

SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:  
DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHES

The Reminiscences of  
Michael Henry Adams

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Henry Adams conducted by Interviewer Liz Strong on June 29, 2017. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs* 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.

Michael Henry Adams began his preservation career in Akron, Ohio, volunteering for Stan-Hywet Hall and advocating against the demolition of several historically significant buildings. He moved to Harlem in the 1980s and became involved in the efforts to save the Audubon Ballroom and the Renaissance Casino and Ballroom. He is a vocal advocate for preserving black history and culture and has written several books on the topic. In this interview, he speaks about Mount Neboh Baptist Church, Villa Lewaro, and Mount Morris Park Historic District specifically, and details the challenges of historic preservation in Harlem. He shares stories about several people he's worked with including John L. Wilson and Carolyn Cassady Kent.

Michael Henry Adams grew up in Akron, Ohio and is a historian and activist. He attended the University of Akron and Columbia University's graduated historic preservation program, and has written several books, including *Harlem: Lost and Found*. He currently lives in Harlem and is the director of Save Harlem Now!, an organization dedicated to preserving Harlem's architecture and history.

Transcriptionist: Jackie Thipthorpe

Session: 1

Interviewee: Michael Henry Adams

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Liz Strong

Date: June 29, 2017

Q: And I'll get this one started. And, I'll start by saying that today is June twenty-ninth, it's a Thursday, 2017. My name is Liz Strong. I'm here with Michael Henry Adams. We are doing an oral history project for the New York Preservation Archive Project. So, I'll just start by asking you when and where were you born.

Adams: I was born in Akron, Ohio, which is a great place to be from. When I was born there in 1956, it was the rubber capital of the world still. I grew up in a more or less middle class family and my father worked for—worked teaching American history and as a coach of cross country and track and tennis and golf, but particularly of basketball. He had been a basketball star at the University of Akron and my mother was a registered nurse. And I have four sisters who are all younger. And came to New York in 1985, with the idea of attending the Historic Preservation Program at Colombia [University], which eventually I did.

I became and interested in historic preservation because I was always interested in old things. I was very close to my father's mother and my father's grandmother and to my mother's mother and I was very much—from an early age, very much impressed by the old buildings that remained in Akron, particularly large, old Victorian houses, which one by one, as I was growing up, seemed to be being knocked down and replaced by parking lots and gas stations and supermarkets.

I was especially impressed, I think, because there was a house that was being knocked down when I was I think around seven or eight, called—that had been—originally had been built as a house called Rose Hill but by a man named Absalom Work *[phonetic]* who had been an early executive with B.F. Goodrich Rubber Company. The house was sold after his death to a man—to another rubber executive named William Christie *[phonetic]*. I believe that William Christie's wife's name was Rose so they changed the name of the house to Rosewill Manor *[phonetic]*.

In the newspaper in Akron it said that this house was being demolished and that it had pink marble columns. That just seemed so amazing to me, because my great grandmother in her living room had these mahogany veneered tables with marble tops. That was very impressive to me these tables with marble tops. But the notion that there was such a thing as pink marble and enough pink marble to make columns and that you would have pink marble in columns on a house and knock it down just seemed inconceivable to me.

But because I didn't have much notion that there was some kind of a *[pause]* profession or avocation as architectural history or as historic preservation and because I had some talent as a—making drawings, I, for a long time, thought that I would end up being an artist. All these interests and even my interest in art, all of these things were clouded by race. The—all of these old buildings and all of my interest in the past were almost of necessity colored in a way that made me particularly interested in things that represented the white past, because that's what was, after all, was emphasized in one's education and on television, everywhere in your life.

It was a very bizarre sort of thing happened—bizarre to me at least looking at it in retrospect, is that I remember in the little primers that we read in the second grade, or the first grade, Alice and Jerry [Series], that there was this segment of the book where Alice and Jerry go to visit grandmother way down south and she lived in this house with columns. There again these columns, column fixation. That book and on TV, movies, that were about the South that talked about the past that featured these white pillared plantation houses, staffed by slaves, in a bizarre kind of way, because the slaves were black and I was black and because the houses were—

appealed to me, I thought oh, well these things—all of that had some fascination for me.

But, of course, I knew I had been taught that slavery was wrong, evil, and wicked and so that caused this sort of conflict, but, it didn't really amount to very much for a long time. So, movies like *Saratoga Trunk* and *Band of Angels* and even *Gone With The Wind* were just enthralling to me. And somehow, though I ought more readily to be identifying with the slaves, I was identifying with slave masters and with their lifestyle, which seemed beautiful and appealing to me. Then ultimately, as I got a little older, I thought oh, well you can't—you can no longer be enamored of old [Colonial] Williamsburg and of Southern plantation houses and of Georgian houses in Annapolis or Charleston or Savannah.

So by the time I was an adolescent I began more and more transfer my allegiance for old buildings to English country houses. That sort of coincided with this thing that happened when I was—the biggest house ever built in Akron had been built by the founder of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, a man named Frank Seiberling and he built a Tudor revival house that was completed in 1915 that was the biggest house ever erected in the state of Ohio and was very

elaborate and it was designed by this man named Charles Schneider who was the Cleveland, Ohio, representative of the New York firm George B. Post & Sons. It was a remarkable house or it is a remarkable house. It was given by the Seiberling family to a private foundation to operate as a house museum.

When I was in—all while I was in—hmm. When I, I think first when I was twelve, I became a member of [American] Red Cross Youth and they had these summer volunteer programs. At about the same time, I had my first job working in the public library closest to my house. But the pay was such that I soon graduated to working in a local restaurant as a bus boy and then at the country club as a bus boy and so I was working but I also was doing these volunteer things.

The first year, when I was twelve, they wouldn't allow you to volunteer as a tour guide at Stan Hywet Hall [and Gardens]. So I volunteered instead at this nursing home called The Sumner Home [for the Aged] and they, just by chance, happened to be headquartered in an old sort of Tudor revival house that had been added onto. That coincided with my interest in old houses and the old people who lived there, coincided with my interest in history and meeting and talking to them about Akron of the past and about the American past in general. I remember there was this woman who was a journalist who had covered the 1938 Olympics in Berlin and she was fascinating to talk to. And there was a poet named May Lord [*phonetic*].

Anyhow, so, it wasn't until I was thirteen that I was able to volunteer at Stan Hywet Hall and I think even that was still younger than they allowed. But, the head of the Red Cross wrote—or the director of the Red Cross wrote a letter for me and they let me volunteer at this house.

Now, when I say that there was this conflict of race well, part of that conflict was that for my mother thought it was all well and good to volunteer at something and be charitable but like so many African Americans she thought the idea that you would work for free was just not ultimately a beneficial thing. She thought that I should be spending all of my time trying to earn money. So, that was a conflict.

And then another was, you know, to go to Stan Hywet Hall to volunteer there on Sundays or Saturdays, whichever day I would have off, meant that I would walk from my neighborhood, which had been a mostly—which had been a white neighborhood but by the time we moved there was mostly African American. But, I would walk through all these other white neighborhoods to get to Stan Hywet, which was in perhaps the most desirable neighborhood in the city. I remember walking there one Sunday, for the first time in my life I think when I was thirteen someone called me a nigger and said, “You should go back to your own neighborhood.” I don’t remember what I said to them or if I said anything. But that only happened that one time and it didn’t bother me that much. After that, motherly Bea [Beatrice] Kannel, who directed the volunteer tour guides, usually drove to pick me up and took me home.

Anyhow, I volunteered at Stan Hywet. I met the daughter of Frank Seiberling, the man who built the house. So his daughter, who was his second eldest child, she was Mrs. Milton Whately Harrison [Irene H. Seiberling Harrison]. By the time I met her I think she was in her eighties and she was very petite but very elegant and she had been in an automobile accident and had lost an

eye so she had—one of her eyes was a glass eye. But she still drove and very rapidly—at a very high rate of speed.

She had—when I first was a volunteer there, she had been away recovering from this auto accident. But, she came back and I was very interested in the history of her family and she knew a lot about her family and she was eager to tell me all about them. But, she was very interested in many issues, conservative political issues and also issues about health. You know, she was one of the first people who I knew who was interested in health food and who made her own yogurt and who had a campaign against the fluoridation of water in Akron, a losing campaign against fluoridation of the water in Akron.

But, she and I met and sort of hit it off. We discovered our birthday was on the same day. She was very impressed with all the knowledge I had about English history and the history of the decorative arts. And she, in fact, once explained for me my proclivity for this history *[laughs]* in a way that at the time I found very flattering but then later, the more I thought about it the less flattering it seemed. She said, “I think you must have had a previous life in Tudor times and that is why you are so knowledgeable about all of these things.”

Q: *[Laughs]*

Adams: So, anyhow, it—so, there—and that was something else that was interesting is that she having come from a family of German immigrants in the Eighteenth Century who had soon become prosper farmers and then become inventors and then industrialists, she really believed in



the individual and manifest destiny. In terms of her father and his factory, she very much believed in paternalism and how her father had formed this company, and knew all the men in his factory, and always had their best interests at heart, and didn't need to have a union because he provided built housing for his workers and had all of their best interests at heart.

What's odd for me is to think how initially, I had this sort of conservative values but, of course, being a child of my time and junior high school being—you know learning that after first being a hawk and thinking, hey, the Vietnam War, we should go over there and bomb the hell out of them to stop communism, to gradually thinking this is unjust. Why are you going to someone else's country and telling them what form of government they should have. So ultimately, our politics completely devolved away from each other. But fortunately, never in a way that impaired our friendship and I don't even think we ever talked about politics much, really, so that was good.

But that's all to say that it took me the longest time to recognize that in turning away from English country—I mean in turning away from Southern plantation houses to English country houses, you know, I just jumped from the frying pan into the fire. The reason why Houghton [Hall] has more mahogany than any other house in England is because the Walpoles were heavily involved in the sugar trade in the Caribbean and had imported this mahogany directly from their holdings there and from Santo Domingo, and that William [Thomas] Beckford was the richest man in England because his wealth derived from West Indian sugar plantations.

Even further on, it gradually came to me that, you know, life is like a Pointillist painting by [Georges] Seurat that every—that you look close up and you see this mass of all these distinct dots that seem completely isolated but the further back you go and the perspective changes the more you determine that everything is connected to everything else. If you believe that, then you come to realize that there is no beauty, no goodness, no wonderful anything that isn't touched somehow also by oppression and misery and everything that's bad, and particularly when you're talking about the world's great monuments. They all have some amount of oppression and exploitation associated with them. But then like the Russians who have so painstakingly preserved and restored all these tsarist palaces not because they are celebrating inequality but because they realize that this beauty represents the sweat, the tears, and the blood of countless masses who died in order to make—that caused all this magnificence to come into being, that therefore that this becomes the cultural patrimony of everyone and ought to be preserved and celebrated as such.

There is my justification for being obsessed to this day with houses built by and for the rich. The thing that makes them all the more appealing to me now is knowing that by and large the rich are as unlikely to want to preserve them as anyone else because they just consume too much of their wealth and they just don't want to bear responsibility and the burden that such places represent to them. Therefore, ironically, places like Stan Hywet Hall, which were built with such care and with such fine materials and such exceptional craftsmanship that they were meant to last for centuries and were built by people who even entertained this fantasy that the riches that they had created would last for the centuries as well and that there would be this dynasty of their privileged family going on and far off into the distant future.

Well, irony of ironies, a house even like this one we're sitting in now. The inequality is coming back and there are more individual families who occupy houses like this all by themselves but far fewer than a century ago. If you were to look in New York, and if you were to look at all the grand houses that were built along Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue, there is not a single family that built some palatial house on Fifth Avenue that still occupies it. Not one! Even in a city that has got some, you know, twenty some billionaires, not one family that built one of these places still lives there. So that represents progress on the one hand but it then gives me the excuse to care for these houses, which otherwise I would have to abominate because of the inequality that they manifest.

Q: I want to ask you something. You said that as you were growing up African American history was largely hidden from you. So in parallel to your appreciation of preservation, how did you become aware of the role African American history played and some of the other things that Africans do now?

Adams: Well, you know, despite the culture and the media around me, you know, my family they were aware of their history and they talked about it a little bit, not very much. Then, by the time I got into junior high school, I had this one black teacher—I don't remember what her name was even—but she was interested in black history and she taught us a certain amount of black history. Other teachers I recall by name were also important. Caroline Bochart, in the sixth grade, she gave me a book about [Pablo] Picasso. My German teacher Miss [Rebecca] Haymaker encouraged me, so did art teachers, Mrs. Barone, Bill Berger, Don Harvey and Charlotte Hanton.

Other older whites were also influential. Kate Clapp, the *Akron Beacon Journal* garden editor, hired me to help in her garden. Charlotte Staiger gave me her old *Antiques and Connoisseur* magazines. Laura Schellschmidt, still a friend today, had me do flowers for her elegant house. Betty Sandwick, who introduced me to Laura, also gave me work, polishing silver. Harold Tower was a kindly eighty-something retired choir master who took me to classical music concerts. I met James Arden Pahlau at one.

Jim took me to concerts, gave me architecture books. Working as a furniture salesman, he eventually descended to become a handy man. When he moved from Massillon to Akron, it scared me to death. He was falling in love with me. Uncertain about my sexuality, it troubled me that people assumed we were gay and lovers. So, in public, I took to treating him rudely. I didn't know how else to dissuade rumors.

A good thing about our gradual estrangement, is that he did not leave me his archive as he'd intended. Through hook and crook, but not much cash, Jim amassed an astonishing library of historic text, drawings, photographs and other materials about art, architecture and the decorative arts. Mostly concerned with Nineteenth and early Twentieth century American design, his collection was especially strong regarding local examples. Jim's original research about local decorators and architects active during the first half of the Twentieth Century is superlative. Happily, all this stuff went to the University of Akron.

And the really fortunate thing about the time that I came up was that it was the dawning of the black consciousness movement of the '60s and the 1970s. By the time I became especially interested in black history and culture—by the time I was an undergraduate in college—the library I think at the University of Akron had not only new books that were written by people like Jervis Andersen, who wrote this wonderful book called *This Was Harlem: [A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950]*, and David Levering Lewis, who wrote this marvelous book *When Harlem was in Vogue*, but they also had reprints or reissues of new editions of literature created during the Harlem renaissance.

Before that, in the Akron-[Summit County] Public Library—the Akron Public Library was really an exceptional library. Now all these libraries, not just in Akron but all over the country, are completely messed up because they have this policy where they will—two policies the libraries seem to have in general. Is one, they have a policy where they will deaccession old books simply because they're old and because they figure there are new books on the same subject that are coming out that are superior. So, that's very bad.

But then the other thing they do that is equally bad is that in New York there is hardly a library you can go to that doesn't have a large portion of their old journals or their books or whatever stored offsite. That means that one, you have to know what they've got off site and two, you then have got to identify and order it and have it get to you. That's very different than going through an open stacked library where you've found some book in the card catalogue that you're interested in, and then you discover that just because you're in the right section that there are all

sorts of other books related to the same subject, which you might not have known about otherwise if you hadn't just seen them adjacent to where you were looking.

But, the library then was wonderful. It didn't have an open stack that is a large portion of its body—of its books were stored in the basement of the library. But such books as were out in the open in open stack gave you this opportunity to find new things. And then once I made friends librarians and asked them to let me look at the closed stacks then I was able to find more things.

But the thing about the Akron Public Library being so good meant that when the Metropolitan Museum of Art had their *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition that featured this catalogue that had a lot of newspaper clippings from the 1920s through the 1970s but also, had photographs, particularly photographs by the Harlem portrait photographer, James Van Der Zee, when that happened, they had that book. When there was the monograph of the work of James Van Der Zee, they had that.

That was an incredible eye-opener because the so-called primitiveness of African culture had not appealed to me as an American and to discover books that showed African Americans in the early Twentieth Century with fine cars and wearing fine clothes and promenading up and down the avenue, who in turn had written wonderful plays and poems and created great works of art that was a revelation and made me want to come and see this place called Harlem.

Then tying in with that, my Great-Aunt Cora, she had photographs of herself and her friends who though they were mostly servants, because they worked for some of the richest people and

emulating them they wore the latest fashion and they wore evening clothes to their annual Christmas party and all these things and that was a wonderful time that reinforced this idea. And as a young woman, my Aunt Cora had briefly lived in Harlem so all these things made Harlem seem like this alluring, fabled place somewhere.

By the time I was in college, I had this friend who was also interested in African American history. We had met and been friends and then briefly dated and because it took me a long time to get out of college, I didn't meet this guy until I was around twenty-six, because I didn't come out until I was around twenty-five. Anyhow, it almost became a kind of competition for us to see who could discover something new about the Harlem Renaissance. When we each read about how some of the greatest personalities of this period of artistic and cultural ferment, [J.M.] Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, and Edna Thomas, and Dorothy West that they were all gay and lesbian, that was amazing, a revelation.

You see, that's the thing for me, history—the thing that makes history so compelling is that history is like a kind of time machine. You can travel in that time machine and go back and, irony of ironies, discover not other people's personalities but discover yourself. People who have had the same interests and motivations and interests and desires that you have and you wouldn't have dreamed that that was so but there it is. And that of course is the thing that is so terrible about so much of the miseducation that happens in America—that the accomplishments of women and blacks and Latinos and gays are all so disregarded and dismissed. So, growing up, if you are from any of these groups, you can tend to feel insignificant or irrelevant in the scheme of things.

I mean that isn't to say that one oughtn't to have enough empathy that in reading *Romeo and Juliet* that you oughtn't to be able to experience the universality of having parents demanding that you do one thing when you desire to do something else. But, it's so much easier if you can see that these are people who look like you or whatever. And the thing of it is, too, is that if you then have some kind of what people would consider some sort of aberrant interest like mine in old buildings, people will say, "Oh, well, that's not your place to be interested in those things. Why are you interested in these things? It's not a part of your—"

I started this preservation group in Akron, Ohio, called Progress Through Preservation and I was helped in doing it by this professor of mine named Don Harvey. I was upset because more and more buildings were being destroyed all the time. The sort of straw for me, the sort of last straw for me, was there was this little modest, narrow renaissance building made out of white terracotta, designed by local architects named Fitcher and Booker that had been built by Frank Sieberling oddly enough called The Delaware Building. It had been bought by some bank in Columbus. I think it was the—was it the Huntington Bank? I don't remember. It had been bought by this bank and they were going to take this terracotta building that I think ionic pilasters and they were going to cover it all in bronzed mirrored glass and make it into a little bronze cube. And they did it, they did do that. So, I thought, oh, damn, you know, they'll be nothing left.

I wrote a guest editorial for the Akron paper, and [*unclear*]*—*I mean Don Harvey he suggested that—and I think I called it something like "Why Can't More Akron Landmarks Be Saved?" And—and what? I proposed at the end that people who had—were similarly interested in



preserving buildings from the past that we join together and form an organization called Progress Through Preservation. Don Harvey was very instrumental in helping me to write this because *[laughs]* so many wonderful buildings had been destroyed that initially all I had was a long list of destroyed buildings. And he said, “No, no, you’ve got to include some success stories to show the alternative, what’s possible.” And I thought, well, there aren’t very many. Some of the buildings I included were even sort of stretches because I remember M. O’Neil [Co.] Department Store that I included, it had been designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, and it had had an alteration where they put these horrible sort of outsized canopies over the doorways to try to make it seem more modern. Fortunately, those have been removed. But I thought, “Oh, I can’t include that, look at that.” But, he said, “No, no, no, no.” So, I included a few adaptive reuse projects that I thought were questionable but it worked.

This group was started and people did join. Ramona and F. Eugene Smith, who had a branding and planning firm, Design Management, were especially helpful and always supportive. When I was first in college, Gene’s film, *Why Ugly, [Why Not?]* had made historic preservation seem to be a real alternative to the usual default of destruction. But, it’s very interesting what ended up happening in a conservative place like Akron. One is that the man who had been the chairman of the board of the Stan Hywet Hall Foundation, a man named Robert [S.] Pflueger, who was a Seiberling family member, and at a Stan Hywet board meeting he said to—because this had been in the paper and he’d read it and other people had read it—and so, the executive director, a man named John Franklin Miller, he is a friend of mine and he related to me how John Pflueger had said in this meeting of board of trustees of Stan Hywet he said, “Where does Michael Adams get

off telling us what to do with our old buildings. Our ancestors built these buildings; his ancestors were just slaves.” So, when John Miller told me that I just thought, oh, damn *[laughs]*.

The other thing that happened, which was less insidious but probably inevitable is that the people who I got who were interested in preserving Akron, the people who I had gathered together, they were all white and they all liked to think of themselves as people who were connected to the powers that be. The problematic thing about trying to be a power amongst the powers that be is that too often you’re seduced by what you mistake for civility and correct behavior, which makes you unwilling to challenge things that people are doing that are terribly wrong lest you offend them. And that almost always occurs *[laughs]* to the detriment of what it is that you’re trying to save.

That’s very much the case in Akron and because I was more confrontational, which I felt was essential because I had had this job in 1970—what, I don’t know, 1977, somewhere around there, a job where I worked with the then director of the Summit County Historical Society on a HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] funded inventory of significant architecture in Summit—in Akron. The idea was we were supposed to identify buildings eligible for the National Register of Historic Places so that no city projects and no HUD funding would be used to adversely impact any historic resource.

But what I didn’t realize at first, and what exercised me so much that I almost quit in the middle of the project, was that in as much as this was happening through the City Planning Department [City of Akron Department of Planning and Development] that they had all these development

goals in the future and so if we encountered some building like the Hotel Portage in the downtown, no matter how significant one might say that it was due to what it had meant in terms of the history and the development of the city, they wanted you to say that it was non-contributing. That it was a—that somehow it had been comprised in a way that made it insignificant. And this was just true all over the city. I thought, oh, golly, you know, how do you fight that obliquely? You just can't. You just have to come right up against it.

All of this dancing around, I guess I really wasn't good at that kind of political thing. And, as a consequence, within a year of founding Progress Through Preservation in Akron, I was voted out of the directorship and replaced. But they still survive. They survive still. They still have no black members and they are still overly cautious. But they have managed to get a local preservation ordinance enacted and they have managed, by hook or crook, to stop some really lame brain schemes of the City of Akron. But they weren't successful in a campaign, led by Ramona Smith, that they had undertaken to stop the City of Akron from destroying virtually every historic public school building they had.

The one public school—the one elementary school I went to was this brown Ohio sandstone building called Crouse Elementary and it was a sort of an English Gothic perpendicular building that had these rampant lions holding shields on the parapet. But then far more significant to me is the school I next went to, Ferdinand Schumacher Elementary School, was completed in about 1933 I think and it had the most beautiful vibrantly colored terracotta reliefs all over the building, both art deco stylized flowers and plants, but also, birds and animals and Native Americans and everything. It was wonderful.

That's too bad but that that's destroyed and destroyed for no good reason. At the time, the—they said, well, you know, they wanted to make buildings that were more energy efficient. All these LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] studies show the easiest way to make a building a LEEDs platinum building is to take a historic masonry building and to give it insulation *[laughs]* and—that that's much easier. But then, one of the worst things I heard was that one of the big objections that they had to these historic schools was they were all three or four stories high and none of them had elevators and that both students and teachers did not want to navigate three or four flights of steps.

Damn! Damn. Of course that struck me, too, the last time I was in Akron was that how the neighborhood that I grew up in was a place more or less known as Maple Valley—the Maple Valley Library, the Maple Valley Drug Store, the Maple Valley Barber Shop—and one walked, or could walk, to all of these places. But now the library, the drug store, the grocery store, they all have drive-thru windows. I thought, damn, who would drive from—but people do.

Q: Yes.

Adams: It represents the generation or the culture. Well, having started Progress Through Preservation in Akron, when I got to Harlem, one of the—two things shocked me about Harlem, and it was mostly due to the media. There had been all of these—I had seen all these articles about Harlem. There was a cover story in the *National Geographic* in the '70s and there was a story in *Ebony* magazine talking about the little neighborhood in Harlem called Hamilton

Heights. It said, “Where the black middle class lives.” Well, that was the first shock was how little of a black middle class survived. That of those people wearing bowler hats and carrying walking sticks walking on the boulevards, their descendants had mostly fled from Harlem during the heroin epidemic or the crack epidemic.

The other thing that shocked me was how derelict and such poor condition such a large portion of Harlem was. Eventually things like learning that in the mid-‘80s that the city owns something like eighty percent of the housing stock because landlords had abandoned their properties and defaulted on their property taxes and not paid their water rates and that you had all these multiple dwellings, which had hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of code violations—that was a surprise.

But, like the people who wrote those articles that I read before I got here, I too, was optimistic that Harlem would rebound and I thought in a slow and gradual way. The shock and dismay has been the rapidity and the brutality of that rejuvenation and how it has—how ironically Harlem’s callous neglect for a long time. I say callous neglect, I mean it’s very bizarre because if one looks at Bob [Robert A.M.] Stern’s book, *New York 1960: [Architecture and Urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial]*, you see all of these slum clearance projects that were planned for Harlem fortunately, only about a quarter of which were ever realized.

There was a lot of interest in creating a remedy for the problem of the Harlem slum but so much of it was wrong headed. The beneficial thing about this callous neglect was that when I got there in 1985, there survived in Harlem all sorts of ephemeral magical kind of things, which you

simply couldn't help to find anywhere else. One of those poignant for me was that across the street from the Hotel Theresa, there was a store that sold—there was a store on the corner on the ground floor and it sold sneakers and athletic socks. That was about the extent of what they sold. But what you noticed was that there were all these oak framed cabinets with glass panels and nickel plated hardware and that painted in reverse on each of these glass panels was a different flower and then carefully lettered underneath the flower was the name of that individual flower.

I thought, wow, what is this? Then it came to me that this had been a florist shop of the century before and that they just left these cabinets and they stored their sneakers and their gym socks *[laughs]* in the cabinets that had once held gardenias and violets and that a hundred years had gone by and that simply had not changed. That was at Seventh Avenue and 145th Street. At 125th Street near Third Avenue there was a saloon and it had swinging doors just like you see in the westerns. There were doors inside of that that you could close. But like on a summer day they would open those doors and you would just walk in and out of those swinging doors. I thought, wow. But that's gone. That's gone and much like it has gone.

Another delight of Harlem of those days was you could visit—many of the houses of worship in Harlem were previously synagogues or previously owned by congregations of a different denomination. One of my favorites was this church that's now called the Mount Neboh Baptist Church on 114th Street and they have been built in about 1909, I think, as Temple Anshe Chesed.

When you go there today, it's very odd because you think okay, well, what this synagogue building looked like was it looked like one of those English city churches that was built after the great fires. It's made out of brick and has an ionic portico and in the tympanum [*phonetic*] of the pediment there are these two tablets of the law so, you say a synagogue. But then, when you looked underneath the portico, there are three doors and over one door is Queen Isabella of Aragon and then King Ferdinand [III] of—where is he from, Castile, I don't know. I thought, oh, a synagogue. I thought, or maybe these were—maybe this was some—I think it is some congregation of Sephardic Jews or something.

But then, you think—in the center panel there's Christopher Columbus discovering America with a priest with a cross next to him. And you say—and you remember, oh, 1492 the [Spanish] Inquisition. So, you say, “No.” But what you learn is that this synagogue, the demographics of the south eastern portion of Harlem, changed so dramatically that by the mid-'20s this synagogue had been sold to a congregation of immigrants from Puerto Rico who established in Temple Anshe Chesed, or what had been Temple Anshe Chesed, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medals Spanish Roman Catholic Church, which is now the Mount Neboh Baptist Church.

Well, the Mount Neboh Baptist Church, they are renowned for their church choir and they went to Paris and were well received there and so now they call their choir the Mount Neboh Baptist Church Paris Choir. To better showcase that choir—though unfortunately—they took the chancel that had been built into the synagogue where the artificial marble enframing of Corinthian columns in a pediment that had enframed the Arch of the Covenant became the enframing of an altarpiece in the form of a fake El Greco nativity scene. Alas that was all thrown into a

dumpster and a wider platform built to showcase the choir. Similarly, this over life-sized particularly bloody and gruesome pieta by the entrance to the church that was smashed to bits and thrown into a dumpster.

All that is very disenchanting because, you know, you experience this layering of culture upon culture only it was there to be seen manifest in these elements. You know, one of my favorites was a little church on Lenox Avenue near 121st Street I think it is. No, I think it's 122nd Street. Anyhow, it's now an African American Protestant church but it was originally built as the [West Side] Unitarian Church of Harlem and designed by Albert Herter of all people. I mean—no, not Albert Herter, sorry. Designed by the guy who was the architect for the Herter Brothers. What is his name? Oh, darn. Is it Charles B. Atwood? I think it's Charles B. Atwood who, when he worked for the Herter Brothers, designed the William Henry Vanderbilt's triple house.

Well, he designed that church and it didn't last too long as a Unitarian Church and became Temple Sons of Corrary [*phonetic*], something or other. The delight for me, you go there, over the altar in this church there was a square panel, and in that square panel, there was a cross with a crown over it, a cross with a little coronet over it. But at the edge of that square, you saw this—and you weren't really quite sure what it was but then you realize that you were looking at the hindquarters and the tails of these lion supporters. These lions, which once supported the tablets of the law, the conquering lions of Judas. And all that was left were [*laugha*]. So, that was funny.



Well, I went in there recently, and the sad thing is they made the cross even bigger, so the hindquarters and the tails are still there, but you almost don't see them because the cross now looms up even higher. It's too bad. People just don't realize what remarkable thing they have, unfortunately.

That was readily apparent to me when I came to Harlem and I thought, okay, I will start a preservation organization, like the one I did in Akron, and I would do it in the same way. I would go to the *New York Amsterdam News* and I will get them to let me write a guest editorial. I met some guy there who was involved in the advertising department and he wanted to help me and I wrote something but it never did get published.

The other difficulty I ran into was just trying to work with the [New York City] Landmarks Preservation Commission and with the various preservation organizations in the city in terms of Harlem. What I discovered is that like most people, preservationists are very selfish. What they're most concerned with is their own little territory, and justifiably so, because they generally haven't even got enough funds to be able to deal with that small area much less worrying about something outside of their area. But, you know, I still dream of the day that the notion of *e pluribus unum* will come to the fore and preservationists will become a force more to be reckoned with because we are so united in our efforts to take on all comers.

But, that was not the case when I came here in 1985. But, one very lucky thing that did happen was Arlene Simon was aware of the existence of Harlem. Somehow or another, I don't remember how it was that I came to talk to her, but she suggested to me she said, "If you want to

interest people in preserving Harlem, you should start a group and moreover you should invite groups from outside of Harlem to come and go on a tour.” She suggested names and groups that I should contact and supplied me with numbers for these people. One of the people she connected me with was Christabel Gough and that was very beneficial. Christabel became my historic preservation godmother: picketing in the rain against the unsuitable Harvard Club addition, at the American Craft Museum, the Audubon, my Harlem book, the Harlem Lost and Found exhibition, being able to stay in New York—almost every good thing I’ve done in New York, she’s played a part in.

Ultimately I did start this group that I very pretentiously called The Upper Manhattan Society for Progress Through Preservation. I did that deliberately hoping that I’d give it some sort of gravitas that will make people take it seriously. I was doing a little bit of writing in *The [New York] Times* in those days and I was having a certain amount of success in getting Christopher Gray and others to write about things that we were concerned about and recognized that that was something that could be crucial was being able to get coverage for what you were interested in. I had a certain amount of luck doing that.

Then I had a certain amount of luck getting friends that took an interest in me and my youthful efforts to allow me to use their name as advisory board members of The Upper Manhattan Society for Progress Through Preservation. We had Mario Buatta, the decorator and Charles Adams Platt the architect and Robert A.M. Stern the architect and Pat [Patricia] Buckley the socialite. That was all to the good. And Christabel Gough. But the hard part of forming an organization, and membership, and trying to cultivate new members, and to have programs, and

meetings—that I never did master. Nor was I ever able to get anyone to successfully—successfully delegate someone else to take on.

In the midst of all this, Arlene had also, been talking to the politician, David [A.] Patterson, who at that point—what the devil was he? Was he the state senator? I think it was the state senator representing Harlem. He announced that he was going to be sponsoring a preservation organization called Landmarks Harlem, just like Landmarks West!, which was derived from his consultation with Arlene.

I thought oh, I'd be perfect to direct something like that. I contacted his office and his assistant, this woman named Gina Stalaker [*phonetic*] and she said, "Oh." She was asking me questions about myself, etc. She was saying how she was from the South and I said, "Oh, that's interesting." Then she asked me where I lived. I said I lived at this building on Hamilton Terrace, number sixty-three. she said, "Oh, you live in that terrible building." I said, "Yes, it is—we do have a lot of problems." She said, "Well, we've tried to help them but those niggers over there they just don't seem to know what they are doing." And I said, "Oh, well, perhaps [*laughs*] we don't." Anyhow, so, that made it not seem good.

I tried to contact Patterson directly and make a complaint about this but I learned, of course, that particularly when you have staff, you're dependent on them. If you're legally blind you probably are extra dependent upon them, so, you don't want to hear anything bad about them. So nothing happened with that. The next thing that happened was that I met this man named Thomas [J.] Bess and he said to me—he thought of himself as a politically connected person, a black man,

and he lived in the Bronx in the little tiny Longwood Historic District. He said, “I’m going to arrange for you to work as a volunteer consultant to C. Virginia Fields who is the new Harlem council member and you will be her preservation consultant. Between Virginia and me, we’re going to see to it that you become the director of Landmarks Harlem.” I said, “Oh, okay.”

I went to work for Virginia. That was a frustrating and difficult thing because, you know, not having any money and trying to do things at the same time trying to save things and every time you looked around something else was threatened with being destroyed. When that thing was thought of in Audubon Theatre where Malcolm X had been killed, Virginia was reluctant to come out against it lest she offend Columbia and who knows who else. That was a frustration.

She did permit me to go around to different meetings to try to denounce the plans to destroy the Audubon but of course, I was very limited in what I could say since I was supposedly representing her. Sometimes I would say, “I’m not saying this as a representative of the council member, I’m saying this on my own behalf, this is deplorable, whatever.”

Q: Tell me more about the Audubon Ballroom situation. Give it a little context.

Adams: It was a disaster. Thomas [W.] Lamb, the Scottish immigrant, came to America in the 1890s, I think it was, and he became a theater specialist. He is credited with designing something like four hundred theaters around the world throughout his career. The Audubon was completed in I think about 1910 or ’12, and was built by the future movie mogul, William F. Fox, who founded 20th Century Fox. As a consequence of that, Lamb has included a fascinating a little

architectural detail and that is his building, which was what at the turn of the Twentieth Century was known as a casino, because a place of pleasure—where neighborhoods all over the country would have these casinos that usually included theaters and billiard parlors and restaurants and meeting rooms and dance halls.

Well, the Audubon Casino included the Audubon Theatre and a large ballroom, which is the room where Malcolm X was ultimately killed, and shops and restaurants. On the Broadway side, it's devised as an arcade of elliptical arches, shallow elliptical arches that aren't carried on columns, except at the entrance, but all the rest, which are windows, are carried on these piers. At the springing of each arch is a terracotta, naturally colored fox head trophy, an allusion to William Fox. Then over the entrance, is this bizarre detail, which I think can only have resulted from those terracotta elements having been on sale by the supplier that week because they relate to absolutely nothing. It is the prow of a galley with oars that has a big sort of Norse-looking mask with a bearded face on it and then that's being pulled through these turbulent waters by this bare-breasted triton holding a sword aloft. What did that relate to? Nothing. It doesn't relate to John James Audubon in a way, it's not his coat of arms or anything, it doesn't relate to anything. Anyhow, that terracotta was all restored.

The Audubon started out as a vaudeville theater, and quickly featured—I mean, and featured people who lived in the neighborhood like the Marx Brothers and other comedy notables and then it quickly they added movies to the vaudeville house and gradually the movies came to replace these theatrical acts. Then in the ballroom where Malcolm X was killed, was rented out for meetings. There were early meetings of the New York Transit Workers Union [Transport

Workers Union] that were held there when they were in formation and there were annual dances. There was this group called the Fun Makers that would hold this annual drag ball around Thanksgiving time.

Then, ultimately, in the late '50s or early '60s, the theater started showing Spanish language movies and was renamed the San Juan Theater. I guess it must have been in the 1970s that the theater was abandoned and that dances stopped happening in the ballroom and the building was vacant, completely vacant. I suppose it must have been one of those places where the owner relinquished on his taxes because the building had come under city ownership and the city was in negotiations with Columbia University to develop the property to create a biotechnological research laboratory and the initial idea was to just demolish everything.

Initially, I didn't really care about it one way or the other. It didn't move me at all. Primarily it didn't move me because I felt that by the time the Municipal Art Society, in the form of Charles Adams Platt and Kent Barwick contacted me to try to involve me in doing something about it, because they wanted to have some black face to relate to this site. I thought well, you know, it's a foregone conclusion. This has all been decided and established. There were still all sorts of planning, board meetings, and things, but I just said, "Oh, this is already done."

But, ultimately, I thought well, heck, Malcolm X is highly important and maybe just maybe it can be saved. But the problem, again, is that whether talking about the Municipal Art Society now they are the traditional sort of preservationists—they are the people who like to think that they are the people who like to think that they are a power working with if not co-equals power

with power colleagues in a courteous and decorous way to hammer out the future of the city. The thing that always is central to their efforts is reasonableness. Well, they got outsmarted on their reasonableness. How? It was kind of like the way that Hilary [R.] Clinton got outsmarted with her healthcare plan. That was so voluminous but no one could read it and then her opponents could denounce it saying all kinds of things that weren't true but no one would be able to take the time to read it to discover that they weren't true. Well, similarly, the Municipal Art Society their idea was that they would come up with a design that would show how the Audubon project could be built incorporating the existing building.

But to counter that, in all of the various newspapers, the Columbia and the [New York City] Planning Commission and the city they just said, "Well, they have come up with a plan—the Municipal Art Society has come up with a plan that is too expensive to produce and therefore impractical." No one bothered to—even once it was said it was too expensive or unworkable nobody even bothered to examine whether that was true or not. They got outsmarted.

Then I was also unfortunate in my other colleagues who were—the December 12th Movement. I don't know if you remember back in those days when David [N.] Dinkins was the mayor and African Americans in Brooklyn felt that Korean bodega owners were disrespectful to African American patrons at these various bodegas. There was one that they were picketing on a regular basis. That was Sonny [Robert] Carson and Elombe Brath in the December 12th Movement, and I was trying to work with them.

To show how insignificant they felt that the Audubon was and how they particularly felt that it was a done deal already, they decided that since their main gig was in Brooklyn that they would relegate the Audubon to the youth movement branch of the December 12th Movement. So I'm working with all these people just out of high school on the Audubon. We had a couple of marches and things but nothing—and what we did do is we effectively went to some community board meetings and that was interesting.

I remember that J. Max Bond [Jr.], the architect who like to think of himself as kind of a black activist, he—but by this time he was a total establishment figure. He had been head of the School of Architecture [Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning] at Columbia and would go on to be the head of the [City] Planning Department of the City of New York. He liked to wear his tweeds and he spoke in a very standard English way.

I remember one of my December 12th Movement youth responding to him saying how the Audubon was in such terrible condition that it couldn't possibly be saved and that it was a lost cause. This young man got up in his testimony to the community board and said, "You don't even talk black!" I could just see Max Bond, his humiliation, after being assessed of not even talking *[laughs]* black. That was hilarious.

Anyhow, but, you know, one had such few joys because it was so frustrating because what I learned—I'm talking to Sonny Carson one day and he says, "Oh, do you really think that we could win this?" I said, "I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think we could win this, yes, yes!" One



of the great things we did was we decided to have a sit-in at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Was it Laurie Beckelman's first day? I think it was her first day.

One of our friends was Joan Shepherd who was a reporter at the *[New York] Daily News*. She had an exclusive to cover our sit-in and she—but she was mindful of her sources and she wanted to be a player, too, so she warned the Landmarks Commission that we were coming. But the fortunate thing is they didn't really believe her. We went up and we began our sit-in and before *The Daily News* reporter could get any pictures, Laurie had already vacated the hearing room but we had all of our young people held up these placards that had X on them from Malcolm X and I don't remember what the others said, but we got some press.

Well, then a miracle happened, a miracle of preservation and I got to examine how costly it can be to be a preservationist. How costly it can be to be courageous and forthright and to do the right thing. That miracle was Ruth [W.] Messinger the borough president. She determined that there was some arcane element of the law that said that if this city money was going to be used to destroy the Audubon that the borough president of Manhattan had a final say on approving the money. She said that she would withhold the money until some preservation component could be devised for the Audubon.

Oh my god, overnight she was so roundly denounced by every editorial board in the city, every one. The really terrible thing was, you see, is because historic preservation was, and to some degree still is, something so obtuse for most African Americans, there weren't any great black leaders coming out in Ruth Messinger's defense saying, "Well, wait a minute, this is our history,

this is our culture that you're trying to destroy." Also, Columbia had been very clever in buying off everybody who might have liked to come out denouncing the project. They had given Malcolm X's widow some kind of appointment and sent her on some trip some place or another, So she was all down with the project and said that she had been told that the building was beyond repair. Max Bond, he was getting the job to design the new building so he was—

Anyhow, any one African American we would have liked—oh, another person who had already been co-opted was David Dinkins. I remember I tried to ambush him at some meeting at the Hispanic Society [of America] in Harlem and I said, "Can you help us with the Audubon?" And he said, "Help you?" He said, "They're going to make it a biotech research lab." I said, "But can you help us to preserve it?" I said, "It's an important African American landmark." And he said, "All the landmarks are important." And I said, "But this one is particularly important for African American history." Anyhow, so that led to nothing. Recently, Dinkins said in an interview how he thinks that gentrification in Harlem is fine. So one can see how useless Harlem leaders are, once they moved, just off Park Avenue.

Ruth Messinger, she really—it's astonishing, I think that that was the beginning of her undoing and how it is that David Dinkins treated her so shabbily when she, easily, after his first term, could have run and beat him, but didn't. Then he got defeated by [Rudolph] Giuliani. Then when she ran after Giuliani, his support of her was lukewarm at best. It was, eh, horrible, horrible.

She can't be praised highly enough for what she did. What she did end up doing then was getting most of the façade preserved, three quarters of the lobby preserved, and a few feet more than half

of the room where Malcolm X was killed preserved, as well as there was some art, you know, a wonderful statue of Malcolm X and a mural about his life in the room where he was killed, these etched glass doorways that symbolically are supposed to refer to him.

Initially, I was very dogmatic and outraged and I was quoted in various papers saying that, “This is a travesty that it would be better for them to destroy everything than to save a few relic-like fragments of this building.” I said, “You wouldn’t take just a stage from Ford’s Theater or you wouldn’t save just a part of the Dallas [Texas School] Book Depository or a portion of the Lorraine Motel, you would save it all.”

Of course, later, I had to admit my error and to say how there couldn’t be no better indictment of the people who destroyed the Audubon than for someone to come to the Audubon to see the beautiful terracotta façade, see the beautiful plasterwork in the lobby—the very plasterwork, of which it was said that it was impossible for it to be saved—and then to go around to where the theater was, this enormous theater, and to see a parking lot. A parking lot that could be put any old where. It could have been put underground! A parking lot. The Audubon was destroyed for a parking lot. That was a valuable lesson to realize that something is something versus nothing.

Q: How did this experience inform you later when the Renaissance [Casino and] Ballroom was being fought over from all these sides?

Adams: Well, you would have liked to have thought that it would have helped to inform me. But it didn’t really because the same difficulty that I had before persisted. I might show a photograph

of myself out picketing in front of the Renaissance on Facebook and have, you know, a dozen likes and people say, oh, well done or whatever. But the business of getting people to join you in protest that's something else altogether different.

So it did inform me from the standpoint that in that case I didn't even care if I got anybody else to join me. I just thought okay, well, I'm going to picket at the Renaissance until they tear it down and try to get as much press, as much negative press, for the Abyssinian [Baptist] Church as I can. So I did that, and had some success but the building is gone.

Then there was this horrible abortive thing like the guy who just became the new state senator for Harlem, Brian Benjamin, he was, at that point, the head of the Land Use Committee of [Manhattan] Community Board 10. He and this other guy who I had been working with, they engineered what they said was going to be a meeting of the developer and the community and we were going to come up with this wonderful compromise.

It took a long time to realize that what they thought was an adequate compromise was to take some diamond shaped bricks and put them in panels that were vaguely reminiscent of panels that have been on the Renaissance, but they weren't even Hispano-Moresque or Majolica tiles that had been there. It was the most cynical kind of gesture and yet, they called this a reasonable compromise. I just thought, oh, golly, I've been hoodwinked again, wasting a lot of time pursuing something, which is nothing—nothing. So that was bitter, getting arrested. For a long time, I was hopeful that I would be able to successfully sue the City.

Q: For the arrest?

Adams: For the arrest, because, from my perspective, all I was doing was expressing my first amendment rights and going there and protesting. I was arrested, held in jail for like, I don't know, what was it, two-and-a-half hours, three to four hours, something like that. Arrested but not for not doing anything illegal. The thing that seemed to me to underscore all of that was the fact that that was in—when? I believe that was in late October and I continued to picket their every Sunday until they demolished the Audubon. They demolished the Audubon on—

Q: The Renaissance or the Audubon?

Adams: I'm sorry the Renaissance. They demolished the Renaissance on the I believe it was the Friday before Easter, Good Friday, and I picketed on Easter and then on the Sunday after Easter. Twice after my arrest that first time, the police did come and I chatted with them there but they went away and I was never arrested again. So if—but I wasn't doing anything differently from what I had done that very first Sunday. So if it was wrong then and worthy of my being arrested then I should have been arrested dozens of times. But instead, of course, that initial arrest for disorderly conduct, they dismissed it. Then why was I not entitled to something? That's pretty horrible.

But it's always a surprise to learn how the world you were taught to believe existed, the degree to which it doesn't exist. Now that said, I'm not so cynical to say fairness doesn't exist at all and good triumphing over evil doesn't exist. But *[laughs]* to coin a phrase as the president said,

“This system is rigged.” The courts are predisposed to accept the lame explanation of authority irrespective of evidence, and that’s whether you’ve got a videotape of someone in a chokehold by the police who dies before your eyes or if you are arrested for doing nothing other than expressing your first amendment rights. It’s rigged.

Realizing that makes it easier to appreciate why it is so hard to motivate and interest and involve people who in other ways, whether it’s their encounters with the school system or the police in other ways or government in other ways, why they are so disheartened and disillusioned and dispirited to a point where they feel like whatever it is that you are trying to do that there is no point in doing it because the system is rigged.

Many people came—many people passing me by the thing that I would chant when I was at the Renaissance was, “Save Harlem now.” Many people would say to me as I chanted they would say, “You’re too late.” In a way I find it hard to disagree with them. When you’re talking about black Harlem, when you’re talking about buildings that represent Harlem’s black heritage in some unique way, be they churches or former nightclubs and former bars, those are being swept away at such a startling rate. Just—there’s not a church in Harlem that’s safe from becoming a luxury condo that has a little obscure place in the corner for the church. The odd thing about that is that the reality of the economics of America, the disparate wealth of whites versus blacks, means that in a neighborhood with a medium income of \$37,000, these new buildings with \$3,000 a month studio apartments are going to primarily go to white people and that those churches are simply escalating the rapidity with which blacks will be displaced and overwhelmed by whites living at market rate in buildings that they can’t afford to live in.

You can easily appreciate that being offered several million dollars and a new place to worship, that these dying tiny, elderly congregations would imagine that this is the hand of god interceding on their behalf and that they are going to be able to use this opportunity to race back to life. But no, they're just prolonging the inevitable and destroying the building that manifests who they are in the process. So that when they go, they'll go without a trace that they were ever even here because that church space is destined to become, I don't know, a community room or an art gallery, or something, and they'll be gone.

That's why all this frenzy around developers calling Harlem south of 125th Street SoHa doesn't bother me at all because it's only symptomatic of something far worse, which is the gentrification that is displacing black people in Harlem. I used to, you know think because of all of this indoctrination of what it is to be an American, I used to think that it was wrong to expect that Harlem should remain a largely black community. But then, of course, I realized that all of the efforts to make Harlem into a largely white community have not happened in some organic accidental spontaneous way. That these have been conscious efforts and stratagems of city government working with commercial interests, that neither the commercial interests nor the city government are especially antagonistic towards black people. But, they're simply aware of the reality that black people have less money. What they want is to make the most money possible; not a living wage, the most money possible.

One of the funny things that happened after 2008 is that before 2008 there had been all of this feverish real estate speculation in Harlem. There were all sorts of new condominium buildings

built. When the crash occurred in 2008, the [New York] City Council had this great idea. Many of these condominium buildings in Harlem and other neighborhoods were incomplete and completely empty. They thought well, let's go to the owners and buy them and make them into affordable housing, for which there is this tremendous demand. Before they could even organize such a scheme that they were just turned down left and right because the owners of those properties did not want to just recover whatever they had invested or some modest profit, they wanted to make the most that they could possibly make.

That is what historic preservation is up against in America. What's really daunting for me is that so often people call themselves preservationists today across the country, they just seem like they're developers of nostalgia or something like that. The woman who is the head of the National Trust [for Historic Preservation], she's got this bizarre notion, that she is publicized far and wide, that the number of house museums in America is unsustainable and moreover new house museums—the notion of new house museums in America, is a completely faulty one.

Q: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'd like to illustrate some of these points with something specific. I think if you provide the same context for the Renaissance project that you did for the Audubon Ballroom that whole narrative leading up to how you got to that point where you were protesting the demolition before it took place, it will illustrate some of these points pretty specifically. So, give me some background on—

Adams: I think I will. I'm getting there.



Q: Sure.

Adams: The reason why I bring up this woman at the National Trust is because of a house that's not in New York City but that's in New York State, the Villa Lewaro in Irvington, New York. This is a house that was built by Madam C. J. Walker as her country house on four little acres in Irvington. She had initially wanted to remodel a house in Flushing, Queens, a house called Bishop's Court and had negotiated with the estate of a Methodist bishop who owned that property, he had died, and her architect, Vertner Woodson Tandy, the second licensed black architect in the State of New York. He designed the scheme for a house there for her. But her white neighbors, her perspective white neighbors, they thought it was all—they thought that it had been all right to have an African American bishop as their neighbor but this woman who was born the daughter of slaves and who was a scrub woman at the start of her career they just couldn't see it.

When she decided to buy these four acres in Irvington, she took the precaution of having a white lawyer buy the property on her behalf and she built her house. When she died, her daughter inherited it and when her daughter died, it was sold to this fraternal organization called The Friends of the Forest [Companions of the Forest in America].

In the meantime, the house that Madam Walker had built in Harlem on 136th Street, where her architect had taken two small conventional brownstone fronted houses and combined them behind a neo-Georgian façade modeled directly after the Percy [R.] Pyne House at Park Avenue on Sixty-Eighth Street—is that the cross street I think it is? That house became a city health

clinic and then in the late '30s, was acquired by the New York Public Library and demolished and replaced by sort of an international-style library building.

I have this fantasy, because unlike so many of today's preservationists who think that replication of historic buildings is of no value and that it's actually detrimental, I point to the rebuilding of Campanile of San Marco in Venice and the replication of the cathedral in Dresden and a host of other examples to say that, no to restore something that was, that had great value or meaning to people that can be really quite impactful and positive even healing and that to keep that building, the public library, but to replicate the façade of Madam Walker's house there—that that would be so neat for our kids I think who go to the library.

Anyhow, so that's my fantasy for 136th Street but for Madam Walker's house in Irvington, its problem is that as a house in America created for an African American in a white world and perhaps in one of the richest community of some of the richest whites in America, that compared to the Rockefeller estate, Kykuit or compared to Jay [Jason] Gould's estate, Lyndhurst, or to the Astor estate, Ferncliff [Estate], it's comparatively modest.

As I know from taken tours sponsored by the Cooper Hewitt [Smithsonian Design] Museum there, for African Americans who realized that when it was completed in 1917 that the average wage for a black New Yorker was eight hundred dollars per year and that there were only—that in all of New York in 1940, there were only—in all of New York City, all five boroughs, there was just four hundred people who owned the place where they lived. For African Americans, that house is as unlikely as if it were [Palace of] Versailles. But the beauty of making it a house

museum is that even though it had custom made Italian Renaissance style furniture produced by the Berkey & Gay [Furniture] Company in Grand Rapids and that despite that, that everything there—in terms of the white world—is ordinary enough that it could easily be replicated and all put back together again. Both with actual things that were there and things that are virtually identical to things that were there.

Then The National Trust they say, “Well, there’s no place for parking.” Well, you could park at Lyndhurst and you could have a shuttle bus that would bring people to Villa Lewaro. On and on and on. Anyhow they say, “You know, well, house museums aren’t sustainable.” This is not just any old house museum. This is not just any old house. This is a unique house in all of America. A black woman who just missed being born a slave by two years, whose parents were slaves, who was married and widowed by the time she was—with a child by the time she was in her early twenties, and who was exhausted from working as a washer woman by the end of her twenties. She became the first African American woman who was a self-made millionaire. Just for an African American—.

That’s the thing, when I look at Harlem, all the time it’s just the thing I marvel at. Here you’ve got this place where at its peak in the mid-‘40s probably had around five hundred thousand people living there. The largest African American settlement in the world. So many people who were brilliant and talented beyond belief, people whose parents or whose grandparents were slaves, who themselves had had the experiences working as share croppers in some cotton patch, who went from the cotton field to Yale [University] or Harvard [University] or Columbia and became doctors and lawyers and artists, I mean, it’s just—it’s a miracle.

It is a miracle which should be especially celebrated by all Americans because not only is it the redemptive answer to the evil of slavery out of which this country was born and flourished, but it is the redemptive promise that that can be done away with and that the people who were slaves can become anything. That, of course, is the thing that makes one so frustrated and cross with oppression and with racism and with white supremacy is that when you look at the improbability of the greatest tennis player in America being an African American, or the greatest golfer in America being an African American, you say, “Well, without oppression it could be that the person who will cure cancer, they’re just waiting for an opportunity to learn enough to cure cancer. How can we throw away such potential in our country?”

That’s just—it kills one all the time. The worse sort of racism that exists today is the racism in which one is not just ignored but dismissed. That is how it is that you happen to have a place called Harlem where only 3.6 percent of the buildings are protected by landmarking versus two thirds of the buildings in Greenwich Village versus about half of the buildings on the Upper West Side. The Landmarks Preservation Commission, they have these rules and they have this funding and small staff and commissioners who are not paid, that their rules that identify that they will designate X number of individual buildings in a given year and X number of historic districts in a given year guarantee that a Harlem will never be able to catch up with a Park Slope or Greenwich Village. How?

That’s just out and out racism. You can’t call it anything else. How can the city sanction such a disparity?

Q: I'd love to add when you were talking about the house, the first self-made millionaire black woman, there is highly suspect timing in that now we have all the Colonial Williamsburg's we could possibly handle, now there are too many house museums.

Adams: Oh, well, you see—I encountered this.

Q: *[Laughs]*

Adams: In the mid-'90s, I went to The National Trust annual convention and their theme that year was cultural diversity. To prove that they were culturally diverse, they established a scholarship program and who were the beneficiaries? Well, all these black people who were enrolled with David Patterson's Save Harlem, which never accomplished a single thing in Harlem except they did put up a couple of signs explaining some historic districts. But other than that, they never accomplished anything.

Anyhow their membership almost enmass seemed to come down to Miami Beach where this cultural adversity themed National Trust convention was being held. Now I have to say, it was extraordinary. They did have wonderful workshops with incredible people saying all kinds of marvelous stuff about black history, which I had never heard of before. But the tragedy was that there weren't very many people at those workshops and the people who were there were all black people.

Then they were holding their cultural diversity themed National Trust meeting in Miami Beach where the NAACP had instituted a boycott because the mayor of Miami Beach did not receive Nelson [R.] Mandela when he had come to visit after apartheid was over. Then, they decided the opening night of this cultural adversity themed National Trust meeting would be on Yom Kippur I think it was. It just the theme it's already out.

They had their newly selected director, in the form of Richard Moe. So I go up to Mr. Moe and I said, "Mr. Moe, because—" As it turned out the Villa Lewaro at that time was for sale. And so I go up to Mr. Moe and I said, "Mr. Moe, the Villa Lewaro, Madam C. J. Walker's country house at Irvington, New York for sale. Could not the Trust buy it and keep it safe until a suitable buyer could be found the same way you did with the Octagon House [Armour-Stiner House] nearby?" Mr. Moe very sanctimoniously says back to me, he says, "Well, I intend during my tenure to take the Trust out of the business of simply being interested in the heritage and culture of the rich." So I said back to Mr. Moe, I said, "Well, Mr. Mo, I think that's a wonderful idea of yours, I really do. But before you do that, could you not acquire at least one property that did not represent the heritage and culture of rich, white, Protestant men?"

Then I found his wife and I start chatting with his wife and I was talking to her. I said, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if the Trust could buy this house?" And she said, "Oh, yes, yes, yes." And then later he came to me and he said, "When you spoke to my wife, she didn't realize that you were a journalist and that you were planning to write something for *New York Newsday* and so this is terribly underhanded and we think that you shouldn't quote her."

The story never did happen and when I heard that Moe was retiring I thought, oh, halleluiah. Now a person even worse than Moe! She doesn't even think that—and, worse, she then went to my friend, A'Lelia Bundles, and told her this crap. A'Lelia Bundles, the great, great granddaughter of Madam Walker, she then buys this crap that the Villa Lewaro should become a conference center or a fitness center or something else that can be self-sustaining and generate an income. I just say, "It's mad! It's nuts! You wouldn't ask that of Mount Vernon." I said, "And Mount Vernon has a—" So then she says, "Well, Mount Vernon has an endowment of sixty million dollars." Or whatever it is. I said, "You don't believe that if a national campaign were mounted to save this unique house that we couldn't raise sixty million and more for the Villa Lewaro, you don't believe that? Why don't you believe that? You don't think that Oprah Winfrey and all these people would be happy to help us to raise this money? You don't think that corporations wanting to get in good with black people would say oh, well, we've got the Villa Lewaro Nikes now and you can buy them and help save the Villa Lewaro." I mean, oh, golly.

That has created what I hope is, a passing breach in my friendship with A'Lelia. But I did speak—was speaking to some woman who is a member of the National Trust and I was telling her what had happened and she and A'Lelia I guess have some connection through the National Archives, they're both on the board there and she seemed to think that she could talk A'Lelia around. I don't know.

Back a hundred years ago, Madam C. J. Walker and others were successful in their effort to raise money to buy Frederick Douglas' house and to make that into a house museum. That's the value of history. If those damn people with so much less and with so many more obstacles could do

that then, how can we dare to set limits for ourselves today of what we can do with something that is unique? It's the ultimate of what there is representing black people in America. That's it. So that's too bad.

Q: I do have to bring it back to New York City.

Adams: Yes.

Q: That was a remarkable story.

Adams: Back in New York *[laughing]*. Meanwhile, back in New York, one of the most perverse episodes of my preservation interest in New York was having been considered at the beginning of the [Michael R.] Bloomberg administration as a potential member of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I had tried to go to work for the Landmarks Commission when I first came here; was unsuccessful. Then was caught up at the height of my Audubon activities and told that there was a job waiting there for me. But, I realized two things that, you know, the old saying of black people, last hired first fired. But then I also realized that in taking such a job it would effectively silence me from being critical about the city's involvement with the destruction of the Audubon. So, I did not take up that offer or entertain that offer.

But when I got this call saying that they wanted to interview me, that there was some guy and that there was this group that wanted to interview me on behalf of Bloomberg, that the head of



this group was some guy named [Arthur L.] Liman who had formerly been the head of the Liman Commission that had something to do with Watergate I think.

I went to that meeting and Mr. Liman was not there. Instead, he was hooked in on a telephone connection. As the meeting progressed, he asked me, he said, “Well, Mr. Adams, I appreciate your interest in historic preservation but what about those times when you as a city commissioner will be dealing with a project where the preservation outcome and the—or the preservation goals and outcome and the goals of economic development and jobs are in conflict?”

I said, “Oh, well, Mr. Liman, from my experience, there are very, very few instances where that’s so.” And he said, “Oh, yes, I know that. I know that’s true. But what about those when it is?” I said oh. I said, “Well, before meeting with you this afternoon, I decided it might be a good idea for me to review the law.” So I did that. When I was in the historic preservation program at Columbia, we had been made to examine the law and its components. I said, “The thing that always struck me about the law was its flexibility. I love that part when it says, any improvement exhibiting special character and/or architectural, historic, or cultural significance.” I said, “But, you know, in reviewing the law before meeting with you, I did not see anything anywhere that talked about any considerations to do with jobs or economic development or anything other than preserving historic resources and therefore that would be what I would have to be guided by as a commissioner, would be the Landmarks Preservation Law.”

Well, I knew that was the wrong answer. But that was the only answer that one should give. So, I didn't get on the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Actually I think it probably had more to do with the fact that I hadn't filed my income taxes—

Q: *[Laughs]*

Adams: —in a decade because I had not earned enough money to file any income taxes.

Q: Can I ask you about you have done some work supporting Community Board 10 in lobbying the Landmarks Preservation Commission to save certain sites on emergency basis and also, a little more recently like a comprehensive plan.

Adams: Oh, yes. The thing of it is that was so funny is those buildings on an emergent basis that was in part prompted by—I was profiled by Adam Gopnik for *The New Yorker* just before my Harlem book came out. He and everyone they were always bugging the hell out of me. They were saying, “Well, you know, why are you doing this alone, why aren't you involving more people?”

I went to the Community Board 10 and I took Adam with me I think a couple of times and it just happened that the building that became the [Upper Manhattan] Empowerment Zone building, built by the Harlem Board of Trade [The Greater Harlem Chamber Commerce], it was under threat. The building which—where Chez Lucienne restaurant is today—that had in it this marvelous bar, which was the oldest bar in continual use in Harlem and is the subject of

photograph from 1920 called—by Otis—a photograph by Otis [C.] Butler called *Last Call* [sic] from 1920 that shows people standing around this space getting their last drink before the Volstead Act [National Prohibition Act] takes effect. That place with its mahogany framed cabinets with cut glass panels and animal head trophies, photographs of boxers and pin-up girls from the 1930s and '40s and '20s. That was all there in the building, which had been built—I mean in a building, which had also housed upstairs the Harlem branch of the American Communist Party. That was under threat and the Renaissance was under threat.

I came up with this list of, I don't know was it a dozen buildings? Whatever the number, I came up with this number. It certainly wasn't more than a dozen buildings and that was published in *The Times* I think, that list of buildings. That I got the community board to vote on an emergency—I mean to vote that they should—that these buildings should be designated on an emergency basis. It got in the paper and that was it [*snaps fingers*]. Nothing happened. Nothing happened.

Worse than nothing happening [*laughs*], is that just a couple of years later the same community board went down en mass to the Landmarks Preservation Commission taking with them former Mayor Dinkins, former Parks Commission Gordon—not Gordon Parks, Gordon Davis, then Borough President C. Virginia Fields, Scott [M.] Stringer. David Dinkins is the saddest one because his wedding ceremony—his wedding breakfast was held at the Renaissance. They all went down to plead with the commission to de-calendar the Renaissance because, as they said, their plan was to preserve it but that landmarking it would be too much of an impediment and

that one of the things they intended to do was to demolish the theater but retain the theater façade and build a new building behind the theater portion.

Well, I knew nothing about this so I wasn't there. The commission had the audacity to say, "Oh, no one testified against doing this so we de-calendared it." But then, as fate would have it, there was a fire. So the theater burned up. Then it didn't really matter to me so much whether they saved the theater. I learned that it had already been altered in the '70s when the Renaissance Theater had become the headquarters for the—what was it called? For the [Charles] Gilpin Players and the New Lafayette Theater Project, because that was another lost battle, the Lafayette [Theatre]. This theater, which was a beautiful building that had become a church, and the church decided to jackhammer off the façade. Then after that, decided that one of the two pavilions that had been on either side of the theater, one of which they had already demolished for a parking lot, but they were going to demolish the second pavilion, which had been the Connie's Inn nightclub and then The Ubangi Club nightclub they knocked that down.

So because of the fire, because of the alteration in the 1970s of the theater the idea that they would build something behind that didn't bother me. But they never fulfilled that promise and the commission in agreeing to de-calendar it should have least gotten a commitment in writing for them to do what they said they were going to do, but they didn't.

Q: Who convinced them of that?

Adams: Hmm?

Q: Who convinced them that landmarking would be an impediment to saving the façade? Like who rallied that group together and who changed the community board's mind on it?

Adams: Well, the thing of it is they must have had some experience. People who live in Harlem who deal with old buildings they have had some experience of dealing with landmarking and the Landmarks Commission. What they've had very, very little experience with is utilizing the investment tax credit. I mean it's shameful how little of that occurs in Harlem. So that the instances in which it has can be counted, I believe, on the fingers of one hand.

Two of those happened at the behest of one of the most politically powerful and connected people there was, Bill [William] Lynch [Jr.]—the Harlem king-maker—he, on behalf of two not-for-profits, the Apollo Theater and the African American league of the NBA [National Basketball Association]. Now get this, not-for-profits that don't even pay taxes, he managed to syndicate their tax credit and sell it so that they can benefit from being landmarked. Then, the unfortunate unintended consequence that often occurs is that at the NBA building, which is best known today as being the place where the Red Rooster restaurant is located and the NBA has sold it. The NBA building started out being built as a deluxe grocery store called Park & Tilford. It was throughout the city and, you know, they were sort of like the Dean & DeLuca of their day. It was a very nice neoclassical building, brick with these marble columns and piers on the first floor.

Well, in the 1930s, that building was acquired by the United Mutual Life Insurance Company, this pioneering African American life insurance company, which was the largest black-owned life insurance company in America when they were sold to some big firm in the 1970s. United Mutual had hired this guy named John Louis Wilson [Jr.], who liked to call himself the first black graduate of the School of Architecture at Columbia. But that was not entirely so.

What happened was that there had been a couple of African Americans who had enrolled in the School of Architecture at Columbia and who dropped out and never finished. Then Wilson enrolled but before he could finish, he had to withdraw to go to work to make enough money to complete his studies at Columbia. In the interim, this guy from Washington named Huillard Robertson [*phonetic*] came to Columbia, enrolled, and finished before Wilson had a chance to. For like the next fifty years these two took turns fighting saying that they each were the first black graduate of the School of Architecture at Columbia. But by the time I met Wilson he said—and, you know, he was like ninety-two or ninety-one—he said, “But he’s dead. So I’m the first black graduate now.”

Q: [*Laughs*].

Adams: This work that he had done streamlining the building in the 1930s, including taking those ionic columns and piers and encasing them in brick so that the building didn’t seem like this old fashioned neoclassical building the State Historic Preservation Office not knowing that that had been done in the 1930s and by a black architect they then okayed it all being undone, which they would have done if they had known that John Louis Wilson had done this. There’s

not a building left [*laughs*] in Harlem that is an example of John Louis Wilson. Anyhow, so much for being the first black graduate of the School of Architecture at Columbia.

What does survive that he designed is that he was working for the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation] in the '30s and this park in like Ninety-Sixth Street or somewhere around there he designed this playhouse, the comfort station—accommodation comfort station playhouse thing. It's got this art deco railing with these scrolls and the scrolls form these stylized monkeys.

One of the few sort of erroneous things in the magnificent biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker: [Robert Moses and the Fall of New York]*, is meant to be an indictment of Moses and an indication of his racism that he had this play station in Harlem with these monkey railings—because that's what Moses supposedly thought of black people. But, in point of fact, it wasn't in a black neighborhood it was Ninety-Sixth Street.

And you see, when I—when Wilson was showing me his drawings, he had a drawing for this. He was very proud of this railing. He thought it was elegant and sophisticated and so did I. Because he said to me that he worked for the Parks Department and worked in Central Park, I thought he had said to me that that had been designed for the Central Park Zoo. So I went to Central Park Zoo looking for it and I couldn't find it.

It was just by chance that I'm looking on Facebook and there's a picture of it and there someone below the picture has put this quote from *The Power Broker* saying this thing about the racism of

Robert Moses. I say, “But that—Ninety-Sixth Street is not Harlem.” I said, “The black children who would have seen that in the 1930s would have been few and far between and moreover, this was designed by a black man!”

The great thing is I found out where this was because I thought—I had begun to think that it had never been built. But he assured me that it had been built. But I bet that’s not landmarked either.

Anyhow, the commission and their regard of Harlem has been just awful. Many African American political figures and leaders, like many white leaders all over the country, have long held this erroneous notion that historic preservation is diametrically opposed to economic development and jobs. Why is that, because as I so often say, well, in New York or in Paris or in Washington, look at all the places that have the most economic development and you will find that by in large they’re the places that have the most preservation. So how do you—and conversely, Harlem has virtually no historic preservation and has virtually no economic development. How do you correlate these two things? How? Where do you come up with this correlation, it’s just nutty?

Be that as it may, that notion is still—it’s so entrenched, it’s so dearly held by people. Now, you realize that without them even thinking about it or expressing it to themselves or expressing it out loud that probably what they’re really—people are really thinking there are opportunities to share the wealth and let contracts with their friends who don’t know anything about historic preservation and don’t deal with preservation components to projects. I just say they should get some new friends *[laughs]*. Instead of penalizing us, they should just get some new friends.



Being aware that that was the attitude of politicians, that that was the attitude of black business people, that that was the attitude of black churches, who have met and they've said in the past in their various meetings—they're these different groups made up of black churches—they've said, "We aren't going to allow those godless, atheistic Jews downtown dictate to us what we can do with our churches."

All of that taken together, the commission, they're very weary of doing anything in Harlem, because they don't want to get beat up on. But to me that's just dereliction of duty. I don't care. They got beat up on by the theater owners and yet they designated the theaters. The combination of more white residence and of—who have a greater predisposition towards the acceptance and acknowledgment of historic preservation—and the increased loss where someplace so universally exemplary of everything that a landmark is, like the Lenox Lounge both in terms of its distinctive style as well as its history of associations with people, to see that destroyed has caused more and more people to become aware of the value of preservation.

Now how does this group that I helped to form, Save Harlem Now, How do they reach out and get those people to meetings and a part of a membership that can be harnessed to oppose yet more destruction? I don't know. But I think that opportunity is ripe now because people are more frustrated with what they see happening there.

But the commission, as I say, they continue to be terrible. The preservation groups less so. I think that it can rightfully be said that had it not been for the Historic Districts Council, that the

Addisleigh Park Historic District in St. Alban, Queens, which sort of became a suburban Sugar Hill after the Second World War, or the small and inadequate but nonetheless improbable Grand Concourse Historic District, neither of those would exist. Nor, for that matter, probably would the extension of the Mount Morris Park Historic District and therein leads one to another indictment of the commission.

When the Mount Morris Park Historic District was designated back in the early '70s, although people in the community were mostly concerned with brownstone row houses and not so concerned with apartment buildings, and although the people who were the most passionately concerned lived on or near Mount Morris Park West, they nevertheless were aware enough that they asked that the entire parameter of the park be designated and that an area going all the way over to Seventh Avenue be designated.

What the commission said to them, they said, "Oh, don't worry this is just the beginning, we'll be back." And the commission was back forty-four years later by which time untold loss had occurred. Of course keeping that in mind, I kept saying—stressing, well, you know, if it takes forty-four years for them to come back that's going to be a disaster we need to get more. The community did ask for more but yet again what we sought was still so much smaller than what was solved. They've been—what was given was so much smaller than what was solved.

Q: Okay.

Adams: Then, this whole thing of race and class is so phony. I worked for State Senator Bill Perkins. But I first became acquainted with him—for four-and-a-half years—when I first became acquainted with him when he was the Harlem city council member and we forged a relationship and that was largely thanks to my friend, Carolyn Cassady Kent, who was the founder of the Landmarks Committee of [Manhattan] Community Board 9. Carolyn was educated at Sarah Lawrence [College] and Columbia and she had that wonderful classic patrician accent like Jane Hathaway, Mr. Drysdale's secretary in the *Beverly Hillbillies*. Just, you know, you'd think she was straight out of casting for a Vassar [College] professor of 1940.

But the thing I loved about Carol—or one of the things I loved about Carolyn is that that accent notwithstanding that she never condescended to people or tried to talk down to people or tried to simplified things because she thought, “Well, people, they won't understand this.” She always was able to communicate what she was trying to convey to people. Unlike me, she was an idealist and always expected and fought for what was right. She always believed in the process and thought that one should cross every T and dot every I so as not to have that used as an excuse for not getting what you were going after.

All these things were valuable things for me to learn. But the frustrating part of her being one's ally was that lots of times being told to dot every I and cross every T you were just being sent on a fool's errand to waste your time or worse to tire you out so you'd just go away. So, I hate being involved in those fool's errands and I try to avoid it when possible.

Q: I hate to say it but we have been at it for two-and-a-half hours. We should probably wrap up soon.

Adams: Oh, no!

Q: Is there anything I should have asked you or that we need to get in our last five or ten minutes?

Adams: Well, I just want to emphasize. Oh [*taps table*]. Bill Perkins he has been very good on historic preservation but even he—you know, there are no perfect people. There is no perfection in life. But even he, you know he was the one who was educated on scholarships through his mother's intervention at Collegiate [Preparatory School] and Brown [University] and yet he wants to be a champion of the black every man and he definitely wants to avoid elitism or snobbery and is, indeed, a kind of reverse snob in terms of denouncing the black bourgeoisie, which definitely can be problematic.

But, the reality is that all of this protest to the contrary, at this point there is no one more bourgeoisie than he and his family. It's kind of ludicrous argument that he makes so that he has said to me many when we were talking about trying to help to preserve the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. He said, "Well, you know, to me the best thing would be to take that building and to make it all into affordable housing." But I said, "But that's not going to happen and so it should be preserved as something beautiful to inspire everybody, anybody, because you don't

know what person in Harlem will see that and will decide they want to be an architecture or an architectural historian or whatever.”

And he said, “Well, we don’t need more people like that, we need more affordable housing.”

And I said, “Yes, we need more affordable housing but you are like Booker T. Washington saying that the most fit destiny for African Americans is to be field hands and laborers.” Field hands and laborers have their place but we need everything. We don’t need just housing. Man doth not live by bread alone. We need everything. He has often denounced me saying things like, well, you know, you just want to take things back the way they were when this was a white community and you even want the white people back. I said, “No, I don’t want the white people back necessarily.” I said, “But I do believe that it was beautiful, it was clean, it was exceptional, and that people who live here now they deserve that too. Why not? Why don’t we deserve that too?”

I guess I say this to say that I have done combat with everyone there is in terms of preservation, including colleagues, and the worse thing about these efforts is that apart from all of the loss is how one gets worn down and how easy it is that people with power and resources are able to manipulate and divide people who have a common cause and a purpose. That’s the really demoralizing thing is to see how there are instances where we could win if we were better united but that we’ve not yet learned to set aside our superficial differences to work for the common good.

When the City Council was introduced—Intro. 775, which I thought was a powerful message against that law or that amendment of the Landmarks law was to—would be for someone in Greenwich Village, or someone on the Upper East Side, or someone on the Upper West Side to say, hey, look, we have got many of the buildings that we want protected in our communities, and we were able to do that using a law that didn't set up any artificial time limits knowing what the politics are like out there in the world that either for historic districts or for individual landmarks. What you all are doing now is not going to hurt our communities so much as the ones that you represent. You black and brown council members who somehow think that this is going to make it easier to landmark things in your neighborhood when, point in fact, it's going to make it more difficult. So, what you are doing is taking a process, which has been unduly discriminatory in the past and making it even more discriminatory now. How are you doing this? How do you justify doing this?

Q: Can I ask you one last question?

Adams: Yes.

Q: I'm terribly sorry to wrap it up.

Adams: Okay.

Q: I've really appreciated your stories today. You must have piles of papers and research from all these years of doing this. What's your plan for preserving them? Where are they going to be archived?

Adams: I don't have any plan. Right now, they are overwhelming me and I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm trying to just get them all in order in terms of living with all of this paper and debris.

But I do have one last story I would like to tell if I may.

Q: Okay. Yes. Can you do it in five minutes? I'm so sorry to rush you.

Adams: Okay, I'm going to try my very best to.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

Adams: When the Landmarks Law was forty years old there was—I mean this, I think, sums up the difficulty I've had in being a preservationist in New York. When the Landmarks Law was forty years old, the Museum of the City of New York—where I had mounted two exhibitions, one called *Harlem Lost and Found*, based on my own book, and one called *Black Star Now*, talking about the way that African American popular culture influences fashion. The Museum of the City of New York had a symposium celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Landmarks

Law at the Museum and it was called something like *Preserving New York: The Next Forty Years*, something like that.

But, of course what I noticed right away was that of all the panels assembled that there were virtually no black or brown people. That where there were black people, the roles they had were inconsequential. For instance, Mary Schmidt Campbell who has just gone to become the head of Spelman [College] but who at that time was the head of the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU [New York University] her role was to introduce the panelists on one of the panels, that was it. This to me had a dire consequence because here we were so close to Harlem and there was no mention being made of Harlem and, at that point, ten years ago, work was going on at a fever pitch to transform Harlem. So finally, I just couldn't take it.

Then worse than that, one they had people like the historian, Robert Jackson, who was there saying things that I just thought were injurious to communities like Harlem and New York in general and just weren't true. Like he was saying the problem of New York housing was that we had all this rent regulation and if we had no rent regulation we would have an abundance of housing for every—that would be affordable for everyone. I said, “Well, what about when we had no regulation there was no abundance of housing for—“ Anyhow.

Finally, I just got up and I said, “This is wrong that you have no black people here in the audience or on the panels and it's wrong. It's like we don't exist in the city.” So Susan Henshaw Jones the then the director, she said, “Michael, just be quiet.” And I said, “I will not be silenced by your elitism and white supremacy.” The next thing I heard was, “Security!” I'm being



dragged. I thought what am I going to do now. So, then, I remembered Martin Luther King [Jr.] and so, I decided I'll just go limp.

I go limp and the next thing I know there is this young African American security guard who was trying to pick me up like a baby, all 210 pounds. I thought, oh, this is messed up. So I'm trying to kick this guy off of me until he finally says to me, he says, "Go ahead, go ahead, kick me again my black brother so I can beat you to a pulp." And I thought, oh, hell.

But then, I look and I see his boss, who is also, African American, who is also, a security guard, who is older and bigger and wiser than he, and who I befriended during these exhibitions. So, then, I was able, you know, to be all—to be—to in my bluff way to say, "Go ahead, go ahead my black brother and beat me to a pulp at the behest of the white man!" Well, anyhow, so I didn't get beaten up.

But, okay, so I thought, "Okay, this is over I won't have to deal with this again. They'll surely get the message." The fiftieth anniversary of the Landmarks Law comes along. The Museum of the City of New York is going to have a panel discussion at the American Medical Association across the street from them and I look and all of the participants are white people. All of them! I think, you know, there might have been some Asian person but in America those Asians are honorary white people.

I then called Susan Henshaw Jones' office. I said, "May I please speak to Susan." And they said, "Oh, she's not here." And I said, "Well, tell her I'm very concerned about this panel." And they

said, “Okay.” So, then, I called her again, “She’s not here.” So, then, I called the deputy director, “She’s not here.” So, then, I sent an email and I said, “You don’t have any people of color as part of your symposium and if you don’t get some between now and tomorrow I am going to send out a press release and announce that I’m going to be picketing your symposium.”

So, Bob Stern was on the panel, like he was on the panel before. This friend of mine in his office sent me an email and he says, by now you probably know that Collette—Claudette, whatever her name is—from Brooklyn that she’s on one of the panelists. Well, she was on the panels and she wasn’t especially articulate but she was the best thing they had on the panels. Why? Because she was seated right next to the head of the New York Real Estate Board who references this ridiculous specious study they’ve done that says, “Have you noticed how in historic districts there tend to be the least amount of affordable housing in the city?”

So I said, “Oh, have you noticed that the richest neighborhoods get the most historic preservation the earliest and how before they were historic districts they had no affordable housing either.” He says this, and so she is able to say, “Well, in the historic district that I’m a part of in Brooklyn we just were able to use the investment tax credit, the federal investment tax credit, to renovate two buildings, which are one hundred percent affordable housing, both of them.”

Now, you would have thought that Susan Henshaw Jones or somebody would have called or written me a note and thanked me, but no! Moreover, that day, when I arrived for the symposium, I was stopped by a police officer and a plains clothed police officer saying to me, “We understand that you don’t have a ticket for tonight’s event so we won’t be able to allow you

to go in.” And I said, “Really!” I said, “Well, Yuien Chin, from the [Hamilton Heights]-West Harlem [Community] Preservation Organization, she bought four tickets and said that I could use all of them.”

I got in. But I’m telling you the arrogance and the dismissal of people of color in New York City, you know, the greatest, most liberal city in the nation, persists and it should not, because I’m just trying to—it’s like—in a nutshell, it’s like the whole thing that people say created Donald John Trump. They say that working class whites felt alienated because their issues were not being addressed in favor of identity politics. That just boggles my mind.

Q: Yes.

Adams: When you’re talking about creating a \$15 minimum wage, is that identity politics? Is that not for anybody who needs \$15 an hour minimum wage? When you’re talking about having free community colleges, is that identity politics? But, even when you were talking about identity politics, what do black people, what do women, what do gay people want? We want what you have! We don’t want more than you have but we want a job, we want a good place to live, everything that you want we want, and should we not be entitled to that? And if we get it, will it not be more likely that you will have it too? But, no, it’s like there’s an idea that if you have what we have it will somehow be taken away from us in order for us to get it.

Q: I’m so sorry I have to end it there.

Adams: Okay.

Q: I screwed up and scheduled a conference call for four-fifteen, which I have missed.

Adams: Oh, no, no, no. Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: No, it's really not your fault it's my fault. But I do have to stop now so I can call them back.  
But thank you so, much for coming in.

Adams: You're so welcome.

Q: I'm so sorry to hurry you out at this time.

Adams: Oh, no, no, no.

Q: Thank you for your stories. What we'll do next is we'll make a transcript of this whole thing—

Adams: Okay.

Q: —and we'll mail it to you.

Adams: Great.

Q: So, you'll have time to if there were any dates that you misplaced or anything you want to correct on the transcript—

Adams: Oh, that will be good.

Q: —before we put it online.

Adams: Great.

Q: I really am sorry to throw you out.

Adams: Oh, no, no, no.

[END OF SESSION]