

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Herbert Oppenheimer

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Herbert Oppenheimer conducted by Interviewer Annette Rosen in 2003. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

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

An architect who was involved in the protests against the demolition of Penn Station, Herbert Oppenheimer was interviewed in 2003 by Annette Rosen in conjunction with the New York Preservation Archive Project's event "Remembering Pennsylvania Station." In the interview, Oppenheimer explains how the fights over Penn Station and other landmarks in the 1960s helped lead architects to understand the importance of preserving historic structures as part of the urban fabric of modern cities.

Herbert Oppenheimer is a former president of the American Institute of Architects and played an instrumental role in the campaign to save Pennsylvania Station. Known in New York's architectural scene for his prolific designs and restoration projects, Oppenheimer's career spans almost seven decades. He has designed and restored a wide variety of buildings, from the Hudson Valley Boys and Girls Club to the Harrison Street houses. He is still a vocal advocate for architecture and design, including calling for NYCHA to prioritize better design elements in public housing projects.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Herbert Oppenheimer

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Annette Rosen

Date: 2003

Q: Please tell us your name and something about how you became involved in the effort to save Penn [Pennsylvania] Station.

Oppenheimer: Thank you. My name is Herbert Oppenheimer, and I was an active member of a semi-secretive group called "Young Architects in the AIA [American Institute of Architects]." We were led by Norval White, Elliot Willensky, and Charles Hughes [Charles Evans Hughes III]—I wonder if you know that name. He was part of our group. Charlie Hughes, Charles Evans Hughes III.

At that time I had started my own office, with Tom Barrett [*ph*] and John Brady. We hired this very good-looking and very bright young woman, Diana Kirsch [Goldstein], who's here tonight. I was going to an AIA meeting, Diana reminds me. I honestly don't remember this, moment by moment, but I believe it's true, having been told by Diana, that she came with me to this meeting, where Norval and others were attending, and she asked us what were we doing to save Pennsylvania Station. We all had a rather blank look, because the AIA wasn't doing anything at all. She came out of that meeting outraged, kicked me in the shins, and told me I had to get started. She called the young Peter Samton, who was just here, and Jordan Gruzen, and Norval White, and started the whole darned thing going.

Q: And Charles Evans Hughes, also.

Oppenheimer: Charlie Hughes was part of the group, and so was Elliot Willensky. They had an office up on 62nd or 63rd Street. Somehow they were helped, financially, to have that office, as a group of young architects. Also, at that time, Davis Brody [Bond LLP] was just getting going. This was really the whole milieu in which this whole thing got started, with Diana very much leading the charge. Of course, two people who were really crucial in bringing this whole thing about were Philip Johnson and Ada Louise Huxtable.

What evolved then, really, was that we were working on three levels. The great names, Philip and Ada Louise, were making announcements, and Norval White and his friends were sort of pulling the strings. But my office, happily, became the center of the foot-soldiers, with Diana, and I do think we turned out more pickets than any other place going. It was a very exciting time. Of course, it ended dismally. It led us, somewhat later, to try to save the old Metropolitan Opera, which was another failure. But with these failures, and particularly with the insight of people like Ada Louise, there was a recognition that preservation of old buildings—they were really like the library, which had given us our history and our knowledge of the past, and our excitement for the present and future. To lose these old buildings was really to lose so much of the urban fabric that made the city work, and which made it beautiful and possible.

What happened, really, then, was that the preservation movement—and I am something of a preservation architect, as well as a modern architect—was no longer a question of saving old

buildings because of their sentimental value, or their simple, obvious historical value. It really became a question of saving old buildings as an essential part of our whole urban fabric. It became a major source of contemporary architecture. Of course, it was after that that people like Jim [James Marston] Fitch—who, sadly, is not here—was able to get going with his whole work at Columbia [University].

Part of my own interest in all this, I have to say, is because my wonderful teacher, Talbot [F.] Hamlin. I don't know if his name has come up at all. Talbot, along with what's-his-name? I'll remember in a moment—Talbot was really one of the great historians, and very much a modernist who appreciated modern architecture. But he also recognized the importance of historical architecture, and he was my teacher at Columbia. He really gave me, personally, a feeling for recognizing the importance of saving wonderful old buildings. Henry-Russell Hitchcock was the other guy I was thinking of. Of course, Russell was an enormous influence on Philip Johnson, in making Philip appreciate the Victorian buildings, appreciating all that and appreciating, particularly, McKim, Mead & White.

So all of this—this was the right moment for this to come about, With Pennsylvania Station as its failure, I think you can really say that that was the beginning of the recognition that old buildings have a place in the modern city, and an essential place in making that city beautiful and livable.

Q: Do you feel that the lessons learned from the loss of Penn Station traveled across the nation, and had an impact in other places, as well?

Oppenheimer: Oh, sure. Certainly, the same fight—the proof that this was an idea whose time had come is that it really sprang up all over the country. There were people concerned with this same concept.

But we still have a long way to go. Even this very evening, I was late coming to the party because I was over at the Jersey City Planning Commission, where the building I love most of all, that I've done recently, is an old coal bunker from 1917, that I've turned into a [Hudson Valley] Boys and Girls Club, right in the middle of town. Now it's suddenly become very hot property, all around that building, and I have these voracious builders nipping at our property, trying to take it over. The planning people are so influenced by trying to please the builders. You tell them that this is not only a social-service building, but part of our history and they all nod and say, "But—can't you just give this up, or that up?"

So the whole profession of architecture is, I think, still very much beset by enormous commercial pressures. I guess one can see that downtown, at Ground Zero [National September 11 Memorial and Museum], where Mr. [David M.] Childs is sticking his nose into [*unclear*]—and doing what I think may be terrible damage to the plans for that area. He's doing so because he's being prodded, already, by Mr. Silverman [*ph*]. So I think this is the very argument—that preservation and good design are two of the elements of keeping our urban fabric beautiful and livable.

Q: With your fine statements and remarks, let me say thank you very, very much for giving us your remarks.

Oppenheimer: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]