

Kelly Carroll for NYPAP

Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy

Jean Prabhu – Iron Hills Civic Association

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Kelly Carroll: This is Kelly Carroll for the New York Preservation Archive Project. I am interviewing a series of individuals and groups about their neighborhood preservation campaigns in New York City. I would like to thank the New York State Council on the Arts for making this program possible today and I will be interviewing Jean Prabhu, who will be talking about her neighborhood in Todt Hill and Dongan Hills in Staten Island, New York, and specifically about her campaign to preserve the Flagg Estate there.

So, I'm going to jump right in and say hello to Jean, and my first question for you is: when you moved to Staten Island in the '80s, can you describe the neighborhood back then, and tell me what it was like and why you were attracted to move there?

Jean Prabhu: Well, it was bucolic, it was beautiful. It was filled with—I'm an old house person—grew up in an old house in Brooklyn, my first house was an old house in Brooklyn. And I came to Todt Hill because I found a beautiful old house in Todt Hill that I could afford and I had a parking spot, so, I was happy to be here. And we had beautiful old homes. We had the JP Morgan summer house, we had the Vanderbilt summer house, we had several Ernest Flagg homes, we had Aymar Embury houses it...it was really very beautiful. I felt privileged to live here. And, of course, there was the Saint Charles Seminary, which is the Ernest Flagg Estate, which is a spectacular estate, and still has many of the characteristics of an estate.

Kelly Carroll: Right.

Jean Prabhu: So that made me want to be here.

Kelly Carroll: Right, and so the Saint Charles Seminary took over what was the Ernest Flagg estate after his death, I believe in 1947, and had been there for a number of years and it's still owned by the Catholic Church.

Jean Prabhu: The Scalabrinian Order.

Kelly Carroll: Right, and they were originally to provide outreach to Italian Americans. What was it like having that estate or that seminary within walking distance to your home? Was that something that you would visit a lot, or on a daily basis? Can you describe what it was like, especially in Staten Island to have that space accessible so close to your home?

Jean Prabhu: It was a privilege, and I did walk the seminary a lot, or the Flagg estate a lot—almost daily—and, at the time I first moved here, I had young children and they had catering events at the mansion, at the Ernest Flagg mansion and even though the nuns didn't speak English, and my daughter didn't speak their language, she was about maybe 10 or 12, she would go over and peel potatoes for the banquet and I would go and say hello to them in the way that I could, and I enjoyed a lot of meetings there. I enjoyed banquets there, and they had Sunday services there and holiday services there. The

community supported the estate. Whatever we were asked to do we did it and we enjoyed it, it was a wonderful privilege to have it within walking distance of my home.

We don't have sidewalks so it's really wonderful to have a peaceful place to walk where you don't have to be quite as aware of the cars coming, and it was just a peaceful beautiful place to think and to be.

Kelly Carroll: Right, I'm so glad you mentioned that there's no sidewalks in your community because out of the five boroughs Staten Island is definitely the most suburban, and urban amenities like sidewalks that we're used to in Brooklyn or Manhattan or Queens or the Bronx aren't necessarily going to be there for you in Staten Island. So, on the Flagg Estate grounds, the situation of the house overlooks the Raritan Bay, you can look out on the ocean and having this pedestrian experience in this part of Staten Island is a unique one. So, I understand that about a little over 10 years ago there was a development proposal that would have introduced a driveway and other things to this site, do you mind speaking a little bit about what happened 10 years ago with the first proposal?

Jean Prabhu: Sure, the first proposal was for condos and I read about it in the paper. I...people were saying, "Well, the mansion is landmarked..." I got the landmark designation documents, and I was able to see that not only was the mansion landmarked but a very substantial portion of the grounds. And that it was landmarked as a type of estate. So, it wasn't just the building, it was also the grounds, and there are outbuildings also, Ernest Flagg buildings. There's the gatehouse, and Wallcot and Bowcot, and they're all landmarked. Some years prior, before I moved here, they had developed around half of the property already, and that was an A.M. Stern designed development. I never knew the property before that existed, so I only knew it once that had been done. But I was already in love with the Ernest Flagg estate when they proposed the condos, and I just started going to community board meetings. And it was amazing to me that no one knew that the designation was as a type of estate and that some of the grounds were also landmarked.

The community board itself didn't know it, and it had been presented to them...well, they were going to take care of the mansion. I went to every meeting and I just spoke about what I could learn and that project was eventually abandoned. The condo project, he had no business being there, and definitely was not of the type of development that was suitable for this really grand estate—and not such a large one—it's only it's about eight acres. So, what's...what we have is really precious and easily lost. So, I go to all the meetings. That's what I do.

Kelly Carroll: Which is so important and a lot of a lot of people are inducted into the preservation realm because of participating at the community board level about something that is, you know, hits close to home. After you informed the community board that not only the mansion itself, but the grounds were landmarked, how did that change the conversation at the community board?

Jean Prabhu: Well, some of the members of the board approached me at other events—I'm fairly active, you know, in my community, I try to support my community—and said, "Wow, we had no idea! Now that we know, we're going to revisit this." And they did, to their credit. And I felt that they were...they wanted to hear about it. They needed to hear about it. But the research had to come from us it, you know, from someone in the community. It wasn't going to come from the developer. He was not about to tell them that the grounds were also landmarked. And he had a lot of things to say and we were always polite to one another, but he knew that my heart was in that Ernest Flagg Estate.

Kelly Carroll: So, originally the house was a very early landmark designation that was designated in 1967 when our Landmarks Law was brand new, and then in 1983 the landmark site was expanded to take in the grounds of the estate, and that same year was when Robert A.M. Stern developed part of the estate that you mentioned earlier, and I believe seven houses were constructed.

And those houses were constructed...they really worked with the landscape; I think they were sep— there was a lot of distance between the houses themselves. That development is called Copperflagg and those incorporated some of the outbuildings that you mentioned, like the carriage house and there used to be a windmill which are landmarked structures. So, I understand that a second development proposal came forward just a few years ago in 2017 and that was to develop on the rest of the estate grounds that had been protected—maybe to prevent that kind of development from happening further—could you describe that development proposal and your organization's involvement with it, which is the Iron Hills Civic Association?

Jean Prabhu: Yes, that that was about...I think they were wanting to put eighteen homes and, obviously, it infringed on the landmarked grounds. They were going to make the mansion into a multi-family dwelling; apartments or condos or whatever, and eighteen homes. I mean, the property couldn't sustain it in any event, whether you love the landmark or not there aren't enough roads, there isn't enough infrastructure. The drainage up here is limited. Because of the suburban nature of it, it was never really developed for that kind of high-density housing and it would have required a lot of changes. You couldn't even get a fire truck in there. I mean, it was not something that was going to work. So, our organization, when they became aware of it started going to meetings. We went to...well I got in touch with you, Kelly. And I said, you know, I think I saw you at one of the meetings where I went, just to hear, you know, how this is done, what was happening at Landmarks. And I learned and I listened, and I spoke.

And my organization, people came with me and as a result, when the developer realized he couldn't just railroad this—he couldn't just do whatever he wanted—that he was going to have to respect the landmark designation, he actually walked away from the project. He had to sort of destroy it to make as much money as he wanted to make, so. Either he needed to be more creative or make less money, I don't know, I don't know which but thank God it's still intact.

Kelly Carroll: It is and it's so interesting what you said about how they either had to destroy it or be more creative and that's often the approach that these developers are faced with. You know, a landmark site is...it has to be respected. The landmark comes first, and I think that maybe something of course could happen with the Flagg Estate, if the right developer, with the right creativity were to purchase it and do it in a more sensitive way, and this issue that you brought up about how you couldn't even get a fire truck to sustain this type of density in this area speaks to how intact the nature of the grounds are.

We're not used to, in other boroughs, having life safety issues being addressed at Landmarks Commission hearings because we've had the infrastructure, it's been here for well over a century in most parts of the City. And Staten Island was a borough of other estates, and when we think about preservation in New York City we don't we don't necessarily think about preservation of open space. But it's absolutely an open space issue in Staten Island and I would like you to speak a little bit about how other estates of land in your area have been affected over the years by development. I know you've talked about in the past, this McMansionization of Staten Island.

Jean Prabhu: Yeah, there's been rampant development on Staten Island and some, and much of it totally profit driven without adequate planning. We've all seen it. The estate that the Jesuits sold that was the Mount Manresa Retreat House that's been destroyed, it's already...they razed all the trees, they destroyed it. But they haven't built yet, because the community is so angered by the high-handed way in which its title was transferred, and the plans were sort of pushed through. Although, once people started educating the politicians, they got on board to say, "We don't want this, we don't want any more of this on Staten Island".

But, just in my neighborhood where the JP Morgan summer house was, there are two brand new, huge homes without...there's no set back, there's no grounds there...it's not so very pretty. I want to be respectful of the people that live there, but they didn't develop it, they just bought those homes. Unfortunately, it has none of the character of that summer home.

And then there's the Richmond County Country Club house which needs to be landmarked. It's also an important structure. It's still there but it's not protected. And then the Vanderbilt summer home—which was really breathtaking in its beauty—that is now...they replaced with three new homes, crowded together. That's a loss. I did send that to Landmarks at one point and said, can you please consider landmarking the Vanderbilt summer home but I knew less then. And I, you know, I put in the application. It was denied. I didn't really understand that I could have done more, and I wished I wish I had done more, because it was really very special. So, there's three houses there now. These are big losses.

There were other beautiful Ernest Flagg designed homes on the hill here. They came down...and two or three houses in their place. It's a loss. It was very beautiful, it was. We still have some of it! We have the Ernest Flagg Estate, which is the greatest of them all. So, I'm hoping we can save that one. It's in danger. It's in jeopardy, it is on the market. So, we're trying to figure out some kind of a solution through the community organization. But, it's, you know, it's going to be offensive.

Kelly Carroll: Yes, has the Iron Hills Civic Association prior to the Flagg Estate, have you all ever been involved in a preservation campaign prior to this?

Jean Prabhu: No, no, and I have to say, I mean, I only became involved with this when I saw that Ernest Flagg Estate being put in danger. I was never a preservationist. I was what you call an "old house person." I love old houses, but I was never, you know, I'm a nurse, I'm an attorney, I'm a personal injury attorney. I didn't know anything about any of this land use or really, even that. I love history, but not about...I didn't have a lot of knowledge about architectural history. So, it's just been a learning process for me. I'm still learning, thanks to people like you, Kelly, and other people that have appeared on behalf of the of the Ernest Flagg Estate.

But I'm learning and I'm not afraid to speak up. I'm old now. Nobody scares me anymore and, you know, that was part of the issues to up here about land use. You know, you're afraid to report things or say anything when you saw over-building, violation of zoning laws, inadequate infrastructure. Actually, right on Four Corners Road, where it turns at North Entry Road, there was a beautiful Ernest Flagg structure which they tore down, and they put three homes. You cannot get a fire truck in there. I don't...I don't know how they ever got that approved. But the structure wasn't landmarked and they just built what they say is "as of right." I can't even imagine how it was permitted, but the homes are there; they've been there a long time now.

You know, I guess seeing all of this is what really got me going on the Ernest Flagg Estate, you know, watching this chipping away at the character of our neighborhood. It's...it's hard to watch.

Kelly Carroll: I'm sure it is, especially in Staten Island which has the lowest amount of landmarks out of out of the other boroughs and there's...I would describe a different mentality in Staten island toward landmarks. In your community specifically, though, I was very impressed by the way, that your group, your community association—your civic association—really was unified for preservation. Do you think that this campaign has maybe changed some people's minds about why preservation is a benefit to Staten Island, as opposed to an impediment as many people do view it as?

Jean Prabhu: It's unfortunate, like, that that people think that when if their home is given landmark status that that's a negative. When, if you really look at it, it's a tremendous positive—if only we could have saved more but—it's a positive. In other words, if we can save the Ernest Flagg Estate, it becomes a community resource. It makes our area beautiful, attractive and I think even, you know, in terms of if all you're thinking about is dollars and cents, I think that having an asset like the Ernest Flagg Estate in your neighborhood makes your own property worth even more because you have access to this beautiful place to be. And, so, I mean, that's my...I'm just a big cheerleader of preservation in Todt Hill.

But I think my community...I've had pushback and I've had a lot of encouragement. So, I think what's helped our community is education. When you came and spoke to us, and Christabel came and spoke to us, I think that helped a lot of people understand the value of...and actually this Ernest Flagg landmark is not only a value to our community. It really is a New York City treasure. And I'm hoping that all of the people of New York at some point, who have an interest in history and development can just come and take a look at what we have: this beautiful treasure.

I did that virtual walking tour where people sort of looked at it on the Zoom thing, but I've actually walked people through as well. You know, people just from Brooklyn Heights and later people from Manhattan, I've just taken them on walks and show them what we have, and they're astounded. They just can't believe how beautiful it is.

Kelly Carroll: Very preservationist of you. Preservationists are big walking tour fans. The best way to encounter something is to see it in real life, and I know Covid set back a lot of that in our field this past year. So, when you when you bring people to the site what are their reactions, is that do you think that it's something that they expected or not?

Jean Prabhu: I think they are so surprised. They are so surprised to see this beautiful place in the City of New York. And they fall in love with it just the way that I did—and they haven't even seen the inside! I mean when you, you know, I fell in love with the whole place. Ernest Flagg had, I think, some very nice ideas about architecture and his home is beautiful.

But when I bring people to see it—I had one lady from Manhattan, I happened to meet her on the nature trail, and she was lost—I was walking her back down the hill and I said, “Do you want to see it, you know, the Ernest Flagg Estate?” and she said, “Sure!” I was showing her how to get back down to Richmond Road to catch a bus and she said, “If I lived here, I would never leave.” Meaning, my neighborhood.

And, but we...you know, Staten Island gets a little bit of a bad rep. That's okay. We, we have to deal with that. That's...when I grew up in Brooklyn, Brooklyn had a bad rep so, things change.

Kelly Carroll: They do, I have to say that when I came to your neighborhood for the first time I was, I was pleasantly surprised. and Ernest Flagg you know, he did pick that spot for a reason and it's on a hill and when you're there even the air feels different because there's not...there's nothing around it and there's old growth trees and it's definitely...it's something that you couldn't create again if it were taken away.

Jean Prabhu: No, and Vanderbilt in the Morgans understood that.

Kelly Carroll: Yes.

Jean Prabhu: That's why they came here for the summer. And they had their fox hunting thing that they did up here which eventually became a golf and tennis club. But when they first started to come, it was a fox...the kennels still exist and is actually landmarked.

Kelly Carroll: Interesting.

Jean Prabhu: Oh, but yeah and someday Kelly, I hope, well, we will see the President's Room in the Richmond County Country Club at some point, which is really spectacular. And that was the summer home of a Southern plantation owner who used to come up here to spend his summers because it is such a beautiful spot, it really is, and if it gets developed you will lose that. You will no longer have that feeling of peace and cool and you know, looking at the water. You feel ten degrees cooler just looking out on the water there. It's really beautiful.

Kelly Carroll: It really is, and when you're there you can feel this continuity from this time that is so far in the past. But because of the land, some of the landscape and architectural features that are intact, it is like going back in time and you certainly don't feel like you're in New York City, as you said.

Jean Prabhu: I know the caretaker there because I wave to him when I'm on my walks and they have one caretaker taking care of the whole thing. He's a lovely man and we both agree there's a spirituality in just in the feeling of the place. You just feel...the beauty of it, it gives you a sort of a spiritual feeling. I'm not a particularly religious person, but, I do feel, as you know, there's just a certain feeling that you get from the beauty of it that you don't get many places.

Kelly Carroll: What would you say to those on Staten Island and in the other boroughs of New York City at large that that would say, "Good for you, but we need to develop, because we need more housing." And what would you say to those that push back against preservation?

Jean Prabhu: Well, we need housing and we need development, but it needs to be sensitive. And beauty! Growing up in Brooklyn, I grew up in a small row house. Five children, two parents, one bathroom. A small house. But what made me imagine, what made me dream, what made me think: well, it was the big library at Grand Army Plaza. It was Prospect Park and the beauty of Prospect Park and even just the banks, even just to go into the banks to pay your student loan, you know, made you feel very special. And once you take away the special places, what are you going to put up? Concrete buildings? And what good will that do? How will that help the people that you're saying you want to house? All of the people. I think there has to be a sensitive way to do it. There has to be a proper way to do it and preservation is a big part of that.

Shouldn't every child have that feeling of awe looking in at a beautiful place? And I think, yes, because I had that privilege growing up in Brooklyn. And it really did make me imagine. Just look at, just look at Grand Central! Every time I walk in, I say this little... "thank you." I say, "Thank you Jackie, thanks so

much” because we almost lost that, and how many people every day walk through that station and feel a sense of pride of just...gladness to be in New York City because you're in a beautiful place. And I don't think you get that feeling on the West Side, sadly, because, you know, they destroyed our station there. Our Penn Station. So, I believe in preservation for a lot of reasons, most of all for the future. For the kids. Because if they don't get to see this kind of beauty, that's a big loss in their life and in in in their development, they need to see this.

Kelly Carroll: I totally agree with you that preservation is for the future, I think that's such a great quote. Because it's important to look back, but it is more important to inspire new generations about our collective history as a city as a nation and these spaces, they do really well into the future. They've held up the through the test of time aesthetically, how they're used, and I hope that the Flagg Estate, whatever its new life is, can be sensitively adapted as you mentioned.

I think we have time for one more question and my question for you, Jean, is: What is a space or place on Staten Island that should be landmarked that isn't?

Jean Prabhu: Well, definitely the Richmond County Country Club. That's a building that that needs to be landmarked. Where else? I'm trying to think because we don't have so many landmarks. I think the Kreischer Mansion is already landmarked so...

Kelly Carroll: Yes, it is. There used to be two! They lost one, it had a twin.

Jean Prabhu: Yes! And you know, even in the Dongan Hills neighborhood there are some beautiful homes. You know, they're interspersed with, you know, with new construction but does that mean they're not worthy of preservation? They certainly add to the neighborhood. I think, take a walk through Dongan Hills and you'll see many homes, and we have a home just around the corner on East Loop Road from 1899 and I think it's in danger and it's super beautiful and I would love to see that protected. Because everyone who walks past it smiles and acknowledges it and loves it! And I think it's in danger. I think it's 26 East Loop Road if I'm not mistaken, but it was built in 1899. It's the only old structure left on East Loop, so...

The Vanderbilt summer home was there, so it's the last one over there. I'd love to see that protected and I'm sure there's more. I'm sure there's more. We're very lucky to have the St. Francis Woodlands. The Coptic Christians bought that—a religious property—and they preserved it and we're really lucky to have that. I don't know that it's landmarked. I think it's not. They've just been very good neighbors, so maybe it should be.

Kelly Carroll: And that's, a lot of buildings are just hanging on because of good stewardship until they're not there anymore. So, sounds like you have a few relics that the Gilded Age is still at your doorstep, but for how long?

Jean Prabhu: I do. I do my best to help.

Kelly Carroll: The community is really lucky to have you, have voice of preservation in Staten Island and I'm sure that you have already inspired many on Staten Island.

Jean Prabhu: Kelly, thank you so much, and thanks for all you've taught me. I really have learned a lot and I'm, you know, now I'm starting to think ahead like what would be a good use, how could we use it? And we're not just like leave it alone, you know, don't you, can't do anything there. We just want it to be

sensitive to how beautiful it is and used in the right way, not just raze it to the ground and put up condos. I mean, I don't think that helps anybody. So, thanks for educating me. I'm going to try to look for something!

Kelly Carroll: No, you've done a tremendous job and being an advocate for your community and for the Flagg Estate and it's people like you who make the real changes in New York City preservation so, thank you. And thank you so much for this interview.

Jean Prabhu: And I hope I got the right answers to the questions.

Kelly Carroll: You did a wonderful, a wonderful job.

Jean Prabhu: You should've told me ahead, I would've studied!

Kelly Carroll: Well, I'm happy to have captured your preservation history and I'm sure I'll see you soon.

Jean Prabhu: Thanks for that. Okay, right.

Kelly Carroll: Alright, have a great day.

Jean Prabhu: You too. Bye.

Kelly Carroll: Okay bye bye.