

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Suzanne Spellman

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Suzanne Spellen conducted by Interviewer Blayze O'Brien in 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual 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.

Suzanne Spellen became active in preservation after buying a house in Crown Heights and getting involved with the effort to landmark Crown Heights North. She was active in the Crown Heights North Association, documenting the historic buildings and doing research about the neighborhood. This sparked an interest in architectural history, which led to her writing for *Brownstoner*, an online paper where she maintains a column focusing on architecturally significant buildings in Brooklyn. She shares her experiences concerning the importance of community involvement and in educating people about the historic and architectural gems in their neighborhoods through walking tours and publication. For the broader preservation world moving forward, she speaks about the need to balance preservation with affordable housing and being flexible enough to allow the city to grow.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Suzanne Spellen

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Blayze O'Brien

Date: 2012

Q: My name is Blayze O'Brien. I'm doing a research interview for the Pratt Institute and the New York Preservation Archive Project. We are also filming right now. Let's take it away Suzanne, please state your name and occupation.

Spellen: Hi, my name is Suzanne Spellen and I'm a writer, architectural historian, preservationist, old house lover, and general busybody when it comes to old neighborhoods and old houses.

Q: First question, what was it like growing up in Gilbertsville, New York? Did its historic character have any impact on you at a young age?

Spellen: It was great. It's a small town in upstate New York and at Otsego County near Cooperstown and Oneonta. It had six hundred people in it. My family was the second black family to move up there since who knows when, so that made it interesting in a lot of respects, but it was great. We had a big old farmhouse and 254 acres and my brother and I ran around and just loved living in the country.

Q: What were your college years like? You said you went to Yale [University]. And what eventually prompted a move to New York City to attend Juilliard [School] and potentially starting a career in classical music?

Spellen: Yale was, in part, my parents dream and after I got there, it became my dream. I really enjoyed my years there. I started to love old buildings in high school. Upstate they have a really strong tradition of preserving everything and mostly because no one has got the money to do anything else. But we grew up around houses that were built around the [American] Revolutionary War. A lot of old stone houses that were even older. And I got so used to being in old houses I couldn't imagine not being in one.

When I got to Yale, I was surrounded by all this incredible architecture of the 1930s mostly that looks like old collegiate Oxford [University of Oxford]. I became super interested in architecture there. I almost became architecture major except I couldn't draw *[laughs]*, so that kind of killed that. I was still studying music then, so I vacillated about what I wanted to do. I ended up being an Afro-American Studies Major with a concentration in music.

After college, I came to New York City. I fully intended to take a year off, just to do something in the meantime, and then go back to graduate school. I was going to be an ethnomusicologist. When I arrived New York, I started taking voice lessons, and I became involved in the whole theatre and opera scene. I never went to graduate school, and I'm still here *[laughs]*.

Q: What would you say was the sudden shift that brought you into the world of academia more so than the performing arts? What made you more inclined to go that route?

Spellen: I really don't think I knew what I wanted *[laughs]*. I was young, dumb, and adventurous, I guess. When I arrived here, we were living in the Bronx and I didn't like the Bronx that much, at least not where I was living. It was the North Bronx up near Woodlawn Cemetery. And it was all apartment buildings from the 1930s which were cool, but that wasn't what I wanted. My mother and I wanted to buy a house in Harlem and we were looking in Harlem for many years and could never find the right place for us.

My mother grew up for a little while in Brooklyn, so she said, "Let's try Bed-Stuy [Bedford Stuyvesant]." We took the subway out to Bed-Stuy. I distinctly remember coming out of the A train at Nostrand Avenue and looking around to see the Alhambra apartment buildings and all the brownstones. I said, "This is it." We found a house that we rented in the neighborhood and I lived there for seventeen years.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about what the community was like then on the streetscape, the overall life of Bed-Stuy, just from your own personal perspective in the early '80s?

Spellen: It was 1983 and everyone who found out we were leaving the Bronx to go to Bed-Stuy said, "You're going to move to Bed-Stuy? It's not safe. You're going to die. There are drugs. It's the biggest ghetto in the world, blah, blah." And we said, yeah, it looks okay to us *[laughs]*. And my mother was not a young woman. She was a schoolteacher and she was teaching at the time

that we moved over there. She switched schools to a school in Brooklyn so she didn't have to commute. She was teaching in Harlem.

We lived in this little three-story brownstone that had never been chopped up. It was a one family. We were renting it for five hundred dollars a month and it was wonderful. It had marble fireplaces and everything was original. It had never been touched, and had the original bathroom, an original kitchen. We loved it. We never felt unsafe and even though my mom passed away two years after we moved there, I lived there by myself for another ten years almost. I never felt unsafe and never felt that the neighborhood was dangerous. There were things going on around. There were certain places you didn't go, but for the most part, it was a great neighborhood and a great block. I came to know most of the neighbors on the block. When I still go over there now, they still remember me. I made life-long friends. Living there really got me interested in brownstones and the whole preservation movement of brownstones.

At the time, there was no hue and cry to landmark Bed-Stuy, but people were very much preservationists within their own families. My best friends on the block were people who eventually we called each other relatives. I'm their grandchild's godmother and everybody thought we were related, because they thought we looked alike anyway *[laughs]*. They had this gorgeous house with beautiful woodwork. Everyone I knew on the block treasured their home. It was just a fallacy that neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy were just sitting there waiting for richer, other people to discover them. People who lived there were very much aware of what they had and they wanted to protect it.

Q: What prompted you specifically into the world of New York preservation, advocacy, and historical and architectural research? Considering Bed-Stuy only had a small landmarked area of homes in the 1970s, do you think that was a reason that prompted you to go in that direction?

Spellen: The first thing that happened was that I was able to finally buy my own home. My landlady was not the nicest person and would not sell us the house. I started looking around and a friend of mine was a flipper of houses. He used to buy wholesale and flip them right and left. And he flipped one to me. I ended up moving to Crown Heights, only about ten blocks away from where I was before. It was the same subway station, and everything was the same for me.

One day I was walking around and there was an open house of an old mansion that's in Crown Heights. I went to the open house and the real estate broker never showed up. So while I was standing there with a bunch of other people, two women who happened to be the founders of the Crown Heights North Association started talking with us. They invited us to the meeting, and I ended up joining. Now I'm a board member *[laughs]*. They were very much in the process of getting Crown Heights North landmarked and that's really how I started getting into the whole landmark thing.

I realized that I knew a lot about neighborhoods that I didn't even realize that I knew. I started doing some real research on architects and buildings. That's how I technically got into the preservation business.

Q: That also brings me to another question. Do you think the city wasn't doing enough to landmark or just preserve and renovate historic properties in worthy neighborhoods such as Bed-Stuy or Crown Heights?

Spellen: The [New York] City's Landmarks Preservation Commission's mandate is that they will not landmark if the community is not behind it. Part of the reason Bed-Stuy was never landmarked at all was because there wasn't enough of community-based support for it. They went onto other communities that really wanted it. Now Bed-Stuy is trying desperately to get landmarked. They are getting there. They're having meetings now so the process is occurring.

But the people over in Crown Heights were very organized. One of the founders of the Crown Heights North Association had worked for Landmarks as a volunteer, so she knew the people there. And she got Crown Heights preservationists hooked up with the Historic Districts Council, which is an advocacy agency that helps communities go through the landmarking process. They were a great help in hooking us with the right politicians, the right city officials, and going through the correct process with paperwork and all the things that are necessary for landmarking. That's part of the reason why we were landmarked before even the second part of Park Slope or Prospect Heights. There were a lot of neighborhoods that were landmarked after us, because we really had our stuff together. We took pictures of every single house in the area, we did a lot of research, we filled out all the forms, we bugged our politicians to write letters, and we really, really bugged Landmarks until they said, "Okay. Okay, we'll landmark you. Leave us alone."

We became the poster child for neighborhoods, especially lower income minority neighborhoods, for landmarking. They were using us everywhere as an example to show that it could be done.

Q: In regards to the Association, what do you think were some of the major successes and some of the major disappointments, if there were any that you could mention?

Spellen: For Crown Heights North [Historic District], there really are no complaints as far as what we've asked for, because we were landmarked for Phase 1. The district is so big they divided it into different phases. We got Phase 1 landmarked in 2007, which was the part that contained areas that they really thought were the most ripe for development and they wanted to get it landmarked before the developers took notice. This was happening about the same time that Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights, Central Brooklyn, even Clinton Hill were really getting noticed by people. A lot of people were moving and buying houses here and developers were starting to think about taller and taller newer buildings.

So they got Phase 1 developed—or designated in 2007. We got Phase 2 designated in 2009, and approved in 2011. And Phase 3 was calendared the same day they designated Phase 2. So we have nothing to complain about. We have one more phase we're trying to get them to do *[laughs]* and that's the smallest one. And when we're done, it's going to be one of the largest historic districts in Brooklyn and maybe the city.

Q: I think it is next to the [Greenwich] Village.

Spellen: Yes. So in Bed-Stuy they've had a little harder time. Everybody in the Landmarks Preservation Commission knows that Bed-Stuy is worthy. All the biggies in preservation have been pushing for it like Andrew Dolkart and people like that. It was really a matter of getting the community to support it, and the community is very much in support of it now. But they had actually calendared an extension to the Stuyvesant Heights [Historic] District way back in the '90s, and then they had no community support, so that it just sat there calendared. And now they're supposed to approve that this year and then go on and calendar the Bedford area, which is the main part of Bed-Stuy—the Fulton-Nostrand corridor.

Q: Yes, the Bedford Corners [Historic District]. There are a lot of districts now that are on the list.

Spellen: There are five of them *[laughs]*.

Q: There is a lot and that is quite big. But hopefully a lot of them do get designated within the coming years.

Spellen: So our organization has been helping them, and I've been helping them personally. I'm good friends with a lot of people who are working towards getting it done, and so I think it will happen.

Q: Do you think they're going to get it done shortly?

Spellen: It's en route. The problem is its one part of the five boroughs of the City. Landmarks has the smallest staff of any mayoral agency, and they don't get a lot of love from other politicians. There is a lot of pressure from developers, and so it's a hard process to get anything done.

Actually, Bloomberg and Commissioner Tierney have actually set a record for being excellent preservationists, especially the outer boroughs. Manhattan, maybe not so much, because of the real estate concerns, but out here in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, there's much more preservation than there ever was before.

Q: I actually thought there was more preservation happening in Manhattan just because of the building stock being older and more important.

Spellen: Well, it's harder to get things designated in Manhattan.

Q: It's harder in certain neighborhoods, considering the development and the real estate.

Spellen: Yes, but let's think that even in the early '80s, there were hardly any districts outside of the boroughs. They just didn't even look in the boroughs. Maybe they would designate the really obvious things, but with neighborhoods like Crown Heights or Bed-Stuy or even Prospect Lefferts Garden, it took a long time.

Q: Do you think outside organizations like the Historic Districts Council has been helpful in that?

Spellen: The Historic Districts Council gets the big gold star in my book, because they tirelessly advocate for neighborhood organizations. They will come out and rally the troops. They tell other organizations how to do it. They give them support. I can't tell you—it wouldn't be possible without them. They're really a great organization.

Q: Now let's jump into the online world of things. In considering brownstoner.com, do you feel your role there has helped to champion preservation causes? Do you think it has made a significant impact on New York based real estate issues and preservation in history in general?

Spellen: I think it's made people more aware. I think my columns have made people more aware of individual buildings with my Building of the Day column, because I'm able to highlight either a single building or a group that's built by the same person. And people go, "Oh, I never even noticed those before." Or, "Wow, that's great! I didn't know the history of that building, that's cool." And I think that's part of educating people as to what's around us that we walk past on the way to the subway and don't even look at initially.

When I first started writing for *Brownstoner*, I wanted to really concentrate on the architectural ornament, because that's what I really love. All the faces, the curly cues, the corbels, and all the details that are on the buildings were what really caught my eyes as a person who loves to go out and take pictures. I found myself taking all these pictures and then I never wrote down where the

buildings were *[laughs]*. So over the years I've gone back and said, "Oh, that's where I got that one from." But I'm better at it now than I was then.

But I don't think I'm influencing the masses. I don't think I'm that important *[laughs]*. I think I'm influencing maybe a few hundred *Brownstoner* readers who may be interested in it. For all I know, on the Internet you can go on *Brownstoner* and read what you want. If you're not interested in what I'm writing, you don't even click it open. If you are, you do. I certainly know I have fans because I meet people all the time who say, "Oh, I loved your column." Then I have people I know who don't read it because it's not their interest, and that's cool.

Q: But the fact that it's still there is making people aware, which is what I like about it, and that it's such a long running thing, too. That takes us to your walking tours with the Municipal Art Society and your own company, Morris, Hill and Sparrow, all of which are prominent Victorian architects and subsequent pen names for your fellow brownstone preservationists. Do you feel your tours are making a difference overall in educating visitors and neighborhoods more about their communities and the built fabric of Brooklyn and New York City in general?

Spellen: Yes, I do. My partner, Morgan Munsey writes as Amzi Hill on *Brownstoner*. He and I do tours of Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights separately. We've given probably a little bit more in Bed-Stuy because of people asking for them specifically, because of the landmarking efforts, and Morgan lives in Bed-Stuy. We've had all kinds of crowds and then we've had days where we've had two people, but I think that's as much dependent on the weather sometimes as anything else.

For the Municipal Art Society, MAS, we've done so far four tours, because we just hooked up with them last year, and they've been great. The people who come are usually Manhattan people and they've never even been to Bed-Stuy or Crown Heights or their parents may have grown up in one of the neighborhoods, especially Crown Heights. It's the first time they've been back in forty or fifty years, so that's always interesting. It's really great. You might have twenty-five people trucking down the street, and it can be interesting. We've had a few local neighborhood characters give us a hard time, but for the most part, it's been really good.

We even did a bike tour for HDC, the Historic Districts Council. We did a bike tour of Bed-Stuy and that was a lot of fun, although I didn't have my biking legs *[laughs]*. I was aching for days afterwards, but it was a lot of fun. We want to do some more of that, too.

Q: What do you feel is the role of walking tours in the overall preservation movement? Do you think they're actually helping despite whatever neighborhood it is?

Spellen: Yes. I think when you're able to walk down the street and someone tells you about a certain building, the history of who built it or who lived in it, or things about the architecture itself, I think it gives you more of an appreciation of your neighborhood, if you happen to live in that neighborhood, or more appreciation of the complexity of Brooklyn, or Manhattan, or wherever you happen to be. So many people are so busy you don't notice anything. You just go from place A to place B and you barely look around you at all except to dodge people. And I think walking tours make you slow down and really appreciate what's around you. Architecture is a form of art, and there is so much art on our streets that we don't even see, and I think

walking tours really help people appreciate it and help them to go from the macro to the micro. I think it really, really helps you see what's around you.

Q: Can you tell us more about the books you're currently working on, like the coffee table book that you mentioned on Prospect Park South, and the book on September 11th [attacks], if you could just give us a brief synopsis of it.

Spellen: My old friend Debora Jackson and I did a book called *Heroes: The Fallen of 9/11*. And it was mostly through her association with the [Brooklyn] Wall of Remembrance, which is a memorial to the first responders who died at 9/11. That's at Coney Island. It's on the wall of Cyclone Park [MCU Park], the ball club. And she was one of the people who were with it from the very beginning. She also was a volunteer for almost a year at the 9/11 site. She was a site supervisor for the Salvation Army, which was where she met all kinds of wonderful people and had a very moving experience, and it changed her life.

She's a graphic artist, and she was asked to put this book together as a fundraiser for them, and she asked me write the copy. So we put the book together, and I think it's a pretty good book about 9/11's first responders. It's not a weepy, sorrowful book. It really tries to tell the story of the wall more than the event of 9/11, and really emphasizes the sacrifice of the people who died that day.

It's got pictures of everyone who died who was a first responder. The wall has a bronze plaque with a picture of everyone who died, and it's really quite a moving experience. Nobody knows

about it for some reason in the city. And we received some great publicity with Gary Sinise, the actor from *CSI: New York*. He did an episode about the wall, because he's one of their big funders, and we were actually in one of his TV shows, so that was cool.

That book came out last year and right now, I'm working on a book about Prospect Park South, which is a suburban neighborhood in Flatbush. That book is going to have a picture of every single house in Prospect Park South, two hundred-some buildings. I wrote the general history of the neighborhood and I'm writing vignettes on certain houses that we picked out as being special. We're going to have all kinds of information about the architects and the development of the neighborhood. It's really quite interesting.

I have a literary agent and she's asking me to get some proposals together. I would really like to write a book about central Brooklyn and the architecture of central Brooklyn. And also, I want to put together the best of some of my columns. We'll see what happens.

Q: You could basically compile a book.

Spellen: I realize I've been doing it for three years now.

Q: It's a great archive. We're all appreciative of it. So here's our final question. What do you feel needs to happen now in your neighborhood and New York City in terms of preservation? What opportunities are there still that preservationists can pursue? What should happen next, basically?

Spellen: I think this probably will never happen, but I think there needs to be a change in the preservation law [New York City Landmarks Law]. I think we need something in between preserved and not preserved. I think there are a lot of buildings that are not super preservation worthy, but they add to the context of the neighborhood. And I think a lot of times; people are not willing to go the extra mile to preserve them and to ask for a historic district for them because they feel that it's encasing the neighborhood in amber. People complain that New York City is not a living city, and that it's being encased in Amber like Venice or someplace like that. People complain that we're preserving everything that's not worthy of preserving and that we need new homes for people. But I think there has to be a way of preserving things that allow for a little more change.

But on the other hand, I also think that new construction in neighborhoods that are preserved needs to be carefully considered. I hate to say we need a style czar, but maybe we do *[laughs]*. I have a big problem with neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy with all of our historic wonderful buildings and then because of urban problems and things being torn down, you get all this in-fill of absolutely hideous architecture that isn't even worthy of the word architecture. There is just no style. They're not well built. They're ugly. And they're not contextual with what's around them. It would be nice if there was some kind of a way of saying, yeah, you can build here, and you don't have to build a mega mansion or something super expensive, but you have to at least build something that fits into the neighborhood.

Q: Contextual?

Spellen: Yes. I don't know if that's possible. I think that's adding another layer of bureaucracy that people will really howl about. But I would love to see the city grow. I am also an advocate for affordable housing and I know that a lot of times you get a neighborhood that is preserved and people feel that they can't do anything, which is not true, but that's what they feel. I think there's a need for affordable housing, and there's a need for middle-class housing that's not being filled. The preservation movement has to figure out a way to become a part of that without losing its soul. I don't know. It's a biggie. I don't know how they're going to do it.

Q: Yes. It's a question that needs to keep going and hopefully we'll solve it one day.

Spellen: Yes, I hope so *[laughs]*.

Q: Hopefully, without losing too much.

Spellen: Right.

Q: All right, Suzanne. Thank you. I hope this wasn't too painful.

Spellen: Well *[laughs]* I guess I lived.

Q: You lived. And that's it. We're good to go.

[END OF INTERVIEW]