

LEADING THE COMMISSION: INTERVIEWS WITH THE FORMER CHAIRS OF NYC'S
LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

The Reminiscences of
Laurie Beckelman

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Laurie Beckelman conducted by Interviewer Liz McEnaney in 2011. This interview is part of the *Leading the Commission: Interviews with the Former Chairs of NYC's Landmarks Preservation Commission* 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.

Laurie Beckelman first became involved in preservation while working for Kent Barwick at the Municipal Art Society. She continued her career of advocacy, as the executive director of New York Landmarks Conservancy before being appointed to chair the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC] in 1990. She speaks about the challenges facing the LPC at this time, such as maintaining itself as a separate agency. When setting her agenda as LPC chair, she emphasized designating Modernism, raising public awareness of preservation, and preserving areas and neighborhoods that had previously been overlooked, such as the Jackson Heights neighborhood in Queens. She also describes the change to working with the New York City Council, after the New York City Board of Estimate was dissolved, and the new issues it raised. She involved the LPC in several high profile cases, including Dvorak House, the African Burial Ground, and the Trans World Airlines Terminal.

Laurie Beckelman was chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission under Mayor David Dinkins, 1990-1994, and also served as executive director of the Landmarks Conservancy from 1981-1990. Beckelman's first full-time job after college, working for Kent Barwick at the Municipal Art Society in 1973, introduced her to the world of preservation. She was instrumental in establishing Urban Center Books, a beloved bookstore and gathering place for those in the art, planning, and design worlds. As LPC chair, Beckelman was involved in the historic designations of St. Bart's, the Carnegie Hill District, Jackson Heights, and the African Burial Ground. Her decisions as chair, particularly in the case of neighborhoods like Jackson Heights, signaled a shift toward preserving previously ignored areas and neighborhoods.

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Session: 1

Interviewee: Laurie Beckelman

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Interviewer: Liz McEnaney

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Q: If you want to jump in and start as kind of—just your background as a preservationist working for organizations like MAS [Municipal Art Society] and Landmarks Conservancy. I know MAS was your first job post-college, is that right?

Beckelman: Yes and no. I dabbled in certain things, and I was on the road with Randy [Jones]—the man who eventually became my husband—with the Maynard Ferguson Group but that’s a whole other story. And then I met Kent [Barwick]. I came back to New York and thought I’d go to graduate school in planning or design. I didn’t know anything about preservation, All I knew was that I did like old buildings, especially churches. Somebody—my brother’s friend’s brother—was in the elevator at 41 East 65th Street, which was one of the first homes of the Municipal Art Society. The American Federation of Arts owned building. Kent said to this other young man from the AFA [American Federation of Arts], “Do you know anyone that’s looking for a job? I’m looking for an assistant.” And he said as a matter of fact—through my brother—yes.

I called him and went in for an interview. I waited a couple of hours to be interviewed by Kent. He needed a secretary. I told him my background and he said “You don’t really have a background in preservation,” and I said, I don’t, but you know I wanted to be an actress, and so although I didn’t grow up—my parents—I was born in Manhattan, my parents are from here. I

spent every weekend expect for the summers in the city. I know the city well, I know the boroughs. My parents were very interested in the city, born and bred New Yorkers. And he said “Alright take this piece of paper and would you type it for me, I have to leave, and just leave it on my desk.” I swear, with carbon paper—

Q: *[Laughs]* you’re kidding?

Beckelman: No, and he had nobody, and I was doing this work and I left. He doesn’t call me, I called him, kept calling and calling, and was offered a job at CBS.

Q: Wow, doing what out of curiosity?

Beckelman: It was an assistant position, some research. I had just graduated from university and my background was sociology and psychology and with a minor in anthropology. I kept calling Kent, because I realized—we never talked money, and I said, I really would—I knew this guy was so fascinating, I went to the library—and remember this was before computers and everything—so I went to the library and I looked up the Municipal Art Society, and went, my god this is an amazing organization.

And he finally called me and he said, “You know I really don’t have the money to pay somebody full time and I really want somebody that has studied history and preservation and you don’t have that.” I said, “I know but I am a quick study and please try to give me a chance.” I’m still

holding on with the CBS people. He had me back in and I had to be interviewed by the Architectural League [of New York], because they were going to share me. They had nobody.

Q: Oh wow.

Beckelman: And then he called me back and he said, “Well the League really wanted somebody else—I’ll try.” I said, “Listen Kent the truth is I have been offered another job. I really want to work for you.” And he said, “Well the other thing is there’s sometimes I can’t pay you.” He said sometimes we run out of money. My salary was \$5,500 a year.

Q: Wow

Beckelman: It was a long time ago too, so I don’t know what \$5,500 is in today’s dollars. I had no insurance—nothing. And he said, “Alright lets try it.” So I went to work for Kent. I worked seven days a week. I loved it so, I helped organized the tours—we did these tours of Fifth Avenue. I just learned and learned and learned. At night I went to school, and I took classes at the New School. It became my life.

Q: That’s incredible Laurie.

Beckelman: And I loved working for Kent. I think what I was intrigued by, is that I was very involved against the Vietnam War. I organized closing down Route One [*inaudible*] to getting Jane Fonda and [Thomas] Hayden and all these famous people to come. I did rallies—not by

myself obviously, but I was always an organizer, I was head of my school and always involved in politics and getting things done. What perfect thing to, saving Grand Central [Terminal] and all of that.

Q: Absolutely

Beckelman: It was phenomenal and working for Kent was amazing.

Q: What was the staff like at MAS at this point, was it pretty much you and Kent?

Beckelman: And a part time young woman by the name of Laura Corak [*phonetic*], who was studying acting, very smart, and a wonderful man by the name of Ron [Ronald] Freedlander who was on the board and we had a radio show on WNYC, called *The Livable City*.

Q: I didn't know that.

Beckelman: That Ron was the producer of. Ron was from a very old New York family. His father was the architect for the Museum of the City of New York.

Q: Wow

Beckelman: And he studied the Beaux Arts.

Q: That's incredible.

Beckelman: And he did some famous old age home on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx that he also did—and other buildings. He was a Beaux Arts architect, Ron's father.

Q: How did MAS grow from the time you were there? Because you were there in—

Beckelman: I was there in 1973, I started.

Q: With you, Kent and the half-time—

Beckelman: And Ron Freedlander and the part-time, not even a half-time, part-time assistant. I worked all the time, early in the morning until late at night. It was so exciting—Kent was so exciting. He was, involved with—first of all, they were expanding the [New York] Landmarks [Preservation] Law. At that point they were only, I think having a series of hearings, X amount of times of year. There were also at the time, there were no scenic landmarks. Everything was changing—the Historic Districts Council was under the umbrella of the Municipal Art Society. The [New York] Landmarks Conservancy was just being founded. The Preservation League of New York State was just being founded. So to be there—and okay, I was only his assistant, but when you don't have a staff, and somebody's hungry, you think they're smart, you get to do everything.

Q: Right, right.

Beckelman: Also, all of a sudden, the Supreme Court of the City of New York, of the State—remember there was the hearing that was going forward for Grand Central, and we were all of the sudden in the middle of it. This was in the mid '70's—Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy] Onassis—and I was picking up the telephone. I was getting, Mrs. Onassis on the phone and saying, “Kent, there is a women on the phone saying she is Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, do you want to speak to her or should I tell her to call back?” and he goes, “No I’ll talk to her.” We don’t know who it is really.

So anyway that’s how it all started. Then Brendon Gill, then the chairman of the board to the Municipal Art Society, and then Fred Papert, Tim Prentice. Brendon was my mentor, Fred was a mentor and they took me under the wings. I was really lucky, really lucky. I got very close to Brendon, and then when they were looking for a director—I was twenty-nine I guess, at the time—so I was at the Municipal Art Society, by this time for almost six years. At this point, Kent was no longer there, Margot was the director and I was a deputy director, along with Henry NG. We were both deputy directors. I was in charge of programming—marketing, whatever. Henry was finance, etc.

I remember Brendon calling me saying they’re looking—oh no, no. You don’t need to know this—I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of Richard Weinstein who was a brilliant urban designer. He then became dean of the school of UCLA [University of California Los Angeles], architecture. At the time he was very close to Don Elliot and they were involved with the creating the education facility fund for the state. They were very involved with creating the tower

at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art], funding for that etc. He was on the board of the Landmarks Conservancy, and he was talking at the about the proposed new tower at MOMA. And he was so arrogant. I, for the Municipal Art Society, went to take notes and hear what they were saying. He was standing next to me, and he was—the group, who was neighbors and community organizers, and organizations like the Municipal Art Society.

I think probably it was at the Janelle Library [*phonetic*] or something. He said—he was so arrogant—he said, “Excuse me, if I were you I would sit down right now. You are really blowing whatever we’ve said—“ and he looked at me and he said, “Who are you?” I said “Nobody.” I said “But I’m serious, you are really offending people” [*unclear*] and he came over and he said, “Seriously who are you?” I said “Nobody.” he said “Where do you work?” I said “I work at Municipal Art Society” and he said “Do you have a card?” I said yes and he called me and said “Let’s have breakfast.” I said ok, and he said, “What do you want to do?” I said “I am doing what I want to do.” and he said “No you’re not, you should be doing something else and there’s a job opening at the Landmarks Conservancy and you should go after it.” He said, “Nobody’s ever talked to me that way”, and I said “I saw how smart you were, and so impressive, and then you started melting down. And I just couldn’t stand the idea that this was happening.” He said— anyway, so we became friends.

Q: Laurie, that’s an incredible story.

Beckelman: It was so wild, I totally forgot about it. And then Holly Whyte [William Hollingsworth Whyte] was on the board, both with the Municipal Art Society and the Landmarks

Conservancy. I called him and he said, “Oh you definitely should apply for this job.” I called Brendon and he said “Oh what a good idea.” So I went for the interview with Don [Donald] Oresman, who became my mentor and I still see him all the time—he’s not that well anymore—I got the job. Susan [Henshaw] Jones had the job, then I got the job and the rest is history. I became head of the Landmarks Conservancy. At the Conservancy, then I think it was ‘87, ‘88 I got a fellowship at Harvard [University], the Loeb Fellowship? You should apply for that, you should really think about that.

Q: I’d love too.

Beckelman: Anyway, we’ll talk about it another time. I remember being—the Municipal Art Society had started—I’m giving you too much information.

Q: No, this is what I want, I’ll dovetail back to Urban Center Books and things like that.

Beckelman: Of course, of course—

Q: No Laurie this is great.

Beckelman: Are you sure? So anyway and then, it started at Municipal Art Society, The Information Exchange that Carol Rifkind did. Do you know about that?

Q: No I don't know about that.

Beckelman: They have The Information Exchange—you should talk to her about it. She has also another perspective on preservation and that whole period. She had been at Columbia then started this and The Information Exchange was basically a public library so people could come in and do research on preservation.

Q: At MAS?

Beckelman: At MAS, so when we moved into the Villard houses—I think it may have been Margot's idea. Have you interviewed Margot Wellington?

Q: Not for this, no.

Beckelman: You have to.

Q: That's a great point.

Beckelman: Do it sooner than later—she's fine. But I would do it sooner than later. She has a great memory.

Q: We've been working with her kind of about—the future of—

Beckelman: Oh I know a lot, Margot and I are very close, I know a lot about it.

Beckelman: Anyway, the Florence School Foundation gave the Municipal Art Society a grant to send people over from New York to look at the Grand Proché of Netheron [*phonetic*]. Grand Proché?

Q: Yes.

Beckelman: So, it was—David Dinkins had just been elected, but he hadn't chosen his commissioners or whatever so it was—oh god it was an incredible group from Albert Scardino, who I think was just appointed the mayor's press secretary, to people from NYSCA [New York State Council of the Arts], Peggy Ayers [*phonetic*], Kent, Gene Norman, why am I not know thinking? It was just an incredible group and I was invited—why am I losing—I'll think of it. Anyway, during this time people said you should think about going on the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission, and I said I don't think so. I don't think I want to work for the city.

Q: Why was that? Out of curiosity, why were you kind of reluctant to—?

Beckelman: I don't know. I was quite comfortable at the Conservancy, and even though I had been there for a long time, I didn't think about ever serving in government. I remember there were all these reports, remember the Platt report and changing—did you ever see—?

Q: The Cooper Report and all those—yes.

Beckelman: The Cooper Report, was Charles [A.] Platt involved in that?

Q: I think he was involved.

Beckelman: The Platt Cooper report, the Cooper Platt report maybe? They make all these recommendations and I agreed with some, and whatever.

I came back and I remember having terrible jetlag, and getting call, saying we want to interview you. I remember calling Don Oresman, at the Conservatory, and said, “Listen, I got this call”—“Well I know about it.” I said, “Well how would you feel?” He said “You should go after it, you have to it.” I said, “I don’t know.”

I went in very reluctantly for the interview. I was very casual. I wasn’t going after the job, so I was very comfortable talking about what my feelings were about what should happen at the Commission. Gave them recommendations. I don’t know if I was even well prepared—this is what I’d be doing, this is what I think should happen. I get a call from Barbara Fife a week later saying “I want you to come down and be interviewed now by the mayor.” There was a group, they did a group—a reconnaissance group, I don’t know the name of it, I guess they vetted everybody—then I met the mayor on a Saturday.

Q: Oh you did—you met with Dinkins?

Beckelman: I met with Dinkins and his deputy mayors. I remember [him] saying, “Well you know people think there are parts, that some people think that you are too much of an advocate to be the chairman.” I said “You mean, people from the Real Estate Board [of New York]?” and he said yes, and I said “Well I think the chairman is more of a judge, there has to be a balance, and yes I may be an advocate, but I also do understand balance, and understanding both sides. I understand the law.” And by this point I thought maybe this sounds interesting. I had a good interview. I’ll never forget—I think I wore my hair back, you know, pearls. I’ll never forget, somebody before I walked in said “Laurie, why aren’t you looking like yourself?” I just had pearls and my hair back and this really conservative little black suit, so un-me.

I had this really good interview but that was it. Then I get a call a week later from Barbara Fife saying, “Can you get here in the next hour?” and I said “Oh why?” and she said “The Mayor wants to have a press conference and announce you.”

Q: And that was it.

Beckelman: I said but I’m not sure I want the job, I’ll get back to you another day *[laughter]*. She said “You do not have a choice. You accept it now or”—“No.” And she said, “You are kidding aren’t you?” I said no I am not kidding. Same thing when Brendon offered me the job in the Conservancy. I said I’d think about it a couple days. He said, “We’re in a board meeting. I’m going to go back there and tell them that you are accepting this job.” So I said “Alright Barbara, I

guess so,” and I called a couple people—my husband or whatever—and then I went down and they announced me.

Q: Laurie that’s so incredible, it’s such a whirlwind story.

Beckelman: It was a whirlwind, it was very exciting.

Q: But you were so tired—from being at MAS and working with Kent and then being on the Conservancy and being there while Gene was chair and then while David was chair—I’m wondering what was your interaction with the Commission because you were working on parallel issues in some ways.

Beckelman: I think at the time, I don’t know why, unless it’s my own naivete or how I have relationships is, I am not a combative person, I mean I know how to fight, but I am not hysterical, and there are two camps. I mean when Helena Rosenthal was alive—you never met her did you?

Q: No.

Beckelman: It’s the loved and soft way of cajoling people as to the other side, which is people I don’t want to name. I don’t respect that. I don’t think that bullying people and ostracizing people and humiliating people is the way to get your point across. I think you can be strong and persuasive. I had very good relationships with the Commission, I didn’t always agree. We fought

when I was at the—and at time I'm sure Kent was upset with us. When I was at the Landmarks Conservancy and Kent was the chairman, we had the Biltmore Hotel. It was a summer, Kent was chairman, and John Zucotti, was the lawyer for the Milsteins [Seymour and Paul Milstein]. He was a former deputy mayor, former chairman of [New York Department of] City Planning. He got a permit to do minor modifications in the rooms of the Biltmore and they started demolishing. He knew damn well what kind of permit they had.

All of the sudden they are demolishing a building and Kent hadn't calendared it. I get a call—I am out in East Hampton. He calls Philip Howard, I call Don Oresman and they, Donald and Philip get a court order to stop the demolition, I run into New York, David [W.] Dunlop writes an article and the whole thing is history. We, at the time, decided not to go for designation, but to try and make a deal with the Milsteins. Kent was furious. But we weren't screaming at each other, we knew we were all on the same side. People were disappointed that the Conservancy was trying to make a deal and that's how a fund was created to—of half a million dollars, which is probably a couple million or a few million now, I don't know—at the Conservancy to help endangered buildings.

They created the Endangered Buildings Fund after this. I am not saying it was the one hundred percent right thing to do but the practical side felt so much had been lost of the Biltmore we weren't going to get any place. But Kent, understandably as the chairman, was trying to make a point. So we were at odds, but we all knew we were on the same side. Why am I saying this, it was at a time, I'd say, that the Landmarks Conservancy—I don't think at every single point we were aligned, meaning whether I was at Municipal Art Society or the Landmarks Conservancy,

but it seemed that we were more closely aligned then in more recent years. I think that under [Rudolph] Guiliani and I think there's been frustration with the [Michael R.] Bloomberg administration, that different preservation felt that not enough has been done. I think that when I became the commissioner—I am jumping all over so I don't know if you want to pull back.

Q: No keep going on this, then we can jump back, if you don't mind going here and there—

Beckelman: Oh no it's fine, no, of course. Is that I decided very quickly when I went, thinking okay what I can do to make my tenure there really relevant, for the city, and for working for this particular mayor, the first African American mayor, what would be the legacy, not of me but of the administration. Thinking back, alright fine I had all these reports, what are some of the things we could change so that more people—

Q: Reports that you had produced, that had kind of come out—?

Beckelman: Not my reports, but the Cooper Report, the Platt—looking at that, what are things that made sense. I also had the remarkable Dorothy Miner to help me think through the process. Also, she is brilliant, she is also frustrating. I had to figure out how to also make things much more open than they had been—she was amazing, she never wrote down anything, she had to have the most photographic memory in history. Sorry nobody ever got her on tape, did they?

Q: I think there is one, there's—it's time stamped, but it can't be released for a certain number of years, but I—

Beckelman: Really? Tony spoke to her?

Q: I don't know if Tony spoke to her, or it was through another project, but I remember Dorothy always mentioning something like that.

Beckelman: You studied with her didn't you? She's remarkable. I learned so much from her.

Q: Yes. She is so amazing.

Beckelman: Anyway, I think we decided to quickly that we had put a new commission together, there were some holdovers, and there were some tragedies too. At the time Elliot Willensky was on the commission when I first took over and he died so quickly, had a heart attack right away. It was tragic, really tragic.

I decided that one of the things that I really wanted to do—with so much focus had always been on Manhattan, and it's understandable. It's a whole education process, you get the best, everybody knows Manhattan. There were already lots of historic districts in outer boroughs. I decided that one, with David Dinkins from Harlem, that we would look at Harlem at some point. I also wanted to look at the boroughs and make that a priority because it wasn't the Manhattan elite that elected him. It was people in other places and I thought why not? This would be a good time—I started holding town hall meetings in all the boroughs.

Q: And that was something Kent had done as well during his time?

Beckelman: I don't remember. Probably he would. I probably learned it from him, I can't remember where, and I don't want to take credit for it. We started having some exhibitions and we started a—I hired Tracie Rozohn.

Q: Oh when—?

Beckelman: What I did was, we needed someone who did communications. I remember going to into Al Scardino. Albert Scardino and his wife Marjorie [Scardino] had a—

Q: Who is Al Scardino?

Beckelman: Albert Scardino was working, actually before that he was a writer at *The New York Times*. But he and his wife had been in Savanna, and had won a Pulitzer for a newspaper that they had published. She is now the head of The Pearson Group. She had been the editor of *The Economist*. I had her on the board of the Landmarks Conservancy. She was—Michael Ansilie, who is head of The National Trust [for Historic Preservation]? His sister in law.

Q: Interesting connection.

Beckelman: Sister in law, brother in law. That's how I met them and I became friends. I said to Albert, we need to find somebody that really has a relationship with the press, that has done

something in preservation in the city. He called me and said you won't believe this, there is a woman I met recently who has moved from Baltimore, who has worked for the Baltimore paper, who's renovated buildings, really understand restoration, you have to meet her. And that's how I met Tracie. Then after working there a couple years, *The New York Times* stole her, and she started writing for real estate.

Q: I love the small world connections, the elevator meeting, everything.

Beckelman: Isn't that wild?

Q: How it all pieces together and all.

Beckelman: I was so lucky because I worked for these incredible people at each stage and I learned so much, so it wasn't me doing it alone. I worked for these great boards, they had confidence in me, I went off and did lots and lots of things and I had always their support and I could rely on them and ask for anything, at all times. That's why saving Grand Central—I ran that with Jackie and Brendon and all of that. I worked for Kent. Kent had the great memory and he was like you go and do this. Okay I'll do it. I was fearless, but I also had a great, what would you call it? If I fell, I knew that I would land.

Q: That you had you had the people who were there to support you and give you the direction that you needed.

Beckelman: Always. Margot was phenomenal. It was a great, great group of people. Then we had this extraordinary lawyers, at the time they were all young. Peter Sloan—

Q: This is with MAS? Or is *[crosstalk]*

Beckelman: This was MAS. They were on the board—at the time they weren't on the board, they were young associates. Jack Kerr was at Simpson Thacher [Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP], and Peter Sloan was at Cahill Gordon [Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP], and they both became partners there. They were writing an amicus brief—Paul Byard was a lawyer at the time, he was writing the amicus briefs at every single level of the courts, as it went through the courts and into the Supreme Court. And then we had all the city lawyers—I worked with them all the time about everything, whether we were creating rallies on 42nd street. We had the best lines in advertising because of Fred Papert, and everybody was doing everything pro bono.

Q: That's incredible. That was kind of the MAS experience that you had, it was this amazing think tank that you had access to then, that was all pro bono, and then you and Kent could drive the programs.

Beckelman: I worked for Kent at the time, so I could—I wasn't a mastermind of any of it, but that's when we did the Grand Central Exhibition.

Q: Can you talk about the Grand Central Exhibition, and what it was like working on that? That whole experience of that campaign? [*Crosstalk*]. Because those are some of the most iconic images.

Beckelman: That was fantastic. Have you ever seen the archives on that? You should look at the archives.

Q: No I should look at the archives.

Beckelman: They're wonderful. I was working for Margot Wellington at the time and we decided—this after the campaign. Kent had really created—we had some of the most famous people in advertising and entertainment. The events, we closed—I think it was Kent's idea or Fred's, I don't know which one—we closed the [Park Avenue] Viaduct front of Grand Central on April fifteenth, which was the peoples day, tax day. That was that whole campaign and that's why did it on April fifteenth. And there was Jackie Onassis and—oh my god, this famous, I forgot his name—accordion player, some famous guy talked about tennis—oh my god, it's all on the files. I helped organize that whole event. But we had Gene Secunder [*phonetic*] from J.Walter Thompson, we had everybody there—flyers and everybody knew about it. It was internationally covered.

Q: That's incredible.

Beckelman: The whole campaign and that event, because it was Jackie. Philip Johnson.

Q: Did you have any sense when you were doing it that it was going to be as groundbreaking as it was?

Beckelman: You had a sense. You had a sense that it was big. You started thinking because when you got in a cab, every taxi driver knew about it, everybody—because of Mrs. Onassis. Everybody. It was staggering. You started to feel something. The whole idea was to get the mayors attention, Mayor [Abraham] Beame's attention.

Q: And it worked. Do you think there's a figure that compares—Jackie was such a rallying figure in some ways, and became the cause of Grand Central—

Beckelman: And preservation.

Q: Oh perseverance and made it—so many people knew—

Beckelman: I can't think of anyone else, and there is no one else like her. Well after that because of her, Bill Moyers got involved—remember with the Towers at Columbus Circle.

Q: Yes.

Beckelman: Remember they held umbrellas up? That must have been Kent's idea.

Q: I don't know about the umbrellas, but I—

Beckelman: Oh they went in, they went into the front of the first proposal by Boston Properties, [Mortimer B.] Zuckerman. A group—I don't know how many people, Kent would tell you— with umbrellas at Central Park, right at the edge, right there at Central Park South, the kind of shadow that it would overcast. Everybody had black umbrellas—this is how big the shadow would be. It made lots of press; it was in all the papers.

Q: That's incredible. Coming at it from your interest in campaigns, and politics and that advocacy—?

Beckelman: That was the exciting part of it. Grand Central was that, so you have the Supreme Court and then you know about the train?

Q: Yes, the Landmarks Express.

Beckelman: We hired somebody, and I worked with them and we organized the train down to Washington and along the way we picked up people. Then we met Jackie Onassis, who was on the train, with [Henry] Geldzahler, and Margo Warnecke, who was John Carl Warnacke's, the famous architect, daughter. Every board member—Doris Freedman who was head of the board. It was phenomenal—then meeting Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan and Jackie Onassis, in Washington. Oh no, Jackie was on the train—Joan Mondale and Senator Moynihan in Washington. Then the next day was the Supreme Court.

Q: And was everyone there for that or did the train go back?

Beckelman: No, everybody stayed.

Q: Everyone was there.

Beckelman: We went to Union Station. We had a big press conference, and we had a big salon on the train, it was—now I look back, I have the chills from it. And nobody did it alone, I didn't do it alone, I had my brother working on it. I had—he was a young student and he was also involved with protesting against the war [The Vietnam War] at the University of Wisconsin, so he really understood how you organized groups. We had everyone working on everything. Somebody was in charge of press—I hired this one woman, Margaret Pree [*phonetic*], who knew about organization, and Virginia Deshaney had been involved, and I was working for Margo at the time. But we worked day and night, day and night.

But I'll never forget the night before I was in Zabar's late at night, it was when Zabar's used to open late at night. Somebody walks over to me and said "How did you have the time to write this article in *The New York Times Magazine*," I said, "What article?" And they said "Come on Laurie don't be so shy," I said "I don't know what you are talking about." They said, "I didn't know you knew anything about child abuse." I said, "I don't." And she shows me this article, and it has my name was spelled the same way.

Q: I saw that when I was calling you.

Beckelman: There is a women who has my name. Who wrote about child abuse and the elderly, and I never met her. I keep running across people. And the next day on the train, everybody had *The New York Times* and they said this is you. This is before computers. I said, I am telling you its not me and they go we know its you, you're just being humble. Because it's such a weird name, with the same spelling.

Q: It was so funny, I came across that and thought how did Laurie get to this?

Beckelman: I know, it's wild. But anyway, it was everyone was so engaged. Everyone. The only one who wasn't was Ed [Edward Irving] Koch. He could not get this thing about Grand Central.

Q: Why? What was he not getting?

Beckelman: Ask Kent sometime. I said the same thing once.

Q: I will, I will.

Beckelman: He said—he was not enthusiastic. He never ever—I never felt like he embraced it, but I was never close to Ed Koch. But I don't think he—he joined us at the press conference but he didn't go on the train. I understand why, but it was just—I don't know, he was kind of dismissive. That was my impression. Now, I could be so wrong. So ask Kent, please ask Kent.

Q: I will ask Kent.

Beckelman: Because Kent would know, and Gene would know because Gene was hired by, he was appointed by Koch.

Q: He was Koch. That's a good question for both of them.

Beckelman: But I give most of my credit to my courage and tenacity to Kent. Because—

Q: In what sense?

Beckelman: Kent was so bold. Nothing was going to stand in his way and he made me believe that. It brings tears to my eyes because—he never—he's still that way, you know what he is like.

Q: I do.

Beckelman: He has this impractical side but he also has this incredible dream and a vision. He gets back to the practical side but he circles everything. Then also you can imagine the team of Fred both of them being quite young. Fred was wild.

Q: I can't imagine. Laurie, I would love—to experience that. I can't imagine what that was like.

Beckelman: I was so lucky. I was so lucky to work with those two men. Margot was great too. Margot understood how to build an organization. Kent really was about—it was Fred's idea he called it being street fighters.

Q: Street fighters?

Beckelman: You know, MAS. You should see the old brochures—with the street fighting, because it was the Municipal Art Society that helped create the first City Planning Commission, the first zoning laws—

Q: HDC [Historic Districts Council]. All the commissions that came out of—and organizations.

Beckelman: Ruth's—what was Ruth's last name? She's been dead for a long time. She was elderly when I met her and Verna Small. These two women from the village who were really the—and Margot Gayle—saving Soho and the cast iron. I worked with all these people. I was twenty-one years, I just turned twenty-two, that's amazing.

Q: It is amazing, and what would the creation of Urban Center Books mean? That was such a legacy for such a long time.

Beckelman: Margot worked so hard on that but it was Joan's [Davidson] idea as I recall. I think it was Joan who wanted to create Urban Center Books. Am I wrong?

Q: I think she was right, but so many people have tried to credit you with Urban Center Books.

Beckelman: Me? No. I wouldn't credit me, I'd be glad to take the credit, but no. No, no, no.

Q: With making it happen.

Beckelman: Well probably. But I was probably more of—and I think Margot would agree to this too—I'm more diplomatic than, let's say Margot and others, so in creating all these things I was there smoothing everything out with the AIA and the Architectural League and the Parks Council and whatever. But I believe it was Margot who really wanted to see that happen and it was Joan's vision. It was really Joan Davidson's vision. That it also—the way it was created, how homey it was.

Q: Yes.

Beckelman: And I guess it was Jim [James] Polshek who designed it.

Q: Oh, that's right.

Beckelman: His office did the Urban Center. But it was Joan, it was Joan's baby. Even when you think about it even when you go to Joan's homes, how nurturing they are, the spaces for reading. That's what that space was like. I give full credit, one hundred percent credit to Joan and Margot

being the director to help create it. I am sure I was involved in creating it, I was much more involved with, also creating the first exhibitions that went into Urban Center.

Q: Which were the first exhibitions?

Beckelman: We did a—because I just realized it, Ivan Chermayeff designed them. We did a model of Grand Central, of the falling down and rebuilding it. I hired James Sanders, Margot's stepson, to help us with the first ones and I can't remember at the moment what they were. But it was about the future of the city.

Q: Wow I would love to see that.

Beckelman: And there's definitely files on that.

Q: Okay

Beckelman: And we were also opening it in time for the Democratic Convention. We got Philip Morris be our big sponsor.

Q: Wow, so MAS at this time seems like such the little engine that could, because you were getting huge sponsors, you had all this pro bono stuff, you did the landmarks trade and this was still with a staff of?

Beckelman: We that at point may have had a staff of about ten. Maybe less. We worked seven days a week. I mean we always worked day and night. I would go home ten o'clock at night and get there at nine. And we didn't go out for lots of lunches, We just worked.

Q: But loved it.

Beckelman: Loved it, I would do it all over again. If there was an organization that was going to be created now, as much as I love working with my clients, I would do this again.

Q: Maybe that should verify our conversation.

Beckelman: Maybe. Maybe it was also because I was so young. And so—Kent was such a visionary, he made you feel that—at one point I worked with him and I wanted a raise. I didn't even know if he liked the work I was doing. I had no idea, he never told me anything, I was always out. I was offered a job to go to work for a very famous movie director. Somebody said he was looking for an assistant. I went to see him—and remember at this time making \$5,500, and this man offered me—he said I want to hire you, I want to teach you everything, I am going to hire you for \$50,000 a year.

Q: Wow.

Beckelman: What? He said, you'll get up to fifty with a bonus of whatever. I remember calling Kent on a weekend and saying I have to talk to you. It was around Christmas, and he said is

everything alright. I said yes. He was living in Westchester, and he came in and he said “Are you and Randy alright?” He thought it was personal, thought I was breaking up with my husband. I said “No, it’s about work, Kent I have been offered another job and I don’t know if you want me to stay, I don’t know if you think I do a good job.” He said “Why would you say that?” I said “Because you never tell me anything.” He said “I love working with you, I am so happy.” I said “This man offered me a job for \$50,000 a year, and its not about the money, I really love what I am doing.” He said “Well what would it take?” I said, “I just want to know that I am doing what I am doing, so I would like a little raise.” You know what I got? A ten dollar raise a week. I think for a second I thought I was insane—he didn’t know what I was making of course.

Q: He really thought you were insane.

Beckelman: This man became even more famous, but anyway it didn’t matter.

Q: From Kent—from that whole experience—how do you feel his guidance shaped you as a leader both at Landmarks and then beyond? Professionally what did you take form working with Kent?

Beckelman: I think Kent and Margot, is that they both had such passion and they were relentless in their will to—because for both of them, it was not about them. For some leaders are truly narcissistic. Neither of them are, and they really believe in the cause, they were both cause oriented. I grew up in a family that was very cause oriented—my parents were involved up in

politics, you know very civic minded and very liberal. And he said you are here to give back and it's all about the contribution. I will never forget the first day there, of my job, at this point my parents were living on Long Island. My father was taking me to the train with a friend of mine who was starting at the Russell Sage Foundation, and he said "Remember, you are here, you are doing this because you believe in it. And I will always support you and help you as long as you believe in this, this is the cause you want to be involved in, this is what your life should be about."

Q: That's amazing Laurie.

Q: So there was Kent, who had been in advertising before, you knew that. He was one of the founders of the South Street Seaport. He sent me to this meeting once, I was his assistant, I was nobody. I was twenty-two years old and I was sitting in the board meeting for him. I couldn't believe it—the chances he gave me. I remember appearing before the Landmarks Commission, and I testified and somebody from the commission asked me a question and I said I'm sorry I'll have to go back to the director to get the answer, I don't have the answer, I'm not familiar enough. And he said "Young lady, I don't believe you because if you didn't have the answer, Mr. Barwick would never send you down here just to read a statement. I know you have much more information." I said I'm really sorry sir but I would feel much more comfortable speaking to the director.

Beckelman: Yes. What a statement though and a very telling statement about Kent.

Q: It was like I am throwing you in there you're going to sink or you're going to swim. But he had such confidence. He didn't even know me, he believed. So when somebody gives you—you have a responsibility when somebody gives you that. And I feel like I've given that to people. Kent always, and so did Margo, they always had time to meet with people. Brendon too, and other people—to give them advice, to help them with their careers. And so I always do that, always make time and try to help young people.

Anyway, but the Commission, what I found working in government, you have all these unsung heroes. You have so many people that work in government, and especially at the Landmarks Commission where I know first hand, that are so smart and work so hard and don't get any credit and that get a lot of abuse. So much abuse. No raises, no real time off, they're always wrong, they're never on time, they didn't look at this thoroughly, they had taken too much time, whatever.

Beckelman: What was that shift, from going from more the not-for-profit world where you could make thing happen, you were executive director of the Conservancy, so were able to shape the agenda of that organization—

Beckelman: It's going so quickly.

Q: —to going to the Commission, and the different dynamic there, of working for the government? What was your relationship with Dinkins and the administration?

Q: That's very interesting. I hope you are asking every chairman that because I am sure that there are very different ones. I really didn't know Mayor Dinkins before. I had met him as an advocate at the Conservancy, when I went to ask him as borough president to support something. But I didn't know him. But I knew Barbara Fife and I reported to Barbara Fife. She had been very active in the Parks Council, as a founder I believe I could be wrong, and she knew Doris Freedman very well—they lived in the same building, probably had children the same age.

Doris Freedman, who was also a mentor, she was president of the Municipal Art Society. At that time you know there weren't paid presidents, she was president of the board, Kent was the executive director, and she's continued as president—and Margot when I worked for Margot. So I knew Barbara and I reported to Barbara, and when I became the chairman's of the Landmarks Commission, there was a new government. There was no more, the [New York City] Board of Estimate. It was the first time that it moved, that the [New York City] Council had the power.

Q: Can you talk about that dynamic of coming in? I mean it's your first day on the job, was the day on the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District?

Beckelman: When we had the vote?

Q: When you had the vote. And the City and Suburban Houses. And the whole thought that we were losing the Board of Estimate we're moving to City Council must approve of designation.

Beckelman: I think the Board of Estimate had to approve both.

Q: Both of those.

Beckelman: That was the first, we weren't into the new government yet. So the Board of Estimate—I remember being there most of the night for—we did very well I recall on the Upper West Side. I thought we were going to lose City and Suburban because I remember going to see Freddy [Fernando] Ferrer and others and them not understanding. And because of [Peter J.] Kalikow being so powerful.

Q: What were the issues about City and Suburban that they weren't getting?

Beckelman: I think people truly didn't understand the planning significance of what City and Suburban meant, and it's form of—it's historical nature. They kept saying its not really architecture. I said it is architecture but it's more about the history of this type of housing in the city and it has to be preserved. We won. But remember they sued?

Q: Yes I do. But that marks a huge shift in some ways in the thinking of what preservation is and what historic buildings are.

Beckelman: But it wasn't my idea. In other words, think about this before, I was the advocate and worked very hard at the Conservancy. It was quite easy go from being the head of the Conservancy—which again, I didn't do alone. I had so many smart people that had been working

on it, who had been advocating, and articulating with incredible prose. And then going into government and having this great staff, who did this incredible report. I don't know if you've ever read the report.

Q: I haven't read the report.

Beckelman: It's phenomenal, and I can't remember who wrote it unfortunately. I remember thinking—but part of it was cut out as I recall. Part of City and Suburban was cut out, the whole site was not designated as I recall. You know who the advisor was for the community?

Q: No

Beckelman: Jennifer Raab.

Q: Oh really?

Beckelman: She was working at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, [Wharton & Garrison, LLP] at the time and she was their lawyer for the community to save it.

Q: Wow that's interesting, I didn't realize that.

Beckelman: I don't recall, I just recall that part of it was removed, extracted.

Q: I think it was the northernmost part.

Beckelman: And then it went to the courts and we won. We had a lot of lawsuits, I don't think Bob [Robert Tierney] has had that many lawsuits, has he? I don't think. I don't think Jennifer has either. Also maybe it was a different time, there was—remember [Thomas D.] Bowers, with St. Bart's [St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church]? There was so many—I was not at the commission at the time, it was before that. I'm just thinking of past decades [*crosstalk*].

Q: The theaters were—

Beckelman: The theaters.

Q: That's something I am curious about because you were involved with the theaters while you were on the Conservancy?

Beckelman: Yes.

Q: And it sounds like it wasn't just a preservation, but it was a zoning issue as well?

Beckelman: I also had Brenden Gill. At the time, another unbelievable mentor and someone I am still quite close to is Ada Louise Huxtable, was the editorial board of *The New York Times* and she was on the board of the Landmarks Conservancy.

Q: Oh, I didn't realize that.

Beckelman: So everything, even changing 42nd st. and all of that? I would talk to her constantly, and so did Brandon. I mean all these people were close enough, but I don't take any credit for this, because having Brenden Gill as the chairman and the advocate for the theaters, and then you have Joe [Joseph] Papp. You know how involved Joan was?

Q: No I didn't know she was involved in the theaters.

Beckelman: With saving the theaters, ask Joan about it sometime.

Q: I will. I didn't know she was involved in the theaters.

Beckelman: Very, very as was Roberta Gratz and Margot. Margot, that was her big thing, but it was also Kent's, Kent was, I think, chairman at the time wasn't he?

Q: He was during the whole theaters issue.

Beckelman: He did a brilliant job. He did a brilliant, brilliant job. He was unbelievable. He was phenomenal, just phenomenal. There was lots of other people I am sure I have forgotten. Well we lost the theaters, and that as a terrible disgrace. The idea of allowing [John] Portman [Jr.] to come in and destroy, I think—the lights and everything it's now working, but to lose those great historic theaters, it was a crime.

Q: How do you see the working of the LPC and City Planning, because it seems like there were zoning issues?

Beckelman: There was a lot of friction at the time.

Q: Yes, when you are at the Conservancy and when you were chair as well?

Beckelman: No. Not that much when I was chair that I can recall, people may remind me differently. I had different issues, I think that some of the challenges that I had, putting the theaters aside for a second—I was an advocate the whole time. We were in lawsuits and whatever. We were very aggressive as advocates related to having the theaters designated. That was a big deal. And we won.

I remember Gerry [Gerald] Schoenfeld tried to go to the Supreme Court. I used to have breakfast with him on a regular basis, and I remember saying, “You are wasting your time and money. The Supreme Court is never going to take this. You are so self-serving, and forget it. Forget it, it’s over.” And he lost. I mean to me—anyway, and look how well the theaters have been, and he said I keep restoring and I said, “Well why should you decide as God?” We’re all here for a period of time and they have to be preserved, separate. From you deciding “We’re great stewards and we know what we are doing so we don’t need you.” That’s what most people think. “Well don’t you see I’ve done a great job restoring my house so why do I need you to tell

me what to do”. I’m going to ensure that it’s there, and when you sell it to someone maybe they hate the house and they’re going to demolish it.

Q: Like the Woolworth Building, the story of how it took to designate this building.

Beckelman: I designated this.

Q: Can you talk about that? What were there challenges doing that? Because there seemed to be so much action around how are we going to get this civic designation. Beverly [Moss Spatt] started talking about it. Kent followed up and talked about. And then—

Beckelman: I think Tony [Anthony C.] Wood may have been very involved in trying to move this, and there was someone else, I can’t remember, who was trying to create this area as a historic district, which never occurred. We never had the power to do it or the influence. I’d love to know who else was involved but there was somebody else advocating from outside of the Commission.

Q: Oh, I should find out. What was it that you didn’t have the power or support, was it because it wasn’t a residential neighborhood?

Beckelman: Yes. I think it was always more difficult to do the commercial and I think also it wasn’t at a time that these buildings weren’t—I think there was a lot of vacancies. When I was there, the economy was not good; crime was high, reinvestment in the city and incentives and

anything urban was difficult, was challenging. Really challenging. But that was before me when Kent had been trying to do that as you said, Beverly. It was Kent then Beverly right?

Q: Beverly then Kent.

Beckelman: Beverly then Kent. Yes, that's right because I remember, I worked for Kent when Beverly was the chairman.

Q: Beverly came on in '70, I think around the time you started at MAS then?

Beckelman: A little after. That's right I was Kent's assistant, when Beverly—I was somebody's assistant. I remember Beverly going into the ladies room to put on her make up on before going to see Kent, it was so funny. That's right, it was before. Then he went to the state and then he went to the city. I'll never forget that job.

Q: So how did you get the Woolworth building designated finally?

Beckelman: Sheer determination. They really were fighting it. They did not agree. I think we just decided we were going to go for it. I don't remember all the details, but it was very difficult. We had the full board—I mean the commission wanted it. There were a number of—it was the Board of Estimate. I guess Andrew Stein was borough president. I remember going to talk to him and others. But the people who were running the Woolworth Building were very upset. They thought the exterior would be fine but not the interior. But we designated the interior.

I think also we had done some work beforehand. When I was head of the Conservancy, we gave the Woolworth Corporation our Chairman's Award for restoration of the building. So we had been working closely with them, so they also knew me.

Q: Ah, so you were cultivating this—

Beckelman: And they knew Kent, so I think it was one of the first things I did. No, I guess it wasn't.

I remember Helena Rosenhal being very, very ill and she was really determined about getting the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum] designated, and they had already won the lawsuit that they were going to build. I knew I was going to be able to stand in their way—we were fighting that so aggressively when I was at the Conservancy. Maneula Hoelterhoff, we had got her writing in *The Wall Street Journal* against the Gwathmey-Seigel addition, which was amazing, and Ada Louise Huxtable—oh my god. I remember fighting and fighting and—

One of the first things I did when I became chairman was to holding a hearing at the Guggenheim.

Q: And what affect did that have?

Beckelman: They [*unclear*]/[*laughter*] in a sense. He says, but Laurie we are storing everything, we're doing this, we're doing that. And I said, Tom [Thomas Krens]—and he said, “Don't you see that we are being great stewards?” I said, “I think you are but if we don't do this, there is no guarantee that you are going to continue that way, what is the guarantee?” We're not standing in the way of your new tower. It's not even a tower, we're not standing in your way. You can build, you have your permits. And we'll work closely with you, whatever. He was furious.

Q: But that was one of the first—

Beckelman: And then I went to work for him you know [*crosstalk*].

Q: But that—for Modernism that was such a huge designation.

Beckelman: That was one of the causes I wanted, very quietly, I knew I was going to hold hearings on Modernist buildings and designate as many as I could.

Q: Why were you so interested in Modernism?

Beckelman: I love—first of all I always loved Frank Lloyd Wright, we designated Frank Lloyd Wright's only Usonian home in Staten Island.

Q: I didn't know that.

Beckelman: Privately owned. We held hearings on the Olivetti Building in TWA [Trans World Airlines Terminal].

Q: That I am curious about, the TWA project, and just the—?

Beckelman: The Port Authority [of New York and New Jersey] was furious.

Q: Can you talk about that one?

Beckelman: That was one of the last things I did.

Q: The challenges of working with a federal—

Beckelman: Oh, it was impossible. They were impossible. I remember I think the feds was there but it was really more the Port Authority that manages it. And remember it was only advisory, because when you are publicly held, your Landmarks Commission is only advisory.

The other thing I also want to talk to you about afterwards, was when we designated—well I didn't designate I was an advocate at the Conservancy at the time—the Seagram Building. I was very involved in that. And then having to—I was the Landmarks Chairman, I think, when we actually designated the Seagram. Or was it designated before? I'm getting a little confused. But I remember having to go to see a city council member in Queens and he was against designating the Four Seasons [Restaurant].

Q: Why was that?

Beckelman: He said, “What are we going to designate the food?” I said no, Archie—what was his last name? It’s impossible. He was also a councilor for Jamaica, so the Jamaica Savings Bank—he overturned the designation on that which was outrageous.

Q: This is the Staten Island?

Beckelman: No, I didn’t mean Staten Island I meant Ellis Island. He was the—Archie, I’ll think of his last name in a minute. He overturned this because I think he had the close relationship with the slum landlord who owned that building and many others. She was a real slum landlord but he got a lot of money from her for his candidacy, election etc. Anyway, we can come back to those things.

Q: Four Seasons seems like a slam dunk. They wanted it.

Beckelman: I know. They wanted it but they didn’t own it at the time. Remember who owned it was the teachers. At that time, when the building was heard, it was sold to Teachers Insurance [Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America]. Phyllis Lambert was very involved in ensuring that--they were very concerned that the building would be designated, both the Seagram Building itself and the Four Seasons. I remember when I was at the Conservancy, the Bronfman lawyers, the Seagram lawyers were Simpson Thatcher Bartlett and the pro bono lawyers for the

Landmarks Conservancy was Simpson Thatcher. So we worked closely together and took easements on the Lippold sculptures in the Four Seasons to help ensure that this would stay the way it was.

So I was always involved, very, very interested Modernism. When I was head of the Conservancy, we honored Phyllis Lambert for her work in architecture, but it was all about Modernism and what she had done. So I knew, that was something I was *[unclear]*—TWA. We never finalized things by the time I left but Jennifer did a great job in moving that agenda forward and ensuring that TWA would stay in place. But it was hard, because they truly didn't—they kept saying you have no right. We're going to do this, we're going to do that. I kept saying, why would you do that when you have this? It was always about educating these people—it's going to cost too much money—and because they were using entirely public funds, they were going to have to *[unclear]* and do everything partially regulatory. Although again everything was advisory and they compromised a lot of spaces there, but I think over all it's gone pretty well. Do you?

Q: I do overall, I wish there was some more active use to it.

Beckelman: I wish there was a lot more active use to it.

Q: But aside, that's my one gripe about that space, I think it could be used for something.

Beckelman: I do too. Also the lounges are not used.

Q: Nothing is used right now, Jet Blue is waiting to come in, not come in.

Beckelman: Well they're in.

Q: Are they?

Beckelman: Jet Blue has been using, you know they built everything new.

Q: Yes but they're not using the old space at all.

Beckelman: I thought they were going to though.

Q: Me too. I thought that was part of the original plan once they put it back in.

Beckelman: That's what I thought, I think Frank Sanchis has been very involved in the Municipal Art Society trying to broker things—Peg had been involved. I don't know, I can't really recall right now.

I meant I want to talk to you about Ellis Island. That also was—many of the things that we started hearing and designating, and part of the reason that I also started looking in different boroughs, it was a way of engaging the new council. All of the sudden the council had so much more power.

Q: Yes, can you talk about that shift from Board of Estimate to City Council and what that meant?

Beckelman: So dramatic. So dramatic because all of the sudden you had nobody at large. Nobody had been elected at large. So, to me, every single individual council member had so much power. Let's assume I was a property owner, if I gave that council member \$10,000, that's a lot of money.

Q: It is a lot of money.

Beckelman: So here, they had to listen to that person, who didn't want their building. While before, talking about the five boroughs and a couple other people, it was much easier I think to working to get things through. Probably Kent wouldn't agree or other people who just worked with the Board of Estimate, but I found you had to do so much more due diligence with the individual members in the boroughs. And then to persuade the speaker, who at the time was Peter Vallone [Sr.]. Peg Green [*phonetic*] was working for him at the time, she was terrific in that position.

Q: How were you reaching out to the council members?

Beckelman: I would meet them all the time. I'd go see them all the time. Constantly.

Q: What were some of their concerns or issues, coming up?

Beckelman: Many of them didn't understand what preservation is. They saw it as a taking. That's not their word—as a real nuisance, getting in the way, costing their community more money. Many of them did not embrace it all. Look at Forest Hills. Forest Hills has never had a hearing.

Q: That's crazy.

Beckelman: It's outrageous. Outrageous.

Q: Do the residents of Forest Hills want—?

Beckelman: I think it's mixed. I don't know now. I don't know what's happening now. I thought it was very important in order to get the city—especially the different boroughs behind the Commission and understanding the great value to the city, as a whole bunch of a property values. I thought it was important to reach out and hold more hearings and designate more districts in the city as opposed to just Manhattan.

Then also going into—I also thought it was important, again because of David Dinkins being the first African American mayor, that we hold a hearing on buildings in Harlem, as well as Stark *[phonetic]* districts and to do it in Harlem. It was a nightmare. It was very difficult. People were exceptionally abusive. It was very distrustful. I worked very closely with the borough president,

Ruth Messinger, who was wonderful. I was trying to think about what was the best way to do it, I worked closely with Reverend [Calvin O.] Butts to figure out—he was very upset about holding a hearing on his church, and I finally persuaded him that I’d help him get money and work closely with him. So he let me do it. I spent so much time with him trying to get that done.

We finally agreed that we would hold the hearing, during the day, in Harlem at the state building on 125th street. We get there and—I didn’t do this on my own, I worked with I thought the community, community boards, borough president’s office, Calvin Butts’ office—we get there and we hold a hearing and we are a few minutes late starting and a person gets up and said “How dare you start late.” We’re only ten minutes late, fifteen minutes. “Why are we here, aren’t we good enough to be downtown at City Hall? We are working people, why are we holding a hearing during the day? We work up here.” There was so much hostility, it was quite shocking. I felt like I fell into a spider’s web. Then people rallied—they didn’t want the church designated. It was an Episcopal church. It was so hostile.

Q: But I always thought that Harlem felt neglected and wanted—

Beckelman: And so did I. “Why did you only start with these buildings, there is so much more, this is nothing. What you’re doing here, how dare you do it this way?” Everything was wrong.

Q: So how did you move forward after that first hearing?

Beckelman: I offended people. I cut people off, I offended people. And then we started designating. And it was a time where we designated buildings, we fought, there was a lot of cajoling. We relied very heavily on the Landmarks Conservancy and the Municipal Art Society. We really relied on so many different people. Virginia Fields was a council member. I became very close with her to help me through this. People, who we're always disappointing. Some people who were working on Morningside south, Morningside Heights. What was her name, Carolyn Kent? Do you remember her? I don't think she's around anymore.

Q: I think she is.

Beckelman: Good, I'm glad to hear that. Haven't seen her in years.

We were never doing enough, but I was able to handle that, as an advocate. Everybody was—we also I might misunderstand but I don't think the Commission designates now unless the owner approves? They work very closely with the owner. I didn't work that closely with the owner. It was like alright, we're going ahead and doing this.

Q: And was this all coming from one of the surveys? The Research Department's surveys of Harlem?

Beckelman: Yes

Q: How heavily did you rely on—?

Beckelman: I relied very heavily on them, I had Tony [Anthony] Robbins who had done the survey. He was still there so he was my weapon. We looked at that and we went beyond that, but we used the surveys—very closely we worked from the surveys. I didn't believe in reinventing the wheel, it was all there so why not use it?

Q: Absolutely.

Beckelman: Harlem was hard. It was also during the time, when you asked me about working for the mayor. When I was chairman of the Commission, the Audubon Ballroom?

Q: Oh yes. I didn't realize that was happening then. So what was that hearing like and that issue?

Beckelman: We didn't designate.

Q: I would have to look. Because it is designated now. Or am I wrong?

Beckelman: You're not. We'll look it up afterwards. I don't remember. We held a hearing. I was told not to hold a hearing.

Q: By the administration?

Beckelman: Did we hold a hearing on it? One second. We spent countless times up there. Ruth Messinger was very upset. Columbia—I think she was for the ballroom itself. I don't believe—it wasn't designated, a deal was made. Wait a minute. I have to look this up, so let's put this on hold. Let's come back to this, because I want to look it up. We did discuss it because I had a—the police were there. People had a sit in. Someone had a sit in. I will never forget, I was in the ladies room and a reporter from the *[New York] Daily News* comes in and said, "Laurie, I'm not sure you want to come out of the bathroom." I said why and she said, "There is a group of very hostile people and you may want to call the police. There is going to be a sit in because you are not designating." I said "We're going to talk about." "But you're not designating it. You're not making this a landmark." I said, "We don't know yet."

I remember having meetings with the deputy mayors and saying "Listen. This is too important. We have to hold a hearing, we have too." We talked about it and talked about it. I remember going up there and then finally it was a compromise that they would save the façade, they would save the ballroom, and Ruth Messinger gave money so they would create a memorial education thing around it. And then they built a building behind it. But as I recall at the time it wasn't a landmark, and the community was furious. The community was accusing me—this was during HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus]—the community was accusing the hospital of doing experiments and getting HIV into the community. This was coming out at the meeting that we had. I think we held—

Q: You held meetings up there at—?

Beckelman: No, we held a meeting at our offices, for the public. I have to go back into my notes, let me just think about it [*crosstalk*].

Q: This would be an interesting one to talk about.

Beckelman: I have it on file. And the other one, at length, when we have more time, we should talk about the African Burial Ground.

Q: I am very curious about that, especially since Dinkins got involved.

Beckelman: That's a very, very long story. I am going to take full credit for that.

Q: Good.

Beckelman: Because it was at a time when—I remember talking to them. We were involved because of the archeology we were required by the federal government, and they found all these bones. Howard University was going to do all these studies on there and interpretation and we weren't going to hold a hearing. And the more I learned about it, and Paul O'Dwyer had, in the 1960s, had educated people how important this was as the African Burial Ground. I remember saying to Barbara Fife, "We have to hold a hearing, we have to designate this." And she said, "Laurie, we can't, It's federal." She was out of town at Martha's Vineyard. I remember thinking I am going to resign or get fired, I can't do this. I have to hold hearing. They said, no the project's too far along, it's going to be this big federal building.

I called mayor Dinkins office and I said I have an emergency, I have to see you. I went to him and said—and by this point there was going to be federal hearing on this. I remember I went to go and testify. I said we have to hold a hearing on this. You're the first African American mayor. All of this is advisory. You have to demand that I hold a hearing. Barbara Fife has told me that I can't. I think either I am going to resign or you are going to fire me, but I have to hold a hearing. I want to do it against her will, but I think you are making the biggest mistake, and how could you not, as the first African American mayor, not tell the story of what happened here? It's tragic.

Q: And what was his response to this?

Beckelman: He said to me "I believe you. But one condition you're going to pick up the phone and call Barbara at Martha's Vineyard and tell her that you are doing this." "And then am I going to be fired?" He said, "You're not going to be fired." I said "She's going to be furious, I went over her head." I said, "I report to her, this is disrespectful, I know what I am doing, but I have to do it." He said, "I know that's why you are here." So I called her, I said "Barbara I am with the mayor, you're going to be furious, if you want to fire me or tell me to resign, fine. But I have just talked to the mayor about holding a hearing and he said yes. Now here is Mayor Dinkins." and I put him on the phone. I heard her say, you're wrong, you're making the biggest mistake, you can't do this. And he said I am sorry Barbara, I'm with Laurie. We're going to hold a press conference. He got off the phone and he said, "Now write the release. And in an hour come back and we'll hold the press conference."

Q: So what was that like? What was the press conference like, and just that experience?

Beckelman: It was amazing. He said, “I have decided, with the Landmarks Commission, I am requesting that they hold a hearing on this.” Whatever, I hadn’t written it, whoever—and I can’t remember who was at the Commission.

Q: Why was Barbara so opposed to the idea of—?

Beckelman: Because she felt that—there was already a design. The whole thing was going forward and that was a time—and also she was a great preservationist. She was not thwarting—not necessarily wanted to thwart the commission, she was so supportive on everything. I loved working for her. I still stay in touch with her.

There was no development going on anywhere. There was so many problems with Dinkins being anti- this, problems in communities, and here was an opportunity the federal government was building. We were in a terrible economic decline, I understood. But I said Barbara that’s all is going to take, we are not even stopping. Well we are stopping them for a little while what they were doing. We were going to have come up with policies with the federal government. The federal government was furious. Oh my god, they were constantly screaming at me, but I couldn’t care less, I knew I had the law behind me and everybody else. And the hearings were the most dramatic experience I’ve ever had and the most abusive.

Q: Why?

Beckelman: People flew in from all over the world to testify.

Q: What types of people? Experts in X, Y, and Z? Or just interested parties?

Beckelman: They were interested parties that had expertise, not necessarily academic, but people whose families were slaves. People who were from the kingdom of wherever. And they walked in with their pins and their jewels and walking sticks. At the hearings they would—and they held them at City Hall in the Board of Estimate Chambers—they would get up and talk about being enslaved, and here we are most of us white, continuing that enslavement, and they were being treated like Jews from the Holocaust. They talked about their ancestors coming over in slave ships. It was so powerful. Someone should actually transcribe everything that went on, it was amazing.

And at one point, actually now in the schools, when I was at the Tweed Courthouse once, I was walking through and they were teaching this. I said “You know, this is a landmark.” They didn’t even know it was a landmark and they were teaching it. “This Burial Ground is a landmark.” They weren’t teaching it. I remember calling the Commission—I remember calling Bob Tierney, and saying, you have got to get whatever deputy mayor, is in charge of education, Dennis whatever his name is, Walcott, to make sure this is in the curriculum.

Q: For that designation was it just the Burial Ground or did the, was it for an area—?

Beckelman: We did a historic district. But it was the Burial Ground. It was a district, but the whole thing was a burial ground.

Q: Oh, the area that the district covered, the entire thing was the burial—

Beckelman: Right.

Q: And just that one part was excavated.

Beckelman: Right, isn't that amazing?

Q: I didn't realize. It is such an amazing story.

Beckelman: It's more in your mind what the Burial Ground really is now. But it told the story also of riots and everything else that happened during that time.

Q: To know that's its more than that little area is so powerful.

Beckelman: I know. People's testimony was—to me that is something that should be part of the oral history, that even when you walk in there and you start hearing peoples voices of what they heard, what happened to their ancestors. Before that it was a place where they kept British war

criminals. It was a place where they were kept as prisoners and tortured and malnourished. Oh my god, so much went on there.

Q: And how—that then put an international perspective on the work being done in New York preservation wise. What was that like? You had kind of gotten the international preservation perspective from Grand Central and then this being a totally different case, and in some ways emotional in that it's resonating with slavery and all this. What was that experience like?

Beckelman: Say that again? I'm sorry, say that again?

Q: Just the press, and the international pressures in some ways, of everyone watching New York, what's going to happen. All these former ancestors of slaves, everything like that, just watching and following this case—what was that like and did you realize how big it was at the time?

Beckelman: No I didn't realize how big it was at the time. The Schomburg Center [for Research in Black Culture] was very involved. They creating new commissions and people. I would go, there were all these meeting about creating this new—what were we going to do with the materials, and the hostility of the meetings up in Harlem.

Q: Oh what you were going to create with the material with the remains uncovered or for interpretation and education? Were they concerned about—?

Beckelman: Everything. There was so much paranoia about what was going to be preserved, how was it going to be preserved, who was going to be on the committee, what was the future, how was this going to be public—[unclear] to the public.

Q: You had such a background from MAS, from doing exhibitions, and really communicating, marketing. Did you feel you were able to do that at the Commission as well? Either have exhibitions or figuring out ways—?

Beckelman: Yes. But not with the African Burial Ground, where I felt entirely helpless and hopeless with being white. There was no way that I was going to be accepted. There was no way that I would have that experience. It was so interesting when I went to work for Public Theater and with George Wolf, who was Black, and who did *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, which is the history of Black evolution in America. It was phenomenal to go from that knowing so much into this theatrical world.

But we did a lot of exhibitions at the Commission. We did it on Modernism and we did it in the old Federal Hall. We did a big exhibition there of unsung architects. Like people—even at SOM [Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill LLP], a woman who did a lot of projects, Nadine someone, nobody even knew—I think it was Nadine. It's actually the part—where the architect in charge, where everyone else got credit. Tracie was fabulous, Tracie Rozhon was fabulous.

Q: She was the one who's doing most of the—

Beckelman: *[crosstalk]* that stuff yes. I'm sure I was criticized for doing things outside, but to me it was more about educating people to what we were doing. We also did an open exhibition on landmarks that weren't designated.

Q: Why weren't they designated?

Beckelman: They had lots of different reasons, probably politics and other things. They hadn't gotten around to yet. We did an exhibition on that. We had a lot of good publicity on that too.

Q: That's an interesting topic, was that in some ways controversial?

Beckelman: Very, yes. I thought it was important to keep it controversial. You know making people that we were there for them. There were frustrations too in that, I know I wanted to designate the McCarren [Park] Pool, we did a survey on all the pools.

Q: Oh cool. I didn't realize that. Were any designated?

Beckelman: I think we finally started hearing them. Orchard Beach and others. We did a lot but every commission, when you talk to any chairman, they all did a lot.

Q: Jackson Heights seems to be one of the cases where you talking about neighborhoods that were unrecognized before *[crosstalk]*.

Beckelman: That were unrecognized. That was a great one.

Q: How did you find interest in Jackson Heights? What put this on the map for you?

Beckelman: Well we hadn't done very much in Queens. So I thought that would be—and once I started hearing about it from the staff. The staff was so smart and coincidentally a few of the staff lived in Jackson Heights, so they knew it well. We'd go out and walk the streets and then the commissioners talked to them quietly. They said they'd be interested so I took the commissioners out there. We held a hearing out there.

Q: Oh you held a hearing in Jackson Heights?

Beckelman: Yes.

Q: Was there opposition to the Jackson Heights—?

Beckelman: A little but I can't remember. It was really good, really fun. I think that was a great success story.

Q: In what sense? What was the take away from Jackson Heights?

Beckelman: I think it was so intact. I think the biggest concerns was what was going to happening the commercial streets. I think we said we'll work out guidelines with you, we're

going to make sure that things through the system quickly. Now whether it did or not I don't know.

Q: Laurie, that's one things that I am curious about. It seems like while you were chair, there were a lot of guidelines that were set up for Madison Avenue and all of that. What impact did that—?

Beckelman: Madison Avenue was before me.

Q: Or Carnegie Hill?

Beckelman: We did do some work, actually we did do Madison Avenue, I'm sorry we did Madison Avenue. A lot of this came out of the reports. In other words what I tried to do is, because I think there were some really good ideas in a lot of the recommendations, so I would constantly go back to them and say, alright what is it can we do to expedite the process? What is it that is needed in some of these commercial areas?

And because the economy really was not good, I kept thinking there has to be ways to ensure that we—also there was a big concern, constantly, that we were going to be devoured by another agency. That we were going to be put under the umbrella of City Planning. People always had this idea that Landmarks didn't have to be on its own. And so I had this idea at the time, that if we had our own building, we would be preserved. Nobody would touch us.

I persuaded Ken [Kenneth J.] Knuckles who was head of—he’s now Deputy Commissioner, I think, of City Planning—and I persuaded him to give us the First Police Precinct. And I persuaded City Hall that they should do that. And I did. I think that was part of the reason why we were able to stay a separate agency. I really believe that by having our own building. I could be wrong and this is my own fantasy.

Q: No, no.

Beckelman: Then unfortunately as you know we lost it. I’ll never forget I became friends with Bill [William J.] Bratton and Bill was commissioner under Guiliani, and he said “I can’t believe you have this building.” Better times, anyway. I mean that was amazing getting that building. The whole idea of—there were so many different threats. Our budgets were being cut, we had to cut back on staff constantly. I relied heavily on the [New York] Landmarks [Preservation] Foundation. We raised money constantly to do surveys and other work for the commission.

Q: Were you relying on the Landmarks Conservancy in some ways as well? For easements and programs like that?

Beckelman: Yes.

Q: What was the relationship?

Beckelman: It was a very good relationship, very, very close with the Conservancy and with the Municipal Art Society. Both for advocacy—it was really a different time. I don't know if it was relationships or just timing. I don't know, it seems that over the years it's—I have really tried to stay separate from the Commission, but there seems to be less and less of a joint, close relationship. Do you agree?

Q: I definitely agree. Reading some for these old things, and seeing how people work together and knew one another, and were fighting for the same causes. And as you say, going about it with different strategies, whether it's regulation or side conversation, thing's like that, it was a different landscape. I think it's very fractured.

Beckelman: I think it's very fractured and I am saddened by it. We worked so hard. Everybody else out there with the enemies, in a way, were they were going to be the ones that you're going to have the most combative relationships with. To have a strong community working together was so important, that we be seen as a well oil machined together, and that we were as an alliance. I think that's then—that seems to not be the way anymore. I don't know where the Conservancy and Municipal Art Society are either. I think they work on quite different things now. Quite different, that's my feeling. I sit on the advisory board of the Landmarks Conservancy but I'm not involved at all. The Municipal Art Society I'm very involved with, and they don't really get involved in preservation—I mean they do some, I don't mean they don't at all, of course they do, but not the same way.

Q: What do you think that it is about the landscape that's changed? Do you think in some ways the Commission has become more political, where before you described you were coming on and you realized that the chair had to be a judge. That you'd come from advocacy and you were there to be a judge, and that that was the role of the Commission to kind of hear everyone. Do you think that landscape has shifted in same way?

Beckelman: Yes. Because it's my understanding—I'm going to be obviously on audio but I'd like you to check this out talking to the next chairman. As I recall many of the chairmen after me, the designations were more hesitant if the owner didn't want the designation. I think that many of them became very persuasive at working out understandings. Jennifer is a very persuasive advocate and I give her tremendous credit for preserving a lot of the buildings in Lower Manhattan. I started it. It really started under Kent who really wanted to get this done. But I had an opportunity to do more education, even when I worked—I worked for Giuliani for about ten months. Starting it, we held hearings on Stone Street, but it was Jennifer who worked with Carl Weisbrod and others, in actually getting the monies. Look at Stone Street now, it's the greatest success story. Jennifer did it. I held the hearing, I was—but she was the one that took it and ran with it. Then persuaded City Hall to do it too.

A lot of people are very critical of Jennifer for not being an advocate. She did one damn good job I think. I really think she was a phenomenal chairman. She had a very tough—a very different City Hall than I did, but I also always felt that I was going to—there was certain things that I would have liked to have done differently. I felt I was very respected by City Hall, and the deputy mayor and I was left alone to do—I mean they knew what my agenda was, what my

policies were. And the Commission—I lost on certain things with the Commission. There were certain things that I'd say to the Commission. I let everybody speak, and I was going to win, and I was going to lose, this is a democracy. If I felt very strong, everyone knew it. But overall I felt that you had to—I had a great staff, and I was not going to let the staff tell me what to do.

Q: That's something I am curious about, your relationship, because it seems like the chair, you're the public voice of the Commission and setting the agenda. You've got the relationship with the administration, and then with the staff itself. I know you came on and Gene had hired more people, and then budget cuts, it sounds like there had to be a shift [*crosstalk*]. So what was your relationship with the staff and in particular with the preservation department and the research department. How did you set your internal agenda from a staffing point?

Beckelman: Well first of all I had Dorothy who was absolutely phenomenal as an advisor. I'm sure I frustrated her to no end, because I wanted to move things quickly and was pretty dismissive of certain things, but I also knew her council was so wise.

Q: Dismissive of what types of things?

Beckelman: Well you know, "Well, we have to study this more," and I said "No we studied enough, I'm moving it forward." "No, Laurie, I think we have to be more thoughtful, we have to be careful of this—" I said Fine, if there is going to be a lawsuit, there is going to be a lawsuit, let's just do it. I would sometimes call lawyers from outside that are my friends and that upset her. I know it upset her a lot.

Q: You would call them for outside advice?

Beckelman: [*Crosstalk*]. I'd say, "Listen. Dorothy is here giving me the greatest advice but she's very conservative. I want to know if I do this am I going to be—I don't want to go to jail."

That's what I said make sure I don't go to jail. Then I'd go back to Dorothy and she was very upset—and she knew these people well—"Will you talk to Dorothy" and they did. She was very upset that I didn't only rely on her. That's not who I am.

Q: What do you think that gained, how did the Commission gain by—?

Beckelman: I think we gained a lot. We took more risks because of that. Dorothy was upset, I know that. I adored her, I worshipped her, but I'm more like—I'm an aggressive advocate and I was going to make sure that we were going to get things done. I had agreed to make some changes.

Q: Were there any specific cases that you can think of that you—?

Beckelman: Not off hand but I will think about. I'll think about it, definitely.

Q: That'd be interesting.

Beckelman: I also brought in as my executive director, Merin [Elizabeth] Urban. Merin had been an associate for Simpson Thacher and she was really smart. She knew Dorothy well, but she also knew the law. I had all these other people helping me. I think I'm good at empowering people—I'm not the smartest person in the room, I know that—but I also wanted the smartest people around me, to give me the best advice. I also remained very close with Kent. I was constantly talking to him about things.

Q: About what it's like being chair and how you manage?

Beckelman: About ideas and different things. No, not manage, but ideas about moving things forward and what he'd think. Taking chances on certain things. He was a great advisor.

Q: What was it like having him at MAS then? To kind of have that support from the advocacy *[crosstalk]*.

Beckelman: It was fabulous, I knew I had one hundred percent support. Not that he was going to agree on everything, and there were things he didn't. Specifics I can't remember right now, but I will. But I knew he was always there for me.

Q: Because Laurie that to me seems like one of the biggest differences to me now with the Commission, is that the Commission doesn't have the support of a lot of the advocacy organizations. I am wondering what that support—?

Beckelman: I know, I had the support of Historic Districts, I had the support of everybody.

Q: And what did that mean, what difference did that make?

Beckelman: It meant everything. That's why I felt I could do anything. I think the commissioners felt that way too. The commissioners played a real role. I got that commission really engaged. I know that and that's not the way it is anymore. I don't know—that's what I was told. I don't go to hearings, I can't tell you what it's like, but I've been told that it's very, very different. Those commissioners worked hard.

Q: What is the make up of the commission? Because I read somewhere that David Dinkins wanted a new mosaic of commissioner, from the time he arrived on the scene he wanted a new eleven person body.

Beckelman: Oh I don't remember that, was that in an article?

Q: I can email it to you.

Beckelman: Would you, I love it if you would.

Q: I will email you that one, I think it was David Dunlop's piece announcing your soon to be arrival as LPC chair.

Beckelman: I guess I was the second women, Beverly had been the one before. I hadn't thought about it. I can't remember what number I was.

Q: I couldn't tell, five?

Beckelman: Five? Maybe six?

Q: How did you change the make up of the Commission?

Beckelman: Kent was very helpful to me and so was Margot because Kent introduced me to Steven Raphael [*phonetic*]. That was his idea. He knew him well and he thought he would be very good as an advisor and really smart. He was so helpful to me. He was one of my weapons.

Q: Steven? How was he—?

Beckelman: He is one of the smartest people I know. He's a real estate attorney, who also developed historic properties in Brooklyn. I give him the credit for helping me create the strategy for holding hearings and designating Elis Island. He was brilliant.

Q: Elis Island is one we'll definitely have to come back to.

Beckelman: But not today, because that's a long talk. We should set up another meeting today for the next one, do it sooner than later, do you think so?

Q: Yes, because once this is fresh we can just keep going with it.

Beckelman: Exactly, this is fun. I'd love to be doing that again, that would be fun. I don't know what'd I designate. Bob's designated a lot, a lot of districts.

Q: Do you think Bob sometimes gets an unfair—?

Beckelman: Yes, I do.

Q: How has the press changed? In terms of being pro-preservation, anti-preservation since you were there?

Beckelman: You don't have a brilliant mind like Ada Louise Huxtable in the pulpit of the papers.

Q: What difference do you think that makes in the mind of everyday New Yorkers?

Beckelman: I don't think it makes any difference in any everyday New Yorkers at all, and she didn't necessarily only write about preservation but she wrote about the city in a different way.

But Manuela Hoelterhoff did too when she was at *The Journal*. She didn't just write about preservation. She understood design, architecture, and just how the city worked. You had

Brendon Gill writing about things in *The New Yorker* that Paul doesn't. Because David

Remnick—that's not a priority. People have changed and their interests have changed. I think

there's a way of getting it back. I don't know how but there has to be. Someone like Martin Filler, even Joe Giamanini [*phonetic*] and others who were writing and wrote about these things. I don't think—I think Bob is a very thoughtful man, but he's not an advocate. I like publicity, I worked with someone—you know Tracie loved publicity. She got it, worked with the press. It wasn't for me it was for what we were doing. It was jazzy and it was fun being out there in public.

Q: How were you able to keep the Commission in the press? Did you have relationships with various authors, writers, journalists?

Beckelman: Yes, we did lots of public things. We also held this—we held, at Gracie Mansion or City Hall we held—we had annual awards. The mayor came. Even when I was sworn in I had a party for like five hundred people.

Q: Where was that?

Beckelman: At City Hall. It was open to the public. And I invited people, I paid for it.

Q: Who's idea was that?

Beckelman: Mine. It was just a way of saying this is a different time. We're going to do something different.

Q: What was the message you hoped to get across? An openness?

Beckelman: Yes. We were open before, David Todd was open. It was new. I wanted to do it—this is a new mayor. It was really new, David Dinkins, first Black mayor. It was really an interesting time. Just a different time I guess. And I was young, so it was—how old was I? Thirty-nine, maybe thirty-eight? I was young, or younger.

You were saying—you asked me about the press and the Commission, Bob. I think Bob gets a bad rap because he has done a lot. But I also think that, and I don't want to talk about this now, but 2 Columbus Circle because I wasn't the commissioner and we want to focus on the Commission if you don't mind?

Q: No.

Beckelman: I appreciate that *[laughter]*. It was kind of a nightmare. But you have to balance everything. Here you have, and I think at the time, Bob has had—think about how much rezoning going on, and the Bloomberg administration attempting to get the Olympics. The economy was booming, in some ways people wanting to build new buildings, already from Guiliani, they were building. I guess there was a downturn under Bloomberg, think about after 9/11. The economy hasn't been great since then, at all. So here you are trying to create incentives for people to build, and you have a deputy mayor that is also encouraging new big development, from stadiums to other things. And there's Bob and the Commission trying to save things.

Oh I know you were asking about the make up of the Commission.

Q: Yes.

Beckelman: Sorry. I got Vicki Match Suna. There was Margot Wellington who we worked with and talked with someone [*unclear*]. Mayor—through the City Hall they knew a couple of people that I didn't know. The African American people that I didn't know, that were fabulous.

Q: So then it was a balance of the administration making some recommendations and then you—

Beckelman: But not saying that I had to do it. Never telling me I had to do it. I had the final say. I had outside people that helped me. Kent was really helpful, and other people I would say what do you think of this, can we find out about this person. I would talk to other groups.

Q: What was your goal when looking for new people? What were you really—?

Beckelman: I wanted people that were smart enough, that really understood the city overall. That were not going to off the reservation and have their entirely different agenda. Definitely they had their own point of view but they understood that we would be strongest if we worked together as a whole,

Q: How would you sum up your agenda in a nutshell?

Beckelman: That when I interviewed people I said, what I really want to do is my goal is to create new guidelines, be as transparent as possible, balance the real estate community along with the preservation community, go into neighborhoods that we haven't looked at before and move our agenda through their meeting, hold hearings and then designate as quickly as we possibly can knowing that we have a great staff, but it's limited. I said if you can buy into that then I want you on the Commission, if you can't and you really think we should be doing other things then you're the wrong people. I want to go into Harlem, which is not easy, and I want to go into here and here, and that's what I want to do. Does that interest you? I'm most interested in modernism too, and what are you interested in? That's what I would do.

Q: So you were really the agenda setter, it wasn't the administration—

Beckelman: No it wasn't the administration.

Q: —it was you setting the agenda. I'd be curious and maybe now is not the time to start going into it, but how successful you feel you were with the agenda you laid out for yourself?

Beckelman: I think I was very successful. I think we as the Commission were successful.

Q: What about the idea of transparency? What did you mean by transparency?

Beckelman: You are required to do everything as open as possible, I really do mean openly. The only thing we didn't, which we weren't at the time criticized for but later on Bob was, and I

think they have changed their policies now, but we had—and the Commission was, when I got there, I realized, here we were saying they weren't transparent, or whatever. What I learned was a lot of the things that I wanted to do they were already doing.

Q: Such as?

Beckelman: Transparency, they were open. They were moving things quickly, but whatever it was the Commission was not communicating it as such.

Q: Can you give *[crosstalk]*—

Beckelman: I didn't make that many changes. I really didn't.

Q: But you changed the messaging then. You changed the way the public—

Beckelman: Public communications and relations, that's what it was. Some of the staff, when we had to lay people off, I know there are certain people in the staff that don't even talk to me when they walk past me. They're very dismissive. They're angry with me over staff changes. It was hard, it was very difficult having to lay people off, it was horrible.

Q: When doing that, were you more interested in keeping research, was it more about the preservation? Because the Upper West Side Central Park West Side—two thousand buildings or something? So then the whole idea of what does this mean for regulation and staff time.

Beckelman: I didn't really have to know whether to do preservation or—I relied on Dorothy and the other people in the—to tell me, what do you think? I mean you were the ones who have been working in the trenches all these years. I knew—I don't have the right to say, alright I'm going to do this. We work together on this I never did that alone, I didn't think that was fair at all. At all. But it was so painful.

I also remember I held a—I went to the Fund for the City of New York and asked them—did a couple of retreats with the commission staff because I felt that—I am not saying the staff would agree with me—but I felt that many of the people that were in the clerical appointments were African American and I'd watch people walk in and never say hello. It's like we were two different classes. I decided I thought it was important to get people together to be the same. We all played a role. Maybe it was a little successful for a while I don't know if it lasted, but I tried but I don't know if it worked. I tried to get people to further engaged with each other. I loved the Commission, I am sure Bob now likes his commission now too.

One person on the Commission that I put on—I still adore him and I thought he would be refreshing and because I was interested in Modernism he'd be really good—I asked Ulrich Franzen to be on the Commission. I talked to him about him, and he was really excited about being on the Commission. He had the most incredible eye for lighting and other things, but he didn't suffer fools very well, and this is not fair but some of the architects that came before the Commission weren't at his level. He was so rude and dismissive of that. It was horrible and most of the time he was right, but you don't win friends that way. You have to be a little more

respectful, and he didn't know how to be. One day he said to me "I don't think I am being helpful to you." "I don't think you are either." He said, "I think I should go off the Commission." I said, "What do you want?" He said "I don't think I am doing a good job." And he said, "I don't think I am being helpful to you, I don't think I'm being fair." He was so good though. I said "Can you control it?" He couldn't do it. He was fabulous.

Q: What were the public hearings like at that time? Because I read about Kent's that went on until two or three in the morning—

Beckelman: That was something I changed, we never did, a couple of them went on until late. I really would say to people you really do have two minutes, I am going to count, this is going to stop by this. I made sure the staff also moved things fast. We ran a very tight ship, very, very tight.

Q: So that was, in some ways it was efficiency of how you can get things done with the—?

Beckelman: *[Laughs]* That's not Kent. Kent still isn't like that. You work with him right? What's changed? I adore Kent I wish I had more patience like Kent does. I'm not a patient person.

Q: I don't believe that.

Beckelman: I am in some things, but not really. But I also felt at a time that I had a window of opportunity to make an impact and then I knew it would be over. I knew that I'd have maybe four years or eight years, if I stayed on I didn't know I thought maybe Mayor Dinkins would be reelected and I would be able to stay on. Or when Guiliani was elected and I was asked to stay on, I realized it was going to be a very different time and I had to leave. We'll talk about that another time. I had a great relationship with Fran Rider [*phonetic*], and had a great relationship, finally with the administration.

Q: With Dinkins?

Beckelman: With Dinkins and then Guiliani. But I made—I was determined to get close to the Guiliani administration while I was there to ensure that I wasn't going to be steamrolled.

Q: I'd be curious to hear about that.

Beckelman: A very different administration.

Q: And the Dinkins. One of the issues I am curious about is Dvorak House. Because that seemed to be such a—and in reading about it, anti-preservation, administrative platform that he took at that moment?

Beckelman: The mayor?

Q: The mayor.

Beckelman: Well he was not for saving it because of the AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome]—and I remember saying to him I am holding a hearing. It was overturned in the Council.

Q: Would you be willing to talk about that for the record? Because I think that's just such a fascinating case.

Beckelman: Definitely, of course. That was—I remember I got Barb Underbilt, [*phonetic*] pro bono to help me figure out a way to save the building and use it for an HIV center. The people at the Beth Israel, were—they had blinders on. You know when the Mapplethorpe Foundation gave them all that money?

Q: I didn't know that.

Beckelman: To build a new center. I felt so strongly that this building could—I felt that even if we were going to lose—it was so important that we as the Commission go down fighting until the end of that. That house was so important to what [Antonin] Dvorak wrote, the *New World Symphony* [*Symphony No. 9*], critical to what he did, the story had to be told. If we were going to go down, everybody was going to know about it. Unfortunately we lost. We never could convince the hospital that they could save the building and still build what they wanted to with the number of beds. They thought we were so elitist and so blinded by our egotism of wanting to

save this building for all the wrong reasons and how selfish we were in not understanding what happens with people that are sick and have AIDS. They—the tax was so cruel.

Q: So did it come down more again, the PR campaign that they waged against the Commission?

Beckelman: I think so, but we had to do it. I am not sure people would do that now. That's what I think. When you asked me what's the difference now, in that. We were willing as a commission to take that stand, and we had everybody with us, that I thought that was important. And I knew there was an excellent chance I would be turned down. We designated it, we fought like hell in the Council, and we lost.

Q: What was that loss like in some ways—because Dinkins could have vetoed City Council.

Beckelman: But he didn't. I didn't know that he wasn't going to do it. I didn't know going in that that was going to be it. I thought I could persuade the council, I really thought I could. We worked hard, everybody, we had lots of people on the outside. But that was when we were together as a community.

Q: That gives me the chills.

Beckelman: I know. It's very different now, isn't it? It was a great group of people that also hadn't been involved—when you think also as an ethnic group, the Czechs. Then Bohemian Hall we designated—it as the whole *[unclear]* thing of the Czech, a whole connection to Dvorak.

Q: Its such an interesting thing about preservation as well, because you were already moving towards City and Suburban, which started before you but seems like your intro into it, so it seems that you were there at the moment where people—Kent was chair with his outside the box thinking about issues, but—

Beckelman: That's where I really got it, from Kent. I didn't get it from me. I can't take credit for that out of the box. That's where I learned. I was really young and he influenced me and Margot really influenced me too. Advocacy and—Margot really understood what an urban center was, truly understood that. She worked so hard, oh my god, she worked late at night every night.

Q: We'll have to interview her.

Beckelman: You have to interview her. She has to be able to tell that story and I think it's being forgotten. Especially that Municipal Art Society is no longer having an Urban Center in that sense. That's why the bookstore is so important to open again and do whatever.

I think we are going to have to stop.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 2

Interviewee: Laurie Beckelman

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Liz McEnaney

Date: 2011

Q: Last time, I know we covered a lot of the ground of MAS, your time at the Conversancy, and then how you got appointed to Landmarks chair. I thought this time, especially if we only have an hour, if we wanted to kind of spend it diving in on more the day-to-day operations of the LPC and what it was like from that standpoint. So Gene [Norman] was Chair before you, and he really—

Beckelman: David [F.M.] Todd was.

Q: Oh David was, that's right.

Beckelman: So between Gene and David. Between Gene and me is David.

Q: That's right.

Beckelman: And David was not there for a long period of time, as I recall.

Q: I think you're right, less than a year.

Beckelman: Oh I don't remember that.

Q: Maybe not.

Beckelman: Maybe about a year or so, but I could be wrong, he'll know.

Q: I wondering, if just when you arrived, if you could talk about what the organization of the staff was, in terms of resources allocated to preservation versus research, and then how you moved forward, kind of what you saw as needing to be done.

Beckelman: Well I must say that, obviously because I'd been so fully integrated in the preservation community, and in advocacy for so long, I felt very comfortable immediately working with the staff. But what I guess I also didn't understand that, as close as we may have been there—I was at the Municipal Art Society and the Landmarks Conservancy after that—how impressive the staff really is. And how efficient and thorough most of the people were that were working there. I really give credit to the people that were managing at the time. It was Joan [R.] Olshansky, for when I was there. She was in place—I didn't change that. At the time she—I guess, what was she? Chief of Staff? I can't remember what her title was at the time. Before that it was Lenore Norman, and they were really efficient. They worked very, very closely with Dorothy Miner.

At the same time, when I was there, Marjorie Pearson was head of preservation and Alex Herrera was in charge—sorry, Marjorie was research, Alex was preservation. I also remember Tony [Anthony] Robins leading a very effective position on research. We really had a core group of

people that I think were doing exceptionally well. And then I brought in Merin Urban, who became my chief of staff, who was a lawyer, who was an association at Simpson Thacher Bartlett. And she was an attorney who really cared about preservation and I really relied on her to manage the staff.

Q: Was she advising in a legal capacity as well? I know that you had Dorothy, but was she—?

Beckelman: Not really. She sat in our meetings whatever, but I really relied on Dorothy for that. I think at times—such respect for Dorothy—we didn't always agree on everything. She had the most extraordinary mind I think of anybody I've ever met in the preservation community. And I know you knew her well. Dorothy was a much more cautious person than I am, and I think at times I frustrated her because I wanted to move things quickly and I didn't always agree with her final outcome, because it wasn't legal, it was what she felt the policy should be. To me that was—I was willing to listen to her, but at the end I felt that I was going to make that decision.

Q: What, do you have an example of something where you felt, I don't want to say less cautious, but you felt you had to move on this?

Beckelman: I think there were things related to violations. I felt that we, you know she was very concerned about changing policy, because then we would open—and I understood why she was saying these things, that it would open up things with the Real Estate Board, or the religious properties community, etc. We had to be cautious because we were under attack so much of the time, and she was right to feel this way, or to be concerned about some of the issues. But when I

was there I was very interested and realized that penalizing and really going after with fines. She was not in favor of it at first, and so I talked to people outside to help me and I think at times she was upset. I had Jack Kerr and Donald Oresman and other lawyers that had great respect for Dorothy and weren't going to do anything, let's say against her. But I was looking for other legal advice.

Q: Why were you so interested, in fact I know came and there was the '90s national recession—

Beckelman: I wasn't even thinking about the money,

Q: The city economically was not so strong.

Beckelman: It wasn't about the money. It was more about if you got people, people rased people and got the [New York City] Sheriff's Office involved, then maybe eventually it could be criminal. I mean I was furious, why is it okay for these people, who have these properties, to just dismiss the Landmarks Commission? And I figured if you went after people, and you had the Sheriff behind you, they'd have to listen to us. And at the same time ensure that you just stop all work, so it wasn't about the money, it was more about you're going to have respect for your landmark. This is the law and you're going to be respected, and if not I'm going to get the Sheriff after you.

Q: Was this something you had noticed from working at the Conservancy and seeing these egregious violations or lack of—?

Beckelman: No, I think it happened more when I was at the Landmarks Commission, and I'd sit at the Landmarks hearings. People would come and I would say, "Well why do you do that?" "Well I really couldn't wait". "Excuse me? You couldn't wait? I don't understand that". I remember saying, "Well then you are going to wait to get your permits, and you're not going to do it". So I think it really started, for me, what we first finally went after then was on Canal Street, there were so many violations. That's how we finally got the Sheriff involved. I have no idea what finally happened years later, but while I was there we got a lot of press on it and I can't—I think it was more of a PR stunt more than what we really, as affective as we tried to be.

Q: In terms of the Canal Street crackdown? Do you want to talk about that, just for the record kind of what the—

Beckelman: I think we did very well, no it was a long time ago, but I think we did very, very well in cracking down and turning things around. And Canal Street is much better now. I give the staff, and the whole city in general, credit for working with the Landmarks Commission. And Dorothy of course was very much a part of it. But when you say—I mean I think that overall I think that many—there was such criticism and such bad press about the Commission and how it was run. And how you try to make a request or something, it took forever to get through the Commission, and it took for ever to get things out of the staff, and it wasn't true. It was bad, just bad information or misinformation.

Q: How did you try to change that? And from a staffing standpoint, going in and having a focus on you wanting to find people, wanting to make sure that they're not taking advantage?

Beckelman: I wanted to try to move things quickly. I also tried to change policy to try to get more and more things done at the staff level.

Q: And how did you specifically go about that?

Beckelman: I started having Dorothy, and others [*unclear*], how can we move things through the Commission? How can you write some legislation, write whatever policy, get us to approve it and get the staff to do more? And, you know, I think at times the staff felt I was putting too much pressure on them. This is my perception, I don't know. Because they were—we were underfunded, we were under staffed and I also felt that the more we could get through, showing things that we could move faster, the more creditability we had. I also, when I became the chairman, I wanted to hire someone, and did, hire someone that understood preservation and understood the press and had worked in the press. And I'd hired Tracie Rozohn. She was very, very effective and very proactive, exceptionally aggressive in dealing with the press and communications. Then we started this award ceremony that we did at both Gracie Mansion, we did at City Hall, we had exhibitions. I mean we just started doing more and more and more things outside.

Q: Right. I'm curious like moving back though to the violations, just in terms of what this meant for the staffing, did it mean that more staffing was allocated towards enforcement? Towards preservation, and less towards research?

Beckelman: No.

Q: Or were you able to strike a balance somehow?

Beckelman: I never put more toward enforcement, I didn't have the staff. That's why we had to go the sheriff, I needed somebody in there and I said—no we didn't, I can't say that the staff ever felt really beleaguered related to the fines. It was more of a perception I think. It was also, it wasn't about the fines, what I really was trying to do with the staff is to have more work done on the staff level and get it away from the full Commission. So we can deal with much bigger issues at the commission level.

Q: Was there a reaction to that in terms of, you know, lack of discussion about certain things at the commission, if more was being handled by staff—windows, whatnot. What was the reaction to that?

Beckelman: I think overall, people were concerned that the public would not have a position. And I felt that there were certain things that were so obvious, windows, other things like facades that should easily be taken of by staff, it shouldn't be—commission shouldn't be dealing with this. You know, the agency is old enough that it should be handled on staff, that you should

know what's right and what's wrong. What's appropriate, what's not and should be done at a staff level, with architects, expeditors and whatever else. And I think overall this is what's happened, I mean I think Jennifer put more and more rules in place. I also kept saying that, there was always an argument that the more you designated—well, how can you designate more historic districts when you don't have the staff to regulate it? And my feeling is, what do you mean? If you do this and you have rules, you can keep moving things quickly. This is not brain surgery. That window, I mean come on they are air conditioners. It's doors. You [unclear] build a new building.

Q: And so the staff was able to handle this and overall—?

Beckelman: The staff was great, I think overall the staff was great. There are always a couple of people that are a little more complicated and don't want to have any change and want to make your life challenging and difficult. But I would say overall it was a great staff.

Q: And once you got the regulations in place, did you see, can you talk about how that changed the dynamic of the Commission in terms of what they were hearing? Was it just more effective, how did that have an impact on—?

Beckelman: I think it's more subtle than that, I think we became more efficient. I think what we were able to do, is we were able to hold more designation hearings. We were able to look at more things than before. Also at the time, when you think about it, I was chairman of the Landmarks Commission when the economy was pretty bad. So we didn't have lots of new

buildings, it was only at the end when I was working, I guess for Guiliani, that there started to be more and more interest in Lower Manhattan.

Q: Can you talk about that a bit more in terms of there not being a lot of, I mean it wasn't huge—
?

Beckelman: We had a lot of—there was still a lot of activity on the getting things through the Commission. I mean people were still living in Greenwich Village, they were still living in areas where they had to do work. Still had to go—I'm just trying to think.

Q: And what were the pressures then from the real estate community at that time?

Beckelman: They were much more interested. First of all the real estate community was never really interested in residential areas. What they're really interested in what's going to be commercial that's going to affect them and slow them down. So it could be from Madison Avenue in the Upper East Side Historic District.

Q: Which we talked about last session.

Beckelman: To what was going on, you know, from residential areas in Columbus Avenue whatever. But in general—I'll never forget when after the, you know, the General Electric Building had been a designated landmark, and the owner Bernie [Bernard H.] Mendik, wanted to

make changes to the lobby which was a designated landmark. And his proposals were totally inappropriate. And I got enormous—

Q: How so?

Beckelman: They were talking about changing original fabric, I mean come on. This wasn't creating even new value and I remember getting pressure, well questions, not pressure actually, from City Hall suggesting that we allow him to do this, because he was, you know, obviously had a lot of real estate, he really cared about the building. I'm thinking, fine, he may care about the building, he doesn't know what he's doing. And no, he's not going to get it through. And they'd be like, "What do you mean? It doesn't look so bad to me". And I'd say, "Well you're not on the Commission, you don't know what you're talking about either." It was that type of thing where I'd say that this were the real estate—the real estate community scared about what effect it was going to have on private property, on their skyscrapers, their buildings that were all about—and wanting to move things quickly. The big concern is here you have more vacant spaces, there were in such bad shape.

Q: Well was the administration really listening to these real estate developers who were saying, "Okay well if you allow me to make these changes, it's going to bring more economic activity?" I mean how—?

Beckelman: No not really, but you know you can imagine when you are an elected official, you still have to listen to your constituents, especially ones that have funded you. No, I think the

Landmarks Commission in general, I mean when I was there overall I didn't get that much pressure from City Hall. I mean they'd ask questions, but it was a democracy. I lost on a number of things at times, and you know I didn't have an iron fist with all the, all the Commission either, as the chairman, that I had to be balanced on everything. But I would say that I probably had a lot less pressure than let's say Jennifer Raab.

Q: In what sense?

Beckelman: When, with you know designating towers down here, doing other things. I held the hearing on Stone Street, and I feel really proud of doing that. But it's Jennifer who got it through, that also worked with Carl Weisbrod when he was head of the Downtown Alliance, getting all those incentives to become more like a restaurant row type thing. You know what it's like down there now?

Q: Yeah.

Beckelman: It's amazing.

Q: It has its own culture in some ways.

Beckelman: It does, it's fantastic though. It's just super. I'd say that, you know each one of us had our issues. I, because I mean most of my time that I spent there, I worked with Mayor Dinkins and I felt very strongly that part of my philosophy in wanting to take the job and how I

wanted to be effective for those few years, or however long his tenure was going to be as mayor, was to—my theory was that he was not elected by the, let's say Manhattan or the wealthy families of Manhattan, the real estate. He was elected—to me was, and this is my own crazy theory, but what was happening the boroughs and what was happening in the neighborhoods. He was going to be more of a Major for the people, this first African Major etc.

I wanted to look at communities that were underserved by the Landmarks Commission. So I held a lot of town hall meetings in all the boroughs. I spent much more time in the boroughs, I felt that Manhattan was pretty safe. I'm not saying we weren't going to lose certain things. I lost, you know, the house that became the AIDs building, you know, [Mont Sinai] Beth-Israel [Hospital] and I mean there were never things obviously that we lost over time, but I was much more interested into going into communities. You know, doing more in Bed-Stuy, expanding into Harlem. Looking at other things in Queens we hadn't looked at, Staten Island you know other areas that were underserved.

Q: Had those been looked at in surveys at all? Or you were going in—?

Beckelman: A couple of them had. A couple of them had, but hadn't been in a long time. The city, you know, Landmarks Commission had done a survey of most of the city. And I'm not saying that you didn't want to update it, but it was there, it was definitely there. But I probably, you know, I talked fast and I wanted to move probably faster than a lot of people, it made them nervous. I also felt that when I finally got there, I realized you know you have a window of opportunity to really be effective and then its over. I really wanted—my goal was to hear a lot

and designate a lot. And, you know, we—also at a time—I don't think they do it anymore. I haven't been—I don't appear before the Commission, I haven't since I left the Commission. But, you know, we used to designate buildings, even if it wasn't for owner's approval. We heard them, and we designated them.

Q: Yeah I'd love for you to talk about that, because that's such a big issue today.

Beckelman: It is, isn't it. I think that that's not a—

Q: It is, so I'm wondering if you could—what was the process of designating without owner consent? Could you give an example of, just to kind of flesh out? Because it is such an issue today in terms of thinking about designation. Or wondering what happens.

Beckelman: Well we did designate a number of buildings that were overturned. Knowing that, we were overturned, and it was also the new council. *[Unclear]* you know the Dvorak House. We designated the Dvorak House. It was of simple brown stone, and knew we were going to have trouble getting it, what do you call it? Keeping it for designation, but I felt it was really important that we had to make the statement. So the point about making the statement holding the hearing. The same way when we did the African Burial Ground. Whatever we're going to do is only advisory.

Q: Right, since it was federally owned property.

Beckelman: How could we not? How could we not hold a hearing? How could we not allow the public? When we finally had figured all of these people had been interned, these people were not allowed to be buried within the confines of the city—how could we not respect people of this city? I mean also being the first African American mayor and not having a public hearing? And you know it's a tremendous concern, a lot of the people in the government didn't want me to do it. I remember saying, "I'll resign, that's fine. I don't mind resigning, but I'm not going to sit back and not do this". And the mayor was one hundred percent supportive, but at first some of the advisors were not. They thought this was not good for him. It's great, it's great for everybody, we have to get it out there.

Q: Well it sounds like so much of your—I'm just hearing a lot about messaging and marketing of preservation, which I also think is something people are interested in today. And it sounds like as chair, that that was a lot of your focus as well, of finds—you're making a statement. All of your outrage program, bringing Tracie onboard. Could you kind of talk about what your general ideas were in terms of this? Or was it something you went in with? Or even—?

Beckelman: I think I went in with it because I give Kent Barwick a lot of the credit for this, and this—and Margot Wellington. Remember I worked for two people who were very interested in marketing and getting out there and messaging and the advocacy. So I went in as an advocate, and before I even worked for Kent and the Municipal Art Society, I was an advocate. And whatever I do, even now, I'm much more interested in the advocacy than the technical part. Somebody else can always take the technical part as far as I'm concerned. I'm more interested in making sure the preservation, in whatever we're doing, is at the table and has a voice. I think that

for a long—each one of us, I mean each one of the chairman, I'd say they had a focus, a highlight and are proud of certain things, and are disappointed on certain issues that they weren't allowed to accomplish. But I'd say that to me there was after the—what was it called? What was it called? The Platt Report?

Q: Oh, the Cooper Report?

Beckelman: The Cooper Report, that it was a very good basis to show how much we really had done and to turn it around.

Q: That's a good point.

Beckelman: And that's what I did. I felt that I had a very good foundation to really say, wait a minute, that's not exactly what's happening. This is really what is, these are the facts. And that's what I used and so I had people around me that helped me create that message.

Q: And to really put it on the table, not just within the administration, but to the public as well.

Beckelman: Oh no, more to the public. I was much more interested in the public than the administration.

Q: How do you think the public's perception of preservation changed through some of these efforts? I don't know if you felt a sense of more support at community meetings, increased *[crosstalk]* Commission?

Beckelman: I had great support out there, I'm not even sure—I think I had a lot of support from the community. I think people trusted me a lot, because I'd come from the background of preservation. They knew who I was, they knew I was already fighting for them when I was head of Landmarks Conservancy.

Q: Right.

Beckelman: I was definitely not a wall prop when it came through advocacy, that if we were going to lose still, I would be right up front. I can't say I did that well within the administration related to the budget, I didn't, I kept getting killed. So I started raising private money, and spent more money, trying to raise more money for the foundation so that we could do research, we could reports. And some people weren't happy about that, Dorothy at times wasn't happy about that.

Q: Why not? I mean—

Beckelman: Because the idea of privatizing. Whereas I understood that, but I also knew that I had to get something accomplished.

Q: Right.

Beckelman: But I understood that, you know, it really should be from the government, government should be paying for it. Well guess what? They weren't. I wasn't going to wait around until they were. And if I was going to have City Council eroding or the administration eroding the budget, I'm not going to let them make me weaker. In the same way, there was incredible—when we moved from Vesey Street, we were right here, to the old, you know, 100 Old Slip, there was a method. There was a method to this madness. I know exactly what I was doing, because I knew that if we had our own building, nobody was going to make us merge with anyone. So if we had our own building, we would be fine for a while. And that's why we did, that's why I wanted to do it, get our own building.

Q: That's really interesting. Was there talk then at that time of merging with City Planning?

Beckelman: Always, always.

Q: Yeah? So how, this idea of balancing, bringing preservation to the table and having it be a part of the larger planning conversation, how do you balance that with keeping its own independent operation? How was it independent and then still interacts with City Planning? And again I ask this, because I think it's something, in my recent Op-Ed pieces in New York Times and everything like that about—

Beckelman: How did I miss that?

Q: Did you see? There's a piece in response to Nicolai Ouroussoff review of Koolhaas's Cronocaos exhibit.

Beckelman: Have you seen the Koolhaas Exhibit?

Q: No.

Beckelman: I saw it at the Biennale.

Q: Oh.

Beckelman: In fact it's fantastic, so I don't understand why everybody's so hysterical.

Q: I've love to hear your thoughts of—is it the same where its, the same one that it's in the Bowery?

Beckelman: I don't know, I'd have to go see it.

Q: The Bowery one is closed, that's why I'm kicking myself.

Beckelman: I thought it had another couple of weeks.

Q: So did I, but it's closed. So I'm curious—

Beckelman: I'd love to talk to somebody who's seen it both places to tell because then I'd know—gosh darn it

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: You want to talk about planning and preservation?

Q: Yes. What the relationship is, how you, whether preservation should in fact be part of planning as people have recently argued, why? What your views are.

Beckelman: I don't think they should be, I don't think, well I'm probably still old school.

Q: During your time as chair how you saw this playing out—the relationship between City Planning and Landmarks and how you tried to strike a balance to accomplish what you needed to accomplish as chair of LPC.

Beckelman: But I also think the—I think that they should really be separate agencies. At the same time, I think it is very, very important for them to be programmatically integrated with discussions all the time. So that MT [*phonetic*], for the better minds, I mean I'm sure are already thinking about this, or have been thinking about this, and this is where I wish Dorothy was still

around, is that the whole idea of the special permits to change things within zoning was the one carrot we had for enhancing preservation. So that if you wanted to change the use, you had a covenant you had to restore the building. It was the one thing that you had, and to me there have to be—I've always felt that there should be other incentives that would complement, so the planning, yes, you want to continue to have the city to grow and build, but what else can you give them? So what's it called again? Section 1-0, what's it called? It was a special permit. In SoHo, so for example the ground floor, second floor, certain uses—you change the use—you had to, let's say, come up with a plan for the restoration of the façade blah, blah, blah whatever. What's the name of the, I forgot the code.

Q: I don't know the code.

Beckelman: I do, I'll think of it. You do know it, you've heard it a million times. And, but there were—or you know, you merge zoning lots, transferred air rights.

Q: Yes I'm curious about that.

Beckelman: You know, there was also concern about it being more flexible, or what types of buildings, you know, if you let one, how do you not let another. All of a sudden the Theater District had more incentives than other types of buildings. And there was always a concern well, aren't you giving more value then, priority, to the theaters as opposed to let's say schools or churches or whatever. You probably could argue, but at the same—so how is it that you have to continue, to me, you really want to build policy legislation around ensuring that the historic

fabric is not lost at the same time that you encourage good design and good development. And the balance is always, so I think one hopes is that you elect and appoint people that understand what an enhanced valued city is.

I don't think it always necessarily works. I, again I was at the time, most of the time, I was working at a time when the city economically wasn't doing well. I had, you know, a good relationship with the [New York City] City Planning Commission, and we didn't have that many fights. In other words, we were really more complementary and I would imagine at different times there would be more difficulty between the commissions, the two commissions. I also always felt that, and again I can't talk about other chairmen and how they worked, is that if I was going to do something, or thinking about it, I would go and talk to the chairman and say, "This is some of the things we're thinking about, I wonder what you think?"

Q: So there was a conversation and a dialogue within the administration between Planning and Preservation of—

Beckelman: Because I think that you are stronger if people know what you want. And then you also know if somebody's really thinking about doing, thinking about doing something against what you want, you start building up your own army and your own strength and your own support to counter it. But I didn't have that many problems, I mean I had a couple of them, and there's—you know, that we never designated the Audobon Ballroom. We were in there with—also there was an amazing borough president at the time, Ruth Messinger, who was phenomenal. She became an amazing ally. Through, because of her, we were able to get money there and

whatever we did as a Commission, we did things, but I always will regret that we never held a hearing. And the feeling was that the site's too far gone, the deal has been made, there's nothing you can do. But I said, "How could you not? How could you not?" I mean there was still, you know I used to fight with them, but I was losing. And I was told I would have no support, so you have to pick and choose your battles. So that's one that I lost. I knew other things, I designated Jamaica Savings Bank and it had been designated before and then Donald Manes overturned, and then I designated again, and it got overturned. But I knew that you had to be out there in the city. And I also felt the person who owned the building, and other buildings, was a lowlife slum lord. How do you not profile this person and embarrass everybody in promoting the slum lord?

Q: So again, it's messaging.

Beckelman: Right.

Q: It's saying that this, we're not going to tolerate this, this is—

Beckelman: Right.

Q: How do you think, in terms of special planning—

Beckelman: But I'm a fighter. I grew up with Kent Barwick. You know we were fighting for Grand Central, we were fighting to save Grace Church, we were fighting St. Barts. You know I, that's—it's like fighting against the Vietnam War. That's where I got my start, and then this

wasn't that hard. It's about fighting for the city that you love. That's what the Commission really, to me, is about. And Tony Wood—that's really, it's not about being a regulator. I mean it's fine, I understand you have to be a regulator, but people were there regulating, that wasn't my interest. And I remember saying that when I was interviewed, I said, "You really just want a regulator, you've got the wrong person. I said, "I know how to be balanced". I said, "And I'm willing to listen to both sides and you have to figure out a balance." You have to figure how to pick and choose your battles. And then at certain times you're going to have to retreat, and other times you just can't. You just don't.

Q: Right. Well how do you feel, so do you feel just going back just to have for, because I'm asking everyone about City Planning and all of that to see how's it's changed over time. So do you feel that the special permits and TDRs [Transferrable Development Rights] were helpful to preservation?

Beckelman: Oh I think they were very helpful.

Q: And in terms—

Beckelman: Why can't I think of this, I'll think of it. I mean this is crazy. It's like forgetting your name, no really it's just like *[unclear]* clear. I think they're very—I wish there were more incentives.

Q: For TDRs, one thing I'm curious, you know TDR is always well the new building must be harmonious and there's some very—?

Beckelman: Well I think there's some real issues like that, when you look at, for example, which I still don't understand is—and I'm not sure the building will ever be built, but on 53rd Street, from St Thomas [St. Thomas Church], they were transferring the air rights, St Thomas, right? On 5th Avenue?

Q: I believe it is.

Beckelman: The [Episcopal] church, it's the one on the corner.

Q: I can picture the church, but I can't picture—

Beckelman: Right, so it's moving it further down to be on the museum line, and I just remember the zoning lots had been merged. And they were going to build a mid-block tower. Now you tell me how that's compatible with the church? Just tell me.

Q: I can't.

Beckelman: Okay, well I can't either. So I don't understand, I really don't understand, and I also I have never seen any of the language with Commission. I just didn't follow it, unfortunately, not enough, just what I read in the paper.

Q: And that's, yeah and I guess that's my question about TDRs in some ways, how do you make sure that they're not so egregious, that you don't have things that are—?

Beckelman: Or in the same way, and I was there—this is not about mid-block, it's about the compatibility and whatever of this design etc. We transferred the air rights from the old City Bank Building on Wall Street where Cipriani is now, across the street to JP Morgan and it was a Kevin Roche building [60 Wall Street].

Q: Oh I know the building.

Beckelman: You know the building, it's big.

Q: It is really big.

Beckelman: And you tell me how that—it's okay, but it's, the compatibility, the balance and all that, you know, and the language is all great that we wrote. And there was, you know, Dorothy helping and [*unclear*] etc.

Q: Right.

Beckelman: But I think that there are issues about how that's done. For example, to me 53rd Street, whether 53rd Street should be built or not, that's not the issue. It's about, okay here you

are, you're in a way training horses, you're transferring this and you're talking about compatibility.

Q: Here's your little charge here. But in terms of the Cipriani Building [55 Wall Street], what were your concerns when it was happening? I mean ...

Beckelman: About the design.

Q: And this is a question too, I know Landmarks can obviously influence design to a certain extent, but is there a degree to which you, during your time there—I guess could you talk about how you tried to influence design?

Beckelman: Well, you know, I'm not a designer. But I do think I know something about design, but I think it's also subjective. And so let's say maybe we were lucky that I, you know, people liked my taste. I know this sounds, to me it was not about taste, it's about, for me it was training and trying to understand about styles from different periods and why it was a value. When I was, just an aside, when I first went to work for Kent Barwick, he let me—I was his assistant and I was reading testimony from the committees, from the board, and it was about the Kresge Building. Not Kresge, excuse me, the old Kress Store. And people were getting up and talking about how this art deco didn't matter. People didn't care about art deco in the early '70s. Nobody—not nobody, but most people didn't care. Well I kept thinking, well how can you just dismiss this style that was on the Ground Concourse, that was all up in Central Park West. And I didn't know anything, I was somebody's assistant. Truly, you know, but I started reading and I

was saying to Kent, “This doesn’t make sense, how was it that this is going to be dismissed and we’re going to allow all these buildings to be demolished? I don’t get it”. I didn’t understand, I was twenty-three years old and nobody could answer it at the time.

Now we save all art deco buildings, so as, here I am at the Landmarks Commission thinking, all right, I may not think this is of value, but who, there is research that says it is. So how do you strike a balance? And so I also felt that who was placed on the Landmarks Commission, you’d figure that the architects are onboard. That’s why, you know, I’ve asked Rick [Ulrich] Franzen, who was a Modernist, to come onboard. I don’t always agree with him, but I wanted that modern sensitivity that other people in the Commission, who were still in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I think that he, who did study architecture and was a Modernist, would give us that.

Q: In terms of both, some of the cases you were hearing, whether it was TWA or whatever. But also in terms of, for instance, a TDR and thinking about compatibility to have his voice?

Beckelman: Right, that’s what I wanted. I’m not saying it was always successful, but that’s what I thought was needed. Not people that were just looking at, you know, Gothic and Romanesque and whatever else and having more people like him would be more helpful. And I don’t know what’s happened on the Commission now, if they’re doing more of that, I just don’t know exactly who is the more, even in the last couple of years, I don’t know who. I mean I know a couple of new people have come on, but no I think it’s a real issue.

I think there are issues, but I think that you have to continue to provide incentives otherwise the Commission is going to become stale. And people are just going to be rolling their eyes, well here we are, saving another thing that doesn't have any value. Although we could build a very big argument—I also think that the other—you know people understand some of the time, or most of the time, architecture. You can explain to them why it's important architecturally. I think we're, the Landmarks Commission still has a very difficult time in explaining why is it historically and culturally significant in meaning why does it have to be saved.

Q: They have a difficult time?

Beckelman: And I think they have a difficult time in regulating those buildings as well. And I think that there has to be another way of telling the story, so you can save these buildings. Because I think over time, even if certain things are modified, as long as you have the building and the stories, somebody else will come back and fix it. It's not gone forever, but if the building's gone forever, it's gone.

Q: That's true.

Beckelman: You know? I don't think that any one of us has done a great job doing that. And if they have, I'd love to know about it, I just don't, you know, what I've seen over time.

Q: So you're seeing a real lack of really getting the essence of what the story is and communicating the story, do you feel its more—?

Beckelman: And I'm not criticizing this administration, its not that, I'm saying overall how we make interpretations. I think that in Europe, a lot of different things are going. I may not agree with all of them, but the buildings still there, the story is still there, the story line continues. And we lose a lot more, and I can't say that every single thing I've seen in Europe and other places are that successful, but the building is still there.

Q: And the story, then the story is still there to be told or added to.

Beckelman: I have got another five minutes, and then I'm going to have to go. I'm sorry.

Q: No, no this is fine.

Beckelman: But that we should definitely make another date.

Q: Okay so there are some other big things to jump to, Landmarks Law, just talking about how it was understood by the Commission. You know, how, and I say this because there are, it kind of goes into the TDR, but these unspoken standards of the meaning of the words such as harmonious and appropriate. And it sounds like you, obviously, were careful and very thoughtful about who you took on the Commission, in terms of when they would give—

Beckelman: Tried, tried.

Q: Tried, but in terms of what they would give to this meeting. And I'm wondering how you facilitated those types of terminologies from a legal standpoint. And I guess even just—

Beckelman: Well because I had Dorothy. Remember I had Dorothy the entire time I was there talking to people. Did you study with her?

Q: Yes.

Beckelman: So you know what she was like, when she talked to you. Sometimes you wanted to wring her neck, but when she talked to you about why this was a value, what this really meant, you had to listen. And whoever you were, you understood why it wasn't working. She had a way of communicating that, who in the Commission does that now?

Q: Again I'm at a loss. I'm mute.

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: Having Dorothy. And when you look at who was on the research desk, Tony Robbins, Marjorie Pearson. There are great people there now. They're great people, always have been. Also I had Sarah—what was her last name?

Q: Landau. As your vice chair.

Beckelman: Yeah, but she could talk about buildings in depth.

Q: And styles.

Beckelman: And hold wonderful, wonderful conversation. And I had Stephen Raphael who's a real intellectual, a great historian. He's a lawyer, a real estate lawyer but he loves and knows so much about the historic fabric of the city. We had really good people. I'm sure they are now too, but this is my story, it's not somebody else's.

Q: And that's what we want.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 3

Interviewee: Laurie Beckelman

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Liz McEnaney (Q1), Anthony

Date: September 8, 2011

Bellov (Q2)

Q1: Today is Thursday, September 8th. We're interviewing Laurie Beckelman.

Q2: 2011.

Q1: 2011, the first on-camera interview with Laurie Beckelman, the fourth interview total.

Q2: That's it.

Q1: Okay. Okay, so Laurie. For someone who doesn't know anything about preservation, what it is, you've worn so many hats. You've been an advocate. You've been chair. You've marketed preservation. You've seen all aspects. You've been a policy maker. I'm wondering if you could just give someone, the layperson, a general description of what preservation is really all about.

Beckelman: I think each one of us, no matter, even if you don't understand the word preservation or have never heard the word preservation or historic preservation, we all are attached to it in some way. It's about the past and it's about an individual's past or a sense of place and once someone realizes that, I think it's a way, it's a really different way of seeing a place, and of experiencing a life. I think that anyone that wants to embrace it will have a very rewarding time

experiencing everyday life or when one travels and knowing that there's a reason that building is there, whether you like the building or not, whether it's a tree or an open space or a specific building. Everything has a story and a remarkable story that's attached to someone. I'm not saying that everything should be saved but it's a way of telling a life story.

Q1: Great answer. And I'm wondering as well just on the broader topic of preservation, the Landmarks Law has been in effect now over forty-five years and I'm wondering if you could talk about how you see the Landmarks Law, the impact that it's had on the city today. How has it really shaped the city? How would the city be different had we not had the law go into effect forty-five years ago? I mean, for someone—what's the visual impact that this law has had?

Beckelman: Well the Landmarks Law that was created in 1965 is a result of a loss of many buildings and most significantly, with the loss of Penn Station, Pennsylvania Station in 1963. That is the symbolic beginning of the landmarks preservation cause and the Law in 1965 and really gave the impetus, I think, for people to rally around this one significant loss. It was based on the Baths of Caracalla, but we'll skip that or whatever.

Q2: Okay.

Q2: It's okay so you can start with that.

Beckelman: Oh.

Q2: Caracalla.

Beckelman: Caracalla, it was based on the Baths of Caracalla, as I recall and I mean, I was just a little kid and I remember as a child, walking through Penn Station in awe. Then all of a sudden, as I was older walking through this most banal building. I didn't even know I cared about architecture at the time. It was just something I knew was different and I think as the law has affected is really what you see around you that you relate to in the city. So whether it be a great public building like Grand Central Terminal or walking through a great lobby in Rockefeller Center, walking in a church, you know, a building in Brooklyn to a number of neighborhoods that have rows and rows and rows of brownstones that are preserved, to finding a building thinking what is this doing in the middle of this great group of buildings? I think the law has really shaped our city in the most positive way and I also think it has been so flexible and in the way it's also been interpreted is what has given the flavor and variety and excitement about the city.

But I also, if I can recognize one person who was with the Landmarks Commission for so long; the lawyer Dorothy Miner, who was so brilliant, who I still think she should be recognized and applauded and awarded for how she interpreted the law, was able to work with some of the great other minds in the courts to interpret the law and to also preserve and enhance the city. It was just remarkable and I give her more credit than anyone in the City of New York and this has been—she was at the Commission probably for way over two decades.

Q1: Do you have any examples about the flexibility of the law in landmarks? I mean because I think people think of landmarks as a very rigid thing. It means you know you can't do this, you can't change this building, but in terms of the flexibility of allowing, being able to have the law and still offer change in the city. It's not prohibitive of change but I'm wondering if you could talk to that nature of landmarking?

Beckelman: Sure, I would say that when the Landmarks Commission was first created, which obviously was created under a law, it was probably more rigid then as time went on because you also were only identifying and designating what people would say, well it looks like a landmark. Let's say, City Hall or the oldest historic districts, Greenwich Village or Brooklyn Heights, but buildings that were, as you say, obviously a landmark, they've been around for many more decades or over a hundred years, than say the newer ones, since under the Landmarks Law, in the City of New York, a building only needs to be thirty years old, while to be on the National Register of Historic Places, which is a federal law and register, it's fifty. So therefore, you need the flexibility because these are living breathing buildings. People use them. They have new lives. There's electricity in buildings that never had electricity, different types of plumbing than they had before. It goes on and on. You need to have, I think, design guidelines or regulations that can be flexible so that a building and use can evolve in these buildings.

I think that the Landmarks Law has—the individuals who wrote the law were quite clever in creating that. So for example, when the Tribeca Historic Districts were created, these were industrial buildings that people didn't live in originally. You also didn't have necessarily on the facades, you didn't have commercial uses in some of the buildings in SoHo, let's say, or in the

Upper East Side and so that you need to have flexibility to allow commerce and to have new uses so that there is—I mean, this is not only a democracy, it's about capitalism. It allows people to make money so that they could continue to invest in these properties.

Q1: I know that while you were as chair as well, you introduced new regulations, new guidelines and now I'm wondering if you could talk to that as well. Relating it to what you just said about the need to have a re-use for these buildings and to recognize the fact that there needs to be new electricity and we have to make it user friendly so that people understand what they can and can't do, and how to do it to help them—to help homeowners realize that they can be preservationists in their own way, and to have the regulations that are required to make landmarking an easier process for everyone involved.

Beckelman: I think that there was always such a stigma with certain groups of people about being a landmark. Oh, if you're a landmark, you can't do anything. I'll never be able to change my windows if I'm a landmark. The regulation tells me I can't do anything. I'm frozen in time which I think is such rubbish and I was determined after being in the private sector running not-for-profits related to landmarks and then going to work for the City of New York with really a creative staff, exceptionally so, and everyone telling me how rigid everybody was, which was not so.

I was determined to create more regulations to allow the staff to have more opportunities to move things quickly through the bureaucratic process—whatever it was going to be—to prove that it was very easy to be a landmark and that more people wanted to be designated landmarks,

whether in high income areas or low income areas, it didn't matter, that these buildings had value. People were investing, were going to continue to create value and that you'd want more of it, not to just say this is set in stone but to continue to have more and more of the city, let's say partially preserved or being flexible of how you change these buildings. And I think that the commissioners after me, the chairman after me continued to do more regulation and the more you designate, the more you need to be as flexible as possible because the minute you start slowing everything down, then the tide turns again and people start rallying against being landmarks.

Q1: Good point.

Beckelman: I'm sorry.

Q2: Hold on.

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: What I have found out is that we're also in a way training people to have the better eye for design. And although this is not a design commission, the idea that you have people that are better at restoring buildings, coming up with new ideas of how to add additions to a building or designing a new building in a vacant lot in a historic district. So you're putting pressure on the architectural community to do better and not to replicate. That is not what the Commission is about and I think over time, what you've seen under the law is the encouragement to say right

now, we're in a new century and that doesn't mean you need to duplicate what was there in another century but that should have—these buildings should speak to each other. It's up to the architect to be more imaginative and more creative. I think that it is the right type of pressure, not only for the acting professional but it also pressures people that are teaching in the universities to do a better job and to be more creative and nothing's by just rote. It has to be about being as creative as possible. It's like creating a new opera, creating a new piece of music. That's what this is about.

Q1: Are there any examples of that kind of design in field design applications that came to you where twenty years prior would never have passed the Commission but that you saw is a turning point or a chance to really find what infill could be and how you can take new designs to that level and make it contextual and harmonious, but still not have it be the replication of the old. Are there any specific examples?

Beckelman: I think there a couple of residential buildings that have been created in Tribeca, in SoHo, in other areas that are—you would know they're modern. You know that they're today's building. They were not built two hundred years ago. But they have the same scale, the materials are reflective. It may not be cast iron but it's steel. There is still an industrial look but you are very well aware that it's a new building and it should be so. I can't think of anything specifically but what I can say when I think he's a great architect is Kevin Roche, Roche-Dinkeloo [Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates], I have great admiration for him. He worked for [Eero] Saarinen years ago. He worked on TWA Building.

He first designed an addition to the Jewish Museum on the Upper East Side and it was a modern building. It doesn't matter whether you liked it or not but there was no way at the time that the Landmarks Commission was going to approve it. This was before I was the chairman of the Landmarks Commission. So he realized that the only way that he was going to get it through is if he created almost a duplicate of what the Warburg Mansion [Felix M. Warburg House] was, a limestone building. That's what he created and it got approved. So when you look at the building now, you don't know what's the original Warburg and the addition. That to me is not what landmarks preservation is about; it's about you have a past, there's a present, and there's a future. And how again, do you tell the story and how do these buildings evolve and how does our history evolve? I remember—I was disappointed because Kevin is a great modern architect and so is his firm. I think that's what we should be encouraging. There are a number of new additions in different historic districts that are not duplicates of these historic buildings. Specifically, I can't remember at the moment, sorry about that.

Q1: The Jewish Museum example is a great one to talk about.

Beckelman: It's a pity. You know, here you have this great modern architect that could have given you something exemplary and I think that Susan Jones has done that—the Museum of the City of New York, there's an addition in the back. You can't see it from the façade. I think the building must have been by Architect Friedman, must have been in the '20s and there's a modern addition by James Stewart Polshek [and] Associates. Now it's called Ennead [Architects] I think. But anyway, it's a great modern addition. You know it's contemporary—and it should be—to

this very classical building. That's what I would encourage, both individual buildings or in historic districts.

Q1: Jumping to more—what we kind of did—your time as chair. I know we covered the ground of when Dinkins appointed you, which is a great story, and I'm wondering how you saw preservation fitting within the larger agenda of his administration. Because some people have at times described the agency as an outlier agency, at least early on when it was formed. It was almost, oh there's the present Landmarks Commission and here is the administration. I think that it seems as though there was a shift that happened over time and it became more integrated into the overall vision of the administration.

I'm wondering during Dinkins' time while you were chair, how you saw preservation playing into his role and interacting with the Planning Commission, the [New York City] Department of Buildings, and just the larger—because the city was in economic turmoil at that time; no money for pretty much anything, not very much development. What were Dinkins' goals within the administration and how was Landmarks—how was the commission a part that?

Beckelman: But the question I have for you, Liz, is are you saying that it was an outlier agency before? Are there other mayors too?

Q1: Well, that's what I'm asking.

Beckelman: I'd say that Landmarks, I think the Landmarks Preservation Commission was never considered, let's say, a priority agency like City Planning or the Fire Department or the Police Department. It was in a way, an adjunct or that's how I think a lot of people saw it. But I think that the different chairmen definitely had their own style, their own priority and they made it relevant in their time. I look back, each chairman was so smartly appointed because of—they all had influence and were right at their time. You could criticize them for whatever, but they were right at that moment.

I'd say, for me, here we were for the first time, the City of New York having its first African-American mayor. The city wasn't in good shape. There was a downturn in the economy and I think there was great concern that the Landmarks Commission was going to hold things up. Well, there wasn't that much going on. There wasn't lots of new building, and at the same time, there was trying to be stimulation in different areas and people were concerned that we were going to slow things down. I was determined that not only were we going to slow things down, that we were going to be a very important part of the economic turnaround for the city. I also felt that under Dinkins, that there were areas of the City—my argument was, well it's not necessarily the elite of Manhattan that got this man elected. It was other parts of the City that were about communities that cared enough to go out and vote and then I was going to start putting some attention into these.

I started having town hall meetings all over the City, hearing what people had to say, whether they liked the Commission or not. I started spending more time talking to different communities seeing what their priorities were. Then putting together an agenda of looking to see what

neighborhoods we were going to go to start holding hearings in other boroughs, that always—I think the knee jerk was oh, everything, everything’s always done in Manhattan and Manhattan is the thing that most preservationists care about. And I said, no, we have to go look at other areas and one of them also was Harlem. This is you know, Mayor Dinkins was from Harlem, lived there as an adult and I thought, well this will be an opportunity to bring in new people, educate new people. Unfortunately at the time, there were very few African-Americans that were engaged in preservation. Very few on the staff, the professional staff at the Commission. I felt this was at a time that we should be doing something about it. This was our opportunity.

Then what also fell into my lap at the time was the recognition of when they were starting to build a new federal building that there was an African burial ground, that people didn’t realize—so we had an opportunity, although it’s only advisory to really make hay over it and direct international attention to this. Having Mayor Dinkins who was so open and so easy to work with, he totally understood what value this would play in history as well as how you continue to tell the story. He was always interested in children and in education and this was an opportunity to get this into the schools, to start teaching and training people about the history of the African Burial Ground which is not a pretty story. It’s a hideous story. I had that opportunity in doing that—I can’t say that I did any better than any other chairman before me but I had another priority.

The other thing is when I became the chairman of the Landmarks Commission, the legislative process changed as well. There was no longer going to be a Board of Estimate and the City Council was going to start having much more power. I also had to introduce myself to all the

City Council members and talk to them about why I wanted to go into their areas and I needed their support if I was going to designate something with the Commission and then have them not overrule these designations. So it was a learning curve for everyone, a big learning curve. It was a great, great time to make new friends, make some new enemies, and to also get us on a larger playing field, I felt.

I also had a great Commission. I think all, many of the commissioners, most people probably are not aware of, the only person that gets paid on the Landmarks Commission is the chairman. And so everyone else that is serving is serving a volunteer. As a volunteer, you spend an enormous amount of time, make an incredible commitment of time and effort in making these decisions. One of the things we decided to do and this was a great, great commission who would help me with strategies. I didn't do this alone. I also had a great staff, is to look at the—can we stop for a second?

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: When we decided to look at Ellis Island, it was only going to be an advisory because it was owned by the federal government but I thought it was really important to draw attention to how important New York was in telling the story of the history of this country. People who were persecuted, fleeing their countries, where were they going to go first? New York City through Ellis Island. And there were heart-wrenching stories about people getting here, people being forced to leave, and I thought what a great way to engage everyone. The City Council's made up

of so many different types of ethnic groups and everybody embraced it, they got it. We had incredible hearings, very emotional.

Then the people from New Jersey came and said, “Ellis Island isn’t in New York. It’s in New Jersey.” I remember saying flippantly but meaning it, “What do you mean? People didn’t come across the Atlantic Ocean to go to New Jersey? They came to go to New York.” They filed their case in the Supreme Court and they won. Part of it really wasn’t about, you know what—it was all about taxes which is—but we made such a great show of it and got so much attention, I think more and more people started embracing preservation. They understood what it meant. It was part of their history. So, there are lots of stories like that and every chairman can tell you about this but I would say that Mayor Dinkins really was a great mayor for preservation and I’d say more times than not, I had incredible flexibility. I did what I wanted to do with the understanding that I felt I had a certain window of opportunity to do something with this great mayor, a wonderful Commission, and to do as much as possible into recognizing and announcing the value of preservation. I’m not saying we didn’t have to lose some battles. Of course, we did but I say overall, we did a pretty good job.

Q1: I’m wondering with the—you touched upon having meetings in Harlem and going up to Harlem. Dinkins was from Harlem and it was the African-American community so in a way, it seemed from another perspective to have a great first community [*crosstalk*]—

Beckelman: I thought so too. It wasn’t our first community that we went into. We went into other—we were in Bedford-Stuyvesant, we were in other parts of the Bronx, Staten Island,

places that were not African-American, not African or whatever. They were areas that people had been requesting for years and years and years to be heard and to be considered. Jackson Heights, we went to other areas.

The Harlem experience was—Reverend Calvin Butts was a great ally, it took a while to get him to agree. He was, at first, was quite hostile, was concerned that we were going to just freeze everything and wasn't going to help the community. Then we started from the [Vincent] Astor Foundation, the [JM] Kaplan Fund, and others, we started getting—giving money into the community and restoring buildings that had been neglected. There was some hostility about me being white, not—there were certain things that they felt that I wasn't doing enough. I realized in certain areas, you're never going to do enough. You're not going to be, it's not appreciated by some. At first, I took it very personally and I realized that's not what this is about. We just have to keep marching forward and we did a lot. And commissions after me did a lot more. But I feel that I started a lot of what was going on there.

Q1: Yeah, going to these communities and really getting things going.

Beckelman: Yes.

Q2: *[Unclear]*.

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: —Actually, I still do, is I drive around weekends and looking at neighborhoods and just—for now, that I’m no longer involved with the Commission—seeing how these areas evolved. It’s so exciting to see. But at the time, I was always going to look at new areas and to learn about them. I just was—this is such a rich society. And these five boroughs, we’ve learned so much and they’re all so different and so interesting that so many of these areas have newer generations and new immigrants.

The one thing that always, I regretted that we did not do in the Bronx is that, you know, along the Grand Concourse—which I’m assuming many of them are designated now, the art deco apartment buildings. But I’ll never forget going there and looking at them. There was all these graffiti on the exteriors and I remember, it was in a pretty affluent Jewish community that had settled these, that were living in these art deco buildings. You know, sunken living rooms, great grand apartments, mosaics in the lobbies. And many of the people that were living in them now were a new community of Latinos. They had no idea of the value and I remember saying we have to write a little booklet on them in English and in Spanish so that people would know, you should be so proud of where you’re living. They have, these buildings have great stories and some of them, you may, you know, they have been subsidized some of them but you should be so proud of what these are. And they’ll come back eventually and they’ll get better and they have, over time, and the graffiti is gone, et cetera.

But that’s what I’m saying about the landmarks, the whole idea of landmarks and the spirit of landmarks, is that about bringing people together. Because it’s all about the relationships and the sense of community that I think is what has brought people together through these different

organizations as well as the Commission. And at times, the Landmarks Commission is embattled because they can't do everything—small staff, lots of real estate pressure, pressure on the mayor, on City Hall, and you have to figure out how do you strike the balance.

Q1: Yeah, the balance is something—

Q2: I'm going to say stop again.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q1: I just wanted to go back to the idea of going into places that hadn't been looked at before like Harlem and Jackson Heights and going into these communities and feeling a resistance to landmarks whether it's the idea of Landmarks, whether it's the process and how you deal with that as chair. As part of your public role to go in and talk about landmarking, explain the value. Could you talk about the strategies that you took in various communities to—when there was resistance, kind of how you overcame that sort or maybe not in some cases?

Beckelman: Well, Harlem already had historic districts and had some individual landmarks so it's not that it had been not addressed before but I would say that in Harlem—is different than Jackson Heights. It's different than some of the other areas because Harlem had been reviewed in the past. The criticism was from community leaders that they had been neglected for so long. So going in there, what I felt was very, very important—Harlem or any community—you needed to have some allies within the community that recognized that there was value. We may not have

all agreed on how to get there but that you had created local partnerships. Because the idea of government going in and just dictating what's going to happen is not the way I think any agency or any government should be going. It's about creating a strong relationship of trust. It takes longer in certain areas than others.

In Jackson Heights, people that were living in the coops were very, very interested in having these areas being designated. The concern mostly was from shop owners. They were concerned that if these buildings were designated, that they would not be able to change their exteriors and that if they were able to change them, they weren't going to be able to afford it, Or if they wanted to put up an awning, it would take too long. Everything was about the concern about money and the length of time to get approvals to have things done. And there was also a big fear about windows. Windows seem to take over everybody's language about what you do or don't do in these districts. So we started creating guidelines so that if you had a building, this is what your choices are. And once you live within that, the flexibility, everything went faster.

I'd say that in certain areas, we were more successful than others in having, being welcomed into the community. I think that it's again, it's having an advance team working with the community, not just walking in and saying, "We're holding a hearing now." It's spending time, making time to talk about what are the fears, what are the issues, is there money to help us in lower income areas? And that continues to be a frustration. There's very little money. Here you are already saying to someone, "I want you to be a landmark and I'm not giving you any incentives to restore your building. I don't care if you don't have any money. Too bad. Now you're a landmark and you have to do it this way." And I really think that it is really the government

should be giving more incentives everywhere and I think that's something that we have let people down for almost fifty years. There is always a little money but not enough. Truly not enough.

Q1: Good point. I wanted to move on to another thing you were really interested in as chair, which is Modernism. You held a hearing on the Guggenheim. You got the ball rolling on TWA. I'm wondering if you could talk about, you were interested in Modernism and then when this whole idea of Modern building being landmark worthy? How this was received by the public in terms of political challenges of—it was Art Deco twenty years earlier, that with this, “Art Deco, a landmark?” And then now you're dealing with Modernism or just what got you interested and why you felt it was a cause to take up?

Beckelman: Well, it's interesting that you would bring up Art Deco because when I, I was very, very young when I went to work at the Municipal Art Society, just out of university and the Kress Stores, one of the Kress Stores on Fifth Avenue was being considered for landmark designation and it was a really important Art Deco building and everyone, including the preservation groups were speaking against it. One young woman who was a student from Colombia, who must have been doing her thesis or something, and talked about this Mayan architecture. I remember sitting there thinking, this is so interesting and why doesn't anybody recognize this. The store building was demolished and I was absolutely in shock thinking how could they not see it? And there were these stores all over the city, all over the country that are these Art Deco and most of them are demolished now. They didn't recognize it the same way

that Art Deco on Central Park West or the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, people didn't recognize it of value.

So, as you say, flash forward twenty years later, Modernism. Buildings are finally being considered because they're thirty years old. Most people said well—and also we live in a society of building ourselves up and tearing ourselves down every couple of decades. It wasn't about—again, this idea of preservation having great value. For me, it was about the design. There was an excitement about them. There was a—I didn't at the time, I didn't even know about the Bauhaus. But once I started reading about it and the idea of these, and also an American form, of the idea that everybody knew about Frank Lloyd Wright and styles.

When the Guggenheim was first built, there was great protest against the Guggenheim. People were outraged by this very strange design not meeting the street wall or anything on Fifth Avenue. And I thought—I think it was more emotional for me than anything, definitely, it was not intellectual—that these buildings had value and that we should be learning more about them. Most of the people also that were involved in preservation didn't think Modernism was a value either. And I just, I think it was a fluke. I did think they had value. I was really interested in learning more and knowing more about who were these architects that were building these, designing these great buildings?

And the reason that—and the Guggenheim, I think many people that started getting interested in the Guggenheim were not necessarily interested in it because it was the Guggenheim. I think some people were afraid that there was going to be a big tower. They didn't want their views—

they wanted their views preserved and then there were other people that said, “You know, this is our only Frank Lloyd Wright building. How can you compromise it?” And so all of a sudden, there was a, I think a groundswell of support for this. But besides the Guggenheim, at the time, there were very, very few Modern buildings.

First of all, they were only for the first time being considered but before that, if you looked at, this was before I was the chairman of the Landmarks Commission, the Lever House and also the Seagram Building were being considered and the owners of both buildings did not want their buildings designated. And I remember, I was director of the Landmarks Conservancy at the time, saying, “These are phenomenal.” I started learning about these buildings before and I was inquisitive about it and learning really about their rich history and where they came from. I realized we have to be identifying more of these and they should be a priority now too. We’ve saved a lot of great buildings from the nineteenth century, early twentieth century. This was their time and we have to create more priority of these.

So at the time, I also thought it was important to put a Modernist on the Landmarks Commission and I asked Ulrich Franzen who was, I think, schooled at Harvard. He built a lot of great Modern houses in different parts of the east coast and had done all of those things for, I think the owners of Philip Morris [International] and the new Philip Morris Building, that it was important for him. He had a different eye. I think we were quite successful in what we were able to designate but there were fights.

Q1: In TWA, I know it wasn’t designated until Jennifer became chairman. You—

Beckelman: I held the hearing.

Q1: And you got the ball rolling on it. Identified it and got the ball rolling. I'm wondering if you could talk about that from a number of standpoints. What are the Modern architecture from the first part, but also a building that somewhat exists out of time and space. I mean, it's at the airport, it's not part of the neighborhood. So the challenges of thinking about a building like that, and the economic viability of it or even the reuse of it, and how those ideas came into play with that building. Because as you've just said, it's an interesting case.

Beckelman: Well, I think TWA out of any of the buildings, except for the Guggenheim, you look at both of them and you know that they are so exceptional in all ways, in every single way. You know, people said about the Guggenheim, "You can't, this is the worst place to look at art." Absolutely wrong, as far as I'm concerned. It's challenging but it's so exciting how you place a piece of art, how you describe your experiencing, and then set up awe and excitement. And the first time, when you think about space in an airplane and what TWA—and you walk in and this feeling of zooming, it's a cathedral, it's the cathedral of flight.

Again, the TWA Building, again for me was more symbolic. The Landmarks Preservation Commission can hold a hearing, can designate the building. It's still only advisory because it is a public building, it's owned by the Port Authority. I thought it was very, very important for the Landmarks Commission and the City of New York to go on a public recognizable official role in this whole negotiation, in what would ever was going to happen in the future, and the Port

Authority had a fit. How dare you be here? You're standing in our way. I said, "We're not standing in your way. We want to be at the table. We have every right to be at the table. Our law allows us to." They were furious. And I said, "Well, who is on your case who's imaginative enough to even think about the future of this?" It was outrageous because you know, I kept thinking about engineers with little pencils telling me what this, what should happen to this building. So there were furious. I'm sure they were happy when I left. But fortunately, I had a great successor who understood its value. You know, there were certain issues, I'm still a little disappointed about these little satellites that were not preserved properly. But overall, I think that Jet Blue has done a good job but you know, it was a very frustrating experience.

When I left, I was still semi-involved in a couple of committees and I think they did a pretty good job. You know, it's still standing. It doesn't have the same use, or I mean, or very general use. There's now talk about maybe creating a hotel there? I don't know what's going to happen. At least, it's not demolished. It's well preserved at the moment but I think that if we had not been involved in any of the negotiations, the building could have been demolished or seriously compromised and that hasn't happened. I think that there is definitely always a role for the Landmarks Commission to play in these. There'll be new Modern buildings we haven't thought about yet that haven't reached the age yet that tell us a story and that give way to something else. When you look at the Seagram Building or the Lever House, they're precursors for other buildings. You know, Black Rock [CBS Building], I mean, there are so many of them. It goes on and on. How many Saarinen buildings are there? How many Frank Lloyd Wright buildings are there? How many—it goes on and on but certain architects that definitely should be featured in the array and recognized, the same way that the Frank Gehry Building [8 Spruce Street] in

Lower Manhattan on Spruce Street will have a role in the future of the city and will be, I'm sure, one day a great landmark.

Q1: Yes. Part of the story.

Beckelman: Right.

Q1: I know that one of your other agenda items was really balancing preservation and the real estate community and you touched upon this of what was happening in the real estate community, in part of that the economy was not doing so hot during that time. So it sounds—you probably you didn't have the real estate pressures that came along during the booming New York years or even that Tierney faced in the Bloomberg years. I'm wondering if you could talk about how you decided to play this role, how to balance preservation and real estate and what the challenges were.

I know that you talked earlier about when you were at the Conservancy, the Biltmore Hotel. When you were at the Conservancy and you were able to make a tradeoff and bargain and not—bargain is the wrong word. You make an agreement with the Milsteins, which then got the Conservancy this huge amount of money which was able to fund hundreds and thousands of restoration projects in the city, versus the role when you're a chair. Obviously, there's a different role to play in balancing preservation and development. So it seems as though, I guess my larger question is could you come talk about how you weigh development and preservation?

Beckelman: When I was appointed Chair of the Landmarks Commission under Mayor Dinkins. As you said, the economy was not in good shape; however, we had incredible pressures from the real estate community because although the economy wasn't good, they still weighed in that no matter what, they did not—especially through the Real Estate Board which is the powerful lobbying group, whatever you call it, the recognizable agency, official institution that represented real estate developers and owners—that they did not, they said, “All right, if you're going to designate buildings, designate individual buildings. Don't let them be commercial because you're going to be in the way of progress where we need to be as flexible as possible, and don't designate historic districts.” They basically were saying it's unconstitutional which obviously, we know it's not, but that's how they fought. And they fought hard and they had lots of money and they couldn't be ignored, so I met with them on a regular basis.

I kept holding hearings and I kept designating and I also designated buildings that they didn't want to be heard and owners that were not happy and my feeling was I'm willing to work with you and if you don't want to work with me and we do believe that is going to be a landmark, it's going to be a landmark. You don't like it figure out how are you going to like it because it's going to happen. And most of the times we were successful, during that time. I think it's about—creating relationships is what again, what's important. I'd say over time, I don't think that I lost friends. Also, I was constantly being educated by men who thought they knew a lot more than I did, as a much younger woman managing an agency, and they were going to tell me what I should be doing. For most people that know me, you don't tell me what to do and I may be nice and smiling at you but I'm definitely going to figure out a way to get my way. I can't remember what the last part of this, what was the last part of it that I can go back to it? You can cut it.

Q1: No, that was pretty good, it was doing the balance. I didn't know if you specifically wanted to talk about the Woolworth building since we're, in—*[crosstalk]*?

Beckelman: Oh, I'll be glad to talk about Woolworth Building. Now when I talk about the Woolworth Building, you know, but you had also asked me, what was the other part of the question about balancing? You said something else.

Q1: Balancing, I was going to jump to the idea of what you're able to do well in the not-for-profit role, with the Conservancy *[crosstalk]*.

Beckelman: Oh, I know what I was going to say. Yes, the Biltmore, no this is what—the Biltmore Hotel, what I find so interesting is that many people in the preservation community were upset about the Conservancy's role in taking the money.

One, it was late in the summer, it was August, the Milstein's, who owned the Biltmore Hotel, had gotten a permit to fix, I think, some radiators and they started demolishing the building. They knew exactly what they were doing with very high-powered lawyers, and once we understood that—and I remember, Kent Barwick was the chairman, Philip Howard was I think, on the board of Municipal Art Society, and I also had a very powerful lawyer involved who was on the board of the Landmarks Conservancy, Donald Oresman who was a partner of Simpson Thacher Bartlett, and he was also Charlie [Charles G.] Bluhdorn's lawyer. Charlie Bluhdorn was the head of—created Gulf and Western [Industries, Inc.] and these people did not suffer fools

easily and had power. And so, in the middle of the night, we were able to get a restraining order to stop work and they continued. And we just kept going after them. Their lawyer was John Zuccotti who was the former deputy mayor and head of City Planning and they didn't know what was going on? I'm sorry. I mean, they knew exactly what they were doing and they were breaking the law.

And so at the time, there was a deal made. You know, they just started demolishing the ballroom. They demolished the area around the clock, the lobby. They were having people when you checked in to the hotel; they moved you to the other hotel, the Roosevelt Hotel which they also owned. They were checking people out. Oh, it was criminal what they were doing and I'm glad that this is on tape because this should be in the record. And so what eventually happened is the—I know that the Commission was not happy with us, but we realized that the only way we were going to get around this is to keep forcing their hand and all the chairman was saying, "We're going to hold a hearing." They held a hearing and realized too much was gone, that we were trying to get some money to be used for preservation.

And at the time, there was even talk of less money and I remember saying to people in my board that this is insanity. We should go after them for millions. They said we wouldn't get it. I said, "Then go into the courts! Who cares? These people have just committed a crime. When you commit a crime and you go to court, and you have a jury and you're accused and then you're voted on, you may go to jail. So put them in jail. This is illegal. Who cares who they are?" I remember going to meetings. They were so outrageous and people kept saying, "What do you know? You're thirty years old and this is absurd. You're never going to get the money." I said,

“We’re going to get the money and we’re just going to continue to abuse them in public and we’re going to get the *Times* behind us.” And people in my board were like—and I said then you’ll have to fire me. But I’m not going to walk away from this. These people have committed a crime.

So we finally got a half a million dollars. Do you know that the photographer at the time in *The New Times* that was covering this? He’s passed away now but he was Dith Pran, who was the photographer that did the story on the Killing Fields? That’s who the photographer. It was a major deal. And so, we got something out of it. Is it good enough? No, it’s not good enough. But we were able to do a lot of good from it and it was a reminder that, to me this should have been called the Biltmore Fund. As a reminder every single day that people cannot get away with murder because that’s what they did. They got away with it. They murdered the building.

But it was also interesting for me was the time when it was one of the first stories, I think, or early stories they gave David Dunlop. He started writing about preservation. So, I mean, there are some really interesting new relationships that were created from it. But it’s not a pretty picture and it’s not a—the real estate community and some people above should be embarrassed for the rest of their lives, what they did. There were other ways around it and could have been compromised. The compromise was that they would keep in spirit, the lobby of the Biltmore and then they have the clock there. It’s pathetic, absolutely pathetic. They could have easily figured out a way to save the building, reuse it and do an office building but they had no imagination, and that’s what you have with a lot of these developers. All they know is about the bottom line—how much money am I going to make?

It's ironic about some of these developers because if you talked to them and you find out where they live, they live in great buildings—Candela Buildings on the Upper East Side. They live in East Hampton in fantastic shingle houses or in Nantucket, so they understand what the value is. But for their work, it's about the bottom line. And they're also not very visual. Anyway, I'm sorry.

Q1: No, these are [*unclear*] because I think that's an incredible story. You know, I wonder what coming out of that and seeing the fact that while you were chair, did you realize the need to have more incentives—

Beckelman: Yes.

Q1: —for developers so that they would play along with Landmarks?

Beckelman: We did feel that they were—I always felt that there should be more incentives and I'm sure that any commissioner, and any chair that you talk to, or lawyers that are involved with preservation that really care about landmarks, they say—

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: —In order to create whatever balance, we need more incentives. You give incentives to owners of major corporations to stay in New York. You give incentives to baseball

teams that are worth hundreds of millions of dollars—Madison Square Garden, et cetera and you're not giving this to property owners and to owners of great landmark buildings, great commercial buildings? Where's the balance and where do you create the value? We're saying to you, you have value, that's why we're giving you this blessing of a landmark. But we're not going to give you any incentive to maintain your building for the future. That's absurd. It's absurd.

Q1: That's a very great way of putting it.

Q2: Hold that thought.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q1: I know that we some what touched upon this but I just wanted to talk about Ellis Island and the African Burial Ground and the sense of navigating federal sites. Again, you talked about this with TWA, but why you thought it's so important for New York City Landmarks Commission to get involved in these federal owned properties as an advisory—with your role being solely advisory but why you saw this and key instances you couldn't pass up.

Beckelman: The one thing about the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Landmarks Law as it relates to buildings that are not privately owned, they are public. You and I pay tax dollars. They are ours and by having the city involved is a public reminder to everyone that we have a right and a role and that they are ours. They are not the agency that is just regulating,

telling us what we should do with these buildings. We pay for them, every single day with our tax dollars, and if they are not doing what we think they should be doing, we have a right to say so and to be engaged and to figure out a way to have a partnership.

To me, it was at a time when I was the Landmarks Commissioner, having a role as whether it would be Grand Central that was going to be going through a revitalization and the MTA welcomed the Landmarks Commission. But buildings like TWA, people always think about—I don't anybody thinks about who owns TWA? Who owns Kennedy Airport? We do. It is an authority. It is public. It is not private. The same way that you think about the African Burial Ground which is under a federal building, for years and years and years, it was never moved because the buildings are only of a certain height and they didn't have to dig deep. When you built in the nineteenth century, you built an X amount. There were no, they weren't digging ten, twenty feet, whatever, down, even though we're on Manhattan schist, it was not that difficult. But when you're going to build a fifty storey building, the earth was going to change. Also there was a requirement of doing archaeology. But when you use public monies, you are required to have certain procedures and you have certain check offs.

It was the Landmark staff—we have a small archaeology department—

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: The Landmarks Commission has a small archaeological staff and it was the staff that identified this and said we have a problem. We're identifying these artifacts and they're human

bones. And they weren't—there was a concern that they weren't being properly acknowledged. In the same way, it's in every single religion, faith, of how do you honor your dead? There were being placed in boxes and that was it. You can't do that. It's part of a heritage whether it's yours or mine. And they said, well no, we've got—this was also at a time in the city when there was no development going on. Here's the federal government coming in. They're going to be building. It's jobs, it's construction jobs, then it's going to be permanent jobs, et cetera, et cetera. I remember thinking, we've got to do something about this and we're going to do it the right way.

There were federal hearings. There were city hearings. And they would say, "Well, what do you care? We don't care about what you say. You're only advisory." But I knew that for the city, meaning the mayor, first African-American mayor and for the Landmarks Commission, we had a very important role to play and I was going to play as long as we possibly could, and be front and center on this as long as we possibly could so everyone realizes that we are someone that has to be reckoned with. Period. That's it. And we were. People were furious and it was like, you know, to me it was like, you know, sorry get a life. This is life and this is what we are now. People are going to know what happened before and there's going to be respect from now on in all of this. And I didn't know anything. We brought in experts that told us how we were going to manage this. It became very, very public. It was phenomenal. I think it was a great—it was a sad day, a sad time, reflecting on how we treated slavery, how we dealt with people that we didn't consider, you know, they weren't citizens. They weren't—in a category that was so hideous, it's hard to talk about. But it was a time that is now part of the history and the story is being told differently now.

Q1: Laurie, during your time, it just seems like you had such an incredible ability to draw attention to the stories, whether it's through exhibitions that you organized with the department and your staff and bringing on Tracie Rozohn. Even just changing the perception of preservation, you know the party, I think you mentioned at City Hall where you became Landmark's chair. But that idea of really putting preservation out there and putting it in the city and making it part of life, making it part of the story. I'm wondering if you can talk about why that was so important to preservation? What was the perception of preservation in some ways when you came in and why did you think it was so important to really emphasize these stories and how it's changed the perception of preservation in a way?

Beckelman: Well again, I go back to—I'm not sure if I changed the perception of preservation. You know, thank you, I mean, everyone for the compliments and I was exceptionally well treated and we all worked very hard and I had a great time. I was so privileged to be in this position. But I also believed that when you are in government, you have a certain amount of time when you can make changes, when you really are effective, and then it's over. And so, I felt that I had perhaps four years? And that I had to figure out an agenda and a timeline to be effective, I also knew that one of the things that I really wanted to do was have someone that understood communications. I remember going to Albert Scardino who, at the time, was the mayor's press secretary, who had won a Pulitzer for his paper in Savannah, who had been writing with *The New York Times*. I remember saying to him, I want to hire somebody to do press and my dream is to have someone that has written about preservation, has possibly done his or her own preservation, and that can tell the story and can move fast. And he said, "I know you're not going

to believe this but I have somebody for you. You have to meet this person. She was at work in Baltimore—“ whatever the paper was down there. “I think she’s looking for a job.” So I met this woman, Tracie Rozohn—central casting. So you know, you can give me all the credit but I had a partner that got it immediately.

Here we are starting to think about exhibitions and making public, or doing an exhibition on buildings, landmarks that aren’t. Or on what about women that were part of major firms that designed buildings, they never got the credit. So we held, you know, Federal Hall that was not used for the public—a public building not having public events. This was her idea. We started getting recognition and articles that we never got before, all because of Tracie. I believed, that keep doing it. Motion was very, very important. Get out there as much as you can. We started with, there was also Landmarks Preservation Foundation separate from the Commission, so we started raising private funds to do these public things, so the public was not paying for these work. It was separate monies outside of the Commission, that was paying for these.

It was all about education and getting as many people engaged in different communities. And it was about excitement so we also started these awards at City Hall and then also Gracie Mansion, recognizing great preservation projects. And before I met Tracie, I decided being the chairman was exciting so I asked permission, if I paid for it, could I hold a party at City Hall? You know, so I paid for it and it’s not that I had a lot of money but I figured, you know, why not? Then so, finally, so we hold a hearing—we had, I don’t know, five hundred people maybe. It was open to people in preservation, just come. You know, some swearing in, and then we had a party.

The ironic thing that after this, whether this goes in the file or not is that I knew, oh god, what's his name? Florent [Morellet]. Florent, this was before—there he was on Gansevoort Street, right? And nobody was looking at the—this is 1990—nobody was looking at the Meat Packing District and I remember saying—my parents knew Florent. Also my parents said, “You know, we really should be having a party for you for just our friends and family in another landmark.” I said, “Well, where do you think we should have it?” “Well, we'll go to Florent's.” So we took over Florent's afterwards. It was so funny, this, and it was a terrible rainy day and then went to Florent's and took over Florent's. It was just so perfect. You know, this continuation of celebration of—it was a, and also I think people were feeling new mayor, new time, but reflecting back also. Right before I became the Landmarks Chairman, there was credible, incredible criticism. I don't think fair at all but tremendous pressure on changing the law and changing the Commission.

And there was something called the Conklin Report and I felt that I had a responsibility to the preservation community, and the former chairman, and the Commission to make them right, not wrong. And that's really, I think, how I really started looking at how I was going to run the Commission and work with the preservation community and the real estate community and try to make—there were some excellent recommendations, but making the Preservation Commission right, not wrong. And that, so I used that in a way as my bible to go forward. And I was very grateful for all the people that worked on it, that—so it ensured that I would have success. I was in a way, a much easier position than the former chairman, I believe. I had this bible, in a way, with great people that also were feeling very vulnerable about the future of the Commission.

Q1: I'm wondering—

Beckelman: And it was also at a time when the Preservation Commission, excuse me, I digress. I was also at a time when the preservation community was very in sync with each other. And so that the Municipal Art Society, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Historic Districts Council, Landmark West, West Pride, other groups were working so closely together and at a time, because of other people—Kent Barwick, Margot Wellington, and others—were working together, even with the environmental community, we had this bond that was created in Albany. And it was the first time, in the few years before I became chairman, that the environmental and the preservation community were working together for the first time, making policy and getting money together for their projects. It was an exceptional time in the history of the City and in preservation.

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: We have about fifteen more minutes. Is that all right?

Q1: Okay, that's fine. It we now, this last preservation question which—your time as chair, I just wanted you to talk about the Dvorak House.

Beckelman: Oh yes, yes.

Q1: And then we can jump into quickly to 2 Columbus.

Beckelman: It's the Dvorak, but you're not going to be on.

Q1: Yeah. That's why I'm edited out *[laughs]*.

Beckelman: You shouldn't be and you're so pretty. You should be on.

Q1: So Dvorak.

Beckelman: Dvorak.

Q2: D-V-O-R-A-K because this is going to be transcribed by someone.

Beckelman: Yeah, Dvorak. It's Czech.

Q1: Dvorak. If you could talk about that whole battle, that's what it became. But why was this house so important to preserve? Why was it a landmark? How did the community get so behind this preservation cause, and then felt ultimate disappointment in some ways when the City Council overruled the designation?

Beckelman: The Dvorak House was a simple, simple brownstone on the east side in the teens [streets] and there was—it was owned by Beth-Israel Hospital. It was at a time, a tragic time in the history of the city during this epidemic of AIDS. Beth-Israel decided that they had to expand

their hospital rooms, I guess, and clinic for AIDS patients. They had money to do this. They owned this property so this was where they had—it was across the street from the hospital and that they were going to expand into this brownstone. There were a couple of well-known Czech citizens living in the city that brought to the attention of the Landmarks Commission that this was an important building.

One of the things that I—challenges I always felt that we had at Landmarks, is how do you interpret landmarks? In other words, to become a city landmark, you have to be, anyone of these or all, architecturally, historically, or culturally significant. It's to say, all right, the Woolworth Building—it's beautiful, it's Gothic. It has all these elements that makes sense. You understand the details, the architectural details. It's a landmark. City Hall looks like a landmark. You could talk about Greenwich Village, the history, what's happened there. You could look at their buildings, architecture and history. I get it. But how do you define culture? How do you tell the story of a building that looks like any other building? How do you say, "Well, this is more important, this one than that."

In the Dvorak House—Dvorak was a very, very important composer and he wrote the *New World Symphony* in that building, in that living room. He wasn't living on the twenty-eighth floor in an apartment building. He was forced to come here as an immigrant. He was forced to live here and he found great solace in this building. He talked about how important it was for him writing and creating this masterpiece that still lives with us today. We felt that in interpreting this, that this was an important way of saving the building, that it was important to

designate it as a landmark for the City of New York so that it would go to tell the future—there would be a plaque on the building perhaps—the full history of the building.

The community got behind it and I felt that it was also symbolic to be able to say to future buildings. There had been other buildings also that we had already designated—former Commissions—very few. But I felt that there was a role to play. I’m not saying that you’re going to save every single stone, but that there was a way of saving the building, adding on some floors, and using it for a new use. We asked the architects Beyer Blinder Belle to do pro bono work for us. They did. They worked with the hospital. The hospital was so antagonistic, so hostile to having it. They were ready to do anything to destroy this.

With the new powers that be, there was the Council now having the power, not the Board of Estimate, the Council overruled the designation. So we lost it but I thought it was very important for us to really fight to the end and to tell the story and for everybody to know that preservation had a future, even though it doesn’t like architecture, say it’s a landmark, that the history and culture and what Dvorak meant internationally in the music world, and what it meant, the *New World Symphony*, what he did was so important. So people will remember the story and never have a past of what happened there. It was a pity but I’m glad that we had the experience to go through it. Sadly, that we lost it.

Q1: So just with our time being a little short. I’m wondering—we haven’t really touched upon MAS and the Conservancy although we got plenty of time on that.

Beckelman: We can do that. We can do it.

Q1: Okay.

Beckelman: We'll do a little more time, if you need.

Q1: But first, just to jump to talking about since your time as chair, and then moving to 2 Columbus Circle, which really in some ways, as you were saying, has become such watershed moment in preservation. You're on one side or the other but for no reason, this bill, this fight has become the preservation cause of the past decade. I'm wondering if you could talk about the 2 Columbus Circle battle, because you have people like Ada Louise Huxtable saying the building isn't of landmark status. It doesn't meet their requirements of a landmark building. But you have community groups who are loud and there are lots of them arguing on the other side.

So here you are, you've come from the advocacy world. You know what it's like to be on that side and you were working with the Museum of Art and Design then. I'm wondering if you could talk about it—and the Commission's involved. So in a way this is used with all your having seen it at various times, I know, the advocacy world. I know the Commission. If you could talk about that battle and your thoughts on it and role in that.

Beckelman: It's a very challenging time but talking about any building including Columbus Circle. I recall talking to people way before I was involved with 2 Columbus Circle. I remember using the building. I talked to other people, anyone that ever lived in—worked in the building.

Nobody ever lived there. But anybody that worked in the building had horror stories to tell how difficult it was to use the building. It was never public it had been closed for so many years. At one point, in the city, we had a bad homeless problem. People were living in the arches, you know, in the loggias. People didn't remember, have very many—the building looked it and turned in on itself. It wasn't looking at the city, there was Central Park.

A number of people in the preservation committee, way before it was even old enough to be considered for landmark designation, they said, “Oh, that's one of the worst buildings. What was Edward Durell Stone thinking?” Especially when you see Edward Durell Stone's houses, what he did, the original building at MOMA. Spectacular. And when I was at the Landmarks Commission it wasn't old enough to be considered for landmark designation. And when I left, I don't recall, I don't think that it was being considered—people didn't still think about it. It wasn't protected in any way but it also wasn't threatened. It was there and it was an eyesore in a way because it was derelict. And it wasn't about whether it was good architecture, it was just a derelict building. But I guess, the city had moved out by that time. I don't anybody was using it, it was vacant.

When I got involved, I think it was also my—this is an overall theory about the city, is I think that the economy had picked up, there are all these new buildings that were being built and I think that the city—many architects and people in the civic community and preservation, had been frustrated with the quality of design, in general, in architecture. That even when that fight to save Columbus Circle and what was going to happen to the building before the Time Warner

Building was built—there was a fight over that. Nobody really liked the former, what was the name of the building that was there?

Q1: The [New York] Coliseum?

Beckelman: The Coliseum, nobody really liked the Coliseum. Other buildings that were being built—reflective glass, the Gulf and Western Building—there was no new park, Central Park wasn't restored yet. The, what do you call the area right there? The Circle wasn't restored. There was all this frustration about every, the whole idea of sameness. Then there was this very strange building there of a certain period and people, I think people started feeling nostalgic about it. Not that they loved it or not, but it was like, "How can you tear down one thing from this period when that's all we have? Isn't there another way of saving it? There must be a way of saving it." People started saying. And even if you're not going to save it, people were saying, "Well, why not hold a hearing on it?"

I think that many people felt over time, there was one place you could always go to, it was like a town hall meeting. You knew it was the Landmarks Commission. You could go to a hearing. You could talk about it and people felt that they were not being given their right. I think that's where the frustration grew and I think that the frustration grew over not feeling that they had access, where they had before. I'm not saying it's right or wrong. It's just my perception and I think that you had a couple of different administrations, both the Giuliani administration and the Bloomberg administration that wanted something done. They wanted the people that were in these, City Hall and the legislature, wanted something new. They didn't want this. They were

convinced that you needed something new. A new use that was going to be very, very public and something that was also going to open to the city, that was going to embrace the park and embrace the public realm, and that this building did everything to turn its back on the city. I think that it was at a time that people were feeling that they didn't have a say in anything and so, to me it became symbolic of other frustrations to do with the city.

[INTERRUPTION]

Beckelman: I think that the 2 Columbus Circle became the poster child for frustrations about development in the city, the frustrations of there was going to be a new stadium, there was going to be something else that they felt that they had no power, and that at Landmarks, you always had a relationship. There was a connection. You could talk about it. You could have a say publicly and there was no public. You saw people really divided. I was shocked to see the hostility and I think there were five lawsuits. It took about three years to move forward and now I think that the Museum of Arts and Design is doing very, very well. The building seems to be doing well. It has a new use. It's a challenging site because it's built over the subways and it's a very, very narrow site. So it's quite challenging. The interior of the building has been—the auditorium was restored and some other things on the ground floor but it's a new use. I'm sure that at times, somebody is going to wonder, "What was this before?" And I think what we're also going to see in time is more of a recognition and a respect for Edward Durell Stone. I'm be curious to see what happens. His son has just written a book about all his work. So it'll be interesting to see what happens when that comes out. Very interesting.

Q1: I very much like your description of the Commission and the hearings as the public town hall, as the place where people go to with different *[unclear]*.

Beckelman: I do feel that more so than any other agency in New York. I really think that that's a role of, the brilliant role that the Landmarks Commission can play. Now, I think that, I guess, this is—how many people have had mayors that had third terms—Bob Tierney has probably designated more historic districts and individual buildings than any other chairman. It's pretty astounding. It'll be interesting to see again how they are continuing to be interpreted and what becomes priorities over the next few years and what happens with the next mayor and what happens to the Commission.

Q1: Are there any other, I was going to end just asking what you see is some of the challenges and opportunities facing preservation today. But is there anything in terms of your time as chair that we didn't touch upon that you want to talk about?

Beckelman: I would say that as my time as chairman of the Landmarks Commission, which was about four years, I'd say that I just want to go on the record to say how remarkable the staff is for the Landmarks Commission and how I feel in a way they're these unsung heroes. They work exceptionally hard. They are very well educated and they have to take a lot of abuse because people are frustrated in moving permits and in educating people, there's not time. But I just tip my hat to them for the incredible work and how they've served. I learned so much from them and from the commissioners that I worked with. That was such a privilege to serve with them.

Also, working in a really healthy environment with great, great people. It was, I mean, what a privilege to serve. It was remarkable.

In the future commission, I think that the challenges they're going to have is they're going to have, I think that more and more pressure has to be put on the public and as the economy changes and if—who knows what's going to happen with government and government spending, but there have to be other incentives. I think we have to become much more diligent and much smarter in getting these incentives because the more we designate and also we want to bring them up to code, make them more green. It goes on and on. It cost for real money. And we should be having the same incentives that newer buildings have, or football teams, or baseball teams, or whatever. We should have those incentives.

And the other thing is I think we have to become more creative in picking how you interpret a sense of place and how these places should be saved. I don't mean, again, every stone, every window, every lintel. I mean, how you continue to tell the story, you know, where did rap start? Where did, you know, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and other forms of expression that have helped, that have started in these buildings—that people don't have to get a PhD in English to find out about something, that it should be in the streets of New York and should be part of the preservation.

Q1: Great end point.

Beckelman: Okay. All right.

Q1: Laurie, thank you!

Beckelman: Oh thanks. This is great!

[END OF INTERVIEW]