

The New York Preservation Archives Project, 174 East 80th Street, New York, NY. <http://www.nypap.org/>

The New York Preservation Archives Project (NYPAP) presents the compelling and widely unacknowledged intersection of architectural preservation and oral history. The focus of the NYPAP extends beyond architectural preservation and really highlights community preservation because, as several of the interviews in the collection suggest, the architectural spaces are significant to and indicative of the communities in which they exist. By working to preserve these spaces, the various architects, community leaders, and lawyers who have been interviewed are actively working to preserve the rich cultural history that has defined New York City for centuries.

In 1965, the New York legislature passed the New York City Landmarks Law, which was designed to protect the city's historic sites. Development, expansion, and economic interests have posed many challenges to the law since it was first enacted. The mission of the NYPAP is to “engage members of the preservation movement”—those who helped defeat challenges to the Landmarks Law as well as other community members—“with their own history” and to “capture the underrepresented stories of preservation in New York City”

(<http://www.nypap.org/oral-history/>). In her 2015 interview, Denise Brown-Puryear highlights one of the central issues driving this dual preservation project. She says that the work of community leaders like herself and her fellow interviewee Deborah Young is often done quietly, with the media only coming out if something tragic happens. In her words, “The positive things, which are plentiful throughout our communities and always have been, are not highlighted” (<http://www.nypap.org/oral-history/denise-brown-puryear-deborah-young/>).

The main page of the NYPAP website is divided into three content areas: “Our Collections,” “Resources,” and “News and Events.” Within “Our Collections,” users have a choice of visiting the “Preservation History Database,” which focuses on the places, organizations, and policies associated with architectural preservation in New York, and the “Oral Histories” collection. There are currently sixty-six interviews available on the site. The earliest interview, with New York City councilman Robert Low, was conducted in 2002, and several interviews were completed in the summer of 2016. The earlier interviews include an embedded audio track, while many of the newer interviews are presented with embedded YouTube videos. For each interview, the user is given a choice of how to read the transcript, either through the downloadable PDF that opens in a separate window or through the full text included on the interview page. It is a beautiful detail of the site’s design that the images paired with the individual interviews draw attention to the architectural spaces at the heart of the project. These spaces, like the Isaac I. Rice Mansion and the 23rd Street Ferry Terminal, are likely as underrepresented in visual history as the stories they tell, simply because they are not as widely recognizable as a landmark like Grand Central Station.

Close to the top of the “Oral Histories” page is an area highlighting three featured projects: “Saving Preservation Stories,” “Through the Legal Lens,” and “Leading the Commission.” The first two projects include short videos that blend excerpts from interviews with text detailing historic information about the topic. These projects are the beginning pieces which group the existing interviews into distinct categories of narration.

One especially striking aspect of the site’s design is that each interview includes a summary of the people, organizations, places, and policies referenced in the interview. Many of the names are hyperlinked to other interviews or database pages. This serves to connect the interviews and context and allows users to explore certain topics further if they choose. Not all interviews have this level of additional accessibility, but it demonstrates the beginnings of a great network for the interviews to live within.

Database pages like the one for the Tribeca Historic Districts have a section titled “Archives, Personal Files, Oral Histories, and Ephemera,” which lists and links to the oral histories that have been conducted pertaining to that place, organization, or policy (<http://www.nypap.org/preservation-history/tribeca-historic-districts/>). The historian will certainly appreciate the work that has

been put into the database pages. The background information provided is well researched and accompanied by footnote citations, which shows that the NYPAP is interested in being utilized as a historic resource on multiple levels. This is also evident on their “Resources” page, where they provide links to other oral history projects in New York. There are also links to the Oral History Association website and the OHA’s Principles and Best Practices.

The layout of the “Resources” page raises a few questions regarding functionality and navigability. There are links on the page that allow users to skip down to the Preservation History Resources or the General Archival Resources, but there is no way to get back to the top of the page other than to scroll back up if you want to navigate elsewhere. There is a surprising resource nugget that is almost hidden at the bottom of the page below the Archival Resources—a section for New York City History and Preservation Resources. Given that the focus of the NYPAP is the preservation of New York’s history, it might have been more valuable to place these resources first. It is incredible that they have taken the time to compile a selection of resources pertaining to records management and general archival preservation guidelines, as this allows the site to function as a teaching tool for future oral historians and archivists; however, that information should not overpower the information about preserving the greatness of New York City.

The group has chosen to make their oral histories available with a Creative Commons copyright, encouraging users to share and utilize the interviews for new research and other projects. The beautiful images of the architecture used throughout the site, however, are subject to their own copyright, and it is unclear if there is an established process for duplication requests, especially for audio.

The scope of the New York Preservation Archives Project essentially seeks to capture a former way of life. The site’s home page showcases an image from the 1962 protest to save Pennsylvania Station, a structure built in the early twentieth century with details modeled on the ancient buildings of Greece and Rome. Images of the lavish Penn Station from its early days in 1905 to its last days in 1962 can be found with many of the interviews. With all of the site’s images being presented in black and white, there is a sensation of being transported to a time when communal spaces like Penn and Grand Central Station could make “every citizen feel important” (American Experience: The Rise and Fall of Penn Station, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Pz8gP2A7rQ>). Efforts by residents to restore spaces in the Grand Concourse of the Bronx also highlight the strong impact of preservation on the community. As urban planner Sam Goodman states, the people are “given the chance to discover what makes their community historically significant. Because, in fact, we are all part of that chain of time.”

The unique and awe-inspiring thing about New York City is seeing historic two-story structures standing amongst modern two-hundred-story skyscrapers—gems visible to every resident and tourist. It is the tireless efforts that

allowed these structures to live on that have gone largely unnoticed. By providing access to these preservation narratives and other historic sources, the NYPAP is working to fill the gap in the historic record, and their achievements thus far have placed the project at the center of a story that is still unfolding.

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