

LEADING THE MOVEMENT:  
INTERVIEWS WITH PRESERVATIONIST LEADERS IN NEW YORK'S CIVIC SECTOR

The Reminiscences of  
Eric Allison

New York Preservation Archive Project

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Eric Allison conducted by Interviewer Elin Juselius in 2011. This interview is part of the Leading the Movement: Interviews with Preservationist Leaders in New York's Civic Sector 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.

Eric Allison is an advocate for historic preservation combined with livable cities. He first became involved in historical preservation in 1984 with the Fort Greene Landmarks Committee, which led him to begin working with the Historical District Council, where he served as president for nearly 10 years. He's written two books, *Creating a Historic District: A Guide for Neighborhoods* and *Historical Preservation and the Livable City* with co-author Laura Peters. During this interview, he speaks about his experience with advocacy and landmarking districts in New York City, and gives perspective on how landmarking can help create more livable cities. He also was involved in the Rebuilt Lower Manhattan Task Force after 9/11 and discusses his experiences balancing function with preservation.

Eric Allison, PhD, AICP, is the founder and coordinator of the Historic Preservation graduate program in the School of Architecture at Pratt Institute. Dr. Allison's research interests are on the role of historic preservation in the creation and maintenance of livable cities, in emerging concepts of heritage preservation, and in the application of Complex Systems Theory to human society, including the future of cities, virtual communities, and the changing nature of the nation-state. He is involved in many organizations in New York City, including the National Council for Preservation Education, the Historic Districts Council, and the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation. Dr. Allison also served on the Rebuild Lower Manhattan Task Force of the Metro Chapter of the American Planning Association after 9/11.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Eric Allison

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Interviewer: Elin Juselius

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Q: This is Elin Juselius interviewing Eric Allison. So, how did you become involved in preservation and planning?

Allison: Well, I moved to Fort Greene, Brooklyn, in 1984 from out on Long Island in the suburbs and got involved with the local preservation organization, the Fort Greene Landmarks [Preservation] Committee, which is the organization that had gotten the Fort Greene [Historic District] designated in the first place and got active with it. It was somewhat moribund and I kind of got it reorganized. It was just doing house tours each year, which were really cool for the neighborhood, because it was a pretty marginal neighborhood back then in '84.

Q: Right. But what interested you in preservation? You were working in finance initially.

Allison: Well, I had been working in finance and then I was working as a freelance writer at that time. It wasn't so much preservation that we were interested in, it's I always liked old houses and this was when the brownstone movement was happening. People were going into neighborhoods and buying brownstones extraordinarily cheap. I paid for a four-story brownstone on Lafayette Avenue, I paid one hundred and fifteen thousand dollars, and we probably put another couple of hundred thousand dollars into it in restorations and a lot of sweat equity. We did almost all the work ourselves on it, which was the only way we could afford it. But the point was it was an

opportunity to move into the city, to have a really a great neighborhood—I mean, it wasn't a great neighborhood, but it looked like a great neighborhood—and to build some equity. Once there, we got involved with the community group.

At the start, it wasn't historic preservation I was interested in, it was history and old houses as part of history. But once I got active in the Fort Greene group, I was on the committee that used to look at the boards each month, the requests for changes to buildings in the historic district. And that brought me into historic preservation, because I was now working and basically spending a lot of my time, when I wasn't writing, down at the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission, testifying, that sort of thing. It was as a citizen activist really that I came into it. Then because I was an activist and I was testifying a lot, I came to the attention of the Historic Districts Council [HDC], and that was in 1988 and they asked me to join the board.

Q: So you had been involved in advocacy efforts since the '80s.

Allison: 1984.

Q: Yeah. And can you talk a bit about how this civic sector has evolved. How has it changed as a movement?

Allison: I'm not sure it really has changed all that much. The same organizations are still doing the same things. I think that there have been ups and downs in that period as to how active people were, how active the organizations were, and how friendly the powers that be have been.

In the last twenty years, it's been a pretty unfriendly environment from the regulatory point of view. You're starting with the [Rudolph] Giuliani administration, but even before that, there was a lot of complaints when I first started out that I didn't understand because I didn't have the history about Gene Norman's tenure and the [Edward I.] Koch administration as the Landmark's chair. People felt that there was a moratorium on historic districts going on. I had nothing to compare it to so I was just listening to what people were saying.

But I think many people who have been in preservation as long as I have would say that the situation has been deteriorating on a regulatory basis while at the same time the number of neighborhoods that want to be historic districts has multiplied. So at the grassroots level, it's bigger than it ever was.

Q: So can you talk a bit about the interaction between civic groups and the Landmark's Preservation Commission then over the years? You were saying that it is—

Allison: Well, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. And the biggest change I've seen, which happened under the Giuliani administration, was that we stopped having access to the commissioners. It used to be we could talk to the commissioners and sort of lobby them a little bit and things like that. Under Jennifer Raab, who was the chair of the Landmarks Commission, they were basically told they weren't allowed to do that. But they were still talking to the real estate people, so the access went from us to the real estate people, which made a remarkable change in the way in which the organizations worked.

Because before, we had been looked at as being kind of, in some ways—I don't want to overstate it, but in some ways the citizen auxiliary of the Landmark Commission. Landmark doesn't have a big enforcement staff, so it was basically the job of local historic district organizations to report to the Landmarks Commission on violations we're having and things like that. They actually, at one point, I took a course at the Landmarks Commission in landmark violation so our organization would know what to report and what not to report, and all that is gone. So it's a much bleaker situation to be in.

On the other hand, they're doing more historic districts than they ever did, because they are now working under a management by objective system that was put in under Giuliani, which is a business term, but it means that you start out at the beginning of the year with saying these are the goals we are going to reach, and it's numerical. So what they now have is a thing that they will do so many historic districts per year and that's upped the number of historic districts being done, but it's made it, I think, harder for the very large districts, because when you're doing that the easy way to do it is to do a whole bunch of small districts that don't take up a lot of your time, as opposed to spending years doing something like the Upper West Side.

Q: So you've mentioned how your interest in historic districts began, but what were some of your ideas behind your doctoral dissertation?

Allison: Well, I went back to school in 1990. By that time, I had—I guess it was around the time I had joined the Historic Districts Council. You may not find this funny, I always think it's funny, but what happened was I was down at the Landmarks Commission with a couple of other

people—yes, it was after I joined the HDC, so it must have been in '88 or '89—with a couple of other people to look at the boards, the proposals. There was a new apartment building going up on Central Park West and I looked at it and I said it looks sort of Art Deco-ish. And the person who was from the Landmarks Commission who was taking us through this looked at it and said, “I thought it looked kind of Secession myself.” And my partner who was there said, “Yes, it looks very Secession.” I had no idea what a Secession was.

I just realized I was totally uneducated in this other than what I was learning on the job. I thought if I'm going to do this, I really need to get an education, and I decided to go back and get a masters degree. I went up to Colombia [University], but I decided not to get a masters degree in preservation because—I'm sorry, I went to Pratt [Institute] rather than Colombia, because I didn't want a masters in preservation. I didn't want to take the conservation course and all that technical stuff. I wanted to get the process and all the rest of it. I went to Pratt and got a planning degree and then went onto Colombia and got a degree in preservation and planning and took all the preservation courses I could for my Ph.D. If I had not gone down that day, I might never have gotten a masters degree or a Ph.D., I would be happily writing books, and off in a corner some place.

Q: Can you discuss your work with the Historic Districts Council before and after becoming president?

Allison: Well, I joined the Historic Districts Council as I said in '88 and I had no idea what I was doing but there were a lot of really good people on the council. Some of the people who actually

founded the council at the time were still there, Joe [Joseph] Rosenberg and Tony [Anthony C.] Wood. It had been a committee of the Municipal Art Society for many, many years, and sometimes it had been active and sometimes it wasn't over that time. But it had just been split off as its own organization the same way the [New York] Landmark Conservancy had been several years earlier. And so it was finding its own independent existence when I was brought on. They were looking for people to bring on who were activists at the time.

Q: Right. So what were some of your goals?

Allison: Well, initially my goals were to be a good board member and I was intending to do nothing more than that. But the longtime treasurer resigned and nobody wanted to be the treasurer so I said I would be the treasurer and that put me into being one of the officers. I did that for a year. Tony Wood—you know Tony, right—okay—and Joe Rosenberg took me to lunch one day. I always tell people, “Be careful going to lunch with Tony.” Every time I go to lunch with Tony—he's a good friend—I get involved in something else that I hadn't planned to do, and it's usually a good thing. They took me to lunch and they said, “We would like you to be the next president of the HDC.” I said basically, “You're nuts.” I had only been on the organization a year at that point and I didn't know enough, I didn't feel I knew enough. They were very persuasive and I finally agreed to be chair if I was convinced that I knew the players well enough. Because that was the thing, I didn't know all the players. I didn't know who all these people were because I hadn't operated on a citywide basis except as a board member for a year, so I had no idea who was who. And Tony was going to stay on as chairman while I would be president, so there would be a backstop for a while. But I think the way I got involved in it is



basically I didn't say no. It's the same thing that happened with the Fort Greene society is somebody came to me to do something and I said yes, and that lasted for ten years.

Q: And why did you believe it was necessary to expand the organization?

Allison: Well, it wasn't so much expand. The organization, we had a really good board. The board is still good. It is amazing the number of people who are willing to put in an incredible amount of work for basically no reward and very little recognition on it, but we had a very good board of directors. But our eyes were much bigger than our stomach and what we needed—one of my talents, partly it's my training and partly it's what I actually do for a living outside of this, is organizational development. I am very, very good at it. I say that because I've built many organizations from scratch and I consult on this, and I cannot not organize. If you give me the chance, I'm going to try to make it organized. Once I became the chair what I saw was we were operating out of post office box. We had no permanent place to meet. It was inadequate for what the organization was trying to do.

One of the first things I managed to get everybody to agree to is we hired an administrator, somebody who could just do the paperwork. And that was okay. The person was okay. But my wife is also a management consultant. She is also a professor of media, but she is also a management consultant. She was a Citibank vice-president for seventeen years, so it just comes out of her; you can't not be after being there. I asked her and she agreed and we held a—on three different days, a complete retreat where we do strategic planning for the organization. It was an all day, facilitated—she's also the best facilitator I have ever come across. You know what a

facilitator is? Okay. We held these three sessions that built on each other basically putting together a five-year strategic plan. So it was the organization as a whole deciding what it wanted to do and based on that, we hired a full-time executive director, we had a whole plan of what we were going to do, we had fundraising goals—it was very clearly laid out. And five years later, we had a second one to do the next five-year plan.

Q: So in the first five years, do you feel that you accomplished your goals?

Allison: I think we accomplished about ninety percent of our goals. People were really swept up in it. One of the things about that kind of thing is if it is facilitated properly, it's not a matter of majority rule or anything like that you come to a consensus. So everybody has participated, everybody agrees, and when you go back to it, if somebody says, "Why are we doing that?" You say, "Well, you know, we all agreed on this." And everybody says, "Yes, we agreed on that." And it pulls people along. To my knowledge, they haven't done that since and I think that's a mistake to not build that kind of consensus on strategically what you're doing as opposed to tactically.

Q: So while you were at the HDC you wrote *Creating an Historic District: A Guide for Neighborhoods*.

Allison: Yes.

Q: How did you create an established guide for such a diversity of neighborhoods each with its own particular set of attributes and circumstances?

Allison: Well, first of all, that was my thesis for here at Pratt in the planning department, and I got permission to do—in the planning department you can do a demonstration of professional competence, which is a project as opposed to a research paper, so that's what I did. What I was actually looking at is not individual historic districts but it's the process of getting the Landmarks Commission to pay attention to you and then to get it through that. So it's basically a step-by-step guide with case studies as to how to organize yourself to become a historic district—and to start the process to become a historic district. What it is you have to do for yourself before they'll even pay attention to you, and then how to get through the process and continue through it and to get them to actually pay attention to you.

So it applies to any historic district so it's not about an individual historic district. It's about the bureaucratic process of becoming a historic district, which includes a lot of neighborhood organization and things like that, but it's the same kind of organization for any group, because it's what's the successful people have done. It's a best practices and how-to book.

Q: Right. So when you were composing it, were there any specific challenges that you faced?

Allison: In terms of doing the book?

Q: Yes.

Allison: No, not really. I mean, I talked to a lot of people. Back when I was doing that, the Landmarks Commission was still friendlier. I mean, you could still do that today, but there were a lot of people who I could talk to about the real process in terms of what happens at their end and what things did they pay attention to, which is to some extent that the squeaky wheel gets the most grease. But also that the best prepared get moved up the queue faster, which makes sense. A lot of the book is about how you become the best prepared. How you come in with the most complete presentation with all the information that they need, in fact, more so if necessary, so that it's easy for them to do it. They're terribly overloaded, terribly underfunded, and terribly understaffed. The more work you can do for them, the more likely it is that they're going to pick you out of a pile, and so that's what it is all about.

Q: Can you talk about your new book, *Historic Preservation and the Livable City*, or some of the ideas and inspirations behind your book and what was it like working with your co-author, Lauren Peters?

Allison: Well, the book came again out of my—I wanted there to be a book like this because I think the historic preservation used by my students—who I'm sure picked this up, at least I hope they did—that I think the historic preservation limits itself in a way that it is harmful to historic preservation by not embracing environmental and sustainability concerns. But the one thing where we can, without changing anything we're doing, contribute to the problems of cities today, is to be a part of the livability movement, which cities more and more are grasping with the concept that this is not just amenities, which means that it's not just things you do when times

are really good and you can afford to have parks or something like that. But rather it's a necessity that if you don't do those things, if you don't put in the bike paths, if you don't put in the environmental friendly stuff, then nobody is going to want to live there and you'll be like most of the rust belt is—a place that people leave at regular intervals.

I didn't see anybody else who was linking historic preservation to that and yet the whole—the cultural end of livability, historic preservation is a part of that. I mean, it shows up in all the various—it's not always labeled that, but you'll find it in all the things that rank historic livable cities and all the rest of it. So it seemed to me that something written in that vein would be valuable.

Now I will say this, I did not actually propose the book to anybody. I was starting to write articles about it and things like that. In one of those things that rarely happens, I got a call from an editor saying would you be interested in writing a book on livable cities and historic preservation. I think it's because I had that in my biography online that that was one of the things I was interested. I was probably the only historic preservationist in the country who had that written down that I was doing that. And I was also a published author; I had co-written three books at that time, written one and co-authored two. So I was known—he knew I could write a book. It took me about two-and-a-half microseconds to say sure when he said that.

As far as working with Lauren, initially I planned to write the book myself and when I was eighteen months overdue on it—which is not excessive, editors think it's excessive, but books are almost always overdue—I realized that I was never going to get it finished without some

help. I knew Lauren as one of my students and the one thing I said to my editor was I wanted to bring in a co-writer. One of the things he said was—and I realized had to be done—is whoever the co-writer it is had to be somebody with credentials that wouldn't look like—I couldn't ask one of my first-year students to do it. It wouldn't like the book was written by somebody who knew what they were talking about.

Lauren was very smart. Her writing style was similar enough to mine that it would mean that the book wouldn't clash, because I had read all her papers all the way down the line, but even beyond that, she was an architect as well as a historic preservationist and she was working at the pre-eminent restoration architecture firm in the city. So that gave her the credentials. I didn't have to tell anybody that she had only graduated two years before, it just looked right on the book, so everything fit.

And she did a fabulous job. We split it up as I did all the narrative, all the theoretical stuff, all the background, all the history, so I wrote about two-thirds of the book, and she did all the case studies. And she was really good at it and she was great at getting at people to talk to and so it was a good collaboration.

Q: So what makes the city livable and how does preservation make the city more livable?

Allison: Well, you've got to buy a copy of the book. It's only sixty-five dollars on Amazon. I don't know why they priced it like that. It's kind of the capsule. It is very simple. You need to do the amenities. You need to pay attention to details if you want to have a livable city. You need to

have streets that people want to walk on. I mean, you have to have all the basics, fire, police protection, all that kind of stuff, anti-crime. But one of the things that's been shown for instance is crime rates go down if lots of people are there. So what you obviously want to do is not have everybody go home at six o'clock at night and the streets are empty. You want to have restaurants and bars and places for people to go and theaters and what have you. It seems like common sense, but it's not very commonsensical when you're Detroit trying to figure out from scratch how to not go out of business.

The examples that I had seen already when I was looking at this were places like Denver, which destroyed most of its old city in urban renewal, but one part of it had been saved by a private group that created Larimer Square, which was a tourist attraction. At the same time, it was still intended to be bulldozed. They were fighting off the bulldozers while they were having this successful tourist attraction and amenity in a dying downtown.

So you start looking at things like that and it's very clear that preserving historic buildings, making them available for loft apartments and things like that—nobody is going to invest in an area that's going to be urban renewal. That's what happened with SoHo. It just happened that artists in New York City moved in there and then agitated—and then the urban renewal that was going to happen was canceled, which was the Lower Manhattan Expressway, leaving the place open and they were then able to become SoHo. But at the time, that whole neighborhood was basically designed to be bulldozed.

And yet if you look at what it had become, with no investment from the city at all—it was all private capital, personal private capital, not private capital in a sense of big corporations—it created an amenity that helped to bring the whole downtown of New York back to life. It was not historic preservation, but it was the preservation of historic buildings by people reoccupying them and using them. Then they went for historic preservation, for landmarking, to preserve what they had created.

The thing that I was coming out of was very few of these lists actually say historic preservation. They talk about cultural, they talk about preserving heritage buildings and things like that, but they don't put the next step on it, that protecting heritage resources and putting money into fixing them is a necessity, not again something you do after you have done everything else. That's what the book was about. I used the case studies in there of places like Vancouver, which have embraced and recognized this and it's part of what they actually do.

Q: In your final chapter, the global picture, on the global cities around the world, what can American cities learn from these cities?

Allison: I think they can see how what the successful cities have done can be applied to their own particular circumstances. It's not a cookie cutter thing it's a conceptual thing. For instance, I was in Detroit recently and I was taking a complete tour of the city, which was horrendous to see, but they are doing some things right. For instance, there is an old marketplace, which had gotten pretty moribund. Historic, but we weren't looking at it because it's Nineteenth Century. But local groups had gotten together and one of the problems in disadvantaged neighborhoods is



there's usually a lack of fresh food. Everything is canned, everything is—and I am not a great vegetarian kind of person, but the point is that you need fresh things, you need more variety and whatever. They started trying to rejuvenate these markets, not from an historic point-of-view, but from the point-of-view of basically helping disadvantaged Detroiters.

And in the process of that though, because they are historic buildings, they fixed up these historic buildings that these are in and it's today a thriving and now expanding marketplace that's crowded year-round. And I think they are now, or they have been, they're becoming—preserve the buildings, historic buildings, landmarked buildings. This is just again, citizen advocacy that the city has agreed to and helped with.

That's the kind of thing you do. You look for the opportunities. Where are there places where you could encourage people to move in? There are lots of neighborhoods in Detroit that have abandoned buildings in the middle of beautiful neighborhoods that people are living in. Why not do what New York City did in the '80s where they had several thousand buildings that were in rem, that means they had been taken for taxes, for back taxes that hadn't been paid. They came up with a plan to sell the buildings for a very low price to people who qualified as low or moderate income who would live in the houses for at least ten years before they sold them, and they arranged for subsidized mortgages for them and loans for rehabilitation.

There was one done in my neighborhood around the corner right outside the historic district. It was bought a New York City schoolteacher with two kids, no husband, and she was thrilled. And she actually a year after she got in there she was on a house tour for what she had done to the

house. Why not do something like that? Take historic neighborhoods, protect them as historic districts so that their quality won't change, and encourage urban homesteading in those ones that are falling apart. There are things that you can do that are historic preservation but their end purpose is not historic preservation it's a tool, just like main street revitalization.

Q: Do you have any examples of cities around the world that you've looked at?

Allison: Well, I would say most of the ones that we were working with—well, probably the best one, there is one that is Station Square in Pittsburgh. Go back thirty years, Pittsburgh was a dying city. It had lost an enormous amount of population. Its whole reason for being was the steel industry and it was gone. It was considered to be one of the cities that was going to disappear. It was losing population the way Detroit was, Cleveland, and whatever. An historic preservation organization, the Pittsburgh Landmark and History Foundation—I have never looked into the details of how they did it—but they took over an area called Station Square. It's the old Pennsylvania railroad station that's across the river from downtown Pittsburgh. They did it because they wanted to save the building. And they managed to get funding and they began rehabilitating the station—and it was a huge complex not just a station. Then they persuaded a hotel to come in and build a hotel on this newly renovated area.

Anyway, to make a long story short, Station Square became a destination for people to come to, it's easy to get to, it's on public transportation, you can drive there right across the bridge, and it's one of the things that helped to spark the rejuvenation of Pittsburgh. Not the whole thing, because a lot of it was the mayor who went out and practically shanghaied high-tech places to

come in to provide jobs and whatever in Pittsburgh, but they also showed that these old pieces of Pittsburgh that were still hanging around could be transformed into something that was economic development, but it was also preservation. I think to a large extent it started with this preservation organization showing that you can do it. There were other initiatives going on as well, but I think that was a turning point.

Cleveland has started. Denver is the other one. That's the other best one I can give you, which they finally after fighting Larimer Square for years finally decided to embrace it and then create a historic district out of what was left of the lower downtown, which was the original area of Pittsburgh. And it was because they had created the historic district that people felt safer making investments in it because it was no longer listed for demolition. Of course the whole story of the Wynkoop Brewery and [John W.] Hickenlooper and his partners and whatever came out of that. They made that initial investment in the restaurant, then they started selling loft apartments and it wouldn't have happened though if it wasn't a historic district. Or at least they had to turn it into a non-urban renewal. But even so, the historic district meant that the city had committed to keep it. And I think that's the first step in any of these things is to do that.

Q: And can you discuss your work with the CECPP [Citizen's Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation] and your role in its activities?

Allison: Well, the CECPP was created out of lunch with Tony Wood again actually. The CECPP work came out of frustration. The Landmark Commission we felt was not—there are actually three presidents of HDC on the CECPP and we were very—how to put this without insulting

anybody? Because I don't want to insult anybody. I don't want to be insulting to anybody. We saw the situation in the city getting worse and worse in terms of how the Landmarks Commission was treating things. Things like 2 Columbus Circle were clearly way off the rails on something like that. And what we were worried about is that the mainstream preservation organizations were no longer, from our point-of-view, doing a lot of advocacy on the problems with the commission. Now Landmark West! does it, and GVSHP [Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation] certainly does it, but on a city-wide basis the Municipal Art Society, which used to be the leader in historic preservation, which the rest of us kind of followed along like ducklings in their wake, has basically abandoned it completely except for occasional big projects kinds of things. They're mostly doing planning and they're not even doing a whole hell a lot of that.

The Landmark Conservancy, which at one time had done a fair amount of advocacy, had decided to concentrate on their strengths, which are—they do grants and loans, they do a lot of work with landmarks and things like that—but they're not an advocacy organization in a sense that they're the one beating on the door at the Landmarks Commission saying you have to do this. And they do really good work and some of their projects that they work on like Governor's Island and things like that are just fabulous what they do.

But they basically decided that they didn't have the resources to do both, or didn't want to do both, and they went in that direction. And that left HDC as the only real city-wide advocacy group. And one of the things I tried to do in my ten years there was to convince the board that we needed to step into the vacuum that was being left and be more of a city-wide advocate for

preservation to criticize the Landmarks Commission. The stuff that had been done by the other organizations that they were no longer doing.

The reason I quit, besides the fact that I was burning out—ten years is an awfully long time to run something like that—was that I got the board so far and no further. We had gotten to the point where we were a really strong advocate for the neighborhoods, and all the rest of that, in fact we were the only people out there—not really we anymore, although I am still an advisor—but got to be a really strong advocate to really help the neighborhoods through this process.

There is nobody else out there to do that kind of thing. But they didn't feel that the organization, I think, had the capacity to fill what I saw as this huge gap and that's why I left. At least one of my successors felt the same way.

Nobody was sitting there and saying the emperor has no clothes. Everybody felt they had—a lot of people I think legitimately felt that you really couldn't criticize the Landmarks Commission too much, because if you did, you'd lose your access and you would lose your ability to influence them, and that's a legitimate thing. If you're trying to save historic buildings and historic districts pissing off the Landmarks Commission is probably not the way to do it. But the group of people who coalesced—anyway, so after this particular thing, Tony and I, and a couple of other people, we got a seminar set up, a conference to get a whole bunch of people in to talk about this as a problem. The upshot of it was after two or three of these—we had over one hundred people at the first one—was that we needed to set up an organization that would basically be willing to be the thorn in the side of the Landmarks Commission if that was necessary, to basically do the things that nobody else could do without ruining their access.

We got a group of like-minded people together. We had three previous chairs of HDC and another board member of HDC and a couple of other people who were long-time involved people, and we decided that we would take on this particular thing. It was just a matter of being pissed off. We called it the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation because we followed an old Greenwich Village, supposedly Jane Jacobs-derived thing, which is that you put what you're doing in the name of the organization so if they write an article about you they have to mention what you're doing at least once. That's why they had things like the Citizen's Committee to Stop Bus Traffic in Washington Square Park. And that's what we do. We're basically out there to do the things nobody else will do. We've sued the Landmarks Commission four times. We've won once. We may have a settlement on the current one that looks like we may get some of the things that we wanted that the Landmarks Commission gave away.

Q: Do you have any specific long-term goals?

Allison: Basically to keep pushing. We're pushing the [New York] City Council. I think we're also pushing the preservation organizations to some extent. We can give them cover. It's always nice if you can walk into somebody—and not just landmarks, anything—and say, “Look, if you deal with us, you don't have to deal with the crazies out there. They're out there. If you deal with us, it will diffuse what they're saying about you.” So if we can be the crazies out there who allow HDC more leeway to push the Commission, because then we can say—they can say, “Well, if you guys do this with us, then they'll stop yelling at you over in the corner.” And I think that's literally what it is.

We're very careful about what battles we're picking, because we try to go after the stuff that we think is particularly egregious. But it's people who are just fed up, so it really is a citizen's committee. It was created out of the people who came to those meetings and volunteered to be on the steering committee and we survive on checks written out to a not-for-profit that allow us to continue our work on a shoestring.

Q: And you're involved in the Rebuild Lower Manhattan Task Force after 9/11 [September 11 Attacks].

Allison: Yeah.

Q: Can you talk a bit about your role and experience there?

Allison: Sure. I was on the—I'm a planner by trade and I was, at one point, on the board of the [New York] Metro Chapter of the American Planning Association. The branch of the national organization in New York City. I was one of the officers of it. And when 9/11 happened, one of the things—a lot of the architect organizations got together, the planners got together, there was a whole bunch of people who got together, and said the city is likely to make hash out of this. They're going to run around in circles, they're going to take the path of least resistance and is there a way that we can influence what happened down there—what would be built down there—so that it would make sense as opposed to taking whatever the developers wanted.

There was an organization that was put together—and I'm trying to think the name of it was—which was the architects and the construction engineers and the planners, preservationists, and a whole bunch of other people got together and said let's come up with a unified plan instead of everybody coming up with individual plans that clashed with each other. So I was the representative on that for APA [American Planning Association]. APA itself had its own committee, which was looking at it from a strictly planning point of view that myself and a couple of other people who were on the other committee were working with. And it was the same thing. It was basically to try to put together and influence them on what they were doing rather than just doing rather than just doing whatever was the quick and dirty answer.

That also led me to be one of the two APA representatives as a consulting party on the work being done by the Port Authority [of New York and New Jersey]. So I spent ten months I think on that. They all kind of blur together because they were all about the same thing and there were different attributes of it. Again, there was a Section 106 process [of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966] going on, there was—the whole concept of what was going to be built was being looked at, and there were probably about fifty people who would convene at regular intervals with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and the Port Authority, and all the rest of those people. They would report to us and we'd make comments and back and forth.

In general it worked. There's always compromises on all these back room things and a lot of them were big things that were done. One of the small things that I am actually very proud of is that I probably kept them from, by speaking up at the right time at the right moment, to keeping the little section of where the connection went to the Chambers Street station from the underground plaza



and the [World] Trade Center that was supposed to be demolished to build the Fulton Street transit center thing. I pointed out that that was the last remaining section of the World Trade Center that was still in existence and the engineers talked about it and said well, we can change the floor height right here or something like that. As far as I know, it's planned to be kept.

Sometimes you can just do those little things and they now have a plaque there that says this is the old entrance from the World Trade Center to the train station. And one of the things I love about it is it is very '60s architecture if you go down and look at it. It was rather heart-rending because there were also representatives of the survivors, there were representatives of the relatives. These were people who were hurting. When we were doing this, we were meeting at 1 Liberty Plaza, and when we started all this it was still burning. Right up through into December the streets were still gritty—when you walked on it they crunched.

So we were going down there all the time. One of the people who I sat with all the time, she ran a not-for-profit organization that had a deal with the Trade Center that her offices would be in whatever room was empty, suite was empty, so she moved around. Whenever they rented it out, they put her in another suite. She was having breakfast in the Windows on the World that morning. Her breakfast meeting ended at eight-thirty and she got on the first elevator and went down. Nobody who waited for the second elevator got out of the building because the planes hit about the time she got out of the elevator.

It was very real for us when we were doing this and there were a lot of things I didn't like. And I came out of it with a real feeling of failure. And it wasn't until later that I started looking at it and

realized how much we managed to save. Like the fight over the survivors stair, which is being saved now, because there were people in the room who had gotten out going down those stairs and felt that this was something that they wanted as part of the story. So in the end I was actually pretty happy about it, but it was hard. I stayed with it for, I think, eleven months and after that I felt like no progress was being made and I was burned out.

Q: Can you discuss your role in the founding of Pratt [Institute] Historic Preservation program. What were some initial roles and thoughts for the program?

Allison: Well, okay. Well, when I was at Pratt in the early '90s, it seemed to me that—as I said, I went and got a planning degree and then I got a—it seemed to me that Pratt would be a perfect place to create a historic preservation program that was the way I thought of it at the time was sort of up-to-date. I thought that looking at the graduates that I had been working with, who were working at the Landmarks Commission and working at all these various organizations and working for me of the preservation organization, and talking to some of them—Vicki Weiner worked for me when I was at HDC for instance, she was our second executive director and did a fabulous job. But that preservation education was still stuck where it had been in 1975 and that the field had moved on. Not that what they were learning was wrong, but that it wasn't complete in my way of thinking.

Pratt with its community focus and the way the Planning Department worked, I thought that more process needed to be put into the thing. So while I was still a student, I proposed to then dean of the architecture school to create a historic preservation program. She was very interested in it and we were actually talking about it and then she was basically ridden out of town on a rail by the faculty.

There was a revolt over her leadership of the school and she left. And I forgot about it for a while.

By that time, I was running HDC and all the rest of it.

In—when was it, I have to think here—I guess—actually I have to look at my own CV to figure out when some of these things are—so that was '92. In 1995, I went to—god, it was only three years later—I went to the new chair, the dean, who is Tom [Thomas] Hanrahan, and I proposed it to him, he was interested. At that time I was teaching one class, I was an adjunct, and I put together an advisory committee. I got people like Tony Wood and a whole bunch of people who were interested in this sort of thing together and we talked about what would be a good program. While we were doing that, we put together a certificate program within the planning school and that went for a little while. That was in 1996. But then the chair changed of the department, they were more interested in something else, and so that kind of slid into obscurity.

Then in 2002—by the way, I was made coordinator of the certificate program. I had at least—I wasn't being paid anything, but at least I had a title. So back in 2002, by that time, we had done several things with the advisory committee and I proposed it and the dean said yeah, let's go ahead. I put together the outline of the program, what it was, and recruited Vicki and Ned [Kaufman] and we spent a year, basically, getting together at regular intervals and devising a program from scratch.

Q: So can you talk a bit about the program itself and what your goals were?

Allison: Well, the goals were, as I said, was to fill the gap. To produce people that came out understanding advocacy. Seeing the connections between what preservation was and other fields

like architecture, like the environmental stuff, like livable cities. We weren't talking about livable cities then. But that it was not an isolated field that we should just pay attention to ourselves and nothing else. That we had a lot of connections out there and we needed to reach out to them because then we're stronger that way.

The idea of, as I said, taking from planning not planning's programs, but the idea of processes. We don't teach design. We're not about design. We're not designing anything. If you want design, become a designer, which Columbia spends a lot of time on. But I was bringing it from an advocate's point-of-view and my experience as an advocate to do this. I think we have done about eighty-five percent of what I was hoping for at this point. If you figure the first class was 2004, so it's not that long in dog years that we've done this, and we're still tinkering with it as we go along. There are probably going to be some changes next year in it again.

Q: Can you mention any of those, where do you see the future in preservation education?

Allison: Well, one of the things we're tinkering with, we don't teach conservation. I left it out because it takes up a lot of the curriculum. I think there are fifteen credits of conservation at Columbia that everybody takes. Because I didn't come at it with a preservation degree, from my point-of-view, conservation was kind of a separate thing from saving buildings. It's what you do after you save the buildings.

But there seems to be—I think it would be useful for the students to have exposure to it and to be able to have it as a resume item, frankly. There are some things we put in there because you have to

have it on your resume and you don't want to have to learn it on the fly. So there is a possibility that we will be putting in a course—this is not certain at this point—but a conservation course in that would tie in with Theo's [Theodore Prudon] course. So there will actually be two courses about how buildings work and one of them would be his course and the other would be about the conservation of buildings. We'll see if that happens. It's not for announcement yet, because it may never happen. He's putting together a proposal for it.

Q: Right. So finally, have you considered methods of archiving your papers, like newspaper articles?

Allison: Oh god, well, I'm starting to archive stuff myself, but I'm terrible at it. The other day I was thinking—I'm on the [New York Preservation] Archive Project board, I'm all this stuff, and I have almost no paperwork. I do have the original—I don't have the first—actually, I do, I found it the other day—I have the first proposal, I have the second proposal, and I have the revised proposal in a file. And it's interesting to go back and look at them to see what I said we wanted to do and what we've done and it really is amazing to me that the original concept has largely survived and seems to be working.

Q: But I mean more broadly in general, newspaper articles and your work in general.

Allison: No.

Q: No.

Allison: Well, I'm starting to now. My wife keeps telling, "You've got to save this stuff." I kept the photograph. That's the CECCP right there. The only time my photographs have been in *The New York Times*, they didn't bother to put our names under it. I know they had them. But no, I haven't. In my defense, I would say it is not a matter of deliberately not doing it, it's a matter that as you may notice, I am not the most organized person when it comes to paperwork. Anything else I am very organized about. I can build organizations, I can do all that kind of stuff, I cannot keep my paperwork straight. So it kind of disappears. But I am trying now, she keeps nudging me. I was quoted in the *Times* two weeks ago and she said to me, "You have to take that out and put it in your docket." Okay, I put it in my folder. She is much more organized than I am and I think that that will cause most of my archives to be saved.

Q: Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

Allison: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]