Historic Preservation.

Q: Do you know or do you have a story about what interested you in historic preservation in the first place?

Melichar: Well, yes, I think the interest began as a young person because I remember going down to the Tabor Grand Opera House in Denver, where I mentioned I was raised, and they were going to tear it down and it just tore me apart that this wonderful piece of history was going to be destroyed forever. I even remember walking in and taking pictures of it, and the curtain, where on the bottom were written lines from a poem, which I learned later came largely from Charles Kingsley, "So fleet the works of man, back to earth again. Ancient and holy things fade like a dream and the hand the master is dust," which I think is an appropriate sort of introduction into what we are trying to do in historic preservation: We do try to try to prevent and preserve holy things from fading "like a dream."

Denver actually was one of the places at the forefront I think of the preservation movement. I read about a Denver woman named Dana Crawford, who is or was on the board of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. While I've never met her, I've sort of hobnobbed with people who did know her at Larimer Square, which was her first preservation that was widely reported. She's actually still alive I believe and she's just reprogrammed Union Station Denver, the turn of the last century's Western railroad hub, into an upscale hotel as well as the station. It is great to see the original purpose retained even if downsized. Anyway, I was introduced to her through just reading and through my sister who was working at one of the exclusive dress shops in Larimer Square. I think that Larimer Square became an initial model for what happened in so many cities and ended with full-blown expressions, like Benjamin Thompson/Rouse Company doing Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market in Boston, and then their development in Lower Manhattan at the South Street Seaport.

Some of what they did is now considered unfortunate—and Dana Crawford admits that as a first project, she did things she would never do again such as taking down an original façade on one building just to make it a sort of arcade to create a more glamorous entranceway. And of course, today we would never take down any façade. *[laughs]* We want to preserve that 1890s look or whatever period of—the Gold Rush of Colorado, which was making Denver boom with all of these wonderful Victorian buildings. So many have been lost but because of one woman's foresight, many have been saved. So that was my initial early childhood initiation into preservation.

And then I have always just loved buildings. I love going to cities because it's a new story each time. I went to Cincinnati for the first time just about a month ago, and it was like another apotheosis. I had no idea that Cincinnati was the most important city in America in the 1820s, only after New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Of course, now it's like so many other cities, rebuilding and taking back buildings that were lost and forgotten. Cincinnati has so many grand things, the art museum to the many buildings downtown and the great railroad station.

I was there specifically to do some research on Rookwood pottery and one of its early artisans and potters, Artus Van Briggle, who ultimately settled in Colorado Springs where I went to school at Colorado College, where nearby is the memorial built to him, which was designed by a Dutch architect with obvious Dutch and Flemish influences. I became interested in his work and I had gone to Rookwood because that's where he started. The Rookwood building is still there, now a restaurant, but a remnant of the company built by a woman with a fabulous story; Maria Longworth Nichols Storer, who became, after she married a prominent politician and then a

Congressman, foreign minister to Spain and then to the Viennese Court where she was presented with all the fanfare at the court of Franz Joseph in its twilight years.

She recognized Van Briggle's talent at Rockwood and sent him to Paris, as they did other young talented staff artists, where he became interested in re-creating the formula for the lost Chinese matte glaze. He is given credit for discovering it. It became a popular glaze that was used all throughout the Arts and Crafts period, and I'm trying to document that better and especially how his early discovery leapt to all other potteries of the period. That's why I was in Cincinnati. I'm trying to write a piece that will give better documentation to what has been written about many times but the documentation has always been not well supported, or at least I think it has not been until I find out otherwise, at which point I will move on to something else. *[Laughs]*

Q: Okay.

Melichar: I plan to go to Paris next, but I don't think I'll go there to research what I can find out about his work at the Académie Julian until I've done some more work here. You never can do enough preparation before you get to some place that's glamorous like Paris and think, oh my gosh, I just don't know what I was supposed to know before I got here. *[laughs]* So that's the story about my involvement with one aspect of what I do now: researching Artus Van Briggle, his work at Rockwood pottery, probably the greatest pottery company of America, in its heyday, and how Van Briggle's work there and then at his own company in Colorado Springs became the first of what then happened all across America.

Q: Okay. Beautiful. Let me ask, let's go back to when you came to New York and you studied historic preservation and ultimately won the lottery that got you this house.

Melichar: Right.

Q: Can you tell me about the lottery? I read that it was a little bit controversial. So I'm interested in how the lottery happened and what it felt like when you won and what was going on around—

Melichar: Sure.

Q: —the housing and the issues around this area in particular.

Melichar: Well, when I was in school, it always was sort of a fantasy of everybody that we would buy a brownstone somehow. So I actually started a group with a friend and several others. We would tour with brokers, four-story buildings; the idea being that we could create a condominium, and each person would own his floor if we pooled our resources, which were even in those days in the 1970s, when it was such a depressed economy, still an expensive proposition for students. We would tour mostly brownstones.

One day I noticed in the *New York Times* that the City of New York was offering 12 brownstones in historic districts in Harlem in order to promote brownstone renovations to help revitalize Harlem, at that time, one of the city's depressed neighborhoods. The idea was to take the best possible buildings that could be offered, ones in several of Harlem's historic districts to people

who would agree to renovate and make their home in the inner city, which in so many places around the country had been abandoned, or taken by the city in what was called in rem for the failure to pay the property tax by the middle class, for suburban neighborhoods. Returning World War II veterans and others wanted yards to raise their children in and primarily they wanted safe neighborhoods, which they were not finding in the inner city. This trend accelerated and became a big problem for every community, every inner city in the nation. One tool to stop the blight was to offer brownstones for a minimal amount of money.

I had one friend from Baltimore and he said, "Yeah, in Baltimore they offered them for a $1 each." And I told him that in New York the houses that they were offering, these 12 houses had all been appraised, and they were being offered from $5,000 to $35,000. He said, "Yeah, only in New York would they charge $35,000 when in Baltimore they were giving them away for $1!" *[laughs]* But that was the way to approach it, to be legal, we were told that they had to be sold at their appraised value. And the difference in value I think between the $5,000 houses and this one, which was actually one of the higher appraisals, if not the highest at $35,000, was the interior of this house was if not good by any means, had some of its original Edwardian detail, whereas many of the houses that were in historic districts had been totally gutted, as fires had occurred after abandonment. It seemed that so many people from the street, the homeless, would move in and just to keep warm, fires were started, left unattended, followed by a full-fledged fire. So some were buying houses that were completely gutted.

After the 12 houses were offered, I got on my bicycle in lower Harlem, actually Manhattan Valley just on its edge, and began to visit each of the houses, most of which were in Central

Harlem around Mount Morris Park. I toured the whole day trip but never got up here where there were two houses being offered in Hamilton Heights. This seemed too far away at the end of the day, not to mention the steep hill from central Harlem up to Hamilton Heights, also known to some as "Sugar Hill." This part of Harlem—for those of you who don't know is on a much higher level. Brendan Gill called it "one of the mountains of Manhattan."

At one point, it was subsumed under the name Washington Heights, and there is still a remnant sign on Broadway at 145th St, a florist with a neon sign: the Washington Heights Florist. I would assume it pre-dates the creation of the historic district, which may have been what really brought the name Hamilton Heights to the neighborhood. They're not names enshrined in any official public record, not at least until an historic district is created, so they are names that are given usually by the public and/or the people who live there. But I think the historic district, one of the first districts of 1966, attached the name Hamilton Heights to it and so it became Hamilton Heights, in that official capacity as a historic district, at least this lower part, which went just shy of West 145th St.

But back to the story. After my bicycle failed to get me up to the buildings of Hamilton Heights, and—

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: To finish how I got the house, I called up my friend who had been the most active member of the group searching for a brownstone, the one who also wanted to find a brownstone

as badly as I did. I also needed more income than I could show from being a student not too long before. I needed somebody else, two people to apply who could show income tax returns with sufficient income to carry the low interest mortgage the City was also offering in the lottery "package."

Q: Right. Right.

Melichar: So I said to her, "Send me your income tax return and we'll apply." And she said, "Well, I didn't make any money either last year." She was a recent resident of NYC from Madison, WI, who wasn't in the preservation program but she was a friend of someone in the program, and we had gotten to be good friends. But she said, "My boyfriend, Roddy, he made some money last year, he's a doorman." And so I said, "Well, then we will send all three of our statements together in the application." Well, she didn't send hers, and I don't know if it was because she hadn't even filed her income tax *[laughs]*. But anyway, she was mad at me later because as you will see as the story progresses my original partner, the ardent group member lost out. Of some 5,000 entrants in the lottery, Roddy and I won one of the 12 houses.

I was lucky in so many ways because by "inheriting" this unusual alliance with Roddy, I found that Roddy was a much easier personality and partner than my friend would have ever been. Even though my friend had been involved, there was nothing on paper that gave her any ability to maintain her standing, other than she had told Roddy who didn't have the down payment, (I think we each needed $5,000), even though he had the better income from the previous year's tax filing, she told him, "Well, you're not getting the money that my mother promised!" *[laughs]*

As you might have guessed she was a well-to-do white girl from the suburbs and he was Hispanic with fewer resources but no money for the down payment. Then Roddy won the amount he needed in Lotto! When their relationship went sour, Roddy squeezed her out saying, "we're not together anymore." And so my friend got squeezed out, Roddy and I became partners, sort of strange bedfellows, and he took the top two floors, and I took the two bottom two.

I should say before I go onto with my story that I have always felt that what happened to me was meant to be. I said it flippantly in the beginning, but the older I get the more I have become convinced that there's a larger "plan" for each of us. I said it flippantly in the beginning because before I had made the bicycle ride to see the lottery houses, where I didn't even make it up the hill to see this house,

I had toured Hamilton Heights on my bicycle when I was a student at Columbia. As I toured, I found there were houses that appeared abandoned --but were cinder blocked-- appeared to be owned by the city, and they warned to "keep out." I made a list of the houses, and I think I came up with a list of eight in this little neighborhood of Hamilton Heights. I wrote to the Department of Real Property, thinking that would be the appropriate place to go, not knowing too much about city agencies and their responsibilities at that time. I got a response saying, "You've written to the wrong agency. You should write to the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development, or HPD." So I sent the same letter to them and but never heard back from them.

After I won this property in the HPD lottery, and we were told which house we had won and called into the HPD Commissioner's office for a formal announcement, I happened to find my

letter from years before and this house was on the list! *[laughs]* So I felt that was HPD's [Department of Housing, Preservation and Development] answer. Somewhat tardy perhaps, but no matter, it was a response that made me very happy, of course. But, as I say, the older I get the more I think—and so many things have happened to me that just were such good luck that you wonder, "Why me?" and "How did it happen?" Of course, I had to take the initiative, but still there were just too many things that happened like that. So that's the story of how I got the house. There's a longer version I can give you of how I became the sole owner, but that is for another day.

Q: Yeah, I think we'll save that. I wanted to ask you what was the lottery actually like?

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Can you describe what that day was like?

Melichar: Yes, but I guess I should speak about the controversy you mentioned, too, in that the lottery was announced, and I noticed it in the newspaper. As I remember it, the controversy began because the congressman from the area, Charles Rangel, who probably was behind the federal subsidies they were going to use --CDBG money as it was known-- and must be used to benefit people who were not too rich, but not too poor either, because they had to be able to support the mortgage that they were offering at a favorable interest rate. The interest rate did fluctuate based on your income history. Rangel, I believe, at this point intervened because he was not happy that the lottery was being offered citywide. He felt that there should be a preference

for people who lived in Harlem. As I recall, it happened as the lottery was happening, it didn't happen before, but I could be wrong, so modifications were made. Then the winners—it was determined that the winners would come predominantly from the Community Boards of Harlem. It is my recollection that the winners were predominantly from Harlem.

The Times article noted that I was a peripheral Harlem winner because I lived at 106th Street and Harlem is technically considered to begin at 110th. They considered me to be a, you know, a nearby winner, even though they may have suspected I was black living so closely to the "demarcation line" or that I was Hispanic, and in fact, they were partly right because one-half of the winning team was Hispanic! It was not based on race, it was based on where you lived in terms of getting the preference. I am sure the city had its best constitutional lawyers working on this. Now I think nobody objected to that but it was sort of a big to-do at the Community Board until the adjustment was made so that people living in the two Harlem Community Boards, I believe it was, above 110th, would be given preference over others.

Q: Okay.

Melichar: The day I won was of course, a great day. I was at work, employed at the time by a developer of historic properties. My dream had been after getting my Master's degree was to work for a developer who was doing historic preservation projects, and I learned about David Teitelbaum, a man of the moment who was currently working on the restoration and renovation of a hotel on the Upper East Side, the Barbizon Hotel on East 63rd Street. One woman who died there was Molly Brown who was made famous by the stage play and then movie, "The

Unsinkable Molly Brown," who lived in Colorado. I always wondered though, why she stayed there because it offered very little luxury—the rooms were really tiny. It was really a place for proper young single women such as Grace Kelly who lived there for a while. It was a hotel with rules about who could come in, especially men who had to stay in the public areas. It was for those women who came to launch their careers in NYC, a place where they could stay and still be considered "proper" women. The hotel is still there but has changed names and ownership many times, so I'm not even sure now what the name is now or who owns it.

The day I had learned I had won the right to buy the house, I was in that hotel because it was our office, while being renovated around us and a half dozen rent-controlled tenants. The dust was flying, and we were working away at other projects he was also doing. He was also working on the Archives, which was a building in the Village that had been the Federal Customs Building originally, which we know is the main way the United States collected money to run the government in the pre income tax days. The building was a monolithic Richardsonian-Romanesque building—it still exists—and we were planning to renovate it into apartments. I picked up the phone and a good friend said, "Did you see your name in the paper? You won!" His name was Bob Dance, and he is an independent art dealer of some repute in the city, and is still a good friend. I have always enjoyed him because he has introduced me to so many things—his Christian faith as an Episcopalian, great food and drink, and great paintings!

Q: Terrific. What was the house like when you got it?

Melichar: Well, HPD offered us an opportunity to see the house. It wasn't easy to show the houses, (and we hadn't seen them before we bid), because they were cinder blocked. They were offering one day where they would knock down the cinderblocks, and we could come in before we signed on the dotted line, actually. So we went. Roddy didn't even care to come. *[laughs]* He was happy to be in the project. Oh, I forgot to tell you though, the reason why Roddy stayed in the project and why his girlfriend was out was because he won another lottery! He won in "Numbers", enough to pay for his $5,000 down payment! So then, he was able to say to his girlfriend, "Sorry, I don't need your money now, so I don't need you." But I actually stayed friends with her. She died recently I'm sad to say, and I was there with her..

I'm a little bit choked up because I did squeeze her out if you consider that I sided with Roddy. But as I said, we were able to stay friends, and she married and had a beautiful house of her own, so I think she was happy.

Q2: I'm actually amazed that the house was cinder blocked.

Melichar: When we arrived at the house, the cinderblocks had been removed so that we could unlock the door, enter and walk around. I never had any reservations about going ahead. To me it was like, "oh my gosh, this is the most fantastic thing," even though—and that's maybe where I should mention the pictures. *[Shows photos of the interior of the house when he got it.]*

Q: You know what you can do, you can—

Melichar: And it will remind me or show—

Q: Well, you can describe them so that—

Melichar: Okay.

Q2: If you want to hold it up I can zoom in on it, too.

Q: Anthony can zoom in. But for the audio, you can just put into words what we're seeing, since the audio isn't seeing it.

Melichar: All right. This is what we saw, and some of the worst of what we saw isn't even here. These were pictures taken by HPD. This was the very back of the inside of the house—the former kitchen. You can see remnants of the kitchen cabinet and you see lots of debris because the back wall had collapsed. The actual back wall, the brick wall, had collapsed. And as you can see an old stove from the 1940s, and a window, which I think was sort of a window that had to be blocked up as we rebuilt the place.

Q: And you can also see that you actually could barely walk.

Melichar: Right. *[laughs]*

Q: And a mattress on the floor.

Melichar: One of my friends said, "I thought you really lost all rationality when you bought that house," because she saw it before I even began work on it. This was the first formal room that was downstairs, the one that I live in primarily now, which I call my living room. And you'll see that the fireplace is completely painted over, and that's one of the first projects that I did personally. As everything else in the house, it was painted over many, many times and it took many attempts at removing it and involved many people. I would hire one guy and he would get it only so far and then the next guy, he would get it a little bit further. Everybody would just get exhausted by the process of removing so much paint. The picture also showed the cinderblock of the back window that now looks onto my garden.

Q: Wow. And now the mantle is this beautiful tiles and wood.

Melichar: Yes, the glazed tiles, which were perfect for me even though we haven't been able to determine who made them. But they are matte glazed, which is what I'm studying, and trying to confirm that it was Artus Van Briggle who discovered that formula and how it spread throughout America. It appeared at almost all the different pottery companies during the Arts and Crafts period at the turn of the last century.

Q: And did you love matte glaze before you discovered that the tiles were downstairs?

Melichar: Well, it really I think began much earlier because I remember buying my first piece of Rookwood, where I mentioned Van Briggle had worked, and showing it to James Marston Fitch

at Columbia. I bought it on Long Island in Huntington, I think, at an antique show or one of those outdoor fairs that I went to with one of my colleagues who was raised there. I remember it distinctly because when I showed it to him he said, "Oh, what a lovely piece of American history at such a reasonable price," This would have been 1976. It was at that point, though, that I got more interested in Rockwood and Van Briggle. And then as I said it all amazingly fits together—that I would acquire a house with matte glazed tiles on the fireplace. *[laughs]*

Q: Lovely. So tell us about this picture.

Melichar: This is the room we're in right now, the front parlor on the second floor. This is the room that—

Q2: It slipped. It's coming out.

A: Oh, okay. This room is based on the motif of a room at Fontainebleau outside of Paris, and this is the room that Marie Antoinette had a personal interest in and actually designed with two 18th century French architects. We know this because I've been there first of all. But we know it also from a decorator who was able to see the motif here and recognize this from the front of the Marie Antoinette mantel. The iconography is of a *bow* for Diana, Goddess of the Hunt. The capital of the column would have been Diana's quiver and arrows are seen sticking out at the top. You can see the feathers that form the back part of the arrow and it's almost exact from the one copied at Fontainebleau.

The boudoir is much more "over the top," and elaborate. It is all gold and silver leaf and it has wonderful tiny Renaissance motif decorations on parts of the wall that I have more simply painted, but I think better reflect the sensitivities of the 20th and 21st centuries. But I did use iridescent paints that suggest the silver hues and I used gold leaf on the top of the cornice that would suggest a great frame around the painting for the "faux Matisse" that I did myself on the ceiling.

I took a postcard that I got at the Museum of Modern Art of Matisse's, "La Danse." From the five figures I turned it into a repetitive frieze of maybe 35 figures so that it would circle the room. Actually, this was modern art when this house was built in 1907. Matisse completed the painting for a wealthy Russian textile merchant, Sergei Shchukin in 1909. The one at the Modern Museum of Art is actually an earlier version, perhaps a study. I happen to like the study better, because I like the colors of the study better than the one he actually sold to Shchukin. I travelled to Russia and the Hermitage Museum three years ago. I really hadn't been there until after I did the painting. But again, I was copying from the Museum of Modern Art's postcard when I transferred the design to the ceiling.

Q: That's fabulous. When did you do that?

Melichar: Well, it was some time ago and it required a lot of preparation. It required the building scaffolding. I have a very clever handyman who built scaffolding so I could stand rather than lay down like I thought Michael Angelo did when he painted the Sistine Chapel, at least they always talk about him lying on scaffolding. I found that very cumbersome so we built the scaffold so I

could stand, and I would paint until I got tired or my arm got tired, and it was an amazing structure because it moved easily about the room, but was stable and did not move when I stood on it, even though there was a way to lock the wheels. I still have it but I've made it now into a little tiny table about this big, which is in my backyard as a tea table. But it's got the four wheels on the bottom that I used with this large piece of scaffolding—almost like the evolution of dinosaurs into modern day birds.

Beyond the restoration of the 18th century French room, you will see that the theme is "Dance" appropriate because it really was the studio of my deceased life partner, Joseph Fields, who at the time was the music director for the Dance Theatre of Harlem and this was actually his studio and the baby grand Mason Hamlin piano in the room was his. Most of the original art on the wall belongs to a lithographic series entitled "The Dance" by a contemporary American artist, Sandy Walker, who I was introduced to by Robert Dance.

Q: And roughly when did you do this?

Melichar: I think this was done in probably around 2004. You may have noticed the giant Sumi-e I did, which is in the hallway to this room, and that was signed and finished in 2002, and it was after that when I began this project. At the same time I was doing that, I hired some professionals, one guy to strip the decorative plaster elements, another to do the floor. There was inlay that had to be replaced from years of abuse and water, which is the great destroyer of historic fabric. We'll talk about Michael Adams, my friend who is a historian in Harlem in a few minutes, he always said that except for water, the worst source of damage was to turn your house

into a fraternity *[laughs],* which happened in this neighborhood across the street. There were two fraternities in the neighborhood, and he was particularly upset about the one on 144th Street that had been taken over by a fraternity and seriously damaged.

Anyway, water had damaged this house too even though no fraternity was involved. I would imagine that the sprinklers that were installed when it was made into a multiple family residency in the 1930s during the Depression followed a code requirement that you had to have a sprinkler in every room. When I bought the house and transformed it back into a four-family, it was my understanding that the code said that you could have a sprinkler at the sources of egress, or the stairs and hallways. I assume that when they were in each room, the destitute woman who owned the house moved out, and when winter came to the unheated house, the water expanded in the sprinklers and caused them to break and water sprayed at some point, or they broke in the winter and then they sprayed later. I believe that most of the damage I found was probably from water damage, and that probably happened over many years, causing everything to deteriorate, including the top floor of this building, the fourth floor. The back of the building was without a roof. In the back, the first floor we talked about the kitchen, the mortar and bricks had deteriorated, and you can see out to the garden.

Q: What was the neighborhood like in the ‘80s when you got the house?

Melichar: It was pretty tough, and as I mentioned anybody who lived in New York during the previous decade or two thought I was crazy. They said only Ron who comes from Colorado *[laughs]* would move to Harlem, because of the riots and the unrest of the ‘60s and ‘70s. I came

to New York City in ’76 so things were still pretty difficult. When I moved here in 1985, we had drug dealers on every corner and that became a major project of mine with others in the neighborhood. Early on I took on leadership roles and was in the early 1990’s elected president of the Homeowners. One of my big initiatives was to address the drug-dealing situation in the whole neighborhood, not just my corner. I stood at the window in this room photographing drug dealers and turning those pictures over to the police, which were probably worthless, but I it did it anyway.

Finally after years of prodding and bringing our plight to the attention of the police, today when you walk out there you won’t see anybody standing on the corner. We couldn’t get good stores or good services until we got rid of the drug dealers, and we’re happy to see after all these many years of being here that we finally have a wonderful little restaurant right behind you, in fact on the corner of West 141st and Amsterdam, called The Grange, started by an entrepreneur. It’s his first business, but he had been a manager of a restaurant for many years so he was very savvy, and I think his wife was, too. He did a wonderful renovation creating a very chic interior and named it after Hamilton Grange, which is a big project that I can talk about that I worked on, but they call it just The Grange. One of the other upscale commercial businesses, actually the first one to come, is now known as Café One, which is a—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q2: Say that again.

Melichar: Café One.

Q2: Just start that whole sentence again because we lost you a while ago.

Melichar: One of the other upscale commercial businesses, actually the first one to come, is now known as Café One. I was speaking to the owner recently she said, "Did you know Meryl Streep was at The Grange the other night?" If Meryl Streep comes here, I guess you could say we have finally made it, and all the working leading up to this was worth it.

Q: You've made it somehow.

Melichar: Right, some point where we have never been before. But if you look down the street, you'll see a lot of new businesses. There is a new bar and grill across the street. There's a new little Italian-Dominican restaurant that's another block away. Then Broadway has never had anything either that was really appealing to I think the people who were buying these houses, which I should say were predominantly African American. More recently, I think we've seen a lot of white people buying houses but except for one or two I think they were intimidated about coming, raising children in a neighborhood where they could—where I could take a risk, I had no children. I was willing to risk my own life, but I'm sure a father or a mother would think twice about moving into a neighborhood where there were drug dealers on every corner, and they had to be worried about their children walking to school.

Q: Yes. I want to ask you about the historic preservation efforts in the area. I know that a part of Hamilton Heights was designated in 1974.

Melichar: Exactly.

Q: And then extended not until—in 2000, right.

Melichar: Yes.

Q: And then further in 2001 and 2002. So I wanted to ask you a little bit about what was going on in those intervening years. I know you had some successes. I read about the cornices and how when you wanted to paint it a lighter color, the Landmarks Preservation Commission said no. Can you tell me about that?

Melichar: Exactly. This is where we bring in Michael Adams again.

Q: Yes.

Melichar: I met Michael on this block at a party that was given by a couple, who also knew Michael. It was at that initial meeting that Michael and I started talking about developing a house tour, because a lot of communities do that as a way of raising money for neighborhood improvement projects. So that was the genesis of starting the Hamilton Heights Historic House and Garden Tour. We decided to bring together 10 to 12 homeowners, who would volunteer to

open their house on a certain day and participate in what was a self-guided tour. We would sell them a ticket for probably not more than $20, if that, back in the days when we first did it, 1991. In fact, here is a copy of the tour guidebook from the first house tour.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: So what I'm showing you now is the first annual Hamilton Heights House Tour guidebook written by Michael Henry Adams. He could do wonderful descriptions of the houses, while I was the organizer and could leverage my leadership in the Homeowners to get them to be the sponsor. We led the tours for four years. I brought a copy of the guidebook, the final one, which was the fourth Hamilton Heights tour. You can see the guidebook got a little better overtime. It's still not great at this point, but it became much better as the years progressed. But this one we did have a hard cover. You know it's like everything, the first time is hardest and by the fourth time it's getting a little easier, but it's still just an enormous amount of work. Michael and I both said to ourselves, we're not going to devote our lives to the Hamilton Heights House Tour. We raised money, which we wanted to do for the Hamilton Grange. That was the money making project to raise money, knowing that it would cost millions of dollars and we would never be able to raise millions of dollars. I think ultimately it was a $12 million project that came from Congress through Rangel. But we thought we could use it sort of like a prodding tool to say look, this community has been ignored.

You can go to Washington's house in Mt. Vernon and see a wonderful house that's been restored. You can go to Thomas Jefferson's house and see a wonderful house that's been

restored. Here's a founding father from New York who was not a president but who should have been if he [Alexander Hamilton] hadn't been born outside the country and was Constitutionally prohibited from serving as the president. Some even say that this provision in the Constitution was written by his political enemies who didn't want him ever to be president. But he was certainly transformative for the nation. He was the first Secretary of the Treasury, instrumental in establishing the nation's financial system. He helped start Patterson, New Jersey, as a major manufacturing center. He had lots of ideas, including starting the Manumission Society, which was the first New York Society that seriously addressed the problem of slavery, and what we could do about it.

He was the forerunner of many great thinkers. He was the man who really established what we now enjoy as the federal system of government with a strong central government. His system basically prevailed over the Jeffersonian image of the agrarian society where you needed slaves and you needed to have large pieces of land. The industrialization of America was what Alexander Hamilton foresaw, and he created the financial instruments and the financial institutions needed for that. We felt he wasn't being recognized properly by a house that was, at that time, squeezed in between an apartment building on one side and a church on the other side, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, which had fortuitously saved the house after the church, following its parishioners, moved uptown from its former location in the Village. In moving, they built this magnificent Richardsonian-Romanesque church, not by Richardson but certainly influenced by him, and it's probably one of the great church buildings of the city when you start looking at it seriously. The architect was R. H. Roberson, and he was also the architect of St James's Episcopal Church on the Upper East Side and the Park Row Building downtown.

But anyway, St. Luke's was planning to build but before they moved here, they learned that the Hamilton Grange on 143rd Street was to be demolished because it sat partially, and I think it was really just a corner, but a corner is a corner into the proposed 1820 street plan of New York City. The church was able to acquire it and move it to the parcel of the land where the church was to be built. They used it for many years, first as the church, and then as the rectory and finally as a social hall, I believe. It was then donated to the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, which was a group that was formed to preserve historic landmarks and natural scenery.

Their intent was to move it to a more appropriate place at some point, because they realized it was compromised at its site, which was so close to the church. Later in the 1930s when the apartment block was built, it was compromised on both sides. When I arrived here in 1985 it sat there looking pretty sad and even the AIA guide said that the interior was a disappointment, because it had been so reconfigured and the furnishings were minimal. It was a sad symbol of this great man's home, the only home that he built himself.

Q: I wanted to ask you about that. I read that when it got moved to St. Nicholas Park where it is now—

Melichar: Right.

Q: —that one of the issues that you commented on was which direction it would face.

Melichar: Exactly.

Q: That you wanted it to face the way it did originally when Hamilton had it built. Can you talk about that and what happened and what your thoughts were?

Melichar: As I have given Michael Adams credit for much that was very good, I should also give him credit for the initiative of which way the house should face, which as another preservationist later said to me, "You're going to lose. Why would you ever join that battle?" I felt that it was important that I support Michael and the Chairman of the District Historic Preservation Committee of Community Board 9, Carolyn Kent, who had been very helpful to me on many occasions with programs I wanted to do. Michael was adamant, and he convinced Carolyn and me of the importance of his position. He argued that it is important to have the light shining on the house and into the interiors as it always had and that we should have the building face the way it had originally stood even if the entrance would not face the street at its new location in St. Nicholas Park. The new site is compromised too by a City College building, the adjacent engineering building on the corner, which is at least very neutral—some people hate it, but it's a neutral gray.

Michael felt that even though it was no longer possible to see either river anymore—the house originally sat at one of the highest points of Manhattan--Hamilton Heights and Washington Heights are "the mountains of Manhattan," as Brendan Gill once wrote in *The New Yorker* magazine. Hamilton had very pointedly chosen this property and built on it so he could see both the Hudson River and the East River from the verandas on each side of the house. Michael

argued we should keep the direction that Hamilton originally chose, and we would have a sense of how the house would have been in its original site. Since the front and rear facades were not that different, I argued that no one would know the difference when looking at the building from the street. We would have the light hitting it in the same way that it always had, even though we couldn't look out the windows at the two rivers.

I supported this position in the neighborhood, made presentations, and went to the Homeowner's meeting to discuss the issue. We caused a considerable problem I think for the Parks Service, and I apologize for that but I also think that it was an important initiative. It was a neighborhood initiative, and I was a part of the neighborhood. Michael Adams and Carolyn Kent were able to find an anonymous gift of over $25,000 for a lawsuit and the lawsuit was pursued until we lost. And the court wrote an opinion of some 40 pages, which was so painful *[laughs]* that I'm not even sure I have read all of it. It was a painful time, and it was a hard thing to lose when we put so much into it, and we felt that it was the right thing to do.

Q: Now it faces north on 141st Street.

Melichar: It was—right. It was totally turned around from the way it originally faced.

Q: And it would have originally faced the south.

Melichar: Exactly. When we first worked out the whole thing about the move there were many community meetings, and we had input about what would happen and what wouldn't happen.

The Parks Service published a "Plan of Action," which maintained the original orientation of the house. It also said the Park Service was going to build a community facility on the former site next to the church, which would be an orientation center for The Grange. The house would just be a house museum, and it would be preserved and restored as Hamilton had known it. As we know it today, it's really just one floor, the parlor floor. The basement area, formerly the kitchen, is the exhibition room. When I pointed that out to a facilitator that the National Parks Service had hired to appease the community not only about its orientation, but also the fact that they were not going to build a center on the vacant site, which I assume the Park Service still owns, she said very perfunctorily, "The house is the memorial to Hamilton. It is the public museum. It is the community center." Today there's no space for a community center anymore. I think their visitor numbers are down substantially too, since the Homeowners can no longer hold its meetings or events there, and I think that's a problem because every once in a while Congress will say, "Well, let's close this historic site because there are not enough people visiting." The Park Service doesn't market it to attract visitors as far as I can tell. It's not an activity that the Park Service feels is their responsibility. Since we can't meet there anymore--Homeowners met regularly, once a month at least or maybe even more--they can no longer count on us to boost their visitor numbers, having eliminated the community space. I do worry about that. I suppose I need to get involved again to work on marketing the place. I suppose that is or should be a community problem and issue.

Did I cover your question? I know I wander around.

Q: Yes. I went to look at it before I came here. I was interested in it because I had read about your strong feelings about the direction of it.

Melichar: Yes.

Q: Now that it's there, and it's been there for several years, what do you think?

Melichar: Well, I think it's been beautifully restored. Michael Adams would probably not be happy if I make that statement. Sorry, Michael, *[laughs]* if you see this. But he refuses to even go near it or reconsider our position. But I take people all the time. I think because we made such a commotion that we did get a much better product because they knew that we were upset about it and would be monitoring the result.

We insisted they take every piece apart and analyze every historic piece of wood or every detail that showed where there was a marking of a cornice or even the stair detail. The stair had been totally reconfigured when it sat on Convent Avenue. When they moved it, the stairway was put back as it originally stood. They were able to trace markings of paint that would show stair treads that had been there, and they really did tremendous research. I have great respect for Stephen Spaulding, the Park Services chief of architectural preservation for this area who is rarely or ever given any credit for his work, giving it all to the firm they hired, JGW Architects. But it was always Spaulding that met with us and explained in detail each step that was being taken and we maintained a great relationship with him. Of course, he wasn't the one determining the house's orientation, but he seemed to know every detail about of the preservation program.

I think that even Congressman Charles Rangel was not as cooperative in the beginning about the whole thing. He was a man of the '60s and in his early years he was trying to feed the people of Harlem and bring social services, and I think he did that well. Some people argue that with me. I think he was slow to see that there were neighborhoods that were evolving or had changed and were seeking new agendas from him. He had to be brought to the table by more progressive supporters of his, like Bill Lynch who was a neighborhood resident, because Rangel was never interested in Hamilton Heights or Hamilton Grange, because it represented an almost elitist position, as many people call historic preservation, rather than something that emboldens the substantive history of a community. So we sort of had to bring him kicking and screaming, and he may not be happy, sorry. *[laughs]*

Sorry, Congressman. But I don't think, in the beginning when we met with him that he was not very much interested in the project. It took years actually and he didn't even appear publicly about it until the Homeowners presented a check for $8,500 that represented the first payment of our commitment of the $10,000 to the Parks Service to push them along. That $10,000 was raised selling $12 tickets over four years to our annual Hamilton Heights House and Garden Tour. I think the Park Service must have had to say, "Well, what are we going to do with this check? We don't have any program yet and the community wants it enough to raise this money." By the way, when day came to finally to celebrate the completion of the restoration of the Grange, nobody at the Park Service seemed to remember our hard earned contribution because no mention was made of it. They thanked the Homeowners and about 5,000 others but that was

all that was said about we got them to finally admit that they needed to do something about the Grange.

Before we presented the check, we had met with the head of Parks Service of this area, which was situated in Philadelphia, and that's part of the problem, since the center is not in New York. It's headed up by the Philadelphia office, which is more concerned about Philadelphia and the story being told there. We sort of pushed them along, and we wrote letters complaining about the situation, and of course they didn't like that. They didn't want the complaints going to our Congress people. So they met with us and they did begin the process, which resulted in a fairly definitive plan--with a plan showing the house oriented in its original direction as I mentioned--and which said all we needed now is money, and so that's when we went continuously to Rangel.

I went to a funeral of a woman who had been active at the Community Board. Her close friend spoke, but she kept looking at me every time she said that she and the woman who had died were the only ones who worked on Hamilton Grange. They were the only ones who were instrumental. And she was mad at me obviously, or maybe I imagined it, and I'm sorry if I did. *[laughs]* But, as I say, she was obviously taking credit for the whole thing. That's fine, she can take credit, and I'll show her my letters and the check for $8,500 with the provision we'd give the final $1,500 when things were moving, and we were happy with the plan.

But before all of the above, we had actually been instrumental in the celebration of the Bicentennial of the Constitution, where we announced that as a Homeowner group, we were committing to getting the Grange restored. Nobody at that point ever thought it would be moved.

It was just too big of an idea, and too expensive. It was also too controversial, because the Park Service had originally proposed moving the house many years before to a landscaped triangle that sits in front of Grant's Tomb. They felt that would be a satisfactory space because it was in front of Grant's Tomb, a space also under the control of the National Park Service. It would be an open space that would give the Grange the breathing space it never had on Convent Ave. That was opposed by the neighborhood very strongly because it was moving the historic resources of our neighborhood out of our neighborhood, further diminishing our historic patrimony and our ability to bring people to live and visit here. So that was some of the background of what we wanted to do, and what we thought we could do.

So we said to the Parks Service, "We're going to raise this money, we're going to give you this check, we're going to prod you until you do it. But we're not going to insist that it be moved, we're not raising that controversy again." Well, the Parks Service I think to their credit decided that there was a place in St. Nicholas Park where it could be moved. It is still within the boundaries of Alexander Hamilton's original property, so that makes it an appropriate site. It's been moved once already. It's not on its original site. So they proposed going after enough money to make the move and that's when we supported it but we, as I mentioned, brought up that major controversy and in fact one neighborhood leader still said that moving the house across the street was tantamount to moving it out of the community!

But I think all and all we have a good result and finally, we have a memorial fitting to honor Alexander Hamilton. Some of the furniture is original and some is not. They won't tell us which *[laughs]* and that's good for their own security. The Museum of the City of New York actually

has the original settee and side chairs, and we talked to them about giving it to the house museum way back in our dream 25 years ago, which was a little bit early but at that time we thought it was going to happen faster. I don't know if they were ever able to convince the Museum of the City of New York to give those original pieces or if that settee and the side chairs were reproduced. Whatever they have done, there is an exactness that makes us proud.

Q: Terrific. So I wanted to talk to you some more about the historic district. I think you're the President of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization, is that right?

Melichar: Right. And we formed that after it became apparent that—

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: Right. We formed the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization because we felt that we needed an organization which embraced the whole community, not just the homeowners but also people who were renters as well as the commercial community, the store and shop owners, anyone who was interested in this neighborhood, and we should bring them into the fold. Actually, the initiative for that has to go to a man who was Deputy Mayor under Dinkins, Bill Lynch, who I mentioned lived in this neighborhood.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: The man who really helped us so much to create this organization was Bill Lynch [William Lynch, Jr], who moved in a group and had a power base that none of us did, and as you know became the most important Deputy Mayor under Dinkins became when he became Mayor. So he was really "the mover and the shaker" behind Dinkins as he was behind so many elected officials from Harlem. He was—I am not a person to ever show emotion like this, because he died recently—but he was a man who worked behind the scenes so his importance was not generally known by the "man-on-the-street. At his funeral at Riverside Church so many acknowledged him for his acute political sensitivities--Rangel, Dinkins, the whole black intelligentsia of Hamilton Heights and Harlem and even Bill and Hillary Clinton were there and spoke about Lynch's genius, intelligence and everything he did for them from behind the scenes.

Anyway, he said, "Well, let's form an organization that embraces everybody, and I can get you a law firm that will do the work pro bono and will help us form this not-for-profit," which is not easy to do and takes lots of work, and if you don't have the money to pay for it you have to find somebody who will do it pro bono. He found that law firm. So we formed a new not-for-profit, which then became our basis for doing things and getting tax deductible donations.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: What's the work that you're having done on your house at the moment?

Melichar: I'm redoing the deck that was blown away when Sandy came through. You should go look at it because it's fun, and the pergola is based on one I was in the University of Wisconsin

at Madison, that was built by master Japanese craftsmen in the 1930s. I'm finally doing something fun.

When you have a home—every time you're getting ready to do something interesting, like painting the ceiling in this room, the plumbing goes or the tenant upstairs says, "Oh, you know, my sink isn't draining." So it's like you've got all these interruptions—anybody out there who is a homeowner should understand that it's not all "fun and games." There is lots of behind the scene work that you never get credit for. In fact, you don't get much credit for all this work either because when it's done right, it looks like it always should have looked. So nobody realizes the work that went into something that was previously in need of repair.

One adapts and learns how to solve problems. In order to repair missing decorative plasterwork, I learned how to make molds. This is an example of a scroll of an ionic column, which will go downstairs someday to replace one that fell off. So the mold is formed on the original piece by painting a liquid plastic on top of the piece you need to replicate elsewhere. When that dries you pour plaster into it, and then the mold is removed and you have a piece that nobody will know is not original. You can even touch it up if it's broken here and there with plaster that is the consistency of clay. The dried plaster pieces are then glued into place.

Q: So the mold is some rubbery material.

Melichar: Right. It's actually a liquid rubber that you buy, and paint over the object to be copied . It used to be we could buy it at Pearl Paint. Isn't Pearl Paint gone now?

Q: I think it is, yes.

Melichar: That's a sad story.

Q: Yes, it is.

Melichar: I'll have to go find it somewhere else now.

Q: That's beautiful.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Okay. Tell us when you formed the Community Preservation Organization.

Melichar: Well, I think it was as far back as 1997, even though that sounds like a long time now, but it's been around a fairly long time now.

Q: And you were talking about Bill Lynch and how important he was.

Melichar: Bill was instrumental in pushing us to do it in the first place and then leading us to resources. He found the law firm, which did the pro bono work to set up the non-profit corporation. He was active in the beginning, later on he took less of a position because, like all of

us know, meetings and the nitty gritty of running an organization can be very tedious. He also was a very busy man running his own company. So he would send his son, Bill Jr. or his daughter, Stacy who was a lawyer..

Q: Can you talk to me about the effort to extend the historic district and what it took? What was that about?

Melichar: Sure, it's an interesting story I think because as you noted—

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: Your question about extending the district is interesting because I think it was unique for several reasons. You mentioned that the original district was formed near the beginning when the Landmarks Law was first approved. That district ran from 140th Street to 145th—actually, 144th Street. I don't think anything on 145th was in the original district. So the first thing we did was—well, actually I should back up one step before that to say that Michael Adams was instrumental in forming a relationship with the chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: I'm having a senior moment, trying to think of her name. Does anybody remember it? She is now the President of Hunter College.

Q: Oh, Jennifer Raab.

Melichar: Jennifer Raab, very good.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: In order to extend the district, a meeting with Raab was facilitated by Michael Adams who got to know Jennifer Raab, and I got to know her too. But I must give him credit for this first meeting. I knew Ronda Wist, who was number two at the Landmarks Commission at that point. She was Executive Director while Jennifer Raab was the Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Ronda Wist and I had known each other because we were in the same class at the Columbia Preservation program. Jennifer Raab saw me going up to Ronda to give her a big hug and she said teasingly, "Oh, you two are just real kissy-kissy, aren't you?" So she knew me from that.

However, Michael Adams gets credit for arranging a meeting with Jennifer Raab in the home of a wonderful sort of doyen of Harlem society, Martha Dolly, who lived in Mount Morris Park. He arranged the meeting in her home with this beautiful stained glass window that was said to be Tiffany. I can't remember now if I thought it was, because so many say something is Tiffany when it isn't, but, it was a grand hous**e.** She had the whole house, not like many of us who were the "poor boys" on the block with tenants. But she lived in this whole house, as she had all of her

married life, just down the street from St. Martin's Church, the great Episcopal Church of Harlem that is now struggling to survive.

At this meeting, I remember running into Jennifer in the kitchen before the meeting even began and speaking with her. Michael was pushing really to get the district started in Mount Morris Park, but a majority of the people at the meeting were from Hamilton Heights while only a few were from the Mount Morris Park area. More importantly we were organized and we told her about everything we had done in Hamilton Heights, and I think we had even begun some surveying. So it was from that meeting, I believe, and not out of any malicious intent on our side, but really just out of an understanding of the reality of who was ready to go and who was not, that Jennifer Raab directed her attention to creating a new district in Hamilton Heights.

Q: And when was that roughly?

Melichar: It was sometime in the late '90s or early 2000s. We wanted to fill out the original district, and Carolyn Kent was insistent on that more so than I think all the others. We wanted the district extended to include the commercial avenue, Amsterdam Avenue. Michael and I both made the point that these commercial/residential buildings on the Avenue were built at the same time largely by the same architects, using the same materials and stylistically they also "belonged" to the district. When the district was formed, the houses got the preference over any other building type. They were desirable, fanciful, unique and so many wanted to own a brownstone that there few objected to their designation or that they should not be preserved.

When you got to the commercial street, there was less interest, largely because they were not as well maintained in many instances. The commercial façade itself would often have been taken off and replaced or covered over. That was a happy circumstance if they had been covered over because you could take off the cover and still retrieve the original fabric in many instances. But it wasn't very interesting, I suppose to those creating the first district, and it was a big thing to make this first step of designating districts. I shouldn't imply that they didn't have foresight, they just were trying to do as much as they could at that time.

But I guess what I should say is that this early example of an area protected by a deed covenant, which was created not by government but by a private developer, was I think a first step toward zoning and even landmarking. So we ended up in the Hamilton Heights Historic District with an excluded commercial district because it had become, overtime, less attractive and less interesting. The apartments above the commercial spaces usually didn't have the grand rooms found in the townhouses. Although some did have more gracious floor plans and were called French flats, which meant they were apartments with larger interior spaces, and could be quite handsomely appointed. Developers don't generally build houses for the poor, so when you hear people dismiss these buildings as "slums"—they could not be further from the truth. They were built for solid people who could afford to pay their rent or could buy a house. By the time the district came along, it wasn't the most attractive place, and the least attractive was the much altered and least maintained commercial strip.

To go back to the notion of expanding the district, Carolyn Kent and I both researched buildings on the commercial strip, to get the relevant supporting facts—the names of the architects, when

they were built, and they were actually somewhat earlier than the houses before the end of the 19th century. Carolyn was adamant that the buildings on Convent that were built in the late 1920s, maybe even early '30s, should be included. Nobody ever suggested that the awful monolith adjacent to the Grange right down to where the houses begin on Convent Avenue would be part of the district, so that was always excluded by unanimous consent.

There was debate with the Commission when we suggested expanding the district to include 145th Street from Amsterdam to St. Nicholas Avenue. There were a lot of brownstones, but again they had been affected by the conversion to either restaurants or other commercial establishments. There is a veterinarian. There are houses that aren't very attractive because they were on the commercial strip and had attracted people who weren't really interested in maintaining their exteriors. Anyway, Jennifer included those, and her whole staff, I should say, it's a huge enterprise to research a district and that's why it's so hard to get them to create new or extend districts. That was the first extension.

The next step was to do the larger district from 145th to 155th Streets, an area commonly known as Sugar Hill, and she agreed to do that, because we were able to show support for it at meetings. It's a big community responsibility, too. Another very important community leader that I should mention is Yuien Chin, who became very active in creating and expanding the new district. You have to be able to get people to come to meetings in numbers greater than that one little meeting we had in the Mount Morris brownstone. It's at the community meetings where you've got to turn out a lot of people to show the support for a district. Yuien Chin was particularly effective at this and at doing so much of the organizational work.

Q: I want to ask about that. I was interested in—you mentioned that something people think that historic preservation is elitist, so I'm interested in what you see the relationship, or if you see a relationship, between historic preservation and have the support of the community and gentrification and economic development, how do all those pieces fit together and what has that meant in a community that was, in its heyday, really an African American community?

Melichar: Right. Well, I'm glad you brought up the dirty word, *gentrification*, because it has sort of reached that connotation, although I think now even so—do you know where the term comes from? It was originally used in London, and it referred to a place where the word gentry had a true application.

Q: Yes. Yes, I do know that.

Melichar: And then it came to America. I don't think in England it ever got sort of the bad connotation as it has come to be used in America. Here it did because it was perceived as something that was pushing out poor people, and it's certainly a hard problem to address and solve. I don't think I've said in this discussion that one of my responsibilities, as a director for the NYC Department of Small Business Services, was to oversee a program called originally Commercial Revitalization and then named later *Avenue NYC*. The program addressed the improvement of depressed commercial strips, like the one that we have just been talking about here that was not included in the Hamilton Heights Historic District. There were "mom and pop stores" in commercial strips all over the city, and during the time I was there from 1982 until

when I retired in 2009, the program had worked in some 150 depressed neighborhoods. In order to qualify for the program, the street had to qualify for CDBG money, Community Development Block Grant money, federal money given to the cities to be used in qualifying neighborhoods.

For us to fund these commercial streets, we had to demonstrate that the major portion, or at least 51 percent, of the surrounding community were considered to be low or moderate income people. The program came to the Hamilton Heights commercial districts in the late 1990s when it was spearheaded by a local not for profit group, a requirement of the program. The program was not too dissimilar from the National Trust's *Main Street Program,* with which we had a continuing dialogue. One big difference was that the Main Street Program required the local organization to pay for the delivery of the Main Street Program whereas the Avenue NYC Program provided the funding to local groups with an established track record of successful program delivery, and the support of its community, to carry out its own program. In this last respect it was similar to the same things that the LPC [Landmark Preservation Commission] was looking for when it moved to create a district. We both looked for a clear history of local support.

Anyway, to go back to the continued discussion about the district itself, we did the expansion and then we next looked at the neighborhoods above 145th Street and that's where we had considerable debate. I always felt that the Landmarks Commission had to commit every year to the mayor, to create a number of districts, and it seemed that I remember hearing, that they committed –or targeted--to doing two historic districts every year. I think that's why the subsequent districts got divided up into several districts. I think they're smart. Being from the

business, you know, working for a different agency but doing some similar things--and my job was nothing compared to what they had to do in terms of research, because, although we had other requirements to meet, we never had to do the extensive research that the LPC had to do, where each individual building needed to be researched and qualified as either contributing or noncontributing in a district.

To make that happen, they, it seemed to me, divided the area up into manageable sections. So they got credit for doing the extension here as one area perhaps, then they divided the next area into three—to which three different names were given, allowing them to get credit as I say, for meeting their goals for subsequent years. I am not being critical of that *modus operandi* because it was a difficult process.

After Jennifer Raab left to become president of Hunter College and a new commissioner, Sherida Paulsen, was appointed, I thought she was a little more picky in some of the Sugar Hill blocks about including or not including contiguous buildings that we felt should be included. One example was a 1920s parking garage on the edge of the district at West 155th Street. Usually nobody loves parking garages, except this one had been built with a terracotta façade and it was really quite distinctive, and the façade tiles, quite decorative. Everybody thought that terracotta was such a relatively easy thing to make and use. You could cast these tiles that looked like granite or even carved stone and have them forever. Well, then we found out that they chip over time as water seeps into the joints and crevices. City College is a good example where terracotta was used in a significant way and ended up having all of its terracotta removed and replaces. It's

landmarked, and they recast and replaced all the tiles. So we'll enjoy it for another half century I suppose—but then perhaps the technology has improved to better sustain it for the future.

But to go back to the creating the districts. The LPC made exclusions where we thought some buildings should have been included, and an example of that was this beautiful terracotta parking garage. People I think understand that there are local historic districts, which are overseen by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which is given real regulatory power by the Landmarks Law of New York City, which is considered to be the strongest in the nation. Over that you have the State Historic Preservation Office, and above that you have the federal government with the National Parks Service and the Department of Interior actually overseeing historic preservation issues at the federal level but can't prevent demolitions except when the federal government is involved or is proposing the demolition, in which case the action must be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Officer, who is the one that the federal government has designated to review and make an appropriate decision. We got that office at the state and federal levels to include the parking garage on the National Register of Historic Places, but the city balked at it for the local district.

Fast forward 10 years later, we have a new building on the site, which was able to be built after the garage was destroyed, even though the State Preservation Office reviewed it and approved it with a few modifications. In its place is a high-rise, which we don't feel fits into the community. It is so much taller than the surrounding buildings. It does serve a good purpose because it addresses housing for moderate and low income people. It was designed by David Adjaye, one of the most famous black architects in the world today, and the lead designer for the National

Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall in Washington, DC. But as Michael Adams said the only thing that relates to—

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: So as Michael Adams said jokingly that the only thing that relates to the context of the neighborhood about this building is that its black tile façade reflects the fact that the neighborhood is black. *[laughs]* The surrounding neighborhood buildings are mostly a light colored limestone, and it makes no reference or shows any sensitivity to the historic character of the neighborhood in terms of size, shape or color. Of course every architect will argue that the building does fit in it, that somehow it fits in. It's a hard thing to find consensus on what is appropriate and what fits in a historic district.

My neighbors are upset because at the end of this block on 141st Street, City College wants to build an extension on the former house of the president of the college, to create the Colin Powell International Center--which prior to that was the Rangel International Center, which he pulled back from when issues got very hot for him in the Congress because he was using his official Congressional stationary to raise money for it. Scaffolding was up, work was going on, and it was soon to be the Rangel Center and I was happy, having watched the building slowly deteriorate all the years I have lived here. Then that scandal broke, worked stopped, the scaffolding came down, *[Laughs]* and he didn't want to have anything to do with it.

Now we're back with Colin Powell contributing what we hear is $5 million, and I think that's great, to move his School for Civic and Global Leadership at City College into the house. While there is no scandal that I know about, my neighbors have made it so hard for City College to move forward that I actually pulled out of the group finally because their demands got to be too much. They were totally opposed to the proposed extension in a contemporary style that is taller than the existing building. So it sits deteriorating and falling apart.

Although I should say one of the things we did with the CPO[Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization] previous to all this, was that we shook the tree so much that when one of the new presidents at City College, Yolanda Moses, heard about the neighborhood's ongoing upset about the eyesore of the community, she called me and said, "I want you to know that one of my initiatives will be to put a new roof on that house." It cost them $125,000, --which nobody could understand because it costs the rest of us at the time about $25,000 max to put a new roof on a house--but "that's government," we were told. "Government has to follow all the rules and regulations *[laughs]*, and government has to hire all these architects, consultants and specialists and everybody must make sure it was done right." She said, "You will be happy to learn that we're going to at the very least preserve the exterior." They sent somebody over to get limestone color they --that I used on my house, as we talked about.

Yolanda Moses said, "We are going to rebuild the façade of the garage," which had been torn down until another woman I should mention, Lana Turner--sort of the Pearl Mesta of Harlem, the hostess with the mostest, of Harlem, and a great organizer--and I met with the facilities

department at City College, pre-Moses, to complain about the partial destruction of a protected building. We were told that City College had already hired an architectural firm to prepare an existing conditions report and we were handed a copy. The first line of the report said: "This house is not a protected property." Now how could anybody who was being hired for $25,000 to produce this report, and back 20 years ago that was a lot of money *[laughs]*, write that after spending all this time researching the property? So the first thing I said to them was, this first line is wrong. This <u>is</u> a protected property. You can't tear down that garage without going to the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

When Yolanda Moses was appointed she said, "We're going to rebuild the façade of the garage," and they did. Fast forward, 10 years later, without any paint ever having been applied to the garage façade, which is made of wood and tin, as was the original garage, the façade is again corroded and become as ugly as the original one, simply because they didn't paint it. If I had it to do over *[laughs]* I was busy doing a number of things—I had a full-time job, and I was trying to extend the district, etc. but if I had it to do over, I would have gone down and painted it myself, which is probably illegal. *[Laughs]*

Q: *[laughs]* Do you see a relationship between historic preservation and preserving African American history in this neighborhood?

Melichar: Well, I certainly always support—

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: I certainly support the preservation of the African American history here and the preservation of the buildings and anything in the built environment that speaks of their life and involvement in Hamilton Heights and Harlem. Even though Harlem was built by developers who were building for middle-class white families, it was either unaffordable originally to a large sector of the black community or it was an example of de facto segregation because the homes and apartments were not made available to the black community.

Later when African Americans were finally able to move here, and Hamilton Heights and Sugar Hill were the last in this transition while it happened much earlier in central Harlem, which became what we now consider to be the "homeland" of Black America, and I think that's wonderful--that it is considered to be the homeland of all African Americans in this country. So many things happened here, so many blacks were nurtured here--musicians, poets, writers, artists and jurists from Thurgood Marshall to the famous tap dancers, the Nicholas Brothers, to Duke Ellington, to Ralph Ellison and almost everybody who is anybody in the world of the African Americans in New York City, lived somewhere here at one time or another.

I am doing some work now trying to find the rumored brownstone here of James Weldon Johnson and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, composers of the hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is referred to as the "Black National Anthem." All these places should be preserved either individually or within a district. They, at the very least, deserve to have some kind of marker to inspire others and especially our young people.

Q: And how much has the larger mix of people who live in this area been involved in establishing the historic district and fighting for it? Has that been important to a broader spectrum of people?

Melichar: Yes, that I think that it was an interesting phenomenon that we were able to garner as much support as we did in a neighborhood where people don't necessarily own their property, and are going to be disinclined to come out to save or protect buildings, which some people do associate with gentrification, higher rents, and making it more difficult to find and retain places to live. But I actually think that African Americans have a special sensitivity unlike other groups of people, even more than some of my white friends, to preserve history in a way that is quite unique. You can visit neighborhoods of African American communities, and you don't see unattractive changes such as the use of permastone as you do in other ethnic group neighborhoods. I'm not speaking of even the most distressed ethnic groups. There are other ethnic groups that thought permastone was a great thing to place over the facades of brownstones, and maybe it was in some instances. *[laughs]* Michael Adams showed me a house once that was beautifully decorated inside in the 1940s or 50s, and it had permastone on the outside. So I'm easily sort of talked out of some of my own prejudices.

But I do think that African Americans when you look at their communities, and you look how they preserve them, they do it with a sensitivity that I think goes far and beyond the norm.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: I think when you look at African American communities often times you see a sensitivity to preserving the original elements, fabric and the original character. I have no idea where that comes from, but I feel it, I see it, and I think I could show you enough examples, even in this neighborhood, and then take you to other neighborhoods where that sensitivity isn't present even though we might consider it to be a more "upwardly mobile" ethnic neighborhood.

Q: Do you see a relationship between historic preservation and economic development?

Melichar: Yes. In fact, I think there have been studies the results of which are always denied by the Chambers of Commerce or the Real Estate Board of New York, who discount the studies and want to show that all of these regulations and restrictions cause problems for them in terms of building. I think you can also see that when you preserve neighborhoods you preserve something that we will never have again probably, not to say that we couldn't but it's so prohibitively expensive, of course. You preserve something that people want to come to see, whether they be Americans or whether they be Europeans, and Europeans have no problem coming to Harlem.

Americans have problems coming to Harlem even today. But Europeans come to all the bed and breakfasts across the street in droves. It's like they can't first of all wait to come to Harlem because there is so much history here that fascinates them—including their fascination with Jazz and the famous clubs and musicians who lived here. They have a fascination with people like Josephine Baker who helped promote such a fascination about blacks and their romantic history in Paris and Europe that they want to come to this heartland. They know now that it's safe, and

they know that they can come and they can see something that relates to the historic past of the black community and figures of the past. Americans are still fearful. Even my relatives will scoff at where I chose to live, because they haven't—and these aren't really close relatives—my close relatives have been here many times and they have a great time.

Q: Okay. I just have a couple of more questions.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: The end of the conversation that I was getting to, because we talked about studies that have shown that neighborhoods like this do promote economic development, no matter what the Chamber of Commerce says, that in fact fixing up neighborhoods brings people, brings businesses, generates higher taxes and of course but they're going to say then, yeah, well, it generates gentrification because you're bringing people who can afford to live there who aren't necessarily the original people. But we can't forget in New York City we do have Rent Stabilization and its earlier sister, Rent Control. We have two systems that were developed many years ago that a lot of people think are unfair in a market economy and are determined to get rid of it. I actually think I'm happy and proud to say that in New York that we can have both the strength of rent regulated apartments to protect people who live here and at the same time preserve buildings, and when those buildings become vacant or apartments become vacant, it does offer an opportunity for new people who can afford to pay higher rents to also be here, and I think rightly so.

I think the best neighborhoods are neighborhoods that have all types of people, all income levels: low, moderate or even high. Of course we're not going to see many high income people unless they're buying mansions like the James Bailey House, which was built by James Bailey of the *Barnum and Bailey Circus* fame, and is being restored by somebody who is rich enough to afford to do it. So we do have some very rich people coming now. But the alternative to the Bailey House would have been, I think, the total loss of it. I think we're happy that somebody rich enough could come along and undo what had happened over many years, which included urine stains on every floor from the dogs of the former owners , and we loved the people who lived there too *[laughs]*, and they lived a full life there, but in their retirement years weren't able to afford to maintain it properly.

The people who had to buy it had to either take the floors up or recreate its marquetry or sand them so deeply that the urine smell would be gone. It's not an easy job to restore a house under any circumstance when it hasn't been maintained properly over many years. I was only lucky enough to do it as a moderate-income person because of, as I say, sort of a lucky streak that I had. *[Laughs]*

Q: That's lovely. I have just a couple more questions before we have to finish. One is when you think about Hamilton Heights and Sugar Hill, what do you see in its future?

Melichar: Well, I still see a very mixed community. We didn't talk about the specifics of how the community is made up of several communities. Amsterdam Avenue really divides this community, from the large apartment buildings to the west and the brownstones on the east,

which is largely the area of the historic district. In those apartment blocks, it's largely Dominican, and that's changed from a few years previous when it was largely Puerto Rican when I wasn't here--but I have been told--and now it's transitioning even to more Mexican residents. I can always tell the change by the restaurants on Broadway. There are still Dominican restaurants even on Amsterdam Avenue, but on Broadway, it used to be consistently Dominican and now we're seeing Mexican restaurants and they're doing authentic Mexican. It's not Americanized-Mexican restaurants. I think it reflects who is living here in a good way, and I think in a balanced way.

The hardest part of all of this really is language because you can't really get over the barrier of inviting a group to participate if they don't understand what you're saying of course and it is cultural, too, I suppose, and it's also class. You know someone who is raised in one class whether white, black, or Dominican doesn't want to live in a building where there are cultural or class issues that irritate, whether it be loud unfamiliar music blaring at them every second of the day or graffitied hallways that are offensive, and so these are examples of I think of the class issue. I think we must sympathize with the poor immigrant who can barely keep their kids in school let alone keep track of what they're doing when they leave home and when they go to school.

Buildings tend to become, I think, singularly representative of a class of people and the large buildings in the neighborhood I still think retain that. I'm saying that in a good way because of rent control and stabilization immigrants continue to live in these buildings, but it doesn't invite gentrification like a townhouse.

A townhouse is given to you vacant usually but not always. That can be a problem for a purchaser or a developer, if there is any evidence that the people living there were rent controlled or stabilized, and were forced out illegally. Mostly the houses can be delivered vacant so after they are renovated, they will attract a different class of people. An apartment block full of low income people will not create a gentrification issue usually. It's just not going to happen unless a developer comes along and is somehow able to empty a building, either over time as people die, move out, or reach a certain level of rent according to the rent regulation laws. Forcing people out is illegal, and is a very serious thing to do these days.

Q: I want to ask you, some of the people who will come to the New York Preservation Archive Project are in communities that are interested in historic preservation and trying to learn how to get started in their own neighborhoods. Is there something that you want to share that you've learned about the resources people need or the questions they need to ask or the groups of people they need to bring together?

Melichar: I've always felt that the first thing you have to do is organize your neighborhood group in the easiest way possible way at first, and then later move to organize your group in the best possible way. And that means you start a group, with a name and address, and you get a letterhead that may look like you're more than you really are. But you get a masthead, you get a group of people, hopefully enough to fill out a list of officers, and you try to get leadership like Bill Lynch even if they won't participate fulltime, and you don't expect them to participate if they're a Deputy Mayor. But you get them on your executive committee and people recognize

those names and they want to be on it, too. As many as you can get like that helps you build your credibility.

You need, within the group you have established, to identify your purpose and your long term and short term goals. Even when you want to establish a district, the first thing to do is not to go to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. If you are going to establish credibility with your group --and the Commission-- you need to accomplish a few short-term goals that really move people to join in the effort. In some places the creation of the historic district may be the most important issue. In a neighborhood like Hamilton Heights, it was not. Crime and the threat posed by crime was and while this was a long term issue, there are many short term issues that can be addressed that will bring people on board, make them feel that the organization is addressing real problems that impact them in a serious way. We met with the police on a regular basis or invited everyone on our mailing list to attend meetings with the police. We became so active in the area that it was not long before we were meeting with the Police Commissioner, himself.

I am recommending that your group address the primary problems in the neighborhood, and the greatest problem was crime. Nobody wants to live where they are afraid, and that was the hardest thing to do, and it was hard for 20 years. At the same time, it's those meetings that brought many people together and gave some confidence that something was happening. At the same time, we certainly didn't wait to solve the long term problem of crime before we went to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, but we met more with the Police Commissioner than we ever met with the Chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

But in terms of telling you what needs to be done: You form a committee, you enlarge it as best you can, you bring in as many important names as you can, and you write letters. I think this is an example where writing letters does make a difference, as opposed to, they would say don't send your resume out, you'll never get a job that way. *[laughs]*

I'm also a fond believer, a great believer, in contacts, meeting people, joining clubs, organizations. However I think as a former city employee, I would encourage new groups to start with those letters that keep them going. A letter to the highest officer in the agency, usually the commissioner, must be answered. It became a public record, and the commissioner will pass it along to the person in the agency responsible for your particular issue to write a response, which will usually be signed by the commissioner. Forget making phone calls. First you will never find the right person to talk to and even if you do, that interchange ultimately serves little purpose. There is no record of your action to use down the line should nothing happen. Even the most dedicated city employee will finally lose track of many of the phone calls that have come in. A letter from an organization is not easily forgotten. It's a written example of a group who has come to you and you've got to deal with it, as opposed to phone calls.

Q: I want to ask you if there is anything that you want to tell me that I haven't asked or a memory that's come up for you that you think is important that you want to share before we say good-bye.

Melichar: I'm surprised that we've covered so much territory. I'm sure as soon as you leave I'll think of all the things I didn't mention but I think I should leave people with the understanding

that it's been a great journey, and I recommend it even if it's hard because so many naysayers in the beginning, as I mentioned, said, "Why would you even attempt to do something like that? Why would a white boy attempt to do something like that in a black neighborhood rife with so many problems, in a house that needed so much work?"

And it's been a great thing that I think I've done myself, just for myself personally, but I am happiest when I see that my interests overlapped with those of the community and we are both the better for it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Melichar: I think my strength is not that I have any particular talent, but I can see the pieces, you know, and I can find the right people to put the pieces together to achieve the result that is sought. I'm not sure I am such a great leader either, so no one should be intimidated, should they feel the same way about taking on any of the projects that we have accomplished in Hamilton Heights. If I have a talent, it might be that I'm more of a person who can recognize talent, and sometimes I don't even know if I recognized it, as I say, it's just serendipitous. I believe now there is more to the mystery of life and that part of the mystery is that there seems to be more happening than that which comes from just your own choosing, when it comes so easily when you need it.

Lana Turner is the one who I mentioned a bit. I should say more about her. She is the social maven in this neighborhood and she talked me into doing concerts in this room and we invite

musicians generally. It's usually classical music, but we've had other forms of music and events. We've had singers, pianists, and string quartets, and it involves mostly people that are looking for more public exposure. We don't charge, and we don't pay, it's just a fun time. Lana Turner is an amazing person in that she always thinks that way. I don't think I do. I have always been sort of had my feet firmly in the economics, as you say of everything—whether an activity is self-supporting.

My whole professional life has been firmly planted in the market place and in business development--what it takes and the money that has to be there to make it happen. And in my own life too, I keep my feet firmly grounded on what it costs and what the risk is of losing money. Really everything I—I told you ever piece of art I have—well, not some things perhaps. *[laughs]* A few things I bought when I was older and more stable and had some more discretionary money. But so many things I have is either cracked or chipped, and I've had some repaired and some not, but they're special to me and remind me of my travels, of friends and family who may have given them to me. So I've always felt that—the way I grounded myself in the affordability of something is that I never knew that I could not lose money very easily on whatever I did, this house included.

Other people have higher aspirations and they're willing to a greater risk, like one of my friends. He said, "I lost my house once after using it for collateral for my business." Well, I'm not that kind of person. If I lost my house, that would be it. He lost his house and he built another empire. He was a businessman, an entrepreneur who had a vision or visions that he could transform into viable entities and one failed, he turned around and started another, all the time raising a family

of three and building a beautiful log cabin home. I'm not that, even though I work in business development, but I wasn't advising people how to be businessman necessarily. I was advising them how they could attract more people to their businesses and that was where historic preservation came in. We were trying to get storeowners to take off the false facades on the fronts of their stores or buildings. We were trying to find ways they could attract their community back to their stores and taking advantage of this found asset is one way to do it.

But I was talking about the concert series that we have that we, my friend Lana Turner organized and to which we invited friends. Sometimes it's hard to get people to come even for free. *[laughs]* But we're trying to develop audiences from the community and it's largely black audiences and black performers, but sometimes it isn't. The two people who soon will be moving into this apartment are actually two Manhattan School of Music musicians who are not black, and it really represents a real change because the building has always been always been pretty much occupied by black tenants. And so we started off with a new direction. But again I think it's important to have everybody. They're very talented and are setting out on their first jobs, themselves so it's a good deal for them because they get a better deal on the rent in order to allow me to use this space for concerts occasionally--and they are a lot of work so they don't happen all that often--where I am encouraging them to perform too in the same space on one of the occasions. .

We usually have a dinner that Lana Turner puts together and usually we both chip in to pay for it. She calls it a light dinner but I think if you went to any place else it would be considered a full buffet. She doesn't do anything in a small way. She organized an enormous event, an evening

fundraiser of the Dinkins's campaign for Mayor. She's somebody that just does every single thing with great care, elegance, and with such beauty that I could never say no to anything she proposes.

She called me yesterday. She hadn't been here for a year, and I have been making improvements over the past year, but I said, "Lana, this apartment has been empty for a year why haven't you done anything? Now I have a tenant who is moving in and you want to do a concert two days after they move in." I couldn't say no to her so I told the tenant, "We're having our first concert." When they took the place, I said, you know Lana Turner and I do these concerts but she hasn't been here for a year so I don't know how often she'll do them, but never more than once a month. So I had to tell them today that we are doing a concert two days after they move in. Lana is excited that you'll have boxes all over because she likes that kind of atmosphere. She thinks such things energize everyone.

Q: So before we say good-bye, you were talking about the board of the Hamilton Heights West Harlem Community Preservation Organization and your own journey.

Melichar: I think I was trying to say that even the board directors—well, the board of directors will make comments, which you wouldn't expect them to make if there is a white boy in the room. *[laughs]* They'll say things like—well, some derogatory things, in some instances. Not really bad but some are worried about the direction that Harlem is going, that it may become a place where whites will move in and push out the black community. So they will say things in front of me until they realize what they said such as,, "Oh, we don't mean you, because you've

been here all these years, and we know you're not here as a speculator or a short term homeowner wanting to take advantage of the spiral of prices upward," I faced that in the beginning, too, that I was just going to be here short-term and move on quickly. Some said to my face that they suspected I'd come in, and I'd leave as soon as I met the commitment, under the terms of the sale from the city, to live here five years and then move on.

Now that I'm here for 30 years, I don't, of course, hear that anymore. I don't want to pat myself on the back because I don't think I did anything that I wouldn't have done anywhere else. But I did become the president of two neighborhood groups whose members were predominately black--the homeowners association and then the CPO. Of course these positions take a lot of work so they are not usually highly contested, but they certainly would not have tolerated me in that position if they felt that my leadership would not be beneficial for them or for the neighborhood. During my tenure, one of which still continues, I have always supported that people who have been here should be protected, and they shouldn't have to move out of their home just as things improve and rents escalate when landlords may not have made any real improvements or worked to make the area better. I think the laws of New York allow for that and should be continued. At the same time, the laws of New York City are stronger than any others in any other city, in the nation, when it comes to the protection of historic structures.

At the moment, the Real Estate Board of New York wants to rescind, not just stop historic districts and landmarking, they want to rescind the whole law. They say developers cannot build in New York because of us. I think that would be a terrible thing not only because it does mean that we would be building only for the rich since these are the only ones that can afford buildings

that are being put up today. But also because we would allow for the destruction of what is so special about New York City. New York City has so many neighborhoods that have already been destroyed. If you start in Lower Manhattan, there are only very few buildings from the federal period—the buildings put up after the American Revolution up to 1820 or so, not to mention all the buildings that are gone from previous eras. There is St. Paul's Chapel; there is the James Watson House, now the rectory of an adjacent Roman Catholic Church.

From the whole area of lower Manhattan, the area that demarked early New York City, we have only a handful of federal buildings—a few more if we count South Street Seaport. That is not to say there weren't great things built too. Sometimes we do get a great building, but often times we lose so much and get so little. I think there is a nice balance here in the city between a very strong preservation law and also a very strong law that protects people living in their spaces.

Q: With that I say thank you so much.

Melichar: You're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]