

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Teri Slater

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Teri Slater conducted by Interviewer Edith Bellinghouse on April 11, 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

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

Teri Slater co-founded the Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side in 2003 to help community organizations preserve their neighborhoods. She was involved in the efforts to landmark the Upper East Side, to save the Central Park Children's Zoo, and to landmark City and Suburban. She is passionate about preserving the sense of place and character of neighborhoods, rather than simply saving old buildings. To that end, she discusses different methods of saving neighborhoods and buildings, including landmarking, but also zoning and land use regulations. She also speaks about the politics of preservation in New York City, the pressure on the Landmarks Preservation Commission to balance commercial needs and development with preserving the city, and the many advocacy groups competing for the same supporters.

Teri Slater was a longtime Upper East Side resident, the co-founder of the group Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side, and a key member of the Unite to Save the Frick campaign. Defenders took on numerous high-profile preservation battles in the neighborhood, including disputes with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other development proposals that threatened historic residential space. Slater also served on Community Board 8 for over twenty years and was the co-chair of CB8's Zoning and Development Committee. She was honored with the Historic Districts Council's Grassroots Preservation Award in 2015.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Teri Slater

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Edith Bellinghouse

Date: April 11, 2012

Q: Let me start that now, and it looks like we're all good to go. This is Edith Bellinghouse. I'm here at the Kress Foundation on East 80th Street in Manhattan with Teri Slater. I have some questions written out, so if I'm sort of looking down or making notes then—

Slater: Okay.

Q: It's just to sort of steer things. All right. I just want to start with if you can tell me briefly about your background, and if you're from New York originally.

Slater: Well, yes, I am from the New York region. I'm a native New Yorker and a native Upper East Sider. Except for a few years in Palo Alto, California, I've lived in actually this very neighborhood in different areas of this neighborhood all of my life. Some of it was in—I'm in actually Yorkville now, but I was a little outside of Yorkville before, and then farther west for many, many years, but this is my beat *[laughs]*.

Q: So this is your home.

Slater: Yes.

Q: So you really know the neighborhood.

Slater: I do. I feel that I do. I've seen the changes that have taken place over the years. My background was not in preservation. I worked for a large corporation for a number of years and then I taught for a couple of years when I was in California. But I was always a preservationist at heart before I left for California. Actively, when I came back to New York one of the very first sort of campaigns I joined was to create the Upper East Side Historic District, and that was a huge campaign. The scope of what people were trying to do, particularly the many fine buildings, which many of them could be individual landmarks, but the area held together as a place, and that's one of the requirements for it. It had a sense of place for historic districts.

Q: What year was this?

Slater: This was the early '80s. I know, I lose the years. Eighty-one, eight-two, I can't remember, but people were working on it for years before that, many people. Friends of the Upper East Side Historic District led the charge. Helena Rosenthal, who was my mentor, she was like a sister to me. A remarkable, remarkable woman, we will never see the likes of her again.

Q: I'm definitely going to want to talk to Helena for a little bit.

Slater: Yes. But she led the charge and it was quite a battle because the Real Estate Board of New York was horrified of what we were trying to do. They don't like regulations, you may know that, and concessions had to be made, where the boundaries were, what were left out. That

became problematic for a lot of us, but you have to—I guess politics is the art of compromise and we had to cut back the Madison Avenue guidelines. The commercial area along Madison Avenue was a component of this whole effort in that they wanted to be sure that the historic district regulations didn't hamper the flow of commerce on Madison. The guidelines that they have for signage on Madison Avenue are not like the guidelines anywhere else in the city. They're much more liberal, shall we say. That was another concession that had to be made, where the boundaries of that district route was pulled in.

Q: So what was happening in the neighborhood at that time that you think was the impetus for this movement?

Slater: Well, there were two things. The fact that we were losing buildings, I mean, people noticed this. When you look at the grid, the city's grid, particularly in Manhattan, you see that the taller buildings are on the avenues and the lower buildings are on the side streets, and this is true here. We have many row house blocks. It's not like our sister community board, the Upper West Side, where you have rows of really pristine row houses. A lot of these small buildings had already been altered in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, and they were, for want of a better word, fancified. They were made into more elaborate buildings from humble row houses, brownstones. They were made much elaborate with limestone facades and so on. But the height remained the brownstone height, the row house height, on the side streets, but the zoning was not in sync with that look. The zoning permitted buildings—it was R8 not R8B, which is contextual zoning now. The R8 zoning permitted I believe buildings up to, maybe, I hate to say this, fourteen stories. I'm trying to remember.

Q: Even in mid block.

Slater: In mid block. It had been done in places. Buildings were being altered in inappropriate ways. We were losing, you know, the real feel and look of the historic areas and historic mid blocks. So that's what people began to notice. Other buildings had been torn down, magnificent buildings to old apartment houses—and of course it just went right out of my head. I meant to bring my notes, but I left them at home. Seventy-ninth and Park [Avenue] there was a magnificent building and that was torn down to build—you'll see there's a Botero sculpture, a different [Fernando] Botero sculpture in front of that building. That was a magnificent house that was torn down. There were things happening and many people realized the value of this historic area and this big communal effort. All of the different people, existing groups, and individuals, working hard to change that and stop it.

Q: So set the scene for me. Who was active at the time and who were sort of the preservation groups that were active on the Upper East Side at that time when you became involved in that situation.

Slater: Well, Friends of the Upper East Side Historic District spearheaded this whole movement. They really—Helena was in the forefront. She was a visionary in many ways and she was not a preservationist by training. She was by nature a preservationist and a remarkable person, as I said. Friends spearheaded it, but the other existing groups were Carnegie Hill Neighbors, with my co-chair Elizabeth Ashby. I don't know if she was yet president, but she became president

and was president for many years. CIVITAS was another group that got involved. There were many block associations. You'd be amazed at the number of block associations and how old some of them are. The Treadwell Farm area has a block association that is very old. I think it goes back to the '20s. There was a block association on my block where I lived for so many years that was founded during—

Q: [Inaudible - 0:07:16.1]

Slater: Seventy-Eighth Street between Lex [Lexington Avenue] and Clark. It was the East 78th Street Block Association Park/Lex, one block. But I thought we did a lot of good, certainly when I was there. They were on board and they were founded during the [Mayor John V.] Lindsay administration. I mean, some of these—and there are others all over the Upper East Side. They were mostly invested in cleanliness and planting trees and flowers and safety issues and so on, which you would think of a block association. But this appealed to so many people because they really appreciated the look and feel of our neighborhood.

Q: Right. That sense of place that you referred to earlier. That sense of place.

Slater: Yes, a sense of place, very important. Also, when the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission looked at areas that sense of place that holds together as a district. You can't have two buildings here and then something strange and then one building over there. It really flowed, it flowed. Happily at the same time, the feeling of the zoning—and Helena was in the forefront of this as well—had to change to be in sync that there should be a happy marriage between the

district regulation, Landmarks regulation, and the zoning regulation. This is not true in all of the different parts of the city where there are historic districts. You have the pressure of the zoning being different from what they're trying to preserve and people are trying to bring those two together, two components together.

Q: Yes. It seems like they tend to exist very separate, zoning and Landmarks regulations.

Slater: They are. They are.

Q: Even today there is not a lot of communication there, I don't think.

Slater: Indeed. When there was a battle—I'm not going to chronologically, but there was a battle to preserve a block up on Madison Avenue in the '90s. It was called the Citibank fight. There was a Citibank building, a low one-story, neo federal, whatever it was, building, which the Landmarks Commission had the foresight to include in the historic district. An apartment building was proposed for that site, developers bought it, and the zoning permitted nineteen stories. Maybe Elizabeth talked about this, nineteen stories or 210 feet, whichever is less. It was the last low-scale brownstone block on Madison Avenue and that's what people were trying to preserve. It would have been so wonderful if they would have been able to keep that, but ultimately I think the building that is there now is eleven stories. They were trying to build, I think, seventeen or eighteen, something like that, and it's not as bad as seventeen or eighteen. But the goal was to preserve the low-scale brownstone character, the low-scale character, because it's such a precious area that's part of Carnegie Hill.

Q: Yes, I want to get back to that specific issue with 91st Street in a moment. Let's circle back and talk about Friends and your relationship with Helena and how she was active and how—

Slater: Well, it's kind of amusing because when we first moved to 78th Street, my husband noticed a crack in our parapet, we had a brownstone. He said, "Oh my goodness, that's where I think there is some water getting in," because he noticed a damp spot in the ceiling below the roof, and we'll have to address it. So we called someone and we weren't trained yet, as far as anything you do—you have to get a certificate of no effect or you have to get a certificate of appropriateness from the Landmarks Commission. We had just come back and so we got a contractor, hired a contractor, had a scaffold, the phone rings, and this very exotic sounding voice said, "Hello." I said, "Yes." She said, "Is this Mrs. Slater?" I said, "Yes." She said, "You are in violation of the Historic District," or something like that. And I said, "What!" She said, "You have a scaffold and this is a historic district, blah, blah, blah." Anyway, P.S., I was drawn into her aura *[laughs]* and ultimately joined Friends and was a vice president for many years. I mean, I enjoyed my time there so much and Helena was just—I'm telling you, she was like a sister. She was my mentor. I learned so much from her.

[Anthony C. Wood] Tony can tell you, we were devastated when she passed away. She had cancer and died. She was in her late seventies, I think by then, but she should have lived to be a hundred. Saying happy birthday on *Good Morning [America]*, whatever it is, *[The] Today Show*. She was the kind of person who should have been around until she was over a hundred, because

we learned from her so much. It was her manner, you know, the way she treated people and her savvy. She was highly intelligent and so on the mark on so many different issues.

Q: Yes, I understand she had a very distinct way of dealing with people in a very friendly yet firm manner.

Slater: Oh god, and some of the, I hate to say scuzzy, but, I shouldn't say this, scuzziest land use attorneys in the city who would cringe when they heard the name Helena Rosenthal. She would just walk right up to them and offer them—she always had a bag of candy, hard candy, and she'd walk up and give people—I don't want to say names on the tape, but the most successful, I mean, these men are just incredible legends in their own minds, actually. She would offer them hard candy and they'd look at her and actually they'd take the hard candy, and they had great respect for her because she was so effective. She was so effective at everything that she did and this worked for her. It wouldn't work for me. I mean, they'd laugh if I carried around a bag and candy, you know, just yell, and scream back and forth. But she was remarkable, I mean, just an amazing person.

Q: That sounds like a special relationship in a way that got you probably even more involved, would you say?

Slater: Absolutely. I mean, she was like a magnet for me to Friends. I'm not a joiner, per se. I tend not to join organizations. I just have a thing about it. But with Friends it was different. It was all Helena, and for me Friends was Helena, and still is in a lot of ways in my mind.

Q: How do you think the—or maybe you can describe for me sort of how the different groups interacted. You had Friends, you mentioned Carnegie Hill Neighbors, CIVITAS, the block associations. How was the interaction?

Slater: Well, you know, generally speaking in preservation, just not in the Upper East Side but all over, people try to be cooperative. When you're in the middle of some sort of advocacy battle you try to get support from many different organizations, you have your list of supporting groups. At the same time, with certain kinds of groups there's a competition, a competitive edge, because they're all vying for the same members if they're membership organizations. While you may support somebody's advocacy efforts on one level, you want to take credit, too, for being in support of that advocacy effort. This is always sort of under the surface.

It's too bad because the monies necessary to do any of this are substantial. If you want to have an advocacy campaign, like Friends' most recent advocacy campaign to create a little historic district, to extend the Upper East Side Historic District along Lexington and some of the side streets—quite a lot of money to create print material, to get people out there, you're using your staff to do the kind of advocacy you hope will achieve your goal. If you go into any kind of litigation to—if you take something to the [New York State] Court of Appeals, you're talking about \$300,000. I've been involved in those battles. You have to raise that money from people.

So these groups, all wonderful groups in their own light, CIVITAS, Carnegie Hill Neighbors, Friends of the Upper East Side, each one has been involved in this kind of campaign. Block

associations tend not to do that kind of thing. They join on in support. But it's these groups, especially in the Upper East Side, on the West Side it's Landmark West, I think. I don't know if there are others. I don't think there's anyone like Landmark West, any other group like Landmark West on the West Side. It's expensive, it's time consuming, and it's hard work. There is that competitive thing going on between groups. It happens with environmental groups, too.

Q: Competitive over a pool of funds?

Slater: Well, I think—

Q: Or for credit?

Slater:—in the pool of funds, potential members, and getting credit for this fight, you know, whatever the fight may be. It's always like that.

Q: I want to talk about formation of your organization, Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side.

Slater: Sure.

Q: What would you say are the key events that led up to that, and what made you want to form that group? After seeing the activity that was going on and your involvement in Friends what was the impetus for Defenders?

Slater: Well, it was I guess observation on my part and Elizabeth Ashby's part and it coincided—there was a big preservation ballot going on at Friends. We were trying to save the Central Park Children's Zoo. I don't know if you have ever heard of it, but it was where the whale was and the Ark and it was just this charming—I guess it was an anachronism. When I look back, I think maybe we shouldn't have bothered with this at all. I don't know. We felt it was a really important, iconic spot in New York where a lot of people—it was kind of a landmark of the heart. Everyone had a reminiscence, some kind of memory of being in this place a child.

Q: I went there as a child as well.

Slater: Exactly.

Q: I'm from New York and I definitely remember the zoo. It has a special nostalgia, I suppose.

Slater: Yes. Well, it was a huge battle. It turned into a huge battle. Helena, she resisted litigious behavior. She didn't like to take it to court, but she wasn't against other people doing that. She supported the battle. If it required that in the end, that's what had to be done. Elizabeth and I realized that so much of the time now, the pressure, the real estate pressure in the city, which is the engine that drives the city, make no mistake about it, and very often collides with preservation efforts. When a neighborhood wants to save something precious and historic, frequently they were almost required to hire an attorney. That's only part of the picture.

Working with community groups, which is what we do, we consult, we advise, we have all the different architectural historians, lawyers, the whole bag of tools you need to fight a battle like that. We were different from Friends in that we don't testify in each and every issue in the Upper East Side at the Landmarks Commission. We do frequently testify, but we don't testify every single month. But we do regularly work with community groups and there have been several in the recent past—Whitney Neighbors, the Whitney Museum and the Whitney Brownstones. A developer was trying to build over the Park Burnett building on Madison Avenue. Those are two recent ones, but there have been big battles and they're still going on, believe it or not.

There is now a developer with another scheme for the brownstones next to the Whitney and the efforts by the other developer, building over the Park Burnett, are unresolved at the moment. He's asking for a zoning text changed to enable him to build the kind of smaller building he wants to build now. He proposed a thirty-seven story building. Lorne Foster was the architect.

Q: Right. And that's Aby [J.] Rosen's development.

Slater: Yes, the green building. Yes.

Q: Yes. I was going to ask you about that in particular. I've seen his name come up a few times in the research that I did for this. So that's 980 Madison, Park Burnett. You said that it was not resolved then.

Slater: No. The Park Burnett building actually was a—I don't want to use the word covenant, but there was an agreement between the Carlisle Hotel and I think there may have been the same owner. I'm trying to remember the history. At one time, that was supposed to remain. It was never designed like the building downtown. I'm terrible with names.

Q: You mean designs of—

Slater: The Condé Nast building. The Condé Nast building was designed with a thought that there would be a building built above it, on top of it, as a face.

Q: Right. Like the Hearst building also.

Slater: Right. That was not true of 980 Madison. It was meant to be low to preserve the views of the Carlisle Hotel. There have been many people thinking about that building over the years. But in the context of Madison Avenue, it's one of the most important buildings along Madison Avenue and that it had at the time a relationship with another building. It fits into the Upper East Side Historic District beautifully, if you walk up and down Madison. That proposal for Norman Foster's huge building—he's a fabulous architect, he designs buildings all over the world, the Tate Gallery and so on—it's just that it was wrong for that place. It might have been wonderful in some other part of the city. People just went berserk when they saw it. It was just so shocking to see something so wildly different from everything around it in terms of materials, height, bulk. It was just wrong.

So the neighborhood rose up, a group was formed, and the battle began. We got involved with that group and we're happy to say that that plan was abandoned. This is frequently what happens when an architect proposes one scheme and then that scheme is rejected, either by the Landmarks Commission or someone else, and then they come back with a second idea. The second idea is never quite as important as the first idea architecturally. It's sad; it looks just the way it is. This time, in my humble opinion, it looks like a parking garage. Yes, it's low-scale. It's a very strange design, and it's squat. It uses—it's just a doubling of the bulk. It has no relationship to the Park Burnett building and it just sits on top of it.

I believe it was approved and the neighbors are still very unhappy about it because there are rules at the Landmarks Commission for rooftop additions and this was being called a rooftop addition. Normally rooftop additions are one story and set back, and the rules were kind of not quite adhered to in this case. They're still working on it. In order to build the building on Madison Avenue, setbacks take place at a certain height and that's what he's applying for now. He wants a waiver. So it's unresolved. We haven't heard from [the Department of] City Planning. They touch base regularly, the group, touch base with us, and we're ready to go at it again.

Q: Does your organization essentially play the role of consultant of sorts, or almost a service provider to other organizations?

Slater: Kind of. Yes, we act—I mean, if you look at our brochure, we say we act in partnership with community groups.

Q: Right.

Slater: We guide them through the process, because most people basically aren't involved in zoning issues, Landmarks issues. They just have very pleasant lives without getting involved in neighborhood battles of one kind or another, and they don't know which direction to go in when something like that happens. What kinds of attorneys you may or may not need. Ending up in court is not something anybody wants to do. We certainly don't and we don't suggest that. But sometimes just having legal representation when you're up against a big developer with the top law firms, Higgins and Quasar, you know, advisors like that, it's overwhelming.

Q: Right. So you're a real resource.

Slater: Yes. I think we're a realistic resource. We look at what's happening in the city and we try to advise the people we work with to be—forewarned is forearmed. Hopefully you will never have to go to court, but they know what to do after we sit down and talk with them.

Q: You mentioned earlier the building at East 91st Street, and it's in the Carnegie Hill Historic District. What happened? I read that there was a lawsuit that was brought to the LPC [Landmarks Preservation Commission] for that.

Slater: I'm trying to remember if there was.

Q: City Neighbors Coalition, if that rings a bell.

Slater: Say that again.

Q: An organization called City Neighbors Coalition.

Slater: Yes. Woody Allen was involved and he certainly came down to the Landmarks Commission. I'm trying to remember, I know—I don't know if it wound up in court. I'm having a memory thing about it. They certainly had top land use attorneys working for them, the developers, but I don't know if it actually ended up in court. I'm trying to remember.

Q: So either way, it sounds—you mentioned earlier that they did actually.

Slater: No, it did end up in court. Sorry.

Q: Okay.

Slater: It just came back to me. It's like a flood of memories I'm trying to deal with now. It did and it got to the Court of Appeals and it wasn't decided on the merits because the building had already been built. But there was an issue about Landmarks Commission having to do or not having to do an EIS [Environmental Impact Statement]. In the old days, they would have to do an EIS. When Jennifer Raab was the chair of Landmarks Commission, she felt that requiring the Landmarks Commission, because of staffing issues and other kinds of time issues, that they should be waived from having to do that. They shouldn't have to do it at the Landmarks

Commission. The rule is that any agency that makes discretionary decisions, like the City Planning Commission or other agencies, would have to do an EIS in a case like this.

I think she was able to change some of the rules in Albany that related to this. That issue remains unresolved and the court didn't rule one way or another on that. It was just kind of unresolved. It was kind of moot because the building had been built. That issue may come back someday now, whether the Landmarks Commission has to do an EIS in cases like this. So, I think that was part of a very interesting outcome of that particular battle.

Q: Tell me about the cottages on 3rd Avenue.

Slater: I'm sorry I didn't bring photographs with me.

Q: I would have loved to have seen it, because it's impossible to find anything online that documents what it was.

Slater: It's just another New York story. It was one of these hidden places and what did it in, I guess, was the fact that it wasn't open to the public. It was a wonderful two-story building on 3rd Avenue, between 78th and 77th Street on the west side of 3rd, and behind the building there were apartments. On the second floor were all these wonderful apartments, one-bedroom apartments with fireplaces. The ground floor level were stores. It was a mixed use. In back of it was this wonderful garden. There was this glorious terrace. A grand stair that led to the terrace, where the entrances to these apartments were. There was a building on 77th Street, a wonderful

building, very deco-ey building that overlooked the gardens. There was a gate on 78th Street and you could stop—you'd hear the birds actually before you got to the gate. It was just this wonderful bird sanctuary and you'd look in and see this lovely garden. It was not open to the public, sadly. It could have been a vest pocket park or something while ensuring the security of the people who lived in the little apartments. It has a great history. Brendan Gill lived there at one time, had an apartment there. Originally, I think there was a tennis court many years ago, maybe in the '30s or something, but it evolved into this garden. It was just one of those magical places everybody knew about in the neighborhood, but you really couldn't communicate this to people without bringing them there.

So this effort began to save it because again, there was the threat of development. AB Rosen was the developer. One thing led to another and the Landmarks Commission just would not look at this. Other groups like Landmarks Conservancy didn't think it rose to the level of landmarking on its own merits. That block could have been landmarked because this is one of the things, we go back to the Upper East Side Historic District, ideally that block of 78th Street, between Lex and 3rd, would have been included in the Upper East Side Historic District. It was not. So what Helena did, and she did this on her block and on this block, there are little individual landmarks that are remarkable carriage houses on 73rd Street between Lex and 3rd on her former block. On this block, remarkable little row houses. They all became individual landmarks. Had that block been included, the cottages and garden definitely would have been included.

Q: Why was it not included?

Slater: The scope of what people wanted seemed too much and the line started to be pulled back,. People in SoHo and TriBeCa can tell you they want X and the Commission said, “Well, we can’t include this block, we can’t include this block.” The lines were pulled back.

Q: The compromise that you spoke of earlier.

Slater: Yes, compromise. That’s why Friends wanted to do—actually, it was Helena’s effort initially to want to include that piece of Lexington and some of the side streets off Lexington, which should have been included. Those blocks should have been included. They’re wonderful blocks. With the same kinds of wonderful buildings in any of the other blocks the historic district has. Anyway, it is no more, the cottages and garden.

The architect’s name, of course, escapes me for the moment. It may come back. I have a terrible times with names sometimes and that’s why I should have had my notes with me. He designed the Swiss building on 5th Avenue. This building was so beautifully designed, so beautifully constructed, they were using sledgehammers to knock it down and they were having difficulty. Even the bulldozer had a problem. The trees, these magnificent willow trees, I mean, it was so depressing and sad when we actually lost it. But I do have photographs somewhere and it was just magical, really magical.

Q: Why do you think Landmarks did not designate it?

Slater: I have to couch my language here. Influential developer, the plans were underway. The owner who owned the building that overlooked the cottages and garden wanted to sell that piece. While he lived, he lived to be ninety-something. Not Goldman, I can't think of his name, but anyway, he always said he would never tear it down. He loved it. He used to sit in a chair in the garden when he was well into his eighties. Just in the end, I guess his family convinced him, whatever, he wanted to sell it. A deal was struck between Rosen and the owner and that was that. The Landmarks Commission, you know, balances these kinds of things.

Q: Right. Because in my research I saw that Rosen used that as an argument for why he could develop that piece of land because it had not been designated a landmark.

Slater: Definitely. Definitely. But the ironic thing with Rosen—and I can say this with some authority, because when we were trying to save the cottages and garden, we went to his office and there was a bulletin next to the desk we were sitting in front of and it said, “Another landmark property,” and it was the Seagram Building. He owns the Seagram Building. He owns the Leaver House. He began to collect landmarked properties. Here we were trying to landmark this property and of course it didn't coincide with his efforts. It's too bad because for the neighborhood, on several levels, not just for its worthiness from a historic point-of-view, because there wasn't any other place like it that I know of. We have some of the little courts and things, Sniffen Court [Historic District], the one—what's the name of it, the Spanish one. I can't think of some of the others, but they'll come to me as well. There are other places like the cottages and garden, but this one was unique, truly unique. You can't win them all, but it was depressing.

Q: I want to talk a little bit about the LPC. It seems that depending on who the Commissioner is or what other influences may be affecting their decisions, different outcomes are the case. I'm just curious about your observations on the Commission over the years or impressions of the various chairs.

Slater: Well, look, this is New York and we have a lot going for us in terms of how we protect landmarks, historic districts, and historic areas. Other cities don't. They're not quite up to our—I mean, you can compare Boston maybe and other cities have caught up, but we have a lot going for us in that respect. But politics rears its ugly head in all of these decisions. When you look at how the commissioners are appointed, who appoints the different commissioners, the influence of the mayor in different agencies, like the [New York] Public Design Commission, the Landmarks Commission, real estate, as I said before, is the engine that drives the city. Zoning regulations very often interfere with the decision-making process on the part of the Landmarks Commission because they feel they have to balance their decisions. I mean, really you would think of a Landmarks Preservation Commission as being focused on preserving landmarks. If you're preserving a landmark, whether the zoning says X, Y, or Z, you preserve the landmark. It doesn't always turn out that way.

The relationship of tall buildings to areas like the Upper East Side or the Upper West Side—how they relate to those neighborhoods, the size, the height, and bulk of buildings, how tall, you know, a Commission—they have some power over tall buildings. We've said for years there is no as-of-right in historic districts, because it has to go to the Landmarks Commission. But the Landmarks Commission tries to make balanced decisions and it's part of the whole political

structure of a city like New York and that's how it works. If they go too far one way, the Real Estate Board of New York starts screaming at the top of their lungs. If they go the other way, preservations are cheering.

In fact, there are a series of articles now—somebody just mailed them to me, Jack, Jack Taylor, he's wonderful that way. In the [*New York*] *Post*, there was an article about Patty [Patricia] Harris, the mayor's deputy mayor, and how this mayor is very pro preservation and historic districts. Then you had a land use attorney, Stephen Meister, writing the next day about how preservation is unhealthy for the city and causes high rents. This is the eternal struggle. But, you know, preservationists want it all. I mean, we do. We want to save almost all of these buildings. Everywhere in New York you're bumping up against politics and that's what it is, and it's very difficult to get past that. You'll find that there are neighborhood battles all over the city where people are so enraged that their areas are not being preserved that they're willing to go to the mat for those areas. If it requires hiring an attorney, they raise the money somehow. These are not wealthy areas.

Some years ago, we saved a building called City and Suburban New York Avenue Estates. That is a phenomenal place. There are two model tenements in the Upper East Side. One is City and Suburban First Avenue Estates; one is City and Suburban York Avenue Estates. The York Avenue Estates are between 79th and 78th between York and the [East] River. That building, the complex, was the response to the old lot tenements and the terrible conditions in all the lot tenements. It was a philanthropic limited investment effort to create a healthy living condition

for poor people, and succeeded admirably. There was a competition for design, there were light courts, and the whole thing is just amazing if you visit it.

When I was at Friends, we had a tour, which I led. We'd take people to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and then bring them to City and Suburban to see the difference, and it was remarkable. The apartments are very small, but charming. The windows are very large so you have the feeling that it's not such a small apartment. The light and air is just remarkable.

So that battle—and this was not like a battle maybe on Madison Avenue—was between ten and twelve years, that's how long it lasted. The Board of Estimate divided the complex in half. Gave half to Calico the developer. Said the other half could be preserved. He wanted to build a building initially as tall as the Empire State Building. Then he lowered, and was going to build four buildings of, like, thirty or forty stories. After many, many years of battling, Ed Costikyan was the attorney, it was resolved in the Court of Appeals and won. One of the few examples of an Article 78 being won. We challenged the decision of the Board of Estimate to do this and prevailed in the Court of Appeals. It had to be put together again. That hadn't been torn down. He did do some alterations.

The sad thing about the First Avenue Estates, if you've been in that area, you'll see the pink stucco.

Q: Yes.

Slater: Yes. At the time, the people in the First Avenue Estates didn't feel the threat, the immediate threat. It was a different developer, Stahl [York Avenue Company, LLC], owner at the time and they didn't have this imminent threat from a developer, so they were reluctant to join in. It was one of the worst mistakes. We should have really pressed them at the time and we just said, "Okay. That's it. You don't want to join." Because that's what happened and there's an example of an owner getting an alteration permit before the building had been calendared. So he was able to do what he did. Just disgraceful. Disgraceful.

Q: He's now claiming hardship. Is that correct?

Slater: He's attempting to make a hardship case. He went before the Landmarks Commission. That company went before we testified on that because that was something we were very close to. They can't possibly grant hardship. It's so ludicrous his argument, honestly, that they can't rent the apartments. Six hundred dollars, I think he was saying. Ridiculous nonsense.

Q: Yeah, I was at that hearing.

Slater: Yes. Yes. But you see how the system works. Big, heavy-duty land use attorneys and people making the case and the other side making its case. There are no other model tenements like those two. There are other similar places, Harlem River Houses, throughout the city, examples of attempts to provide that kind of solid, healthy housing, but happily, they've been preserved.

Q: I love the name of your organization, “Defenders.”

Slater: That was Tony’s name. He chose that.

Q: Okay.

Slater: We thought it was a bit much at the time. It was like, “Okay, Defenders.”

Q: Also a phrase you used earlier was “forewarned is forearmed,” which I really like that. I feel like they really go together well. Maybe you can describe the sort of essence of defending something, and being more proactive, and is that a role that the organization plays?

Slater: Yes, it is. And here’s an example in an unrelated kind of—it’s actually part of city government. I’ve been a member of the local community board, as has Elizabeth, for many, many years. When I first joined, almost nobody came and spoke at the public sessions. Certainly, no one from Madison Avenue would think of going to a community board to say, “This building is being torn down. We need your help,” whatever, you know. Nobody came. A few people said, “Oh, the traffic light is not working,” or whatever.

Times have changed with this kind of real estate pressure. These valuable historic resources are under threat one way or another. They’re very innovative and ingenious ideas on the parts of developers sometimes, how they can combine a landmark building with a huge building, you know, all kinds of things coming down the pipe. There is a need and working with communities

like that where they see that they just don't know how to get started. Valuable advice is just that. Valuable advice at a critical time when you're trying to save something very important like a historic building or an area, and getting people organized, and that's the hardest thing to do. Getting people focused and organized, because people all have their own ideas about how to go about something. It's happening now with the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. I don't know if you know anything about that proposal.

Q: Tell me about that.

Slater: Yes. Well, unfortunately, it was unanimously approved at the Landmarks Commission. There is a proposal—for the 100th Anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum, Kevin Roche, who is an incredible architect, designed the grand stair. The original stair of the Metropolitan Museum was a stair that was flanked by two, I think it was limestone sort of rectangle stone base things that had lanterns, lighting fixtures of the period on top and you'd enter right up the middle. His idea was to open up the stair, have this grand stair, and you could enter from north, south, east. The two fountains, symmetrical fountains, which used to have plumes of water going up twenty feet, it was amazing. For a modern architect he was able to create this classic design, which referred to the Beaux-Arts Building, respected it.

Some people said it was cold. I think Ada Louise Huxtable at the time said it was a cold flank because there was so much exposed stone. Some trees were added. They were never taken care of. The fountains fell into disrepair. Along came—and how this happened, I guess David Koch is a member of the board of Lincoln Center and also a member of the board at the Metropolitan,

liked the fountain at Lincoln Center a lot, and he wanted a similar fountain or fountains in front of the Met. He said, “Wouldn’t that be nice.” Then the whole issue of removing vendors from the steps and removing people from sitting on the steps. The argument was so strange that Laurie Olin, a landscape design firm, was hired to produce a scheme for the front of the Museum. Well, he did indeed, and it’s really a resocialization of that entire space. They would destroy the existing fountains, keep the grand stair, create two square fountains that would flank the staircase, re-landscape both sides of the stair, and have a food kiosk, a ticket booth, 400 tables, and chairs, parasols. It’s sort of like putting Bryant Park—

Q: I was going to say it sounds like Bryant Park.

Slater:—in front of the Metropolitan Museum. Exactly. Exactly. People are going to interact and everyone is going to be happy forever. Well [*laughs*], I am sorry. I have been in New York a long time, you can say my age.

Q: No, no.

Slater: But I’ve heard of spots that mean something, not just to us but to the rest of the world. You know, we did testify at the Public Design Commission and why do they want people not to sit on the steps? I mean, there are the Spanish Steps in Rome. It’s traditional there. I mean, yes, you could re-landscape the area, we were for that, make it greener if that’s what you want to do, but have it relate to what is there. There is a park. Has anyone noticed Central Park, it’s right

there surrounding the wonderful Beaux-Arts Building. But this was just too much, it's overwhelming.

So the wagons are circling now, people are very upset, the people who live in the area, the Fifth Avenue neighbor—whenever you live near a so-called community facility, that's what they're described as in the zoning resolution. They actually say they're as-of-right, because there are compatible uses. Okay, whether it's a university, medical institution or cultural institution, many of these institutions are no longer compatible. They are going beyond of what the concept of compatibility is. It's always this eternal struggle, it's the nature of the beast. You live near a school, a hospital, something is going to go awry in the future, and that's what has happened once again.

They have not been a good neighbor, the Met. This is sad because that is their asset. That building is their asset and it means a lot to visitors, as well as it should mean a lot to them. But they think it's wonderful and everyone else thinks it's terrible, so we're there again. The Landmarks Commission did and the Public Design Commission didn't say yay or nay, but they looked at the four or five aspects of this design and made recommendations on each of the aspects. It's going to come back in a month or so with the institution's response to their suggestions. I think the only commissioner who voted against it was Polshek, James Polshek.

Q: So you are also involved with the Historic Districts Council [HDC]. You were on the board of the HDC, is that correct?

Slater: Yes. Yes. For many years.

Q: I just want to sort of go a little broader into basically New York organizations, Historic Districts Council, MAS [Municipal Art Society], and the [New York] Landmarks Conservancy. What role do those citywide organizations play?

Slater: Well, the Landmarks Conservancy, I think it has a sort of special role because it fulfills a need that I think exists all over the city with religious institutions. It helps churches, synagogues and other religious institutions keep their physical plants going, because it's very difficult—things change. Some of our most historic and beautiful buildings are religious institutions and to keep those in good repair requires a little help, and they're very innovative in their suggestions. They have a whole book or list of various contractors and so on, and they also provide grants to religious institutions. They're a wonderful both advocacy group and preservation group.

MAS has pulled back a bit. I don't know why. There were some financial issues there, or whatever happened, but they seem not to be as involved in preservation as they once were. They have a preservation committee and that committee always reviewed major issues. They reviewed the [Tisch] Children's Zoo. They didn't like that at all and there was a lot of controversy about it, but other kinds of things. They always had a role, a very important role, I thought.

Historic Districts Council is a citywide group, and we go where other people I think in many ways fear to tread. Although some of them do go there. We go to places where there isn't a lot of support. Parts of the city where there are little neighborhoods where people have a very

conscious idea of what is important historically, but they just don't have the resources to get the ball rolling. To get the necessary funding or to get organized, same kind of thing I was talking about before, and HDC does. That's one of our most important roles. Going to the places in the city most people have never heard of, wonderful places, historic places. Simeon [Bankoff] and our staff go out there and explain what needs to be done, and listen. Sometimes sadly, some of these places people want to save don't rise to the level of importance and we have to say, "No, we don't think—maybe a zoning change would be the way to save this area."

That's true. You know, that's something that is beginning to be discussed more and more, because this is one of the great accusations from the development community that it's just a way to stop development preservation. I think maybe some people may think of it that way and use it that way, preservation, but a zoning change might achieve the same goal. It's not always landmarking that saves an area. A zoning change can save an area, too. Sadly, some of the same development—members of the development community—are against zoning changes as well. They just want this kind of free market, you build wherever you want to build, whoever owns the property keep the—you know, there's a happy medium, which we've been unable to reach in the city.

So HDC fills a role that I think none of the other group citywide really—I don't know if you know about our Grassroots [Preservation] Awards, that's coming up. We have a wonderful fellow by the name of Ted Greenwald. I had never met him before until the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building was under threat. He was this one-man band, you know, he led the charge, and he came out of nowhere to say, "This is important." He was part of Docomomo, the

group Docomomo, and trying to get—and he was successful in raising consciousness and getting people’s attention. Eric got involved in this whole battle. He’s just a remarkable fellow, so he’s getting the Grassroots Award.

Q: Zoning, as a tool, seems recent, or at least is being used more recently. I guess the question is you formed the group in 2002 and then here we are ten years later. What changes have you seen take place, have we made progress, and have there been turning points that you can identify?

Slater: Yes. I’m chairman of the Zoning and Development Committee at the Community Board, have been for a number of years. We have an application before the Department of City Planning and it’s taking a very long time to get through the system, but hopefully this year something will happen.

Many years ago, in the ‘80s, when the Upper East Side Historic District was going through and the mid-block zoning was being changed, the hospitals far east—we have several major institutions—wanted to exempt a couple of properties, because they were under construction, doing work. The mid-block throughout the Upper East Side were to be zoned R8B, which is contextual zoning, which allowed buildings up to a height of sixty feet with a setback seventy-five feet for all owners of property and they were given 4.0 FAR [Floor Area Ratio].

There was an exception for community facilities. They were given a little more, 5.1 FAR in the mid-blocks, to allow these buildings to be completed. It was supposed to be temporary. Everyone assumed it would just sort of—there would be a sunset provision somehow, and it would just go

into the sunset and never be heard from again. Then everyone, all owners of property in mid-blocks anywhere, would have 4.0. It didn't happen. It remained 5.1 for community facilities. That flies in the face of what the Historic District means, you know, keeping the low-scale brownstone character. It's almost a constitutional issue in a sense of owners of identical property have different rights. I mean, the community facility is next door, I'm here, I get 4.0, and they get 5.1. People questioned that.

So some years ago, it was actually the Department of City Planning that recommended we address this. We said, "What issues?" This was before I was chair of the committee. So we sort of inherited this. Anyway, we've applied to return all of the community facility designated properties to 4.0. To have it all be the same. We're the only community board in the whole city that has this, because it was specific to these institutions at the time. That's one change we hope goes through.

Madison Avenue was rezoned. Elizabeth probably spoke about this. She was very instrumental and spearheaded this change where the Madison Avenue zoning regulations you could build huge buildings, you know, thirty, forty stories on Madison. In fact, if you go up to the 90s you'll see a couple of them. There was so much controversy about the result of these buildings being built that they rezoned Madison Avenue so that it is nineteen stories or 210 feet now.

The issue of developers buying buildings, like the Citibank building, like 980 Madison, and applying for these zoning text amendments to exempt that specific site from the regulations—they don't have to set back at a certain height, whatever they want—is not a good policy. We're

addressing that now. It's how to preserve the context and character of historic districts. We're here talking about preservation, but zoning plays a very important part in the city.

In the '70s, there were a lot of master plans being developed by the Department of City Planning. Where are they today? I know there are a couple of them that have come up in the last ten years, but it's not like those days. We need to think about the city as a whole and what different neighborhoods mean, what their value is. In fact, the Landmarks Law incorporates real property value into—they have to consider real property value. What does that mean to us? There should be a value between—and I know in my heart there is—once you develop a historic district, you think of places like SoHo and TriBeCa, fought by the Real Estate Board of New York. They all want to be there. They all want to be there. Why? There's a value there. There's a value on the Upper East Side. To defend his last building, Rosen was saying, "We are a tired neighborhood, we're over-the-hill, we need more exciting buildings." People move there because it's—you want to describe it as over-the-hill, fine, if that's your definition. It's not over-the-hill. It's a wonderful residential neighborhood and with beautiful buildings. So that's why we're here.

Q: Right. I mean, people move to Park Slope out of Manhattan all the time and Park Slope is a neighborhood that thirty years ago was—

Slater: Yes, yes.

Q:—no one would think that would be a place to—

Slater: It's amazing. We have tours at Defenders and we went out to Park Slope and had a wonderful tour. We were amazed at the buildings and the restaurants. It's just become this incredible place. I'm just amazed. So, anyway.

Q: I'm going to start to wrap up and I just have one last question for you.

Slater: Mm-hmm.

Q: It's sort of open-ended. It's to someone that you meet that may be new to preservation or new to the idea of saving a place or just beginning to work in preservation now, what would be sort of your message to them? What should they know and what should they be thinking about?

Slater: Well, I would say be passionate, because passion takes you a long way. You do things you would never do. I mean, it's like an insane person. When you're overly passionate, you're pushed forward by this strong feeling that you're right about something. You have a gut feeling about something, and you're passionate. When you see a beautiful building, a wonderful building, whatever it is, or an area, be passionate. The passion will get you into offices, in to talk to elected officials, it will get you very far. You have to go beyond that passion, you know, organize. I think having passion about something is very, very important.

I also would urge young people to get involved in preservation because we often say, "Who is bringing up the rear here? We're these old people now, and we won't be here much longer." Honestly, the young people getting more and more involved in preservation, there have been

people who have had wonderful battles who are certainly younger than I am, who are involved in preservation, but we need more young people in preservation.

But the passion is very important, the organizational skills, not giving up. In the City and Suburban battle, I'm not going to mention names, but very important people were advising us to compromise. Not just advising us, pressuring us to compromise. When we would meet, people were crying. They would be sitting around a table like this crying. We didn't want to give up. We didn't want to give up. We could not see that building divided in half and we ignored them, and we prevailed. It was the passion and belief that we were right to save these important buildings. That's what I would say. The passion is what you first experience when you see something so important.

Q: Yes. Absolutely. That will resonate with a lot of people.

Slater: Yes. And young people are naturally passionate about stuff. We have to find them, recruit them, and get them involved.

Q: All right. Well, that's why I'm here today.

Slater: Well—

Q: Teri, thank you so much.

Slater: Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Q: It's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]