

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

The Reminiscences of  
Peter Samton

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Samton conducted by Interviewer Kelly Carroll on July 16, 2014. 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.

As a young architect, Peter Samton was involved in the fight to save Penn Station. At the time, and interest historical preservation was an outlier amongst architects. He discusses how attitudes slowly changed, how his experiences in Europe sparked his interest in saving historical buildings, and how the Landmark Preservation Commission has evolved. He mentions several projects in which he worked with local historical organizations to preserve buildings during renovations including the 72nd street subway station and the Montana Apartments.

Peter Samton, FAIA, is a principal in the New York architecture firm IBI Group • Gruzen Samton. A 1957 graduate of the MIT School of Architecture, Samton spent time in France as a Fulbright Scholar and then worked with several architects, including Marcel Breuer, before joining his present firm in the early 1960s when it was known as Kelly & Gruzen. During Samton's tenure, the firm has designed a number of notable projects in New York and elsewhere. As a young architect, Samton was among the leaders of the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York (AGBANY), which organized a picket-line protest of the impending demolition of New York City's Pennsylvania Station in August 1962 and lobbied officials on the station's behalf. Samton has continued to be an outspoken voice in civic affairs since the protest and has served as president of the City Club of New York.

Transcriptionist: Kimberly Carmichael

Session: 1

Interviewee: Peter Samton

Location: Manhattan, New York

Interviewer: Kelly Carroll

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Q: Good morning, this is Kelly Carroll for the New York Preservation Archive Project here with Peter Samton to conduct an oral history on *Leading the Movement: Interviews With Preservationist Leaders in New York's Civic Sector*. Good morning, Peter.

Samton: Good morning.

Q: To start out with some background, could you talk about the origins of your interest in preservation? When you were an architecture student, did you ever think of preservation in your early professional life?

Samton: I was an architecture student back in the 1950s. Preservation was a word then, it wasn't a movement at all. There was little interest or knowledge about preservation in this country. At the time, I went to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] School of Architecture [and Planning] and got a Fulbright [Scholar Program] Fellowship to France. I was fortunate in that and met a bunch of other architects over there—Paris Prize winners, Rome Prize and so forth. We traveled together and explored Europe in the mid-1950s.

Then I came back to New York and started working as an apprentice in various offices in New York City. In the early 1960s, I met a bunch of other architects, particularly Elliot Willensky and

Norval White, who I befriended. In the early 1960s—'61 and '62—we heard about plans for the demolition of Penn [Pennsylvania Station] Station, which took us aback. We were somewhat shocked that there was even a consideration of demolishing this great building. Having had the good fortune of traveling in Europe, we began to talk about this with these other architects. My current partner Jordan [L.] Gruzen, who I was at MIT with and also was on a Fulbright to Italy in the '50s, we gathered a bunch of people together and said, 'How can this be?' This would never happen in France or Italy, the idea of demolishing the Notre Dame or the [Musée du] Louvre or any historic building would just never come to mind, no matter its location.

Q: So your time on your Fulbright scholarship directly impacted you?

Samton: My time in Europe, yes. The other interesting thing was that in the early '60s I had made several trips to Europe after my Fulbright and I noticed that European cities, particularly London and Paris, were beginning to clean their old buildings. You have to remember that this was not much after the war. All the great monuments of European cities were still black or gray, very dirty looking. They began to clean them and when they were clean, they were white or pink, and it made such a huge difference.

Here in New York, Penn Station was black. It looked awful to many people, especially those who had no background in the history of architecture or no interest in that. That added to this interest in the demolition of Penn Station, that is was a dirty building. In this country, it's like dixie cup architecture—we throw things away. We don't take the time to clean. That was the beginning of our thought when we organized this group of young architects.

Q: With Penn Station being one of the many threatened landmarks of the early 1960s, why did Penn, in particular, strike such a nerve?

Samton: Because it occupied such an important position in the city. It was above not only the connection to the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Long Island Railroad and two major subway lines going north-south, it was a block from the Empire State Building. It was a very strategic location. The city fathers at that time—the big politicians and others—began to maneuver and say this was all a wasted space. Several acres of land two blocks running north-south and a big block running east-west should not be consumed by a building that really does very little other than provide space for passengers. It could be a much more useful building and could do many other things. That was the thinking then. It was such a strategic location.

Q: How did AGBANY [Action Group for Better Architecture in New York] attract media attention to the protests and do you recall the press' initial reaction?

Samton: That's why we had Norval White and Elliot. They were both very smart about these things. They were young, not much older than I was. They were very verbal themselves—they were in touch with some of the publications. The rest of us, we were just dumb architects. What did we know about communicating with the press? Norval became the head person, Elliot next in charge and we looked for ways to get the press to pay attention.

They were just not interested. Robert [F.] Wagner was the mayor at the time. There were lots of politicians who just were not knowledgeable about architecture, nor were they interested in it. There were just a few of us young architects who showed interest. The idea of preservation was barely mentioned by people. There were such people as Henry Hope Reed and others who were preservationists, but they were thought of as Nineteenth Century dandies. Preservation was a thing for old people yearning for the past.

Q: Did you feel in the beginning that it may have been possible to save the station or did you always have the sense that it was likely a lost cause?

Samton: Well, we thought it was an outside shot. We were not so hopeful because by that time there was already a design in place to produce a different building by the architect Charles Luckman. There was a lot of energy already put into the idea of replacing the building. This was like a hail mary, we thought. The more we got into it, the more outraged we became. It was not a question of winning the battle so much as fighting a war. This was going to be much bigger than Penn Station—that the public was just ignorant, especially the business community and politicians. There was literally no one there who could be a hero and could stand up for this.

Years later in the effort to save Grand Central [Terminal], there was Jackie [Jacqueline] Kennedy [Onassis] and people like that. At this point, there was nobody. People in this country were just not smart about it. They didn't think it was an issue. We were a new country and were much more interested in new buildings. How many old buildings were there anyway—buildings of

architectural importance. It was just not on the table for discussion among most of the people. It took young architects to alert them. We felt that was our job.

Q: What about the response of other established organizations, such as the AIA [American Institute of Architects] or MAS [Municipal Art Society], to these protests that you led?

Samton: The interesting thing is that the AIA itself was run by a bunch of fuddy-duddies. I worked in buildings like 101 Park Ave, which was known then as the architects' building, for some reason, and there were a bunch of architects there. Most of the architecture firms in New York, Alfred Easton Poor and people like that, were not really thinking about saving old buildings. They were thinking then about building new office buildings in the city. There was really nobody there in the community that showed interest. The AIA, particularly, was run by these older architects. Young employees were not active in the AIA. That was a side issue that Norval White got interested in. He was young then, he was in his early thirties. I was in my mid-twenties.

One of the things we did, was we came before the AIA and met with them. There was a woman who was our Madame Lafarge. Her name was Diana Kirsch. She was the girlfriend of my brother, Claude. She was livid. In the sense, while she wasn't as knowledgeable as Norval and as Elliot, she was the spunk that got us really moving. She said, "We've got to go to the goddamn AIA and tell them that they're asleep at the switch." She pushed us to go there and meet with them, which we did. But we found that they were just not concerned. They said, "Look, the city needs new buildings, this is a big site that is basically sitting fallow, it has no useful purpose, just

a lot of space, a lot of architecture but very little use. What do passengers need all that space for?” These are architects talking to us. Maybe they saw an opportunity to do a new building there. It was not unusual for architects then to think of anyplace that they could build—they would build. The historic movement did not exist. It was absolutely nonexistent. There was no such thing as preservation on the lips of anybody.

Q: MAS acted similarly?

Samton: It was the same thing. MAS, as such, was like the AIA—it existed more or less for fancy rich people that may have been interested and curious about things. First of all, it was not as organized as it became, especially in years later and today it didn’t have a lot of energy from younger people. It was mostly older, well-to-do people who thought of it as something they could give money to maybe with some good causes. But, again, preservation was not something that was on anybody’s lips.

Q: During the AGBANY protests, there was a twofold strategy—it seems that you guys were working the legal channels and bringing public attention to the cause. How did AGBANY balance these two aspects of its campaign?

Samton: Well, I don’t think we did too well at either. The fact that we organized the protest was maybe our biggest achievement. Fortunately, we did a few things that made it become somewhat of a headliner. As far as political maneuvering, that came somewhat after the protest than before. Before, we couldn’t get anybody on the phone. Who is AGBANY? What do you want? So, it



took the protest and it took the publication of articles about the protest to open doors in government for us.

It took months after that for us to meet with representatives of the mayor or other people. Even when Norval met with Mayor Wagner, at that point it was sort of a *fait accompli*. There was no indication on anybody's part of reconsidering the demolition of this building. They did meet; they were civilized about it. Because of articles appearing in newspapers and magazines, they decided to meet just to show goodwill. It was almost ordained that it wouldn't work. They were not going to stop the wrecking ball for one minute.

Q: Do you recall speaking before the [New York] City Planning Commission about the permit for Madison Square Garden?

Samton: I don't really recall that [*laughter*]. I know it happened. I don't remember how much I got involved in this and how much Norval and Elliot and others did. It was a bit of a frenzy then. I was perhaps more involved in organizing the protests in front of Penn Station. One of my roles was to get attention from the media. In order to do that, we felt we needed a few celebrities there. We thought of Philip Johnson. He was reluctant to come. He himself was not interested in preservation then, which is ironic when you think of the career of Philip Johnson after that—he was very much identified with preservation. I got to know Philip quite well after that and became president of the AIA many years later and had a fair amount of contact with him. The one thing you could say about him was that he was a very flexible person. He would think one way one

way and turn around the next day and reconsider it. So, he did that here. He said, “Ok I’ll come.” And he had a meeting with us.

Mrs. [Elizabeth] Bliss Parkinson was a client, a well-established woman. I’m not sure what he was doing for her, maybe a house or something like that. I think she was one the board of the Museum of Modern Art, I don’t remember exactly. But he and she came and they had their meeting as they walked around on the picket line on that day in June.

[INTERRUPTION]

Samton: So that was a good thing. Then we got Eero Saarinen to come and a number of other people. Rick [Ulrich] Franzen was then a fairly young architect himself, a modern architect, who I had actually applied to for a job at the time, so I knew him, but then I decided to take a job with Marcel Breuer instead. But we couldn’t get Breuer to come—Breuer was a complete modernist. He was not yet convinced about Penn Station. But Rick Franzen was, which was interesting. That was an interesting detail. I had been working at the time for Marcel Breuer.

Q: You said that you don’t recall specifically speaking before the City Planning Commission, but could you talk a little about the reaction after the permit was issued? Among AGBANY and the city in general?

Samton: Well, we were quite livid about it. We got no support from anybody. One of the things that I did—this is also *[unclear]*. We had the picket line but it was not until a year, maybe a year

and a half after the picket line that the demolition began. The picket line was on August 2, 1962. The demolition didn't begin until later in '63. During that time, we kept figuring out what is it that we could do to continue what happened then with the picket line. In other words, the picket line was such a success because there was so much written about it. But that was a one-time event and we needed to stimulate more of the public. Again, I don't remember exactly, but I remember putting a chain around all the columns and making as if I were tied to the column.

[INTERRUPTION]

Samton: We did little gestures here and there. We went before City Planning and met with the mayor and met with politicians. But everything was dead in its tracks. We didn't gain any momentum from that. We needed people in positions of power to make our case. As young architects, no one was paying attention to us. The advantage of Norval is he was a very big person. He was six-foot seven, and huge, must have weighed close to three hundred pounds and had a big, booming voice. People really paid attention. Elliot Willensky was a smaller guy but very articulate and bright. They were perfect spokespeople for our group. They were just the right people at that point.

The political establishment and the business community couldn't be influenced somehow. They didn't see this as a cause celebre; they didn't see this as something of monumental importance. They saw this as a bunch of young architects interested in their profession. They saw us as young architects who spent too much time in Europe. "In this country, we do new things. We're not interested in preserving old, dirty buildings. We build new, modern buildings like the Lever

House.” which interestingly was—a new building done in the mid-1950s. The client of the Lever House was Charles Luckman. He was the president of Lever Brothers and he commissioned Skidmore, Owings [&Merrill, LLP] [SOM] to do that building. He enjoyed that building so much he decided to go back into architecture. And he had his own firm, which was out in Los Angeles at that time. He was commissioned to do the new Penn Station. So you have a modern architect doing a building in place of the old Penn Station, which infuriated us. It was like he was a traitor. This guy—and I wrote nasty letters to him. I communicated quite a bit with him. He was actually quite gentlemanly enough and wrote back. But I was not civilized at all.

We were infuriated by what was going on but couldn’t get anywhere. I wrote notes to Luckman—we did everything we knew. We thought we’d make him feel guilty. But here he was, a well-known leader of the business community, the president of Lever Brothers who went back into architecture doing this giant new building on the site of this wonderful old, what we thought of as a landmark. A landmark then was not known. The forces were against us; we got nowhere. I was left in my frustrations doing a lot of stupid things like writing nasty letters, letters to the editor, letters to Luckman, saying terrible things to politicians and businesspeople, the AIA. It ended up going nowhere.

Q: You talk about Norval and Elliot a lot and their involvement. How did they first become involved? Did you know them before?

Samton: Diana Kirsch, she was the conscience of this group. She was a very strong-willed person. She worked for Abe [Abraham W.] Geller at the time, whom my brother worked for also.

He was sort of an architect's architect. She got us feeling guilty that we were sitting around not doing anything when there were plans to demolish Penn Station. She said, why are we sitting around? Why don't we organize? She knew all these people because she knew almost every architect in the city.

[INTERRTUPTION]

Samtom: I think she was a force that brought us together. Both Norval and Elliot jumped into it. Norval had an office on East Sixty-First Street at that time, which was a really nice office. We met there at his office—the rest of us didn't have offices at the time. Norval was already a practicing architect—not very big, maybe three employees or something like that. So we would meet there. I didn't know Elliot, I did know Norval, I did know Diana, my brother and other people. That was more or less the way we organized and got together.

Q: What about Ray [Raymond S.] Rubinow?

Samton: Well, he was a business leader in the community. I just remember that he was sort of an activist, not an architect, someone Norval knew. I didn't really know him. I knew literally nobody then. I was just five or six years out of school and was working in offices. The interesting thing is I got to know a lot of these people then. I think he was involved in the effort to save Carnegie Hall.

Q: Yes, he was.

Samton: That occurred, I believe, before this. I think that's how we got him into this. Carnegie Hall was an important architectural milestone, and it was a different issue then. That was more about that being a great concert hall and there were other forces, like Issac Stern and other people, that came into that. Ray Rubinow, because of his role there somehow got involved with Penn Station. Norval or somebody got him into it. I think he helped us. Nothing anybody did worked anyway. Why don't we take a break.

Q: Just let me hit pause.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: We were speaking about Ray Rubinow. Did he reach out to any influential people during this?

Samton: Possibly. I don't think we got Issac Stern. That was more Norval's doing than mine. I had more to do with Philip Johnson and some of the architects—the others, it was mostly architects. There were a few influential people who were not architects.

To the public and the press and everybody, it was an architect's picket line, with a few other people thrown in. It was hard enough to get architects interested in this then. We were all younger—the older ones couldn't care less. If you look at pictures of the picket line, it was

people in their twenties and thirties mostly, with a few older architects here and there. Ray Rubinow being one of the older people who was not an architect.

Q: How did Norval get other influential architects to participate? Was that also because of the press coverage, like in *the [New York] Times*?

Samton: No, I think it was a genuine interest and feeling about doing something to save the building from being torn down. There were people who, like me and many of my contemporaries, who had experience in living and studying and working in Europe. There was a generational gap between the younger architects and the older architects and the young architects and the public. This was like a rebellion then.

It was a definite generational thing, for sure. We felt that something had to be done here. Every scholarship and fellowship was sending some young person to Europe, whether it was the Paris Prize or the Rome Prize or the Rotch Traveling Scholarship that goes to students in Boston, at MIT and Harvard [University] and so forth. The first thing a young architect does when he graduates from college is go to Europe. So what are you doing sending us to Europe to study the great buildings when here in this country you do such monstrous things?

It was a real architectural thing then, and particularly a generational thing. You couldn't get dignified, older architects—with some exceptions—to participate.

Q: Did AGBANY reach out to Mayor Wagner or members of his administration?

Samton: Yes. That was particularly Norval. There was a meeting with Mayor Wagner. It was not a very productive meeting. He was very cordial, but he shrugged his shoulders and said, “It’s a done deal.” Part of it was it took months and months to get that meeting. By that time it was maybe early 1963. I didn’t go to the meeting. It was Norval and possibly Elliot.

When you think of people like Bobby [Robert F.] Wagner [III], his son, who became politically very active and Henry [A.M.] Stern, who was beginning to get quite active. Henry Stern was more or less a contemporary of mine and was for many years [New York City Department of] Parks [and Recreation] Commissioner. Their sophistication came later on. They were nowhere on this debate. Both of them, who one thinks of as being relatively sophisticated political-types, who were government employed—they were not on board. It took the demolition itself to make people aware that it was more than a done deal, really. It was a great tragedy and why was I asleep at the switch?

Q: Did AGBANY reach out to politicians such as John [V.] Lindsay?

Samton: No, Lindsay was then congressman and had not yet run for mayor. He was sophisticated. I don’t remember that we reached out to him. We didn’t know yet that he was going to run for mayor. He was also representing the East Side and the West Side. I don’t recall reaching out to Lindsay. He would have been perfect because he was so sophisticated and maybe he would have seen what this was all about.



Q: At the time, the Landmarks Commission was not what it is now, but did you encourage the then-commission to take a stand or make a statement about Penn?

Samton: We tried. There was a meeting or two, as I recall. First of all, they had no authority yet. They were in name only. It was almost as if they were throwing a few peanuts to us. I don't remember when it was created, around that same time. It existed a number of years before there was really teeth made which was, as I recall 1965.

Q: Yes, the fiftieth is coming up.

Samton: Before then, there was a Landmarks Preservation Commission, but you could basically say it didn't exist.

Q: After the demolition—you guys came together around saving the station so afterward, did you have any vision for AGBANY to continue in a more permanent role? What happened after?

Samton: What happened, I think many of us went off in our own directions. AGBANY, as such, didn't really continue but I became very involved in various things—The City Club [of New York], the Municipal Art Society, I became president of the AIA, as Norval did too. If you can't fight them, join them. I became president in 1975, some twelve or thirteen years later. By then, things had changed already.

All of us were very active in the effort to save Grand Central [Terminal]. AGBANY, again, didn't exist as such in that effort. That had a lot more teeth in it because of Penn Station being torn down. People became really panicked about Grand Central being torn down. We got Jackie [Jacqueline] Kennedy [Onassis] to be our figurehead. I didn't lead that. But we got into it with the Brokaw Mansion. I went there to picket. I think it was 1965. But that was also a lost cause. That was a very wonderful mansion at the corner Seventy-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, where they built this big, tall apartment building now. People began to respond and take note, but it was not seen in the same light as Penn Station. Not as big a building, not as important and central to the city.

More and more, it became clear—all these things, whether Penn Station or the Brokaw Mansion, affected public legislation, affected the Landmarks Preservation Commission in a way that they became more powerful to do more things. Each of these was a stepping-stone to preservation and had some sort of effect.

Also, there was another building—that was earlier, around the same time as Penn Station, there was the Savoy-Plaza [Hotel], across from The Plaza Hotel, where the Apple store is now. There was a picket there too *[laughs]*. We tried there and there was the building that went there. None of us really cared for the idea. Each was a different situation. That was one where we said, “Why are they creating a plaza in front of a plaza?” And the architect for that building was one of our own, Ed [Edward Durell] Stone. This became much more of an architectural issue than a preservation issue. Savoy-Plaza was a nice building but it was not a masterpiece like Penn Station or the Brokaw Mansion. What is was an urban design issue. Here comes Fifth Avenue

going downtown and suddenly it opens to the wonderful plaza in front of The Plaza Hotel. Along comes a developer who knocks down the Savoy-Plaza, which helped the street wall to continue down Fifth Avenue. So you knock that down and in those days, they gave you bonuses for producing plazas. So here you got a bonus to do a plaza in front of a plaza in front of The Plaza Hotel. It was a joke, but each of those issues was different. I don't recall exactly when that was it occurred. It was after Penn Station not before—maybe '64 or '65. But it was the same group.

We were all actors, not as AGBANY, not as the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York, but as individuals. I've picketed in front of dozens of buildings and so forth, going into the 1980s when they were building those big buildings at the southwest corner—

Q: Time Warner Center?

Samton: What became the Time Warner building. We had a walk-in against the shadow, which was on October 29, 1987.

Q: With the umbrellas, right?

Samton: That was the day the market crashed, so I remember that date. We had umbrellas, and hundreds of us walked to create this shadow. And many of the same people were there. We were all trying to get the public to understand and become more sophisticated about these things. And it did have an effect. There was no question that after [unclear] desing, the next design which was SOM, the buildings were lower. Even today, we have developers building these huge

skyscraper buildings on Fifty-Seventh Street. Each one has got to cast an enormous shadow onto Central Park going all the way up to Seventy-Second Street or more, which is crazy to allow that.

Q: You touched on the Brokaw Mansions and Savoy-Plaza. Did you guys picket the old Met [Metropolitan Opera House]?

Samton: No, that was down on Fortieth Street, I think. And that was sort of a grimy building. That never got a lot of attention. We were not like Henry Hope Reed. The problem was there were people in the '60s who were against any old building being torn down—anything old is great. That was not our position. We didn't want to be identified with that. We wanted to keep the worthy buildings. Really, it was the beginning of the landmark movement, the movement to save historic, important buildings. The Metropolitan Opera House had a lot of problems, the steps were small, it was in a very bad area for an opera house then, down on Fortieth Street and Broadway, as I recall. I don't think it represented the best of architecture worth saving. We didn't fight that fight.

We tried to pick and choose the really important fights, which I think made a difference. People didn't say, oh, they just want to save anything that's old. That's not our position.

Q: You talked about being active in preservation into the '80s, with what became the Time Warner Center. How has your awareness of preservation shaped your career?

Samton: I'm involved in a certain amount of preservation of buildings here and there. For instance, I'd been the architect for the Columbia Grammar [& Preparatory] School, which is here on the West Side near Central Park West here, in the Nineties. They, it was almost thirty years ago, began to buy property there. They are expanding, they are a very good school that was interested in expanding into the neighborhood but doing it in a way where they are a good neighbor, as much as possible.

We've taken a number of the buildings—they own ten to twelve brownstones on Ninety-Fourth Street, Ninety-Third Street. We've renovated them and turned them into school buildings while keeping the front. We've met before the community planning board. We've met with historic groups. And there have been fights. A lot of the neighbors were upset because they didn't want all that traffic and activity. But by and large, in the sense of the work that was done, and certainly over the years I've learned about it and enjoyed the challenge of working with both the community on the one hand and the school on the other and keeping existing buildings and renovating them while inserting a little bit of new here and there as well.

In the old days, they would have just demolished the brownstones. Imagine taking seven brownstones, which is what we did, and making a single school building out of seven brownstones while not doing anything to the front of the building. We had to unite the back, we had to do exiting and elevators. We had to do everything to make it a safe building for schoolchildren. But we preserved a lot. The neighborhood is all the better off for it because the buildings look much better. It's true they're not residential buildings. But still, we're preserving

the buildings and in these days, buildings change in their use. As an architect, I've seen that happen a lot and it's interesting and good. It's not a bad thing. That's part of what's happened.

I've become involved in many sites. I did, along with a friend Richard Dattner, we did the subway station at Seventy-Second Street, which is a new building—was a new building then more than ten years ago when we did it. We had to meet with historic groups and so forth and the building had to go before every agency and so forth. I think we were sensitive to that part of the city, where there's an open square at Seventy-Second and Broadway. It has affected my work. Not everything I've done is historic preservation, but I would say I've learned from it.

I did a building here at the corner of Eighty-Eighth Street and Broadway called the Montana Apartments, which are twin tower buildings. They are the first twin tower buildings since the 1930s, since the Emery Roth buildings on Central Park West. It's the first sort of modern twin tower buildings. It was the [New York] City Planning Commission had zoning that encouraged plazas, like the Plaza Hotel and the Savoy-Plaza demolition. I said the same thing here because I'm a member of that fight, that, why build a plaza on Broadway? Building plazas and getting zoning bonuses makes sense in certain areas, especially down in the Wall Street area and places like that, but not on Broadway, which is a street that is 150 feet wide. You don't want to have a plaza there. Let's get a bonus for something else and they gave us a bonus for what they called housing quality. City Planning helped us create these twin tower buildings, which allow sunlight to come between. That all sort of came from preservation also.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: We're almost done, but just two more general questions to wrap up. You've touched on this a few times today, but in general how do you think architects' attitudes toward preservation have changed since the '60s?

Samton: It's changed a lot. I think there are a lot of very good architects today who have been in school since those times who are aware of preservation. I think the city has benefited a lot. I think young architects are more sophisticated and more ready to look around and take advantage of the good things that our city has. The attitude today from more than fifty years ago is very different. We were like a rebel group then. We were a smaller bunch of mostly young architects in their twenties and early thirties who were interested in changing things then, and learned from Europe and felt that the senior architects here were in a different world.

Today, I think it much more acceptable and I think most every architect who has major commissions in the city is going to be more sensitive to the important older buildings and the need to preserve and the need to be a good neighbor to the other buildings. Think of all the historic districts that we now have. It's not just Manhattan. Brooklyn has a huge number of historic districts, Queens has them.

My son bought into a historic district in Crown Heights, and the buildings are so-so. They're nothing to write home about. In some ways, the pendulum might have swung a little too far. For example, he has a brownstone on a street where they have brownstones with stained glass. The good thing is you want to preserve the brownstone and the scale of it. It would be terrible to

demolish the building and build an eighteen-story high rise. On the other hand, a commission now is pushing to preserve stain glass that hasn't even been there.

Photos from the 1940s show stain glass in the transom above the door and so forth. And they are asking him to put back the stain glass. The stain glass, from my inspection of photos, isn't even that great. That, I think, is overreach. That's going too far in that direction. I think keeping the building, keeping the façade, keeping the unity of the street is important, but give me a break. At some point, you draw the line. I think the pendulum has swung more than necessary [*phone ringing*].

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: You do have materials from AGBANY and your own preservation efforts. The New York Preservation Archive Project is wondering if you ever considered a method of archiving those items.

Samton: Yes, I could do that. I have a lot of stuff here—piles and piles of stuff. I would like to do that actually because [*unclear*] what would happen. My kids might not keep that and I think it's worth keeping. There's a lot of old, interesting stuff from that time. It would make a good little exhibit, the stuff I have. I don't know if we have time to go over it now. I have all the forms we took out and got signatures. We went around with these little clipboards. There were lots of articles and we put ads in the newspaper with everybody's name with big exclamation marks. People thought we were crazy, what were we so excited about?



We have that and a lot of photographs that were taken then by a fellow—he was a photographer then who became an architect because of his involvement with photographing the picket line. His name was David Hirsch. He was a good photographer then who decided to become an architect all because of what happened then. I have many of his photographs showing the picket line and the demolition of the station. A lot of it has been published already. There's a book by Lorraine [B.] Diehl about the demolition of Penn Station. I don't think what I have is that new, but I do have a lot of the picket line and our feeble attempt of getting support. I just kept it because I knew it was an important event that other people didn't think was important. So I kept it. I keep everything anyway.

Q: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]