

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

The Reminiscences of
Jeffrey Kroessler

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jeffrey Kroessler conducted by Interviewer Sarah Sher on March 9, 2012. 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. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Jeffrey Koessler is a historian and preservation advocate in New York City. He discusses the unique challenges of historical preservation in Queens, detailing many political struggles with the Borough government and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. He was involved in the efforts to preserve the Terra-Cotta Company Office, one of the first landmark designations in Queens, and to landmark Sunnyside Gardens. Sunnyside Gardens' landmarking battle was extensive, and he discusses many of the challenges to receiving the landmark designation. He also discusses the how historical preservation has changed and evolved over the years and the challenges in historical preservation moving forward, in Queens and New York City.

Dr. Jeffrey A. Kroessler, historian and preservationist, is the founder and president of the Queensborough Preservation League and a leading preservation activist in Queens. He is on the board of advisors for the Historic Districts Council and is a member of the Municipal Art Society's preservation committee. He is also Acting Chair of the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation, and he is a Centennial Historian, member of a distinguished group who advised on New York City 100: Greater New York Centennial Celebration history programming in 1998.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Jeffrey Kroessler

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Sarah Sher

Date: March 9, 2012

Q: All right. So it is March 9, 2012, and my name is Sarah Sher and I'm here with Jeffrey Kroessler to talk about both your preservation advocacy in Queens as well as citywide in New York City. I would like to start with Queens and then go more broad after that. So first I'm interested in hearing how you got involved in preservation in the first place. I know you're a historian and I'm not sure if that's what led you to it in the first place, but if you could discuss that.

Kroessler: In the first place, few historians are led to preservation.

Q: Few historians.

Kroessler: That's few historians. There is a great divide between academic historians and historic preservationists, surprisingly. You would think that they would be more in tune with each other, but they're not. And quite often when academic historians turn to preservation, they get it wrong. But I was, at the time I got involved with this, an academic historian or training to be an academic historian. I was in the graduate program at the City University [of New York] [CUNY] Graduate School. Actually, even before then, I was working at LaGuardia Community College in the community history program, which had been founded to collect information about local history.

Local historians, even local historians, aren't always preservationists. The old school local historians are more antiquarians and the idea of advocacy for the historic built environment is alien to that breed of local historian. I've got a masters in history at that point. I'm working at the community history program. We're doing public history—putting exhibits of leisure in Queens, work in Queens, transportation in Queens. We're putting these exhibits up in public places and each year they produce a calendar on a historical theme about Queens at that time.

And as such, I became involved with the [Greater] Astoria Historical Society. I had moved to Astoria and so I became involved with them just because they sponsored our calendar, they cosponsored certain events, we did programs for them involving some of the same people. So it was a way for an academic enterprise, LaGuardia Community College community history program, to gain legitimacy in the community by working with the Astoria Historical Society, which at that time was not necessarily engaged in preservation efforts.

The issue that began had nothing to do with the community history program necessarily, but we became aware of the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company. The office building of the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta building was under the [Ed Koch] Queensboro Bridge, just south of the Queensboro Bridge. Susan Tunick became—who is an expert in terra cotta, all things terra cotta—became engaged in rescuing this building, became aware of this building and then wanted to preserve this building. And I don't

know how she found me exactly, but somehow. I was with the Astoria Historical Society and LaGuardia Community History Program—at this point, I might have left LaGuardia and was now at the CUNY Graduate School in urban history—and we had a long campaign to try and designate the Terra-Cotta Building.

This was at a time when Donald [R.] Manes was the borough president of Queens. He was not a friend of preservation. He was an honestly corrupt borough president, and I mean that in the best way, best sense of the word. We had a site on the Queens waterfront, a largely empty site on the Queens waterfront, one lonely building, and there were lots of discussions as to what should be going on, on the Queens waterfront floated around over and over again, from housing to an art center. This was in the early '80s. This was like 1980, '81, because as this is the end of the fiscal crisis, but the city is still broke, and there had been no municipal investment for years. So the idea is that you've got—suddenly money that is going to begin flowing and we understood that a man like Donald Manes would want to get some of it.

He's also on the [New York City] Board of Estimate. The way the [New York City] Landmarks Law worked is that everything has to go to the Board of Estimate. So if we get Donny, Donald Manes, to support a designation, the other borough presidents will go along and then the mayor and everyone else will go along and it's assured. If Donald Manes opposes it, and he did have a history of overturning designations at the Board of Estimate. We engaged in discussions to try and strategize how do we get this designate. We weren't at all sure that the [New York City] Landmarks [Preservation] Commission

[LPC] would designate this only to have it turned back. They had turned back the Steinway Village row houses and they had also turned back the Triboro Theater in Queens, so they may have been a little gun shy.

So Susan put together a group of us and we would meet regularly. It involved me, from the Greater Astoria Historical Society, Tony [Anthony C.] Wood, Susan Tunick, and Laurie Beckelman, who at that time I believe was at the [New York] Landmarks Conservancy.

Q: Oh, so not a chair yet?

Kroessler: No, she was simply a civilian at the Landmarks Conservancy. We were all young, more or less, and we met for lunch every couple of weeks. We met for lunch at the Bowery Savings Bank on Forty-Second Street across from Grand Central, because Jane Stanicki, a vice president at the Bowery, invited us into the corporate executive dining room and we would have a catered lunch every couple of weeks to discuss the Terra Cotta building. We did come up with strategies—letter writing, who to approach, when to talk them, what have we heard. It was a very ongoing constructive set of discussions and it was designated a landmark. Let me think. Was it this one?

We had ultimately a meeting with Donald Manes, except he was out that day and we met with his deputy borough president, Claire [K.] Shulman. We're sitting in Borough Hall and this was pre-[Rudolph] Giuliani banning smoking, obviously. This is the [Edward I.]

Koch years. We're sitting in a conference room at Borough Hall and it's me, because I'm a Queens guy who has to be at the meeting, and Susan Tunick, and I don't know who else was there, but I know Brendan Gill was there. Brendan Gill is with us and lobbying, lobbying, lobbying about the Terra Cotta Building and at the meeting Claire Shulman had been smoking during the meeting, you know, she had a cigarette. And at the very end after we thought some great progress, Brendan Gill said something like, "And madame, deputy borough president, I hope you will resolve to curtail your evil habit of smoking and resolve to leave it." At which point Claire is putting another cigarette in her mouth and lighting it with a steely, Democratic machine gaze in her eyes at Brendan Gill.

But we did secure his vote even though—it was difficult because Citibank either owned the property or was buying the property. So we have the Democratic power structure in Queens, Citibank, Queens's waterfront, and money floating around, and the idea that they would designate it was a little unusual. That was my first taste of preservation. I believe the Municipal Art Society [MAS] gave one of their awards—they used to give awards to community groups and preservation and do-good city people—and I believe Greater Astoria got one of those awards early on because of this campaign and getting it designated. Even though Greater Astoria hadn't done much except be the Queens group on the ground.

I'm still in graduate school and thinking about—I'm doing a dissertation on Queens because I started out at the community history program at LaGuardia Community College as the researcher, executive director. When I went to graduate school the idea is find a

topic that is searching for its historian. Queens had no academic history about it, so that's what I decided to do. In that capacity, I would go to the Queens Borough Public Library to do research. I encountered people who had done writing about Queens. In moving in those circles, I encountered Nina Rappaport who was then the director of the Sunnyside Foundation.

Now the Sunnyside Foundation was a non-for-profit founded to do good work in historic Sunnyside Gardens, which was not a historic district but was protected by special zoning and their efforts were to create the gradual improvement of Sunnyside Gardens to bring it back to its historic self, its historic character. So that's their mission. I got involved with Nina and we decided to create something called the Queensborough Preservation League. It began with individuals and organizations, the Greater Astoria Historical Society, the Sunnyside Foundation, and whatever other groups were out there in Queens.

Q: Okay. So it was a conglomeration of different—

Kroessler: Yeah. It was early on reaching out to individuals who had an affinity for preservation and there weren't a lot. I can barely remember who was involved at this point. We might have had some people from the Queens Historical Society or not. But it was very much a young group and not a very well connected group. We just threw this together.

We would have meetings to discuss what should be preserved, what's the state of preservation, how do we do this. Nina and I decided that we should put together a little book called *Historic Preservation in Queens* or whatever we were going to call it. This is early in the preservation—I had no idea—this is early in the preservation movement, because I thought it was—already had been here for preservation for ever and everyone had been doing all this stuff and we are late to the dance in Queens, when in fact, it's only like 1983 [laughter]. The law is only twenty years old.

In any event, we had this idea and out of that we applied for funding with the J.M. Kaplan Fund and I believe at that time Tony was associated with the J.M. Kaplan fund maybe, and he funded our project. We met with them a couple of times and they funded the money through a third party, because Queensborough Preservation League didn't have a [section] 501(c)3 or anything, it was just a name with a letterhead with a couple of names. We would testify at the commission on preservation things in Queens, as a way of just getting involved.

Q: Were there specific goals that you set out when you formed the Preservation League?

Kroessler: Just how do we further preservation in Queens. How do we get things designated in Queens? We don't have a lot and there are historic places out here so how do we advance that. That was all that we were thinking.

Q: Right. And did the book help at all?

Kroessler: No, not at all [*laughter*]. I went through it recently. The book came out in '88 and I think in '88—my dates are little off here because it's all like in the mist of the past.

Q: I think it was finished in 1990. I got to flip through it before this.

Kroessler: Nineteen-Ninety. That was the—yeah. So I looked at it twenty years later in '10 I guess. How many things—how many sites had been designated that had listed in the book by 2010. It was like four, five, not a lot. We put this out there, as a way of saying look, here's a preliminary inventory of what's out there and these are worthy of designation. The Landmarks Commission did not jump to designate any of them. They only designated things that came before them and they weren't looking for things to designate in Queens.

We did it at a time when this was a common preservation advocacy step. Tribeca, Ladies Mile—lots of neighborhoods have these kinds of—Jackson Heights did it a year or two after we did to great effect; very nice volume. But they gave us funding to do the *Historic Preservation of Queens* book and we actually got it done. God, without—I mean, it was early in the computer age, I did not have a computer. Nina had one of the first Apple Macintoshes, which was the little box thing. We were trying to save things and, you know, I would make changes on paper, then she would enter it or not, and it was just such a mess ultimately. But we did get it done and it was a very important thing to have done even if it didn't result in a string of designations to follow.

Q: Right. And so how has the Queensborough Preservation League evolved over the years?

Kroessler: It dissolved.

Q: It dissolved.

Kroessler: Yeah, it just dissolved. Nina moved away and the Sunnyside Foundation fell apart, number one. It was good to have an organization with an office, with office staff that you could use as just an anchor for a group that exists on the letterhead. So she moved away and the Sunnyside Foundation collapses pretty much.

Then we have—I'm deep into my graduate school, I'm teaching, I'm doing exhibits for the Queens Historical Society, I'm making a living and I'm making a living with like two things here, one thing there, and like it's just throwing everything together as a freelancer. So I didn't have time to keep on it, although we did have meetings from time to time and we had some money from the book that we put into an account that was used up and then just was lost through bank fees I guess.

We did have some success with it, but it just did not persist. It was a good organization to have a presence in Queens at the time, but you can't keep dragging people in it. And the fact that there are no wins, that you don't really get any victories. Some people come into

an organization and they want to designate to save one particular thing, when that doesn't happen, they go away, and that's the end of it.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: It's a rare character who understands that you're involved for the principle of saving these things, and the law of saving these things, as much as the particular.

Q: Right. The sentimental attachment.

Kroessler: Yeah. Or the local, you know, we want to save this in our neighborhood.

Okay. Then you don't, and it's like preservation doesn't work. Not too often. Not in Queens. Not today. Come back tomorrow.

Q: Yeah. Well, sort of fast-forward into the future a bit, I did want to talk about Sunnyside Gardens specifically. Could you just explain the events surrounding the designation of Sunnyside Gardens Historic District and what role you played in its designation? I remember following it a bit.

Kroessler: Sure. There was one other—before we get to that—

Q: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Kroessler:—just to talk about borough hall. Borough hall appointed a borough historian. Every county in the State of New York has to have a county historian and Queens appointed a complete nincompoop as borough historian. They have a history of appointing complete nincompoops as borough historians. And he actually had been on the Landmarks Commission, or the first director of the Landmarks Commission, and he was sitting as the borough historian. We brought together historians, local historians from around the borough, meeting at borough hall to talk about history, preservation and whatever else. And it had the potential to be a really effective tool, except that you had not exactly a bright guy at the head of the table and you have a borough hall administration that isn't behind preservation, but had a group within borough hall been advocating strongly and pushing it could have happened, but that did not.

But we all attended these meetings for several years and we put together—one or two Queens's history conferences came out of this. There were some—the idea of bringing people together to do this was a positive. One of the events was the Poppenhusen Institute came. The Poppenhusen Institute was a 1860s public building, which had had a big theater, meeting rooms in College Point Queens built by Conrad Poppenhusen for the community, which was his workers in his factory.

There was a board of the Poppenhusen Institute and there were also College Point residents who wanted to preserve it. The board had the great idea that this is an enormous building, it takes a lot of money, what if we sold the building, tore it down basically, and used the money for scholarships or something like that, which is quite the scam these

days. Other not-for-profits have done that. Then, for them, it wasn't a scam. It was this is a headache, we're losing money, and we can't do anything with it. I actually chaired that meeting and the decision was no we can't. We can't approve that and essentially turn back the idea. We supported the insurgents against the board and eventually the board was forced to cede control and could not tear it down. So now the building is still there and they're still working on it, but it's still a losing proposition.

So there were these—you know, an advancement of preservation as better than giving up. And there were voices in favor of this from College Point to Sunnyside, Astoria, in Flushing. Like people around who were involved in this and were committed enough to write letters to the Landmarks Commission or the mayor or something like that.

But at some point I decided I can't waste anymore hours at Queens Borough Hall, especially after the book came out. Actually a bit before that, I had pretty much backed away from it and the new borough historian, Stanley Cogan, had meetings at borough hall. And I took it as—I had brought him into the Historic Districts Council [HDC], and I took it as intentional that he did not invite me to the meetings that he convened at borough hall, which was fine with me, because I wanted no part of what was going on there. Because, you know, after Donald Manes killed himself, Claire Shulman became borough president and she was not a friend of preservation.

Anyway, once Claire appointed Stanley and had these meetings at borough hall going nowhere, I mean, literally I just backed away from all of it. Finished my dissertation, got

other jobs, was involved in other things, but was involved in preservation on a citywide basis. In one of the meetings that we had with Tony, afterwards I talked to him and he asked me if I would join the Historic Districts Council [HDC], sometime in the mid '80s. I said sure, you know, not knowing what it would entail some twenty-five years later.

So I got involved with HDC and then later on, I don't know, about eight years after that, I was asked to be on the Municipal Art Society Preservation Committee. So I'm on HDC's board, I'm on the MAS Preservation Committee and still talked to preservationists out in Queens about issues that they're confronting and what we're doing. I guess I stepped away from day-to-day involvement in everything in Queens, but stepped very much into citywide preservation advocacy.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: So getting back to Sunnyside. I got married [*laughing*]. That's the middle of the story.

Q: Yes.

Kroessler: I had been aware of Sunnyside for years because it was part of my research. Doing a dissertation on Queens, Sunnyside was part of it. Working with Nina Rappaport about the Sunnyside Foundation and preservation efforts. All of that's the pre-history. The later history is when my wife and I got married I was living in an apartment in

Astoria. The top floor of a two-family house. Laura was living in a rent-stabilized apartment on West Eighty-Fifth Street at Riverside, so she has no view of the river. It's not like she's overlooking the harbor. You know, she's got the air shaft and some light coming out.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: So even after we got married, we kept our two apartments. I mean, we mostly lived in Queens, but we had to keep the two apartments for stuff and everything else. We began looking for a house and I repeatedly approached a friend of mine from the Queensborough Preservation League who was in Sunnyside, who founded the Sunnyside Foundation, Dorothy Morehead, and she had a real estate agent. I said, "Dorothy, we're looking for a house." She never really took me seriously necessarily because—I don't know why it just took a while. But after two years, she finally did find us a house. She said, "Well, we have a house for you in May." This is January. "We need it now. We need it now." It came through when she said and we bought it. She made sure that we got the house basically by not showing it to anyone else. "Here's the house." It's like, "Okay, good, we'll take it."

Q: Nice.

Kroessler: So we took the house. Well, it took two years.

Q: Two years, but still.

Kroessler: She lived on the block so when houses come up she was determining who is going to buy this house, you know, managing the neighborhood in that way.

Q: That's powerful.

Kroessler: It is. Yeah. I had been shopping around Queens with Laura and there were limited places that we would go to. Astoria was becoming architecturally and urbanistically chaotic because people were buying properties and doing horrible things to it, illegal driveways, illegal pavement, there's no protection, illegal additions, and the zoning was permitting legal additions. It was not a good—I mean, it's not an environment I wanted to live in.

So we determined that if we wanted a house with a backyard, and the only way to protect your investment, our investment, the only way to protect ourselves from Queens's chaos was by buying into a historic district. But what's in Queens? you have Douglaston. We can't afford eight hundred thousand dollars for a house in Douglaston. There is Hunter's Point, Jackson Heights. We don't want an apartment, we want a house.

So we picked Sunnyside Gardens and coincidentally—we were married in 2000, we bought our house in 2004. About 2002, '03, some residents of Sunnyside Gardens began a campaign to become designated a historic district, and they did it. They got involved

with me because they had approached Historic Districts Council, Simeon [Bankoff] sent them to me. I'm talking to them, I'm thrilled that they're doing this, I'm attending some meetings with them, we're talking about the designation process and regulation and whatever else, and meanwhile Laura and I are looking for a house. So we bought a house in the Gardens at the time that the preservation fight was picking up, was beginning to accelerate. Can we stop for a second?

Q: Yeah.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Yes.

Kroessler: My wife and I bought specifically because we knew it would be a protected neighborhood. There was already a layer of protection in the neighborhood through its Special Planned Community Preservation District status. And we moved in just as the preservation fight was accelerating. My wife is an architect. She was working for an architectural firm in Manhattan at the time, decided to go out on her own in 2005, and did. "Well, what if I go out on my own?" It's like, "Well, if no one walks through the door for a year, I'm sure we can cover it, just based on what you have in the bank, what I'm making, I think we can cover if no one—you know, even with a mortgage I think we can do it."

She was, “Well, I don’t know if I should do it or not.” And we looked at the corner of our street, there’s a commercial strip right at the edge of the district, and there’s a for rent sign on a shop next to the shoe maker and the barber. For rent, like a room twice as big as this on the street and it’s like, “Well, yeah, you can do that.”

She rents this and puts up her sign, Laura Heim Architect, on the door and starts getting some business slowly. But she’s in her office as an architect, beginning to get business from Sunnyside Gardens. I’m a historian, academic, librarian at this point, doing historic preservation advocacy and talking with my neighbors now about preserving the neighborhood. It got really unpleasant really quickly in Sunnyside Gardens, unnecessarily so. Laura had never been in a—she had never done any stuff like this. I mean, she had nasty people in architects’ offices being jerks to her, but never this kind of public controversy. And I finally explained to her, Look Laura, look at this way. We would go into meetings and not be afraid to say things or to confront people. I said, “Look, we’re the Marines. We came here, we’re expected to take casualties, and we’re expected to win. And after we win, the Army is going to take the credit. Other people are going to take the credit, but we are the Marines. We have to be the people who do what pushes it and when the bad guys say something, we have to be the ones to confront it.” She did it as an architect. I did it as the most expert person in the neighborhood on the Landmarks Law.

It turned out that the Landmarks Commission has made me a liar *[laughs]*, because I said they’ll regulate all the beautiful things that are here and make everyone’s life easy by regulating according to the old regulations. And it’s like, no, anyone can ask for anything

and they've approved the absolute ridiculous stuff. They have approved, since designation, illegal work. They have approved work that had stop work orders from the Buildings Department [New York City Department of Buildings] because it's illegal in every way.

Q: At staff level or—?

Kroessler: Yeah. Just, oh, that's legal. That's fine. There are worse cases but some guy— this was after designation—one of our neighbors built a deck, was building a deck without any permits. You need permits to build a deck regardless. He's building it to cover the entire backyard, which is illegal under the old zoning and the new zoning. He gets a stop work order from the Department of Buildings. Comes screaming at our door at night threatening my wife who then locks the door. I mean, it was just horrible.

A year-and-a-half later, the Landmarks Commission finally gives him permits to build exactly what he had and to cover the deck with synthetic plastic wood planks. Plastic planks as the surface of a deck in a neighborhood where the entire pallet is wood and brick and he's using plastic. And they said, yep, that's fine, you poor Queens homeowner you. And so, as I said, the Landmarks Commission has made a liar out of me, but I'll still take the law and its regulatory potential over what could have happened.

Laura and I attended meetings. We analyzed the statements about the bad guys. I keep referring to them as bad guys. The bad guys were a motley crew of some people who were just self-interested like, I want mine. Just completely dishonest, unpleasant people.

One homeowner actually put dormers up on his house as the process is going through—dormers that are illegal but had somehow gotten [New York Department of] City Planning to buy his calculations and Laura is like, “He can’t do that. I do the calculations for a living. You can’t do that.” But he finagled two dormers. People looked at it and said, “That’s legal now? I’m now in favor of landmarking.” Because they saw if this is what’s happening, people who were on the fence suddenly—

So we went public with opposing things like that. There were some members of the Bangladeshi community, some Bangladeshis who lived in Sunnyside Gardens, but they were not actively involved in opposing preservation. They were used by some of the other people. Kind of like bank robbers take hostages, like they kind of used them as human shields. And the people who were really driving the anti-preservation were a couple of academics. Academics, one who was a professor of planning, God help us, at Hunter College. I know what she teaches her students, I mean, it’s malpractice in a lot of ways as far as I’m concerned. That would be Susan Turner Meiklejohn of Hunter College. Also there was a husband and wife couple who wrote a book, kind of a performance piece about immigrants in Queens called *Crossing the Blvd: [Strangers, Neighbors, Aliens in a New America]*, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloane.

These three academics led the agitation against it, which as one of our preservation allies referred to it as agit-prop, because they were well versed in this kind of activism and coming out of left wing politics, dishonest statements. They published things that were flat out lies and misstatements of fact intentionally. And it was all very odd because when we moved in, Susan Turner Meiklejohn got in touch with us, or we got in touch with her, maybe she came into Laura's office, and we invited her for a glass of wine in our backyard. We knew she did not like preservation, who knows why, so as one urban historian with a PhD in CUNY, to another PhD at Hunter, invited her over.

She sat in our backyard, and we talked over a bottle of wine about landmarks, the law, what it does do, what it doesn't do, no, that's not right, the Landmarks Commission absolutely does not make you change your windows unless you apply to them, you know, just all this stuff. No, it is not a racist thing that it's preservationists against minorities. All we're doing is we all want to preserve the way it is and this is where the Landmarks Commission made me a liar. I said of course the regulations that exist now under the special planned zoning will be just adopted by the commission as their regulations. No, they threw it out. Now anyone can ask for anything, which is why the Landmarks Commission made me a liar.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: But we're talking about this and at the end, you know, weeks go by, preservation heats up, she's on the other side absolutely saying things that I told her were

not the case. And I thought that is so dishonest that something else is up here. She can't be that stupid or deaf that she didn't hear what I was saying. It has to be intentional, and it was.

Anyway, Simeon had the best take on it. I said, "Why were these people opposed to it?" And he said, "I think they were just bored academics." I'm like, yeah, maybe they were bored academics thinking this would be a fun thing to do to oppose landmarking and make comments like the people in favor of landmarking are all racist. They're going to make you do expensive things to your property that you can't afford. It will lead to gentrification. They would say things like, "I couldn't afford to buy a house here and if it's designated the property values would go up." And I'm like, "I just bought a house. My property values should go up. This is a good thing. You're a homeowner, it's a good thing, don't you think." That's when I thought they had gone through the looking glass. Rising property values are bad. I'm like, uh—

Anyway, they would say things like that and Laura and I would have to—we would be the ones that would contradict them and say this is not true. This is a mistake. They're the ones who brought in the immigrants and said—which is very touchy—the Bangladeshis—to say this is horrible, they're just doing it because they hate theses Bangladeshis. I've heard these preservationists say that they don't want those people here. All this nonsense.

Q: Oh my God.

Kroessler: Using the race card in a very disreputable fashion. There was one public hearing at the [Queens] Community Board [No. 2] where they were saying its anti-immigrant and all this. The poor immigrants are being pushed upon by—and one after another people came up, “I’m an immigrant. I came here from Austria. I bought my house here and I have dah, dah, dah. I want this. I’m an immigrant, how can you say it.” And then someone else, “I came here from Ireland and I bought my own house. How dare you.” “I’m from China and my parents bought this house. They’re Chinese. We moved in here, we want designation.” I mean, one another. I mean, we didn’t send anyone up. They were just so ticked off at being like castigated as the poor immigrants. Meanwhile these people are browbeating the Landmarks Commission to translate every document and every official pronouncement into Bengali.

Q: Oh my god.

Kroessler: I’m like that is so dishonest. These are people who bought houses. You don’t buy houses in Queens that cost five hundred thousand dollars if you can’t handle a little bit of English. It’s a little disreputable.

Laura and I were involved in all of these public meetings with the Landmarks Commission, with the Community Board, the city councilman who was a complete spineless jellyfish. If you have a strong city councilman, who is willing to do the right thing when he knows it’s the right thing makes your life a lot easier. When you have a

spineless jellyfish like Eric [N.] Gioia who presents himself as a progressive independent when he is in fact as much a creature of the machine as anything else, a political insider from the machine.

The low point with my estimation of him—it kept getting lower, but the low point was at the hearing at the Landmarks Commission for the public hearing on a designation, which ended up like three to two in favor. It was like sixty to thirty or something, two to one I guess. Sixty in favor, thirty against. At that hearing, he did not come, someone from his staff came, and read a letter saying this is a very important issue and I want the Landmarks Commission to listen carefully to all sides and I'm going to weigh all the information as I make up my decision. I'm like, it's the goddamn hearing.

Q: Yeah, you can make up your mind right now.

Kroessler: If you can't make up your mind for the hearing, when is it going to—and that to me is like you're making this behind closed doors as a deal. And so thank goodness for term limits for him.

Anyway, we knew that a big Community Board meeting was coming with the Landmarks Commission again. The idea that you have to keep coming back each time and fight these same battles in public again and again is quite distasteful. Because it's been done but then they brow-beat the Landmarks Commission to saying you're not being accessible enough so you have to have another meeting.

Anyway, at this, Laura and I are trying to think. We're coming back from one thing or another in the car and talking about well, what do we do? How do we position this? And we came up with an idea of taking photographs of the neighborhood and Photoshopping into the block what could be done legally under the present zoning.

Q: Smart.

Kroessler: So we took a block of Sunnyside Gardens row houses and showed them with big glass Palladian windows, aluminum siding, stucco, graffiti-type paint all over it, greenhouses on the top floor, we showed—some of them were actually done in Astoria—but we showed what could be done. And by holding these up at the meeting and saying, “This is allowed.” and asking the Commission pointedly, “This is allowed now.” “Yes.” “Would this be allowed under designation?” And they didn't say, “I want to vomit.” What they said was, “It seems unlikely.” Or something like that. “It's highly unlikely that the commission would approve something like that.” And the bad guys were completely thrown off because they couldn't even understand that these were hypotheticals. They were saying, “They're presenting this as what's really here and that's not really here.” It's like, no. The level of, in that case, stupidity coupled with ignorance and venality.

I mean, it was very effective doing that and the pro people visually got it, absolutely, a lot of the antis saw it, they had to understand that this is what we're talking about, and the Landmarks Commission got it. That was really what turned it so that there is no going

back. Just as an aside, Warren Lehrer, who was married to Judith Sloane. His brother is Brian Lehrer who is the talk show host on WNYC.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: And Warren got his brother, Brian, to do a show on the war in Sunnyside Gardens—the fighting, neighbor against neighbor in Sunnyside Gardens. Meanwhile, the press loves it and they're acting as though this is a fight to the death between neighbors and it wasn't. It was a small group of academics who had agitated for this. As I said, there were some people who were just in it for their own I want to do horrible things to my house, which is why I bought in a regulated neighborhood. There was someone else who was just principally opposed to the idea of this kind of regulation. Okay, your legal, philosophical, political bent is that the city has no right to regulate certain features—fine. That's fine. You can't argue with that, but legally it can. And then you have other people who are out for political gain, like a member of the Republican club, who is a complete—you can understand the demise of the Republicans when people like him are running it.

So you have people—even the Democratic district leaders are on the other side. It's like well, why. You've got three quarters of the residents here. Why? Because they see that they may get more votes by opposing it than supporting it, even though three quarters of the homeowners are residents are in favor. Go figure.

So Warren gets his brother to do the radio show and Susan Meiklejohn they all arranged the whole thing between Susan and Brian Lehrer it had all been set up. And then they call me and say, “Jeff, we have a radio debate with Susan Turner Meiklejohn on the Brian Lehrer show and it will be next Thursday.” “Yeah.” “Well, we’re expecting you to be on it.” “No.” “Why?” “No. I don’t need to do that. Why do I need to be part of that setup. I mean, it’s his brother, it’s her, and like you guys have scheduled all this without asking me, but you’ve already announced that I’m going to be on it. I mean, go to hell.” I said, “You should have this other person.” I suggested a social worker in our neighborhood named Irma Rodriguez [*phonetic*], who is just a very nice woman. And I thought you’re not going to bash her over anything. She’ll just be a nice woman from the neighborhood and I was convinced that I had to do that, the radio show. You can still get I’m sure on Brian Lehrer’s archives. It might still be there.

But, I mean, they brought up every—he did announce that he was Warren’s brother trying to be fair. I had actually been on Brian Lehrer’s show when I was promoting another book of mine, so I had already been on his show. Needless to say when I asked him to do a show on my next book I never heard back.

Thinking like [Herbert] Marshall McLuhan, I thought radio was a hot medium. You can’t be laid back. And so I tried to be as crisp and as aggressive as possible. And when Susan introduced the, “This is all about anti-immigrant, dah, dah, dah,” I said, “Brian, how much time do I have. Why do I have to defend myself against being called a racist? You know, this isn’t about—” and boom. I had been able to shoot down the idea that this is

somehow the last stand of White America against—I mean, for gods sake it's Queens. Nobody cares. It's Queens, the most diverse place on the planet. At this point trying to lay people into these racial categories is so academic that it is nonsense.

Anyway, the Landmarks Commission did finally vote in favor. They postponed it, they fiddled, they did everything they could to make sure that the process played out as long as it could and as legitimately as it could, even to the point of redundancy. I, in fact, contacted Bob [Robert B.] Tierney at one point and said, I despair. If you guys don't designate this, then there's no future for the Landmarks Law because all the ducks are in a row, everyone is involved, it's historically culturally, architecturally significant, it's recognized all over the place, you've got the support of the homeowners, and if you guys don't regulate this, then it's pretty much time to fold up your tent. And they did.

And Eric Gioia was a jerk to the end, negotiating with the Landmarks Commission and City Planning over the changed planning rules and everything else. Focusing on nonsense.

Q: Right. So do you feel that there are any consequences to the designation besides these new additions going through?

Kroessler: No, it's the best thing. It was necessary for it to be done. The downsides I'm mentioning are the coming out of the Landmarks Commission now. The way the staff, the counsel, and the Landmarks chair think is, to my mind, contrary to what is best to a

historic district like this. This is a planned community. Different than what they usually regulate. They are regulating it as if it's the Upper East Side with separate backyards. Ask for what kind of windows do you want. They don't understand all the windows are the same, instead of saying use these. Like apply for everything.

My wife has had to produce drawings and photographs and documentation for her applications that other homeowners can basically submit a sketch on a napkin. For some reason she has had a very hard time. She gets her work through because she's really good and she understands the preservation aspect of this and does everything right and by the book. Still, the Landmarks Commission makes her jump through hoops. I don't understand why they bend over backwards for people who want to do the wrong thing and make the pro-preservation people feel like something the cat dragged in.

They have literally, as I mentioned earlier, there were jobs that had gotten stop work orders from the Department of Buildings, because they're illegal—because they didn't have permits, and they're illegal under the current zoning, and so they have stop work orders. And Landmarks says, "Well, it looks like what's next door." What's next door is illegal. They're matching an illegal condition that was built without permits and was not allowable. Well, it looks like what's next door and it's just Queens, it's just a mess anyway, what the heck.

We have a government of laws, but it's also a government of men and the individuals who are running this. When we were being designated the question was asked to the

commission do you regulate the backyards, because in Sunnyside it's a very important aspect, you know, the open courts. And they said, "Of course. The Landmarks Commission regulates 360 degrees, the entire site, the entire lot is designated."

Since then, we've had some situations come up with illegal construction in the rear yards or changes. We submit violations and Landmarks says, "Is it visible from the street?" "No." "Well, then we can't do anything." I'm like, come on. You do everywhere else. "We can't go back there because its trespassing." What if you came back with me? What if someone takes you back there like the president of the court association, you know, that kind of thing. They really feel—the atmosphere was so poisoned by the designation struggle, unnecessarily so, because the Landmarks Commission and elected officials all let it play it out much longer than it should have and tolerated a lot of bad behavior. And I think that the commission now, which has nothing to do with me and oral history, but I think the commission now is nervous about offending people who didn't want designation so will let them do things, and I just think that's wrong.

Q: Right. Yeah. And so as a resident of Sunnyside, have these events affected you personally and continuing now after the designation?

Kroessler: There are some people who don't speak to me, which is fine with me because some of them are crazy. It's affected my wife's business because she gets—a lot of her clients are from Sunnyside Gardens and she does really good work so if people want renovations they come to her, mostly.

I don't know what any long-term—it's at the point where neighbors have to start regulating the district. The people who led the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance, the people who led that, have absolutely refused to get involved with ongoing regulation. So what you have is an organization that is known at the Landmarks Commission as being the community organization refusing to touch anything. The last thing they did was get money from the city councilmen for tote bags. Thank you very much, I have eighty of them. Not Sunnyside Gardens, I've got tote bags from everyone. I don't need another one. What we need is a manual of dos and don'ts for homeowners.

We're talking about doing that now, between me and Laura and the president of one of the courts. We're going to start working on that now, but it hasn't made for a harmonious neighborhood necessarily. The bad guys have mostly gone away, but it's a very tense thing. People are doing illegal work and when you phone in the illegal work, the Landmarks Commission doesn't necessarily back you up. That's the condition we're in right now, which is why we want to get something more solid. But we wouldn't have it any other way. It would be worse without it.

Q: Yeah. Before we move on from Sunnyside Gardens, any other final thoughts?

Kroessler: No. Not on that one.

Q: All right. So you've talked about a few site-specific efforts in Queens since we started talking, but are there any other efforts that you would like to discuss for this talk besides the Terra-Cotta Company?

Kroessler: The Terra-Cotta Company was a really—that was the first campaign that won a preservation designation in Queens in the way that it did and we thought that that would herald an era of designation. But each one was just slow and not very—the biggest one was Douglaston [Hill Historic District], getting Douglaston done, because that's a suburban neighborhood, a consciously suburban neighborhood, and the Landmarks Commission wanted absolutely nothing to do with that because it's suburbs and they regulate Park Slope. They don't regulate suburban, freestanding single-family house neighborhoods.

They did the same things that Sunnyside did. You get all the homeowners involved. You get a list of neighbors who want to support it. You have the history behind it. You bring in experts to discuss it. You walk the Landmarks Commission through it. You do all of your homework. That's what Kevin [F.] Wolfe and company did at Douglaston. That's what the group in Parkway Village did, only to see the Landmarks Commission say, "No, we don't think so." That's what we did in Sunnyside Gardens. And then the Landmarks Commission says, "No, we don't think so."

Except, when Jennifer Raab was chair at the Landmarks Commission, she lives in Fieldston, which is single family, big single-family houses in the Bronx, a suburban

neighborhood. She came out to Douglaston and said, “Sure.” Because she understood it, whereas the Landmarks Commission can understand Jackson Heights. It’s apartment buildings. Like, “Yeah, we know how to do this. Master plan, we’re good.” They look urban. You get to Sunnyside Gardens it’s a planned garden suburb they don’t get it. Parkway Village is like Sunnyside Gardens, a planned garden community, garden suburb, built for the employees of the United Nations by Robert Moses. They had elected officials, they had all the homeowners, they had historic organizations, everyone was ready, and the Landmarks Commission just said, “No, we don’t think so. It doesn’t look historic enough. It doesn’t have great architecture.” Well, the law doesn’t say just architecture, it says culture and history. No, it doesn’t have great architecture. It’s because you don’t understand the history of what built it there and when.

Other things in Queens? What other fights?

Q: What about wasn’t there a library that was going to be knocked down?

Kroessler: Recently? Elmhurst?

Q: Semi-recently, yes.

Kroessler: Oh, no. Like right now.

Q: Right now. Is that right now?

Kroessler: Yeah. Yeah, they're demolishing the Elmhurst Branch of the Queens Borough Public Library. It was built in 1906 as one of the half dozen Carnegie Libraries built in Queens, and they're demolishing it now. I had very civil conversations with the head of the Queens Library construction branch, former deputy borough president under Clair Shulman, Peter Magnani. He's a very nice man. And just talking to him about it, it's just like the juggernaut of old Queens thinking which is we need new. The community deserves new. Which I find offensive because a good architect could take that building and build around it and do something really exciting instead of getting a box, which is what they build. That's old Queens thinking. What can you say, it's old Queens thinking and it's still there in these institutions. In part because they get big money and they don't see—if they have big money capital projects they don't see that renovation and expansion can be even better than clear-cutting. I still don't get that.

Q: And has it evolved at all since you've started to be involved in preservation? Has it gotten any better?

Kroessler: Yeah, you don't have to convince people in Queens that preservation is a good thing, unless they're dumb academics, in which case they're uneducable. But you don't have to convince neighborhoods that preservation is the best thing. You don't have to convince them that preservation is better for the neighborhood than clear cutting historic structures, like the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium. It's still there. For some reason they could have just demolished it—except it's expensive to demolish that thing—and sold the

ground, which is what they're trying to do. Not everyone thinks that that's a good idea even within the West Side Tennis Club. I'm sure that the West Side Tennis Club is having internal discussions over whether they should or shouldn't at this point, even though the board is like yeah, we should.

You don't have in Queens a tough slog. You know, when we did historic preservation in Queens, people in Queens, it was not on their horizon, historic preservation, they were not aware of it, they didn't think there was history worth preserving in Queens, and it was not—I mean the political structure was opposed, historically and even up to the present in some ways. The people in Queens today want preservation. They don't get it from the Landmarks Commission. The Landmarks Commission refuses to designate certain sites.

The worst example in recent years, the absolute worst, was St. Saviour's Church in Maspeth, Queens. St. Savior's was an Episcopal Church. Wood, carpenter gothic, country gothic, designed by Richard Upjohn from 1853, '55, something like that. Antebellum, country gothic, Richard Upjohn as in Trinity Church. That Richard Upjohn has a church standing on a large plot of land that had never been built on from colonial times to the present, except for the church and maybe the parsonage. Little things, but it hadn't been ripped up and done. It was wooded, it's a perfect park. This building, the Landmarks Commission refused to hold a public hearing on because they said it had been damaged by fire and changed.

A week later, they designated a synagogue in Corona where the entire front had been redone. Ripped out, new front put on, different stair entrance, yeah, okay, we'll designate it anyway. Years ago, the Landmarks Commission designated I think it was—I can't remember, it might have been either Gene Norman or David [F.M.] Todd who was the chair, designated the Onderdonk house in Ridgewood, which was a 1700s Dutch farmhouse on the border of Brooklyn and Queens, which had burned to the ground. It had burned to the foundation. It had been restored, they were restoring it, and there was a fire and there goes the Eighteenth Century.

Then the Greater Ridgewood Historical Society rebuilt it pretty much, so they designated a replica. They designated the site, and you have the foundation, but they designated a replica and they would not designate—they absolutely dug in their heels and I thought why. Is it because it's a church? Well, it wasn't a church. It was not a church. It had belonged to no congregation, it had been sold. So it wasn't a church, it was an empty building. The neighborhood is saying this will be a great park. No. I mean, you ask Mary Beth Betts why, and well, there was a fire and so part of it had been changed. Yeah.

So historic preservation doesn't improve historic buildings, it freezes them in whatever situation they were at the time. Nonsense. So, yeah, there are still issues in Queens that make no sense to me, but it's not a fight to—I mean, at this point, they're fights that make no sense, like why would you not designate that. But you don't have to make the case for preservation necessarily.

Q: Okay. So the preservation movement exists now in Queens.

Kroessler: There are preservationists in Queens.

Q: It's not necessarily a movement though.

Kroessler: Right.

Q: Okay.

Kroessler: I mean, there's a committee that meets at Queens Borough Hall, which I have never been invited to.

Q: A Queens preservation committee?

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: Borough-wide?

Kroessler: The Borough President's Preservation Advisory Committee or something. Maybe. There is also the Four Borough [Neighborhood] Preservation Alliance, which I have no involvement with. And the borough historian who has no interest in preservation whatsoever. So you have several bodies that meet to discuss this, but I don't know—since

they don't involve me with anything, which is fine with me—I don't know how effective they are and I don't think they are very effective. Because at the same time as you have people in Queens wanting preservation, there is a tone of political discourse in Queens, which is not very, I don't know, it's kind of an angry, confrontational, demanding, which I don't think works.

Q: Okay. So what do you feel your greatest contribution to the movement has been in Queens specifically?

Kroessler: Longevity [*laughs*].

Q: Longevity. You've lasted.

Kroessler: Well, the idea that I came into it—I'm sixty. I started doing this in 1980. I started getting involved with the Greater Astoria Historical Society. I ended up on the board and being the historian and liked working with them for years before it just made no sense to me anymore. Now I'm on the board again, and it still makes no sense.

Different people, but it's a different set of issues.

The greatest contribution I would think was when I say longevity, I mean, I got involved before there was any preservation in Queens and putting out that little book on Historic Preservation in Queens, putting that out to make a statement that there is something

worth preserving. So you can't pretend that there is nothing out there and that no one cares.

The idea that someone from Queens was on city-wide preservation organizations, like the Historic Districts Council and the MAS Preservation Committee, not as a representative of a historic district, but as simply someone who resides in this borough and is involved in preservation, meant that I could always bring knowledge of preservation to Queens issues and a knowledge of Queens to preservation issues. And I could do it with the rigor of an academic, meaning I don't just grasp on random facts, I try and have information that matters to make the case really. And so when I make a case for something, I know that it's not grasping at straws, or it's not the angriness of Queens doesn't get any respect, it's this is the case we can make and this is why it deserves designation. This is why this application for change is inappropriate or whatever else.

So the fact that thirty years later I'm still involved with preservation in Queens makes me a rarity.

Q: Right. Okay. And also, what do you feel your greatest challenge has been?

Kroessler: Greatest challenge. Earning a living.

Q: Earning a living *[laughter]*.

Kroessler: No, it was—I don't know, it was getting—the greatest challenge was actually being in the trenches of the Sunnyside Gardens fight. But the greatest challenge, I mean we did a book on preservation in Queens. Was that a challenge? No, it was just something we set out to do because it needed doing. The biggest challenge is how do you create a mature preservation organization in Queens, which I thought we were going to do with the Queens Preservation League, but there weren't enough people to keep it going, to make it work, to think beyond their particular issues to larger preservation concerns, there wasn't enough of that to keep that going. And today, the people who are involved are neighborhood-based or local issued-based. You don't have a borough-wide voice for preservation that's what's still missing, because Queens still is kind of atomized.

Q: And do you feel that the other four boroughs have that?

Kroessler: No.

Q: No?

Kroessler: Brooklyn certainly doesn't, but they have strong—the Brooklyn Heights Association is strong. But right now, I don't think there is any group advocating for Park Slope or Greenpoint or Cobble Hill or Carroll Gardens, all historic districts, Fort Greene. There is a Fort Greene Association, but I don't know that they're involved in preservation anymore in the way that they were when neighborhoods were being designated and the

changes were coming up to the commission. Maybe it's a point of maturity that the Commission knows how to regulate in Carroll Gardens. Carroll Gardens neighbors don't have to monitor people doing the wrong thing. If people do do the wrong thing, they get violations, you know, the process works, whereas that's not the case in Queens just yet.

Q: Then can you speak more broadly about the differences between preservation in Queens and preservation in the other four boroughs?

Kroessler: The Bronx is very similar. Staten Island is very similar in that you have—the Bronx is in its way different because so much of the Bronx was devastated in the '60s and '70s. You have an even greater cultural divide on the basis of race and ethnicity in the Bronx, in huge parts of the Bronx, so you don't have some of the long-term residents to advocate for a place.

Grand Concourse was just designated a historic district. There were no residents of Grand Concourse involved. It wasn't like it was a grassroots Grand Concourse movement. On the other hand, Riverdale and Fieldston were involved with the residents advocating for this kind of preservation.

In Staten Island you have a different political culture and it's even angrier than Queens in that there was a neighborhood, I think it's called Westerleigh, actually it was originally Prohibition Park. It was developed around 1900 as a dry suburb, Prohibition Park, meaning that the people who moved there would not drink and you had these big wood

framed houses. The Landmarks Commission actually went out there to talk about designating this suburban neighborhood, Prohibition Park, and the reception by a couple of homeowners was so, almost violent in their opposition. I don't mean that they were like threatening to beat to them up, but I mean that they were so agitated and irrational and it's like this is just an information session. If this is how they're handling this—the Landmarks Commission just ran away.

But on the other hand, there are other parts of Staten Island that do have communities, like some in Tottenville and Stapleton. They've got a row in Stapleton in designated, but not as much as you would think.

Brooklyn is different. Brooklyn is mature. Brooklyn has mature historic districts. And I think that it's—I mentioned that I'm sixty. We're all older. We came out of preservation at a time when preservation was fighting for legitimacy and there were neighborhoods to be saved that were under threat. And we saw the law as a way of protecting not only the historic communities of the city, but also as a way of preserving the city, because in the '70s and '80s, the city's survival was not at all certain. It could have gone the way of Detroit and everyone was predicting that. Everyone was predicting New York's downward spiral is forever. And preservation brought it back by stabilizing a lot of neighborhoods—making them valuable, increasing property values, all of that.

There aren't preservationists coming out of those preserved neighborhoods. They don't contribute to preservation organizations. They don't attend preservation events. There is

no preservation constituency in these historic districts in Brooklyn. They just live there and take advantage of it. But you don't have a generation of people coming in to conserve their neighborhoods, at least not that I've met. The people who do it, are the generation who get it designated, they're the ones who fight for the regulatory standards, and the Landmarks Commission, once that pattern is in place, will follow that usually, with the odd exception. But usually, once you get a pattern for regulating a neighborhood in place, it's good.

The exception to that is Brooklyn Heights, because they have the Brooklyn Heights Association and that is a different case. The greatest challenge, I think, for all of us is the generational change that's taking place. The aging out of the generation of preservationists. They're not being replaced by new ones. And even people who are dedicated to the city, like out of Williamsburg, for all the hipness that transformed Williamsburg, you didn't get any voices of the new Williamsburg people saying we have to save historic Williamsburg.

Q: Yeah, that's true.

Kroessler: None. You got, I want more of mine, is what I see coming out of them. And they'll take advantage of the city around them, but they have no investment in, this is something worth saving. Not that I see they see in that.

Q: And do you think that's purely generational or is it just a wave of people in New York City who aren't faced with the same challenges that the people who lived in New York City three decades ago had?

Kroessler: They are not facing the same challenges as thirty years ago when people could discover SoHo. This is the difference. In 1973, when people discovered SoHo and turned it into like an art mecca, SoHo became the art capital, it was literally empty. I mean, it's not like you're displacing anything, there were empty lofts that landlords were willing to break the law to fill. And the result of the discovery of SoHo, the invention of SoHo, was that the [John V.] Lindsay Administration had SoHo designated a historic district. Right?

Q: Yeah.

Kroessler: Arts. This is in the middle of Manhattan, empty buildings, the fire department called it Hell's Hundred Acres, because when fires broke out, the dry wood floors, it was not good to be a fireman in these places. But, you know, it was brought back by people committed to the city and then SoHo is now SoHo.

Williamsburg, the same thing was happening. Undervalued properties, some empty properties, dangerous neighborhood in terms of crime and the like. People discover Williamsburg, what happens? The [Michael R.] Bloomberg administration up-zones it. And people call that gentrification. It is not gentrification, it is just development. It's

high-rise development bringing people into the neighborhood, who have no commitment to the neighborhood. It's not an organic growth. It's a completely artificial experience.

Same thing happening in Long Island City, at the Vernon [Boulevard]-Jackson [Avenue] stop. The people getting off there they're now New Yorkers but they weren't forty-five minutes ago. So what they're going to do, I don't know.

Q: Interesting. So do you feel that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has been too focused on Manhattan and hasn't been focusing on the boroughs?

Kroessler: No, not anymore. I don't think they understand the other boroughs in the way that they think they do. For example, not designating St. Savior's. For refusing to designate a historic district in Richmond Hill because the porches had been enclosed. Well, you know, it's been one hundred years, things change, but.

Q: Layers.

Kroessler: And there were layers of urban use, but that doesn't mean that the four Queen Anne houses that are on this block shouldn't be designated. I mean, where else are you going to find them. You're not, they're 1869. They're it. And the Landmarks Commission said, "I don't think so." You know, siding. Okay. Whereas in Manhattan neighborhoods, they will designate Eighth Street in Manhattan. That changed? I mean, there's nothing original on Eighth Street and yet it's designated, regulated, and the idea is

that it gradually brings it back. That was the idea. But they somehow don't apply that in Queens.

Q: Interesting. And so you said yet when you said that the Landmarks Commission doesn't focus—I'm sorry, not anymore. So the Landmarks Commission used to focus more on Manhattan?

Kroessler: Yeah, it was easier.

Q: And when do you think that transition took place?

Kroessler: It took place over—I don't know an exact date, but the idea that the people in other places started wanting their neighborhoods designated. "We want a big district here. We deserve a designation. This is historic you have to designate it." Once that started happening, the Landmarks Commission had to focus on these places. But if I had to guess as to what the Landmarks Commission would dream of, the only thing they have to regulate is the Upper East Side and Park Slope. Okay. We've got it. They'd be very happy with that, but.

Q: Because they're the easiest to do?

Kroessler: Easy, they know how to do it, it looks like a nice historic neighborhood. It looks right, unlike Sunnyside Gardens, well, it's just brick. What is it? In the same way

that they let the Provincetown Playhouse go in Manhattan. “Well, it’s just undistinguished brick. It doesn’t mean anything.” It’s just what happened here maybe. It’s like, well, you let it go. And it did matter.

Q: Right. And do you feel that there are specific chairs that were better than others?

Kroessler: Yeah, Kent [Barwick] was terrific. Gene Norman worked very hard under very difficult circumstances. The sad thing is that from Laurie Beckelman on, the chairs have been presiding over an increasing politicized agency. Meaning that their independence has been compromised and I don’t feel that they’re free to do what they would independently think is best for the city in terms of landmark designation and regulation. I feel that they are constrained by their political people above. Until at this point, I really I don’t know that if you remove the chains from the Landmarks Commission that Bloomberg has suffocated them with, him being worse than Giuliani, who was worse than [David] Dinkins, who was worse than Koch.

Q: It just keeps getting worse.

Kroessler: Well, yeah. I don’t even know if you removed all controls on the Landmarks Commission, okay, designate on the merits, regulate on the merits, just do the right thing, I don’t know if they’d know what to do. Because I don’t think the Landmarks Commission has a vision of preservation as—I think it’s something they regulate, but

they don't have a vision right now of how preservation will contribute to the vitality of the city. I don't think they do.

Q: No bigger picture.

Kroessler: No bigger picture. It's just, I have to regulate this or designate this. What are the concerns of this. Does the owner approve? Well, then maybe we can—you know, we have an 1855 Richard Upjohn country gothic church on a virgin plot of land. We have to designate that. And instead it's, no we don't. We do or we don't, it doesn't matter.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: Once a republic becomes an empire, it's hard to go back to being a republic, and I don't see how the republic of the Landmarks Preservation Commission can re-establish itself as an independent free-thinking agency, which is respected by those above by saying this is going to cause me trouble, but you're doing the right thing based on the expertise on the commission. I also don't think the commissioners have—it used to be that there were dynamic individuals who were intelligent and committed to this and now you have political appointees more than ever. And that reduces the independence of the commission and their sense of mission.

Q: Right. That's too bad.

Kroessler: It is. I mean, not all of them. You know, like Richard [M.] Olcott was on the commission as an architect. He was very good, very good interested in Modernist architecture and the like. But, no, in general.

Q: So just to round out the Queens conversation, specifically focusing on politics, you mentioned Donald Manes earlier. And so from Donald Manes to now Helen [M.] Marshall.

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: In terms of borough presidents, how has the political environment evolved for preservation?

Kroessler: Well, it used to matter. We had to go to Don.

Q: Because he was on the Board of Estimate.

Kroessler: We had to meet with him because he was on the Board of Estimate and that was that. But now it's—I mean, we had a meeting with Helen Marshall about Sunnyside and the bad guys had a meeting with Helen and completely crazy apparently. But you do that out of pro forma, because you want support from everyone you can get support from, but they're irrelevant at this point.

Claire Shulman was dishonest in dealing with preservationists. She and Henry [J.] Stern demolished the [Billy Rose] Aquacade from the 1939 World's Fair, which was the New York State Pavilion built as a permanent fixture in the park. That was a don quixote on my part. I got support from everyone, I got it listed on the State Register [of Historic Places], we had support from everyone from EL [Edgar Lawrence] Doctorow to god knows who, all saying, no, this is a historic thing. The history of the park says that this Aquacade should remain the park. It was built as a permanent feature. It's not an intrusion. And yet they're saying, "Oh, we have to demolish it because it's a danger." Well, it's solid it's not going anywhere. "Well, it's riddled with asbestos." Whenever you hear people say it's riddled with asbestos, it's like the last refuge of the scoundrel.

And I remember the workman were there taking it apart. I said, "So, you found much asbestos?" And he says, "No, not really. No, there's nothing here." Yet they're saying we have to tear it down it's riddled with asbestos. Did we mention it's outdoors so if anything flakes off it's going to go into the outdoors?

Anyway, she used her own money to tear that down because if she had used federal funds or state funds—

Q: Section 106 [of the National Historic Preservation Act].

Kroessler: Yeah. She would have had to—I guess. But she said it was her own money.

Who knows. Henry Stern was in it, demolishing this. And, you know, they're saying it's

an intrusion in the park, we have to create this beautiful park. The lake is an artificial lake that is more dead than alive, number one, so talk about nature. Two, it was built as a permanent structure in the park not like a fair frill to come and go. And then finally, at the same time they're tearing this down they're building the U.S. Tennis Center, the largest tennis venue in the world with tennis courts covering acres that belong to the U.S. Tennis Center not the Parks Department. So while they are tearing down the historic Aquacade from the 1939 Worlds Fair, which is original and built with New York State money, they're building something else.

Q: Privatizing public land.

Kroessler: And privatizing public land, essentially. The hypocrisy of that and the sheer nastiness of it. But I got Claire back. She was backing a statue of Queen Catherine of Braganza, who was a Portuguese princess who married Charles II. The Portuguese community said, "We should have a statue of Queen Catherine of Braganza and we'll pay for it." So they started raising all this money to build this statue that would have been a third the size of the Statue of Liberty to go on the Queens shoreline, because Catherine of Braganza is the Queen for whom Queens is named. As far as I can tell, no, she is not. There is no record of that in anything that I have found except for some Victorian histories that say so, and then everyone else repeats the same fact from the same sources. So there is no actual evidence saying that's the case. She was the Queen of England at the time Queens was named Queens, but whether that is her, no evidence.

This is moving quite a long and when I saw the ridiculous statue, I thought that would be it. You look at this statue, come on, it's kitsch. But no, it keeps moving along, moving along. So I wrote an op-ed in *Newsday* saying that this was the wrong statue for Queens, for a lot of reasons like we had an American Revolution to get rid of British monarchs. We don't have statues of British monarchs. The last one we tore down and melted into bullets to fire at the British at the Battle of Long Island. You know, we don't have these.

And by the way, she was the Queen of England and the daughter of the king of Portugal and the wealth of the Portuguese king came from the African slave trade. I said that'll do it. And it did. The op-ed was out there, the idea got out there, and suddenly the arguments started building. It took, like a while. A year later, it resurfaces that this is going to happen, and suddenly the black community is up in arms against this.

Letters start appearing in the papers. There's an article from the Irish saying, I don't want to see a British monarch's arse standing on the dah, dah, dah, because of the horrible treatment of the Irish. And I'm like, oh, that's great. We've got the blacks and the Irish all riled up against this thing. And then there was a little letter in one of the Queens papers from like Irving Goldstein saying and did we mention that the inquisition in Portugal killed the Jews. And it's like bingo. I've got the blacks, I've got the Irish, I've got the Jews. Dead.

And there was actually a meeting at Queens Borough Hall discussing the Queen Catherine of Braganza like pro and con and it was just ridiculous in many of its aspects and they killed the statue.

Q: Great.

Kroessler: And I thought that got even with Claire, embarrassed the hell out of her. Should have listened to me *[laughs]*.

Q: Yes, definitely. Any good stories with city council members as well?

Kroessler: No. No.

Q: Are they irrelevant as well?

Kroessler: No, they're not irrelevant. Unless you get your city councilman behind your preservation issue, you don't. My city councilman lives across the street from me in historic Sunnyside Gardens.

Q: Oh, access.

Kroessler: He was not city council member during the fight. Became city council member after the fight. I guess in—the election was '09. I guess it was '09 because '13 is the next one, right.

Q: Right.

Kroessler: So he was elected in '09. He has written checks for the Preservation Alliance so that they could do like their bags, but he has not been a voice for preservation. Has not been an advocate for preservation. He's an advocate for gay rights and green, but he hasn't been necessarily—and labor. But those are traditional Democratic, you know, apple pie and motherhood. Preservation isn't on his like to-do list. And he lives across the street. I mean, I can talk to him or whatever else, but he hasn't supported preservation, like Historic Districts Council or anything else. Difficult. He does libraries too. He does good things, but it's all the usual funding stuff. There is no leadership coming out.

City councilmen, when we were—there was a designation that the city council was going to overturn the Jamaica Savings Bank on Jamaica Avenue. It had been designated once before and overturned in the Manes years. Now it came up again and it was in danger at the city council. I wrote an op-ed in *Newsday*. The op-eds were in *New York Newsday*, which was a great venue. That paper is gone.

Q: Except on Long Island.

Kroessler: Long Island *Newsday* is there, but it doesn't mean anything in the city the way it did. If you have a Pulitzer Prize-winning paper covering the city, people have to notice, and they did. And the fact that they were willing to print op-eds, they printed one of mine on Queen Catherine of the Braganza. They did another one on this Jamaica incident. And fighting this was just, you know, old line black councilman from Jamaica in his district, the owner of the building when it was one of his campaign contributors to the tune of like a hundred bucks or something. It wasn't like he was completely bought off, it was just stupid.

His argument was—essentially, if I can sum up his argument, that building was built by white people and doesn't mean a thing to my constituents.

Q: Wow.

Kroessler: He said it a little nicer than that, but it doesn't mean anything to my constituents because that was built at an earlier time and they have other concerns. The nonsense about that. That was council member Archie [W.] Spigner and we created a verb for a while, Spignerized, which we would use for a while. But there are so few of us now who know what that means no one uses Spignerized anymore, but that was the idea.

And other council members couldn't vote against it because he was deputy leader. And one council member I said, "Sheldon, did you see my op-ed?" "Yes, I saw it. What am I supposed to when the deputy chair grabs you and says, I want your vote on this. What are

you supposed to do?” I said, “Well, you could do the right thing, but you’re not.” They know what the right thing to do is and they can’t do it because they have to support their—that’s just the way the city council works.

When they finally voted for Sunnyside Gardens, and Eric Gioia is on floor, we’re in the balcony ready to applaud when they finally vote. He finally is saying something about Sunnyside Gardens and he thanks the district leader, the female district leader for that. We had a meeting with her, she was complete blockhead, and opposed to preservation. I’m like you’re thanking her? You’re stiffing all of us up in the balcony who did all this work to get you here in the spotlight and you’re thanking this blockhead who had opposed it. We had coffee with her and it’s like, why am I talking to this brick. You know, it was ridiculous. So, no, city council members, you need them, but despair *[laughter]*.

Q: Despair. Oh, so we have one more Queens question. So I guess we’ve covered this, the attitudes of Queens residents towards preservation.

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: How they’ve affected designations. I guess we’ve touched on that.

Kroessler: Yeah. People want it. They didn’t. Now they do.

Q: Now they do. So do you think that greater public involvement in preservation activities, and understanding of the Landmarks process would alter these attitudes even further?

Kroessler: People will become involved and interested if it affects them and that's it. You're not going to find most people—there are some individuals in Queens who are animated by the idea of preserving historic Queens, there are a couple. But for the most part, you find people in Kew Gardens who want to protect Kew Gardens and you find people in Woodhaven who wanted to protect certain aspects of Woodhaven. But you don't get—and when it is possible, they'll be involved as much as they can be, and when it happens or not, that's it. So there are some individuals who are involved in an ongoing basis, but not a lot.

Q: Okay. All right. So we're about an hour and forty-five minutes in. Are you willing to stay with me for the New York City-wide questions now?

Kroessler: If you have questions?

Q: Yes. Starting with HDC.

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: You joined HDC in 1987 just as it switched from a committee of MAS to its own non-profit organization. So over the past twenty-five years, how has HDC evolved from when you began?

Kroessler: Oh, it's gone from a shoe-string volunteer organization, where we all stuffed envelopes together, and were learning about the city and issues from each other, and moving from one meeting place to another because we did not have a home, to a very established, financially solid, principled preservation organization that has a city-wide presence among the preservation community, among the elected officials, and the press. It is an absolute success story.

Q: Okay. And what work do you do for HDC?

Kroessler: These days, I attend meetings. I attend meetings and attend meetings. There's more than that. For example, being involved with the conference, doing the conceptualizing of the conference, trying to determine what the program should be, the structure of the conference, who should be invited and why, what topics we want to cover, what is the point of the conference, all of those issues, which is more than putting out the flyers. There are staff that do that. Not doing publicity, handling the space, ordering the coffee, that's what's staff is doing. All of the logistics making it work. At the beginning, we all did all the logistics, including stuffing envelopes and doing the mailings, going down and testifying, reading testimony, and the rest, going out to neighborhoods everywhere.

So what I do is I try and—I mean, what any board member does is guide the organization to what should the organization be doing. What should our position be. Should we be aggressive on a position or just watch it or say this is beyond our mandate.

Q: Okay. Great.

Kroessler: Which is a sign of maturity of the organization.

Q: Yeah. No, that's great. But it started out completely volunteer and then has evolved into such a robust organization.

Kroessler: Yeah. I was the secretary for a while and that literally meant taking the minutes and distributing the minutes and doing the mailings of the minutes. Doing the nuts and bolts. It's not just being the secretary and you sign things, because the staff writes the letters, it's a different position.

Q: And you had mentioned you joined the MAS Preservation Committee after you joined the HDC's board.

Kroessler: Yeah. I don't know, seven years later or something like that.

Q: Oh, seven years later.

Kroessler: I don't know, five, seven years later. I did not keep an accurate record of where I was going and when.

Q: Right. So what kind of projects have you been involved in with the MAS Preservation Committee?

Kroessler: It has been a very worthwhile experience because there was a time when Municipal Art Society was involved in preservation in a very direct way. That meant developers wanting to put a building on the big vacant lot in the seaport would come and present. And the preservationists and architects on the MAS Preservation Committee would dissect the proposal and say we either will or will not support this.

New buildings in old districts, discussions therein. You get architects and preservationists discussing this is bad for preservation, this is good for architecture, should it be more historic, should it be different—you get a great discussion of all that. For years, that was the issue. The heart of what the committee did mostly was guide MAS, what positions it takes on these big preservation issues. Supporting designations, people who wanted designation would come to the committee, make a presentation to get support, so MAS would then be on board with Tribeca, Sunnyside, whatever, Jackson Heights.

That is no longer the case. In the last two years, two and a half years, the Preservation Committee has pretty much been reduced to staff telling us what they're doing. And it's

getting to the point where that's not worth it. Not listening to the preservationists or sometimes the architects on issues and then, you know, testifying the way they were going to testify anyway. It's no longer a cutting edge or in the center of things preservation organization, yet their reputation is still such.

Just this week, they supported the Zone Green Text Amendment that city council proposed. We never had a chance to discuss it in detail in the Preservation Committee. There was a presentation to the Planning Committee. Some of us attended. We wrote up some comments and they were alluded to in the testimony, but the testimony was we support this, this is great. Well, it may be, problems with this, or maybe problems with that, but on the whole it's a great thing. And it is not a great thing. You should not be testifying in favor of this because it's going to do harm. And to say that the Landmarks Commission is going to be backing up the protection of historic buildings is like wishful thinking at this point. I know that they'll support it because it's green. Well, we have to embrace green and allow the homeowner to embrace green and get these savings. It's going to be a disaster. So that's the shift that is taking place.

Q: Is that a Kent to Vin [Cipolla] shift?

Kroessler: Right. But it's also the board.

Q: It's also the board.

Kroessler: I'm sure the board has been making these changes along the way. In the makeup of the board and their decisions, I don't know. I'm not privy to the way the board thinks. But I do know that the individuals who have contributed to the Municipal Art Society as members of the committees, many of us for many years are quite disillusioned. And I don't just mean the Preservation Committee, I mean others as well. It's an organization that's changing course and some people are going to have to abandon ship.

Q: Right. To jump to a newer organization, can you discuss your involvement with the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation?

Kroessler: Yeah. That was founded out of the frustration of the entire preservation community with the dysfunctional nature of the Preservation Commission under Bloomberg. It had finally gotten to the point—I was at a wedding and just by chance a member of the Landmarks Commission was attending this wedding because she was the best friend of the bride in college. So there is a member of the Landmarks Commission, “Jeff, how are you. It's so nice to see you. We don't see you testifying at Landmarks. You don't come down and testify anymore.” And I said, “What grown man or woman wants to waste his time when you've already made your decision.” I don't know how many bourbons I had had at the time, but basically, why am I wasting my time.

I remember discussing with Roger [P.] Lang, who had been with the Conservancy—now the Conservancy is a conservative organization. They are not out there with protest signs let alone pitchforks. Roger said, “I'm just giving up. They're beyond help and there is

nothing to be done we just have to wait for a new Commission.” I thought if Roger thinks that—and they work behind the scenes always in how they do stuff.

Out of that came a Preservation Summit. A lot of us from preservation organizations and independents discussing the state of preservation, out of that came a committee, smaller. Out of that committee, had another meeting, and out of that came a much smaller group, because it was decided to be individuals and a lot of groups didn’t want to be part of this because they still had to work with the Commission. And so it ended up a handful of us individuals just discussing what the hell was wrong and what can be done. Our idea was that we should be thinking what the flashpoints in preservation and advocacy are, where are the problems specifically with the Landmarks Commission and city government and how do we do something to get MAS or the Conservancy or HDC to move on an issue, because we have to highlight it somehow. We expected that we would go out of business in a year or two. Four years later or so, in Bloomberg’s third term we’re still here.

We’ve sued the Commission a couple of times. Fortunately, we have a former United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Whitney North Seymour Jr. [Mike], retired of the firm of Simpson Thacher [&] Bartlett. An enormous white-shoe law firm, so he’s not a lightweight, doing legal work. Its like, “Okay Mike, if you think we should sue, I’m with you. You know what we’re doing.”

We have lost several times, but one lawsuit was filed on the fact that Landmarks Commissioners had not been reappointed in a timely fashion. And the court said, “You’re

right, you have to reappoint them. Mr. Mayor, reappoint them.” And then he did.

Everyone was reappointed or newly appointed, and that was a one shot deal. Now they have to be reappointed again and it’s like there isn’t this ongoing attention.

We also sued on—who do you go to when the Landmarks Commission has done the wrong thing and preservation groups are saying the Landmarks Commission has already done it, that’s it, there’s nothing to be done. And finally, they end up with us and we become party of a lawsuit to sue the Landmarks Commission over what they did at 510 Fifth Avenue. The amazing thing was, for the first time, a preservation group was given—even a motley, questionable group like the Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation—like this ad hoc group was given standing by the court to sue the Landmarks Commission. I don’t know if we sued the commission or Vornado [Realty] Trust, the owner, but we did and the case was settled more favorably than had it not been brought, to everyone’s surprise.

The fact that you don’t have to live next door, or in the building, or own the property to have standing. That someone who is just a concerned citizen might have standing to sue on a matter like this we think is pretty big.

Q: Yeah, that’s very difficult.

Kroessler: I keep hoping that we can go out of business, but we all decided we’re not going to go out of business after this. We have to think of what else to do.

Q: Do you have long-term goals?

Kroessler: No.

Q: No.

Kroessler: Our long-term goal, all of us, is to have an independent and ethical Landmarks Commission regulating and designating on the merits. That's our only long-term goal because we feel that is good for the city in the way it turns out and it is good for the political culture of the city. I tell you when we started—when I started going to the Landmarks Commission in the early '80s, like '83 maybe, maybe that's when I started, something like that. When I started going there, I was definitely struck by the notion that what you said in testimony, and the approach of the Landmarks Commission and the commissioners to public hearings was that it matter what people said in testimony and that the decisions were made based on the arguments presented. I might have been more wishful thinking then. I'm more cynical now, but I really think that was the case and at some point that changed. Why would I go down and testify. It's not as if you don't know what the vote is going to be so why bother. You didn't ask me beforehand for any information or support or anything. It doesn't make any sense. So that's the long-term. All of us in the Citizens Committee, that's all we want, an independent and ethical Landmarks Commission.

Q: Right. So you would say that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has sort of devolved.

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: It used to be much better in terms of listening to the community.

Kroessler: Yeah. That the process was a live process. That the issues were live when they came to a hearing and that what citizens testified as to mattered. Now, they have the motions already typed up beforehand.

Q: Typed up. Yeah.

Kroessler: I mean, if you know what you're going to do, why am I testifying. Especially on a Certificate of Appropriateness. Maybe for a designation hearing, you know you're going to designate, that's one thing. But for a Certificate of Appropriateness, the public is bringing you new information. That's not always right.

Q: Is there any other way that the LPC has changed over the past thirty years?

Kroessler: It's more staff driven. What's changed in the last thirty years is that you used to have a preservationist running it and now you have a lawyer, at best. You used to have architects and preservationists involved deeply. Now it's political appointees. I mean,

Bob Tierney is just a political appointee and he's running an agency, he manages meetings, but he didn't understand anything about the law beforehand, which means that the counsel, Mark Silberman, can tell him what the right answer is and he does it. Sarah Carroll, head of regulation, can tell him what the right answer is and he'll do it, whether it is or isn't. And having had discussions with both of them, I'll tell you, they make decisions that are arbitrary and capricious and are not based in precedent. It's how they have redefined the law. So they're going very far from a preservation ethos, which means historic preservation is essential to the health of the city, and that preservation standards should be of the highest because you regulate so that it can come back to a higher standard over time. Their approach is whatever the owner wants we have to accommodate, essentially, and that is dangerous and not good for regulation—oh, you want plastic wood? Sure.

Q: I still can't believe that.

Kroessler: Yeah, that's a tough one to get your head around. Yeah.

Q: So how about the civic sector, how has that changed in the past thirty years?

Kroessler: I don't think it's as lively as it was. The civic organizations are not as—they don't have as broad a base as they once did. The membership I don't think is as wide. I don't think it's—the civics are still in place, but I don't think they have the gravitas that they did. I don't know why that is. Part of it has to do with the whole media landscape

being changed, because the media landscape was newspapers. Newspapers had—you know, not everyone gets on the opinion pages. Not everyone gets quoted. Not everyone can make a story happen. Because of that filter, you had a much more mature, restrained public discourse, because it was in the papers. And it took a day or two—like you submit an op-ed and it doesn't come out for two or three days sometimes, maybe the next day, sometimes a week. But it's this measured discourse where an issue can be debated over several weeks in the paper and now it's immediate. The immediacy of media means that there is no measured discourse anymore. I don't know if you look at *Gothamist*, I look at *Gothamist*, and the discourse is so disheartening. Just the nastiness and the lack of empathy for the other side that you see in these issues is just discouraging.

Q: And lack of thought.

Kroessler: And the lack of thought. So there were many more organizations that when they weighed in—I remember going to the Women's City Club [of New York]. What has happened to the Women's City Club? But there was an organization, the Women's City Club, there was a good government organization, was it, I don't know, maybe Sally Goodgold was the Women's City Club or another good government group. She would focus on any urban issues, from the schools to preservation, to our ambassador to the Vatican, if we had such a thing. Any such public issue would come before these civics like the Women's City Club. And you could go there with a preservation issue and they would discuss it and they would take a stand.

Those groups aren't really there anymore—citywide groups with very Catholic interests.

No. Now you get little groups with their little interest. Very few of them have a bigger picture and the right to have bigger opinions. So those groups have diminished.

Furthermore this administration, and the administration before, have been notoriously unsympathetic to listening to such groups. The whole tone of government is we are above criticism and we can do whatever we want, and they do.

Now at the Citizen's Committee we're thinking we have to sue. The idea that they would approve the demolition of a landmark prior to its designation and have that as the agreement for designation is atrocious. I would think thirty years ago that would have been a scandal of scandals. I don't think the Landmarks commissioner could have survived. And now it's simply who cares. Who cares. We've got the power. As Cornelius Vanderbilt said, "Why do I care for the law, I got the power ain't I." Like yeah, exactly. And that's where we are, if I can be pessimistic.

Q: So the relationship between civic groups and the Landmarks Commission has just—that relationship is almost gone then?

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: Because there's just no more—

Kroessler: Well, the Landmarks Conservancy completely gave up on this Commissioner. They may have come back because it hasn't gone away. I really don't think that the next mayor will make any great return to where the civics get to critique and have government change as a result. I don't think that the next mayor will likely do that.

Q: So how have your attitudes towards preservation in general changed over time?

Kroessler: I guess you start out thinking that's a beautiful building why would it be torn down. When I was a kid, I went to Penn [Pennsylvania] Station, really. We lived in Long Island, I took the Long Island Railroad, and when you get out you come up and you're in Penn Station. I'm eight years old and I'm like oh my god, this is the way the world should be. Then I'm eleven years old or whatever and they're tearing down Penn Station. It's like what? How can this make sense. This really big building, how can it make sense? So sometimes it's just this doesn't make sense. You evolve from this is a beautiful old building it should stay here. And that's where a lot of people start from. That's me as a kid, but as I grew as a historian, the thing that really changed is that I see how historic preservation fits into the contemporary city and the part that historic preservation played in the revitalization of the city during the bad old days. The city got its Landmarks Law in the 1960s, just as it began coming apart in every which way. The schools came apart, the finances came apart, crime came apart, infrastructure came apart, transit came apart. You name it, the city came apart beginning in the mid '60s into the middle of the Koch Administration in the '80s. So for twenty years the city is coming apart and it can't seem to get better.

If you think of the 1977 World Series as the cameras are showing the Yankees and the Dodgers at Yankee Stadium the camera pans into the distance, in the Bronx, and we're looking at the burning tenements in the Bronx. As the Yankees are playing in the World Series, literally in the background the Bronx is burning. Literally. I mean, they questioned whether Howard [W.] Cosell actually said, "Ladies and gentleman the Bronx is burning." But I seem to remember it and I remember seeing that shot. At that exact moment, individuals are committing themselves to preserve the city and the preservation community is born during those very difficult times fighting to save their city.

Being able to look at how historic preservation plays in the bigger panorama of the history of New York City I think is what is special to the way I approach preservation. I'll talk to fellow academics and they'll say gentrification, bad, gentrification, bad. I was at a symposium at LaGuardia Community College that a friend of mine put on about gentrification. And I said, "Gentrification saved New York City, period. Without it, we wouldn't have been here today." We would have all been subject to—the city government had given up. They were willing to have planned shrinkage be the policy of the metropolis and preservationists said no. Other people did too but really that's what gave us a physical city to rally around. Without the physical neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope, and these other places, the west side, [Upper] East Side Historic District, without the physical place, you can't build up around it and have a city that's worth living in otherwise it doesn't matter.

So from my perspective, right now I look at it as what are the historical forces at play at the moment and I hope that I am smart enough at the moment to know what's happening in the present, although I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure what happened thirty years ago
[laughter].

Q: Right. And so can you share your thoughts on some of the individuals that you felt had made the greater contributions to preservation advocacy in New York?

Kroessler: The first person was Elliot Willensky. The entire time I knew Elliot, he was on the Landmarks Commission. I got to know him by testifying at the commission and being involved in preservation groups like HDC and whatever else. And I think we just sort of were becoming friends by virtue of the way we approached the city of this should be fun. There are good things. We should celebrate the good things. We should make this— we're doing this for good reasons.

Elliot Willensky's AIA [American Institute of Architects] guide, and his *When Brooklyn Was the World [1920-1957]*, when you read that little book about Brooklyn in the Twentieth Century, it's a terrific summary of the highlights of Brooklyn life. I thought he was just so smart about the city and had such affection for it. For someone like that to be on the Landmarks Commission, someone you could approach outside of the commission and see him casually talking about other things. I don't know when we were doing it but we were discussing something we saw in *Newsday*, I think it was *Newsday*, it might have *Science Times*, the first time we had seen a story about chaos theory. And I said, "Oh,

that was really interesting I cut that out.” When we used to cut out clippings. And he said, “I cut that out too. That was really interesting.” Chaos theory, who knew when it was a new thing. So first I would say Elliot.

Secondly, Tony [Anthony M.] Tung being a member of the Landmarks Commission, who I also got to know and become sort of friends with. The idea that he could be an independent voice at the Landmarks Commission as a young man, approachable, thoughtful and young—the idea that he was so young when he was doing this, just a couple of years older than me, and the fight that he had when he was tossed off over Bryant Park. That whole Bryant Park battle really said—that galvanized the preservation community like it—that was the event that brought the preservation community into a single community because it was, this is the wrong thing to do. And getting to know Tony through that principled stand, fighting for what the Landmarks Commission should be, and then knowing him over the years with his comments about Landmarks and his book *Preserving the World’s Great Cities*, I would say left an enormous mark.

And then of course Tony Wood who has ruined my life, from HDC to Citizens Committee, to god knows what, involving me in all these things.

Q: To this interview.

Kroessler: The non-stop advocacy and I really respect the way that he can see where the situation is today and cut through the particular interests, even of someone like me. We all have particular interests, but I always think that Tony has a view of the big picture.

The absolute dedication of Christabel Gough—that she shows up the Landmarks Commission all the time, that she has never quit on it, that the idea that she produced *Village Views* those years when everything was print—that was extraordinary. Having those series of volumes, because you wouldn't want to miss what was being written in there because it was a commentary on issues. That kind of commentary is now in blogs and it doesn't carry the same weight. And it's certainly influenced the way the preservation community thought of itself and set standards.

Simeon came into this as a kid, out of college, and for some reason he has been with HDC for god knows how many years and has really overseen it into a major organization. It's grown and matured under him and I didn't think that he had the maturity to mature an organization, but it certainly has, and to give it that kind of citywide presence.

Then you could just go on with other names. Watching people like Arlene [Simon] turn—I mean, we all would dread Arlene calling us because we knew she was calling to yell at us for something. “How come you haven't done that?” “I want to yell at you about this.” It's like, “Arlene, I'm trying. I'm sorry. I disagree with you.” Like click. “I'm sorry, Arlene.” She, I don't want to say single-handedly, but out of nothing created Landmark West! to bring back the West Side and got it designated, and got other things

designated, and combated the commission on when they were doing the wrong thing.

And of all things, for that woman to have turned around West Seventy-Second Street, to use the law and cajole all of these small shop keepers to do the right thing, that block is a hundred percent better now than it was. Maybe it would have happened that way anyway, but it didn't. It happened because she had the Landmarks Law behind her and could count on that happening. But I don't know if that's an unusual force of nature there.

Q: All right. The last question is just if you have any archiving items, such as papers, newspaper articles, photos, records related to preservation.

Kroessler: You can have them.

Q: I can have them.

Kroessler: If I find them, you can have them.

Q: Is there a good storage place for them?

Kroessler: No. They're in my basement.

Q: In your basement? Oh, well at least we know.

Kroessler: They're in here. I don't know where they are anymore. You go to an archive and you see everything archived and nicely done, but when you're living with it, you create papers, they're gone, and then you suddenly find a pile. If I ever get through any piles of stuff, and I find anything that you all think might be worth archiving, it's yours.

Q: Okay. Good to know.

Kroessler: Yeah.

Q: All right. Well, thank you.

Kroessler: Okay. Thank you.

Q: Anything else you want to add for the record?

Kroessler: No.

Q: All right. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]