INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Christian Zimmerman

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Christian Zimmerman conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on September 13, 2021. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are 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

Christian Zimmerman grew up in the prairie landscape of North Dakota. He studied horticulture at the University of North Dakota and landscape architecture at the University of Idaho before moving east to New York City in 1985 to look for work and to explore different historical landscapes. He started working for the Parks Department at the Olmsted Center in their capital projects division, a job he held for two years until a new position for a landscape architect opened at the Prospect Park Alliance. He applied, got the job, and "the rest is history"; Zimmerman has worked at the Prospect Park Alliance ever since, moving through the ranks to arrive at his current role, vice president of capital and landscape management. In this capacity, Zimmerman oversees historic preservation—including the maintenance of Prospect Park's scenic landmarks—as well as ecological restoration and new design.

In this interview, Zimmerman describes the early days of the Prospect Park Alliance under the direction of Tupper Thomas during a time when the park was considered dangerous and most of the buildings and ecological landscapes were in need of restoration. He describes woodland and riparian restorations and the ecological strategies at play in the preservation of the scenic aspects of the park. He also details the restorations of the Endale Arch and the design of the Lakeside LeFrak Center, and recalls events when people have gravitated to Prospect Park to collectively celebrate or grieve.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey | Session: 1

Interviewee: Christian Zimmerman | Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic | Date: September 13, 2021

Q: Today is September 13, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Christian Zimmerman for the New York Preservation Archive Project. And we're doing this interview remotely via video call and Christian, because I don't have your signed consent form yet, do I have your permission to record this interview now?

Zimmerman: Yes.

Q: Okay, thank you. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Zimmerman: My name's Christian Zimmerman. I am the Vice President of Capital and Landscape Management for the Prospect Park Alliance. I am a practicing landscape architect as well. I oversee all design and construction as well as the grounds of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. I have a team of landscape architects, architects, preservationists, horticulture, arboriculture, ecological preservationists, ecological researchers, scientists that help maintain and help take care of the park.

Q: Thank you for that. Can you share a little bit about your early life and where you grew up and some of the landscapes that you grew up in?

Zimmerman: I grew up in a very different landscape. I grew up in North Dakota. Prairie, so when you think of the landscape in North Dakota, it starts about the knees down. It's grassland. It's not Eastern hardwoods. It's rolling and flat. So that's where I grew up. And then I went to school at North Dakota State University to study horticulture. It was the first thing I got into and then I was introduced to the field of landscape architecture. I wound up moving west and I landed at the University of Idaho. So I graduated in landscape architecture there and then I moved east. One of those weird—

Q: Yes, how did you—sorry.

Zimmerman: That's all right. It's one of those funny things that when I say I'm from North Dakota, I can almost guarantee that anyone, my first introduction with, they will say, "Oh, I've never met anyone from North Dakota." It's a common New York City comment. I think that's how I got a lot of interviews actually at design firms because they wanted to see someone from Idaho and North Dakota. It's not generally—most landscape architects go west from that area and south.

Q: Yes, that's interesting. I'm not one hundred percent sure if I know anyone who is from North Dakota but I have been to North Dakota and I think likewise got interviews for a job I applied to at North Dakota because of the question of why are you from New York City and you're applying for a job in North Dakota?

Zimmerman: We are a funny lot that way. I realize most of this won't make the interview

probably but it does give you a good background. But it's true. It's really interesting. It's like that's how I got into the door. They also wanted to know, is it an accredited program? I'm like yes, it's accredited.

Q: When you were young, I'm interested in how you got to know the landscape and know the differences in that landscape, which can to an outsider look quite monotonous. How did you get to know that and what was that like top then pursue horticulture, which is a very formal way of learning?

Zimmerman: So growing up in rural—I mean it sounds like an oxymoron, rural North Dakota, but besides Fargo, it's pretty rural. I grew up in rural North Dakota and my playground was the country. And you ran. You'd go running through the landscape, the prairie, the wheat fields, the sloughs, the gullies. The intimacy of the landscape as opposed to—you look down and you settle within it and it's a very small, very active landscape, insect-wise, and wildlife-wise. It's on the Central Flyway for birds. And most people out here wouldn't think of it but the pelicans from the Gulf of Mexico summer in my hometown lake. So we have that. So you see lots and lots of birds and wildlife.

So it's a solitary kind of growing up, I think. You entertain yourself that way. You become very observant about the spaces. And the other thing that is unique to that area, the horizon line is so strong and dramatic. You watch storms come in and you see them miles and miles away. You just watch them slowly come across.

You learn to really embrace nature, I guess, and trying to figure out what I wanted to do because I had no idea what I wanted to do in college. I thought, well, horticulture, plants. It was definitely not an area once I got into it that I knew I wouldn't be able to do much with it. Most of the people I knew went on and they wound up teaching or getting into research and I didn't really want to research. I was more into the arts part and studying. I love plant identification. I love ID'ing trees and shrubs. One of the challenges there was you had to identify trees not only by leaves but also when the leaves were gone. So you had to know buds and bark. You couldn't cheat by looking at the leaf.

Anyway, that's that, and then when I went to Idaho, I actually ran out of money in Idaho. I traveled west after I graduated and I ran out of money in Coeur d'Alene. So I had to sell clothing for awhile and get myself figured out. Then I didn't want to travel any further so I went to the University of Idaho in Moscow in landscape architecture, which was more design-oriented. There are programs that are more science-oriented as well, different levels. This was through the College of Art and Architecture and that's when I stepped up a level in plant size. I started to think about trees more. I mean there are trees in North Dakota, but they're mostly riparian for shelter belts, they're along the water. They're around the lakes. They may ring—they may be fifty feet on either side of the bank of the river and then it's prairie. So it's like that.

In Idaho, I was on the western side of the Rockies. So you started seeing a different landscape completely, pine trees, even more arid. And then also agriculture over there, soybean, and much more rolling. The topography is much greater. But still it's a rural campus, a small town. I think 16,000 is the total and 11,000 are students, something like that. Washington State University is

seven miles away. They're right next to each other. They're border towns. That's even worse, that 17,000 students with 5,000 residents. Kind of an interesting community.

Q: Yes. What were some of the influences that you had at the time? You mentioned you were more artistically inclined. So when you started to study landscape architecture and then changed your geographic location, what was inspiring to you at the time?

Zimmerman: If I step back, one of the interesting things about the horticulture program that I started, so it was small as well, intimate. Because the program was such that it had a lot of science, a lot of research but it had this artistic piece that you would have a class in floral design, flower arranging. So there you would be doing intimate little arrangements and looking at the intimacy of just what a flower arrangement and the whole different—Japanese style flower arranging to French—all different. Then also propagation, where you'd be grafting trees, branches. You would get into that, that's small. And at Idaho, they had a strong arts emphasis. At least at the time, I have no idea what it is now, but a lot of drawing, a lot of hand drawing back then. Computers were not as—they were there but it was a completely different kind of animal. They were truly support. You didn't design by using a computer. We designed by hand drawing. So there was a lot of sketching.

And there was observation. You had to go out. Everyone had their sketchbook. Everyone sat there and drew either a landscape or a building, pieces of it, a lamp post, just really getting into details of how shapes form and how things are created. Sculpture too, working with clay, which was fun.

Q: So what drew you to move east to New York City?

Zimmerman: My brother lived here and he had a couch. I wish it was more exotic than that. I wanted to do something completely different. It was a small class, so most of the people in my class went to Seattle or San Francisco, the big areas, and Portland. I just didn't want to do that. I was interested in preservation. There really isn't a strong preservation background out there but I've always been interested in history, American history, world history. And I knew moving east I'd be exposed to historical landscapes more. So I didn't plan on—I honestly wasn't planning on staying in New York. It was like the point I could start out and then I'd interview up and down the coast.

I graduated in 1985 from landscape architecture school and that was when there was a recession. So there were no jobs out there. So I interviewed up and down the coast, as far north as Portland, and south. Got in every door because they said who, Idaho? What? But I needed to make a living. About a month and a half, two and a half months in, my brother said, "There's a job opening at Parks. Why don't you interview there?" I was like, okay. So I wound up getting a position at the Parks Department at the Olmsted Center, their capital projects division. Okay, let's start there. I wasn't against it. It just wasn't my first choice.

Q: How did you get introduced to the city? Can you describe where you were living, where your brother was living, and just how you kind of got to know the built environments and also some of the natural places?

Zimmerman: Brooklyn was very different in the [19]80s. It was the height of the crack epidemic. They lived in what's broadly called Park Slope. It really was 4th Avenue, close to Atlantic Avenue station, a pretty rough area back then. So rough, I was baptized in the city: the first month, I was mugged twice by gunpoint in the first two weeks of work. Growing up in North Dakota, I actually recognized what a gun looked like. So that was kind of a jarring thing but then never again. I got it out of my system which was nice. I prefer that.

He took me around. We went all over the city. It was fun going to seedy Times Square, going to the *Intrepid,* going to the World Trade Center. He just kind of took me and showed me the city. Once I decided to stay, he said let's show you what New York is. And I've fallen in love—I've lived here longer than I've lived anywhere. I just completely love New York. I can't even imagine being anywhere else. Brooklyn's—thirty-two years in Brooklyn. It's such a wonderfully crazy city. As you know—you're from New York?

Q: Not originally, but I have lived here longer than I've lived anywhere else, more than half my life. This is twenty-one years, twenty-one years in two weeks or so.

Zimmerman: Yes, more than half your life—I think you need to get past that one hurdle and you have to get past the indignities of standing in that line. There's people that are here for—there's that one point—I'm sure you have plenty of friends, there here seven years and they just can't take it anymore. They snap and then they're gone. Well, once I got over that. I keep telling people, no, it's okay. You know housing and all this. But it's just a wonderfully, so dynamic city.

And it's a young person city but it's also an elderly person city. I think it really does—it works for everyone. It really can and you can find your spaces I think.

So I worked at the Parks Department for two years and there was a position—I was planning on actually moving back west because—I don't know how I can say this politically or nicely, but I kind of had it with the Parks Department, the bureaucracy. I was thinking of moving to Seattle. But then there was a new position opening up as a landscape architect at the Prospect Park Alliance.

Tupper Thomas, the administrator at the time wanted to create her own team to control more of the design. So I interviewed and I got the job and the rest is history. So I've stayed here and I just kind of moved up. I was a landscape designer, then a landscape architect, assistant director, director, just moving up within.

And I think, long-term, I don't know if I would have been able to survive here without parks like Prospect Park. I really think we could use five in each borough. I think they're just precious, especially with COVID[-19 pandemic]. You just see it now, where people go. And I saw it after 9/11. That was just another moment we can get into later. I'll probably cry. I do every year, it's like [sighs]. But to have this outlet is such an important resource. It's life-saving for people. I think many people took it for granted until COVID. I realize this cycle of you live here for ten years, you move on, the transient nature of New York City, but for those it captures or catches, it's those spaces.

Q: Yes, absolutely. When you first started at the Prospect Park Alliance, what was the state of the park and what were the kind of tasks that you were tackling at first?

Zimmerman: So the park was in pretty horrible condition. The administrator of the park, Tupper Thomas, was hired in 1980, and Betsy Barlow Rogers in Central Park. That was the first move. And her focus was with many buildings just boarded up. It was all abandoned. Very few people came into the park. I think they did a study early on, this was before me, and I think—it was called the Ukeles User Study, [Jacob B.] Ukeles is the name of the person. And it was 1.7 million people visited the park every year. That's users. For example, if you ran the park every day, you would be considered 365 visits.

So very few people actually came to the park and they stayed on the edges, the perimeter. You're familiar with Prospect Park? So the ring roads. They didn't go inside. They mostly stayed on the road to the exterior. So that's where all the playgrounds were. That's where the zoo is. Wollman Rink was just on the inside, just on the other side, any of the active things. But there weren't that many people. And her focus was to start by reactivating the buildings, bring the Picnic House back, the Tennis House, and just give them meaning. By the time I came—when I worked at Parks in 1988, I had worked on a couple. I was assigned the Brooklyn division, so I was familiar with the park. We had been working on it in pieces. Once she did most of the buildings, her focus was then the landscape and the playgrounds. That was next. And I was hired to start that piece. There was a city landscape architect here that came just before me but then my first assignment was designing the first playground, to start the process of restoring the park, landscape-wise.

We had no idea that it was going to work. She had one contract. I was an annual employee. I was a contract employee. I had no idea that I would be this far. It really was, okay, we've got one contract, let's see if we can finish it, then the next. I joke—for the Alliance, I think I was employee number seven, somewhere seven to ten. There was a few of us hired the same time. So it was that early on when I started. And we built the playground and we got another contract. So we slowly grew. We started restoring all of the playgrounds but it wasn't until the Ravine restoration, the big woodland restoration, that we took over in '96. That was the major changes.

But it was rough in the park. You'd walk through the arches and they're filled with crack vials, needles, little bags. My office was still where I'm sitting for thirty-one years. When I move, the amount of crap that's going to come out of this is going to be awful because you accumulate it. Somebody's basement, I just live in somebody's basement. We'd leave in pairs at night. It was just a different place. It wasn't scary. It was just your radar—you were aware of your surroundings. But as we restored the landscape, we got more and more people in. That was probably the most significant park-changing project in that first era. I kind of consider I've had three eras that I've been living through in the park.

Q: Let me ask you about the Alliance. As you mentioned, you were one of the first employees. So even though you were on contract, the first people to be working in that new, relatively new organization—

Zimmerman: Well, we didn't call it that. I just thought of it that way because I had no idea.

Q: So what was the relationship to the Parks Department or to the other entities that were supposedly dedicating energy to the park? The park was under different purviews. So how did the Alliance begin to shape their role?

Zimmerman: It was an interesting time and relationship with the Parks Department. No one knew quite what to think of us. And I think many of them couldn't quite figure out why we should even exist. Probably what helped was Tupper was a city employee. So she was an administrator. So, stepping back, she was appointed administrator of Prospect Park, a city employee through the Parks Department. She formed, with some neighborhood advocates, the Prospect Park Alliance. Central Park is the same, if you kind of look at that model.

So we were a support group and we were created because the neighborhood, the more interested, wealthier people in the neighborhood, said something's got to change. We need to support this park. We need to do something and we need to support the Parks Department. That's why they called it an alliance. They didn't want it to be adversarial. It's an alliance. It's an alliance of people and the city. Now, we thought that more than the city did, I think, and the Parks Department because we were taking away—we were setting up a situation where we would be the exclusive design team and the construction supervision team for Prospect Park. The administration was fine. I would say my peers were a little more questioning.

But the whole idea, the concept for Tupper was accountability. With a city as large as New York is, and the Parks Department is, vast as it is, I know it's one of the smaller from a people point of

view. It's one of the smaller city agencies but it's vast property and sprawling, and working all around the five boroughs. Tupper didn't feel that she was being paid attention or the park was being paid attention to, to the level that she wanted, because she met with the constituents. She met with the community and if something was falling apart, if you did it—a project was built and it was built by somebody that was somewhere in another borough, the design. If it was falling apart quickly, she couldn't call anyone. She couldn't figure out how do I get this changed.

So the person who used to work for the Brooklyn division, now they had transferred over to the Bronx. And she was a city employee. She knew the system and she just didn't like that part of it. And when you work on one property—I feel like I work on an estate, in some ways. You're on one big property. You want someone to be intimately involved in it. And I jokingly tell people that Tupper, really, at the end of the day wanted to be able to pick up the phone and yell at somebody. And she wanted to know that no matter what, if something was wrong, she'd call me, call my phone, and say what is going on? What the hell did you do wrong? Why can't you fix this, whereas she couldn't do that. Now she had employees that she could actually directly say, you're a designer. Do something. Or you're in construction. We didn't have as much control as she thought she could or would have but we had a lot more control.

So it really was that intimate involvement and I'm a strong believer in that too. I've seen how it works. It's not only my part but it's your part. It's your neighborhood. I can't control everything. I'd go crazy if things were following apart. But also, I understand it in a way that others don't. I mean, there are really excellent designers out there but we live and breathe the part. I think that's the difference. Central Park is the same way. Central Park Conservancy has a design team that's

just embedded in that park. There aren't many of us.

So that was Tupper's idea. She wanted to be able to know that she was given the money and she dictated more because, as often happens, it happened before, she would get the money and then they would pat her on the head and say okay, let the professionals take care of this now. We know what's best. Except if they didn't do what the community wanted, it all came back to her. At the end of the day, it's accountability.

Q: And how were you introduced to the park as a scenic landmark? What did that mean for your work early on?

Zimmerman: Well, I fell in love with the park almost instantly, even in its kind of state of ruin, because in some funny ways, the Long Meadow is my prairie. You've got that ninety acres in New York and it's all lined by trees on either side—think riparian—and it's rolling. So just that beautiful landscape. The water course was just this wreck of a water course but you could see, looking at the historic pictures, you could see what the potential was. The great thing, the wonderful thing about being in Brooklyn and after the [Robert] Moses era—what Moses was doing, he took down a lot of structures because they frankly couldn't take care of it. But thankfully, most of the alterations that Moses did were on the perimeter, the Band Shell, the main entrance to the Wollman Rink, the zoo and all the playgrounds. The interior was left alone. So it was just sedimented in. The water course was untouched. It was just buried. It was all there.

We coined the phrase landscape archaeology. In some sense, it was what we wound up doing

sometimes. We'd uncovered a waterfall, a weir, a rock outcropping. We did the "do here no harm": don't mess with it, just uncover it. If it's stable, leave it and take the historic pictures and try to match it up. But working on that water course, rebuilding waterfalls, that was fun. I had never done that before. I think coming in, just seeing—also because at the time, there weren't that many people here, it felt like the rural part of New York City. It was rural, especially in the wintertime. Nobody was here in the wintertime. I loved it. That was the silence.

Going home, I go home once a year to see my mother. She's still alive. And I always at some point drive out in the middle of the fields and sit in a wheat field and just listen to the wheat rush. You have to come out here on a winter day—not now, it's too busy. You know how when you walk through the woods in the fall and you that hear that and you're alone—that it just brings me back. There's that quality. And having a park the size of this allows for that. You can walk through and hear the fall winds when the leaves are changing. It's a very quiet, calming experience. So it brings me back to my rural—I know it's not the same—but it brings me back to that experience, or auditory experience.

Q: Is that an element that you work to protect as part of the scenic aspect of the park?

Zimmerman: Yes, it's more and more difficult because of the use, but yes. I think we think of—this is about the Long Meadow but I think it's significant—I think we think of that as sacred. I mean, there is nothing more iconic of a landscape feature in an urban setting than coming through the Endale Arch. Do you know we restored that just recently? You've seen we've lit it up. But walking through that, there's nothing like that anywhere in the country. It's kind of like

Bow Bridge in Central Park. You may say that and you instantly go, oh yeah, I know that. But it's like walking through the Endale Arch and you see, framed, the Long Meadow and it's pretty much as Olmsted and Vaux designed it, from a land form. The trees obviously aren't the same. We have a couple trees that are that old in that area but most of the trees are new but the undulating land form, that has not been altered. The alteration came down in the '50s at the Ballfields. But you don't see them at that point because of the dog leg.

We call—we, I call it—a few of us call it the Prospect Park "come hither" landscape. It never lets you see it all at once. It always unfolds and says, come here. As you walk along and to see little glimpses of it and it pulls you along. Even as we're doing contemporary design in some places, I still want to have that. You can't see it all. When we were reconstructing the Ravine, the whole water course to the Boathouse, you really saw the intent of Olmsted and Vaux. You'd stand in a location and you'd see an element, like a waterfall from a distance. But you didn't walk to it, you walked away from it on the path, and then you got to it. You got to it when they wanted you to get to it. There's a lot of that. You hear the waterfall, you can't see it. You can't see it until they want you to see it. It's all this urgency. It keeps pulling you and pulling you and pulling you along. And the whole light, shade and shadow, the quality. You're in a dark tunnel and you come into bright light and then you have a canopy that shades you. Then you get into the sunlight again, then you get into another canopy walk. It's just always drawing you and you see the long views, the short views, even the shadows.

It's the most beautiful space. I learn something new every day. I really do. I'm not kidding. All you do is you get up early in the morning and you see the sun rise. How does that play across the

meadow? Then you wait until sunset and you look at it again. It's completely different. Sun's on one side, sun's on the other side. It's this wonderfully choreographed space. It is contrived but I see contrived as a good word. It's positive. It is purposeful for sure and we try and do that as well. You see how it just absorbs—I think as a scenic landscape, one of the other brilliant aspects of it is as well how it absorbs layers. McKim, Mead & White came in and they're going to make the park subservient to the City Beautiful movement and that strong landscape. It's all on the perimeter for the most part, the edges.

It's fine, Olmsted and Vaux really were understated designers. They didn't want to—you've read, I'm sure, or you've seen plenty of times—they talk about everything is subservient to everything. Nothing is dominant. It is a singular composition. But McKim, Mead & White, they wanted "look at me!" Olmsted and Vaux said don't look at me, look at this. Look at it. If you ever notice when you walk into the Long Meadow, if you come in on the north end, you won't see any evergreens. It's all hardwood. And the reason—further down, you'll start seeing things that were planted later, that we had planted, but you go and you look at it, why is that? It's a single composition. Nothing dominates over anything. Whereas, if it was an evergreen, you would see an evergreen stand out from a hardwood when there's no leaves. They didn't want that. They wanted it to be this unifying place. Now clearly in the spring, you have the trees that are blooming but they're blooming everywhere. There's not an individual tree there. There are masses of flowering trees.

So it was meant to be this singular composition. It's why the arches are set within. The differences with McKim, Mead & White and Helmle & Huberty—like the Boathouse. The

Boathouse is the diamond ring on the hand. You see it. That's not Olmsted and Vaux. But it still fits. It kind of works within the space. They observe it. I think one of the more challenging things is bringing in contemporary designers, like working with Tod and Billie—Tod Williams and Billie Tsien—doing the Lakeside LeFrak Center. That was contemporary design. Again, it was very challenging in the sense that it was this big larger facility but when we first started working—I started working on that in 1997, finished it in 2013. That's all with the planning. I can't say this to millennials, the new generation. When you tell them, oh, it will take you thirteen years to finish that project, "No, I don't have time for that!" These projects take time.

But we started first by trying to recreate a Vaux-type structure and early on, we just realized it was silly. It was just silly, like why are you forcing this? When we went back and looked at it—as I said earlier, you have Olmsted-Vaux, McKim, Mead & White, Helmle & Huberty, WPA [Works Progress Administration], and then contemporary. Yes, we need a contemporary layer and it can handle it. If you look at—I suppose the dominance of the canopy kind of stands out but through time, as the landscape is growing, it will completely be filtered and softened and having that stonework against the box, the stone of the Concert Grove, it's complementary. I think people coming understand that the park can absorb new. It doesn't mean that we don't—there are places, like around the Boathouse, like around the Nethermead, the Long Meadow, we're not adding contemporary structures. We are keeping the park mostly intact.

Q: Maybe we can use these two kinds of examples to explain a little bit about how you might interact with the Preservation Commission. So the two things that I heard were kind of the landscape archaeology and then what you were just describing with the Lakeside development,

whether the park can absorb the new. So maybe if we can start with the landscape archaeology and the woodlands restoration. What is it like in terms of staff discussions or permits or approvals, all of that stuff?

Zimmerman: So the first one is called the Ravine restoration. So that started a long time ago. When it was first started, it was started by outside consultants. Bruce Kelly/David Varnell, I think, was the firm. They don't exist anymore. When it was first begun, it was a strictly preservation original-intent landscape. What I mean to say by that is they were trying to recreate the Olmsted-Vaux design. Plant material-wise was the biggest difference. But the bridges, the water course, carving it out, recreating it, it had all completely silted in. The bridges were gone. There were chain-link fences, concrete. But they had wild ornamental plants because, remember Olmsted and Vaux at that time, Olmsted particularly, he was designing for effect, lush landscapes. The whole native aesthetic wasn't really in the 1860s. Ecology, it didn't exist in that perception. Their version of woods, it was a woodland area but it's not a native forest, what you would today consider.

So they were going down that path and there's a gentleman, Ed Toth, who was the director of landscape management for the park. He was an ecologist at the time and he got Tupper's ear. He said we're Brooklyn's last remaining forest and this is not a healthy forest and ecologically we need this. Wildlife needs this. Public needs this. We need to restore and we need to create and recreate the native landscape because we'll forever lose it if we don't become stewards. And she was skeptical. It's like designer against environmentalist at the time. But he took her to Staten Island to the Green Belt, which was native. It was healthy. It was not stripped. He said this is

what Prospect Park should look like.

I can show you a picture because I was showing my new director, since you've been to the park. That was our forest before I came or when I came. So it's not a forest. It's trees. That is the woods. If you came out here and wanted to do a walk, I can take you to this spot and show you. It's night and day. That's what Prospect Park looked like in 1996.

Q: Wow.

Zimmerman: Yes, very different everywhere. That's what the entire woods looked like. And he said this can't exist. This is not sustainable. And with the original design, it was going to add an underlayer. There would be a lot of rhododendrons, a lot of ornamental things, that he said could not be sustained. Yes, it was part of the original design but maybe we should go away from that. When we took over, we were handed the project. The concept was, architecturally, sight-wise, pond-wise, shape, boulders, rock work, bridges, whatever: follow the original design. But when it came to plant material, let's follow the new model of woodland restoration. And we were way ahead of the curve on that. There weren't many native nurseries. We contract grew the plant material.

So we had to sell this concept to the public and to the Parks Department. And it was just a new approach. And our approval process is just—New York City can just grind you to a pulp. We could be an Eastern European city or bureaucracy. Russia has nothing on us when it comes to shutting us down. Sorry to digress but whether it's a path—let's just say I'm going to do the

Garfield entrance, from Garfield to the Park Drive or the Lakeside Center. You have, in-house—that's Prospect Park—everyone looks at it, questions it, ponders it. Then when you get us to all approve on it, then you go to what's called Brooklyn in-house. It's the borough at the Capital Projects division. That's the head of design there and they all pee on the bush, get their input on it. That, I may strike out, but just to give you a picture. Then you go to the deputy commissioner of parks who runs Capital Projects and she approves it, in this case. And then you go to the commissioner. They approve it.

Then you go to the borough board, the borough president's office, because we're a regional park. We don't go to the community boards. They all go to there. Since we're a regional park, the entire borough, public service—the council members, the board districts—they all come in and they vote on it. Then we have our community committee, which has to do with the park. These are just the neighborhood bird club, you launched Transportation Alternatives, you're a dog walker, you belong to FIDO [Fellowship for the Interests of Dogs and their Owners], whatever, a representative from your interest group comes, Park Slope parents, you name it. They're all there. They don't have voting but they comment on it.

Then we go to the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC] and then we go to the [New York City Public] Design Commission [PDC]. And then we're finally done for the first round. And then we have to go back and do it all again, most of it again. And here's the interesting thing. I don't know if you knew this but Giuliani changed the structure, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. So everyone thinks Landmarks Preservation has binding control over Prospect Park, because it's a scenic landmark. It doesn't. The Public Design Commission does. He rewrote it. And I speculate

that he was so angry at Landmarks for some reason. I don't know what it was. There's got to be something. You can dig this up and figure it out. There's a change but he changed the law or the charter in some way that buildings, existing buildings, are under the purview of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Everything else is under the purview of the New York Public Design Commission. So the Long Meadow, if I wanted to build a building, whatever, ballfields, golf course, whatever, if I wanted to do anything like that, Landmarks is advisory. They can be against it but they're not binding. Design Commission's binding.

So your preservation organization that has the most interest, honestly when you think about it, in saving Prospect Park has the least amount of authority from the citywide perspective. The Litchfield Villa doesn't go to Design Commission. Boat House doesn't go, Picnic House, any of those buildings. They don't go, it stops at LPC. But if it's anything, it goes on. I don't know if you knew that.

Q: I didn't. So the Design Commission is making decisions about scenic landmarks and interior landmarks?[1]

Zimmerman: From a preservation point of view, you hope, but that's not their—I mean, they're not bad. It just doesn't—when you think about a historic place, you would think it should be a preservation wing of the city, that has more maneuver. Now the PDC definitely listens. So when

[1] According to the NYC Design Jurisdiction website, "the Public Design Commission has binding jurisdiction over the following elements within scenic landmarks: installation or conservation or art, construction of new structures, and works of landscape architecture. Where the Public Design Commission is binding, LPC has advisory review…LPC has binding jurisdiction over all work to individual landmarks and historic districts, with the exception of the installation or conservation of art, as well as alterations or additions to existing structures within scenic landmarks." https://www1.nyc.gov/site/designcommission/review/jurisdiction.page, accessed Dec 14, 2021.

the LPC writes a report and if they hate something—but they don't have to agree.

Q: So when did that law change?

Zimmerman: During Giuliani's era. So '94?

Q: So earlier, okay.

Zimmerman: Yes, early '90s.

Q: So with the Ravine—

Zimmerman: Well, so the Ravine was a different case because we were recreating an original design and honestly, it was a very cool original design. You got three waterfalls. You've got chutes and streams, little ponds and these rustic bridges, rustic shelters. And it was only the plant aspect—and there wasn't a landscape architect sitting on the Landmarks Preservation Commission at the time. There's one on the—it was called the Art Commission back then. It wasn't called the Public Design Commission. And they were fine with the change. We were our worst—and often are our worst critics. The fights over trees and species and size—I mean, what we battled over is what we called horticultural zone plantings as opposed to the native plantings. They were still native but the difference was in size because we were focusing on, we'd look at waterfalls as attractive nuisances. You want to get to it. So we thought you just can't be planting a little seedling that's a three foot tall whip. We needed to plant a sizeable tree because it would

never survive.

So our battles were how big of an area should that zone be. When should it be strict native plantings? But that was more easy. What was more difficult than that when you had the town hall meetings with the community and we were going to fence off the first phase of the Ravine for ten years. It was not a pretty thing. I mean, parents stood up and said, "My child will never see this landscape or experience it?" Well, it's thirteen acres out of 526. And the concept behind that was, since we're planting all these seedlings that are small, we needed to protect them so they didn't get overrun. But that probably our most controversial piece, just explaining. I can't even imagine, with today's social media, how that would play out. I just can't even imagine us doing it. Thankfully, that's not where we are. We finished that part. We'll have to go back and fix it again because it does silt in.

But that was probably the biggest thing, those community meetings, and saying okay, we're creating it. And you could see the restoration and people got into it. It turned at one point where people didn't want the fences to come down, and that's why when you see a lower fence or a four-foot fence, it just stops dogs and people. I mean it doesn't stop anyone from jumping the fences if they want to, but ninety percent of the public adheres to that, less so during COVID. Before COVID, people were pretty good about it.

So that project went through the process. It was a lengthy process, a lot of hand-holding, but in the end, people saw what we were doing and you could follow it. Since it was phased because of the money, you could see, all of a sudden, there's a pond. You see waterfalls. They didn't see

waterfalls before. You could see a stream. There were things that were popping up that really—and we tried to make those accessible. So that was fun.

I'm going to digress on one thing for you. I hope I'm not making your job harder.

Q: No, not at all. Digressions welcome.

Zimmerman: So here's my thing, for you guys to set this—but today, the public, and what you wind up having, the challenge that the designers have, what they had the luxury of doing that they could never do again—let's look at the Long Meadow and let's look at Brooklyn Bridge Park. Knock down drag out fight, Brooklyn Bridge Park, great park, different kind of park, urban, the differences. The views from Brooklyn Bridge Park are exterior. The views from Prospect Park are interior. You want to look within, whereas Brooklyn Bridge Park, you want to look out and see the skyline and the water, all of that. But the other thing is, just think today, we're coming to the public, the community, to present the design of the Long Meadow, a piece of it and they look at it and they ask you, well, what is it? Well, it's going to be a ninety-acre meadow with trees and rolling lawn. It's like um, right, but what are you going to put on it? Well, nothing, we're going to leave it unstructured and let you do what you wish to it. Where are the ball fields going to go? We're not putting ballfields. Um, no golf, no soccer, no volleyball? No, we're not doing any of that. It's just going to be ninety acres of meadow. You're going to design ninety acres of grass? How would that go?

Look at Brooklyn Bridge Park. It's programmed to death, every space, Pier One, Pier whatever.

That was demanded. You couldn't do the Long Meadow, one of the most brilliant designs in urban landscapes. And they say it time and time again—because you come out here at any given day, you have people picnicking. Some of them have Frisbees, some of them will just be sitting quietly. They all decide to do what they want to do, small "d" democratically. It's brilliant. There's no way in hell we could ever do that, not ninety acres. So that's why it's so important for us to take care of it and make sure that doesn't change. I mean, the ballfields happened pre-Landmarks. But that's it. They're tucked down at the end. They're okay. The back stops are put on the sides.

So anyways, there's my digression. You can think of that, next time you're walking at Brooklyn Bridge Park and see that every space has an intent. You walk the Long Meadow and it's completely unprogrammed.

Q: Yes, I'm actually thinking of Domino Park, which I've been to more recently, which is strange to be in and think, "Oh, there's something I was supposed to be doing here? I thought that was just wood but I'm supposed to play bocce?" And this is where I'm supposed to sit but it's Astroturf.

Zimmerman: Yes, right, that's it. You walk this—you see people, just plop down wherever, oh, I like this spot. And children will play or they'll have a dog. Watching the dogs. Two kids will be kicking a soccer ball around. There'll be family gatherings or a picnic. We need more of that and we will never get any more of that.

Q: And there's a way in which preserving that landscape actually kind of keeps the scene changing.

Zimmerman: It's constantly changing. Well, if you think about on a Saturday morning, the sea of dogs walking, and that slowly changes. Then there's the sunbathers. It's kind of like a tide coming in and out. Something brings in something and then something—it's a very beautiful thing. It's just large enough. The Nethermead is less so. It still has some of that aspect but I think because it's so linear, curvy. It has that undulation but it's winding, in that you don't see it all at once. I mean when [President Joseph] Biden won the election, oh, my gosh, the party on that meadow was pretty insane. I have pictures of it. I can send you that. And you see it at its most—and everyone is like hanging out, just sitting and then they did a wave. Everyone was coming in with the signs and there would be this wave. You could hear the rolling cheer as it goes down the meadow. It was one of those fun moments. It's a great place.

Now, Lakeside Center, very different issue, much more controversial in the sense that we were then putting in contemporary design. But the difference in that was that there was always skating in Prospect Park, the original design had it but it was on the lake. The temps would get lower and freeze. There's this romantic view that they skated all the time in the winter, every day in the winter. No—yes, climate change, but no, you see in the annual reports, in 1871, seven days were good for skating. Seven days? Whatever, we can romanticize that now. That's why Moses put this skating rink but they destroyed the most formal landscape of the park, the Concert Grove, the lower terrace. They knocked over a wall. And it was all for recreation. They didn't do it maliciously. The idea was we have a three-hundred-space parking lot. We have a parking lot on

Breeze Hill. We have sixty acres of water. So we take a few acres, big deal. So they just leveled it and put the rink in. But they destroyed this view, this amazing view descending down from the Concert Grove Pavilion to Music Island. Music Island was buried, it was covered.

So the rink was wearing out. We said we need to replace it. Why don't we take the opportunity to move it, build a new one in a new location, and reconstruct the Concert Grove, the historic original design? So we had to study that. We went about going through that. Early on, we thought about putting it in the Parade Ground and people didn't like that idea, the public and internal, because there was always skating and in the park, next to the water, on the water. We needed that feel. And if you built a rink at the Parade Ground, that meant you took ballfields away as an activity. And removing ballfields from children is just not even—not going to go there.

I don't know if you—yes, you were here. So when the Cyclones were first coming to town and they were building a stadium for the Cyclones. And the Giuliani administration came to us and said, well, we need a temporary location for the stadium. And they were going to build for the Coney Island Cyclones a stadium at the Parade Ground. I mean, they were going to do all this but that meant, for one year, two of the fields would be parking. But at the end of that year, when they finally finished the stadium at Coney Island, they would hand over this beautiful baseball field. We didn't want that many bleachers or anything. They would downsize it. The field would be the field but the accoutrements would be more to our scale. The fights at Borough Hall! You had these little children, these little girls, soccer players with their pony tails, crying. And the kids, "You're taking this away from us!" It was just dying. The borough president was the one

fighting Giuliani. They hated each other. So he killed it.

So the wonderfully ironic thing is all the Little Leaguers and all the soccer players, when he killed it, they all turned and said, so now you'll fix it for us. So he had to put his entire capital budget into the Parade Ground. He was furious. He just sat there, he didn't like it. It was so great. But we sunk $21 million into making that a really great facility. So then we couldn't put the rink over there obviously. That wasn't going to happen. So we figured the parking lot at the end was the best location. How that worked, from a landmarks point of view, we actually flew through the approvals because what we were doing was, we were eliminating a three-hundred-car-space parking lot and we were bringing back the most formal Olmsted-Vaux design. So we were actually bringing back a landmark. And yes, we were building a rink but we were replacing a parking lot—that was original. Actually, I've had preservationists when I've done presentations say, "But that's an original carriage concourse." I said yes, but there's no carriages anymore. It's a car space and most people don't use it. They change their batteries and fluid. It wasn't really used.

So that's how the approval process worked actually pretty well because the preservationists understood what we were creating, as long as we did it sensitively. We were getting rid of a parking lot, which we didn't need. It was never full. And we brought that vista back, that promenade. It still took a long time. It still went through the same approvals that our path would be, many more pictures, many more drawings. But that was kind of a win-win in that sense as well, just because you were doing a new facility for recreation. We buried the building. We were trying to hide—not hide the building but treat it like an Olmsted-Vaux landscape. Obviously, the

canopy, the big cover, is pretty dominant but it will change. If you look at it from the original pictures to now, you barely see it from the Concert Grove. And it was thankfully people like Tod and Billie who were sensitive to that. They were looking at the quality of stone and the size and massiveness. But they weren't trying to say "look at me." They weren't McKim, Mead & White trying to say "look at me," it's the diamond, that kind of stuff. I mean, it's a skating facility. It's a pretty nice-looking facility.

Q: Yes, I haven't been there since shortly after it opened, I think.

Zimmerman: It's a little more worn.

Q: [Laughs] Have there been any instances where you've gotten the endorsements of the LPC but are stopped by the Design Commission?

Zimmerman: I don't think so. We've had negative reports from the LPC and Design Commission has overruled them. I'd have to dig those up to get specific but I remember that. I don't ever remember—I can't think of one that just went against Landmarks, saying we're not going to do that. No, that's interesting. I'd have to think about that a little bit more but no, I don't think so. Everything that we've done—and I've worked on every project since 1990—I can't think of one. I'm trying to think, they may have questioned a detail or a pigment.

Q: So is it fair to say that it's been kind of a different administrative reality for you to have to go to them for the final approval but it hasn't necessarily been a challenge or a barrier?

Zimmerman: Well, I wouldn't say that. [Laughs] The challenge is—when we're doing a straight preservation, we sail through. We can do that really, really well. I think because I'm a firm believer, as long as I'm here, that our landscapes should be restrained, not "look at me." So when we built the new entrances on Flatbush Avenue, those are the first new entrances since 1943. There was a moment where there could have been a time where we tried to create some vertical—something to say "look at me." And if you look at it, it's an opening. It's an opening. So what we do is, in that term, it's elegant. It's high-quality. The stone, it's massive as opposed to veneer. It doesn't look veneer. You can see these are big pieces of stone. But it's in keeping with what Olmsted and Vaux would do, low understated but beautiful in the quality of material.

We've done a few projects like that and I think Landmarks sees that we're not trying to grab attention, that we're providing a service to a need and that we're doing it sensitively. You can see that Olmsted and Vaux could have done something like this but it's contemporary. The stone cut, the shape, you would not say—well, I wouldn't anyway, maybe the general public might but I wouldn't say—"Oh, that looks like 1870!" No, it's modern, it's contemporary. But the quality of the stone, the depth, the weight and the combination with rocks and the plantings. It will be interesting when we do the Rose Garden, which is our next big move. Actually, the children's pool which is the Vale of Cashmere. That's what people called it, it's originally called the Children's Pool. It's where they would play with their model boats. So they would do that.

That's a preservation project that will be really interesting. I've been waiting to do that for years because it's like a mini-Prospect Park. It's got the original design shape. It's bounded by

McKim, Mead & White, who added their City Beautiful Movement stone and ballast rock. And then you've got WPA cobble and then you've got the 1960s brick for the centennial. So you've got these layers. We're like, what do you pick? And it's all in this little intimate landscape. So that's a fun one. But the Rose Garden will be all contemporary because it was the Children's Playground originally. It's where our first carousel was. And then it changed to the Rose Garden with the three basins and then new 1960s basins. There aren't any roses. It's long and a bunch of yews. So we'll be doing all contemporary, adding a new building, probably a Zucker-like play experience [referring to Donald And Barbara Zucker Natural Exploration Area] now that's become more and more popular. And then a sensory or a pollinator garden, a contemplative space.

That will be an interesting one to get through Landmarks because they could say, well, go back to building a playground, a big playground. It was the first playground that Olmsted and Vaux created, which was a very different type of playground, see-saws, and play equipment in the 1860s was not the same, as you can imagine. And then we're going to put a building into a hillside, which will be green, compost bathrooms. Because there was nothing over there at the time, it will all be contemporary. But it's, I hope, elegant, quality material but low, understated. With that said, I think PDC is going to have a lot more to say about it because of the design.

Q: And are you the person who is making these presentations and making the argument about the preservation benefits?

Zimmerman: It will be a mix of my team. So the architects will choose the architecture. I'll

probably do the overall why it can change, what existed there. For the Children's Pool, I'll be doing that one because you have to pick the dominant layer. You're going to have to choose—I'm going to choose what layer, and then you've got to say why that layer, why that one over this one, that combination. At the end of the day, it is an argument and it's not clear-cut because layers exist for a reason. You have one being dominant, why?

That's the interesting thing about landscape architecture as opposed to—you're not going to change the Woolworth Building. I guess the Brooklyn Museum is—what they did [they did change it], but there's the Brooklyn Museum, so someone did change that. That's pretty rare. But with landscapes, no one thinks twice about changing a landscape. We'll just add, we'll change. For us to go back, that's a piece where we want to go back to. So, well, how far back do you go? I'm hoping that the landscape itself, the landforms, will be harkening back to the Olmsted-Vaux design and the overall outer shape will be McKim, Mead & White because it's so dominant with all that hard stone. It's beautiful. But it's like, what's right?

The Ravine was easy to bring it back because there was no—the dominant alteration was neglect. No one purposely altered it. There was a swan boat structure but it was small. Other than that, it was just left to sediment in and that was it. So we're scratching on and covering things, and rebuilding some stuff. So that as opposed to something like the Children's Pool where it was altered, multiple times.

And it's tastes. It's kind of the Concert Grove—it actually had the same thing, with the aesthetics. They called it the Flower Garden after the 1888 because ornamentation was very

popular. We had the carpet stairs, which is where you had a granite staircase and then next to it were flower beds in the shape of steps that went down. It's crazy-looking. That must have been a nightmare to take care of. And then Music Island became Scarlet Island because someone at the time decided, oh, I like red flowers. So it was red flowers. I'm sure it was probably cool-looking for a time [laughs] but it's just kind of crazy things.

Q: Yes, it seems like you can make an argument for a different—uplifting another layer and maybe decreasing that. It becomes a little more clear in those examples. Now, when you're working with the individual landmarks within a scenic landmark, what is that process like, for either restoration or routine upkeep?

Zimmerman: Yes, I mean for the Boathouse, we try to adhere to the original design intent. We'll alter the inside if we need to because none of our buildings are interior landmarks. Even the Boathouse, as pretty as it is, it was altered beyond—not worth saving in that sense. For the most part, we do that. What's interesting now is, we're going to Landmarks, our landscape architect is working on an ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] ramp to access the Villa and going back and forth. That's been a real interesting thing. But no one's against accessibility but how do you do that with an 1850s building. I mean, we're so immature compared to—you go to Europe, they're just everywhere. There's not a lot of places, but when they decide to put a ramp in, they put a ramp in. If you think about it, there's a lot of places that aren't accessible in Europe and it's true the pavements alone are pretty harsh. But you see, it would be a Roman ruin with a ramp.

Here, that's argued over for days. But that's going to the commission this month and it's all

about the railing. The ramp is one thing. It's the railing. What do those pickets look like? Should they look like anything? Should they look like Park Slope? All the iron work—should it be contemporary? I'll get back to you. We'll see how it lands but that's coming up.

Q: I wanted to ask also about the features of the park, like you mentioned the Endale Arch, things that are not actually individually landmarked but are obviously notable and historical and part of the design. How is the process different when there's work that you're doing on those or the Camperdown Elm, for example?

Zimmerman: The Endale Arch was interesting. When I sold that—when I got funding for it—sorry, my boss just called. I'm going to text him and say I'm in a meeting.

Q: Okay, thanks.

Zimmerman: Sorry. So Endale—did you see it before, the wood cladding? Had you been here before? Did you remember it? The exposed brick? Graffiti?

Q: Yes, I think I've only seen it in the pre-restoration. I don't think I've seen it in years.

Zimmerman: You've seen it all shiny and—you've seen the pictures?

Q: I've seen the pictures.

Zimmerman: Yes, you should come.

Q: [Laughs] For sure.

Zimmerman: I'm the chief docent of the park, just to let you know, and you need to come here. When I was pitching that for funding, we got private funding for that. That was great but when I was talking about the project, people are going, "It's an arch? It's a tunnel." I'm like no, it's not just a tunnel. It looks like just a tunnel now because it's just worn-out brick but it's not a tunnel. It's a passageway from the urban to the rural. You need to see the transition and feel it and walk through this space. We finally got the funding and finally did it, and we lit it—just kind of snuck that in honestly. At the last minute I said we really need to light this. So we did two strips of LED lights and created this little cove and everybody loves it. No one remembers that no one saw it in the presentations. But they all love it now, so they all own it. I love when those moments happen. When those moments don't happen, that's when they really crash hard. But when they do go well, this is one of those.

But then no one thought the budget was enough but it was private money. It was a craftsman that I had worked with for over twenty years, and he's just a sweetheart of a guy, and he comes to the park to chill. He does high-end residential, high-end work. When he's tired of working with really wealthy people who don't want to pay him and that fight that's constantly—I mean think: Donald Trumps all over the place. He comes to the park and he zens out. He's a craftsman. He's just a beautiful craftsman. You can see the woodwork he's done.

Those are moments that are really great, when landmarks—everyone saw it and the approval process flew through. Even when we said we didn't want to restore it in every way—we wanted to expose the detail of the substructure because the craftsmanship back then, the way they worked on the brick, that was never meant to be seen. It was just tremendous. What's so fun is when you're there, when we first had it and the lights go on at sunset, they follow the summer sunset. And it is a moment where they're walking and everyone is having a conversation and then they stop and they keep walking and they stop talking. But it's "just a tunnel." See? And that's when finally people go oh, it's not a tunnel. No, and it's a beautiful thing. Weddings have taken place, fashion shoots, concerts, everything goes on in that "tunnel." It's a great space. If you have Instagram and search Endale Arch, you'll just see everything in the world in there.

But that was a good project, it was intimate. It was landmarked but there was very little original material. All of the original material was the substructure. So I think the scrutiny changes with landmarks in the sense that you're doing a recreation. You're not doing a restoration or preservation. I mean we preserved the remaining wood but it was maybe twenty percent of the structure, and it's just replicating it. Then you get into are you replicating it well? Are you following the intent and heart of the design? And that's what we do very well. The staff gets into that.

Q: And that would be true of the individual landmarks as well that you're restoring, replicating the original intent?

Zimmerman: Yes, we did the Boathouse, the Tennis House, except for when you're adding

something like the ADA ramp to meet code for accessibility for modern use. Other than that, we try our best to really adhere to what Helmle & Huberty were wanting to do. What did Olmsted and Vaux want to do? What did McKim, Mead & White want to do? When we go back for the Children's Pool, we'll try and recreate a McKim, Mead & White balustrade. We follow their drawings. We don't have detailed drawings for most of the park. We have big plans. We follow the annual report. It says this rustic bridge was fifteen feet wide, forty-five feet long and it was made with black locust. Okay, and then we go back and get photographs and try to do a lot of photo reference. It's fun. It's a mix of contemporary and old, the original.

The nice thing about Prospect Park, I also tell the staff that you could be in any other place, like a city—we are the Parks Department of the medium-sized cities. We have ballfields, we have lakes, we have streams, we have meadows, we have running lanes, we have picnicking, we have everything. It's all condensed. It's New York. The city of Boise has all of this, it's just spread out. Des Moines.

Q: And is it black and white or whatever gray area when these steps of approval are necessary? Are there times where you can say look, we're just touching this up? We're just maintaining the original here and this isn't—I'm not trying to catch you in anything but since we had so many questions about how do you function as a scenic landmark. Also I'm hearing from you that a lot of the scenic aspects are things that you have really felt as somebody who's there and has been there for a long time.

Zimmerman: Do I think I know what's best? Yes. Is that what you want me to say? [Laughs]

Q: [Laughs]

Zimmerman: Do other people think I know what's best? No. That's personality and that happens. Generally, it doesn't happen. That happens with the co-equals, professionals, the other practitioners. It rarely happens with the commissioners. It is the capital projects review, the review with the agency staff, the other landscape architects and their perceptions and view. So I think that's where those struggles take place. So there you have to try and out-Olmsted them or out-Vaux them if you want. Well, I think he believes this. Well, I thought he believe that. This is his intent. No, this is his intent. So yes, there is that. That happens all the time. Isn't that kind of human nature? Every time we show up, we remind them that we're doing it and they aren't. It's a pretty beautiful place to be working.

Some people are fine with it and, like all things through time, I've been through cycles of lots of review and no review. From "they know what they're doing, let's let them do it" to "I don't trust anything that they're doing." They're going to put a rock in the wrong place. Yes, we've run into that in the thirty-one years I've been here. Absolutely, I've run into that, where they just don't trust us to or they trust us too much. I like it in the middle. I really do like them questioning, saying how did you come up with that? Where's the intent? Cite this. As opposed to, "I think Olmsted wanted that." It's completely arbitrary. We say that to them—actually I don't say that to them. Have I said that to them? I might have said that to them, yes.

Q: If you are thinking about—well, as lot of then interviews that we do are with people who are

doing preservation on a grassroots level, small scale. Do you have any insight into—should a scenic landmark status be considered more often than it is? What are the benefits or the downsides of scenic landmark versus individual landmark?

Zimmerman: I think we should be landmarking more recent pieces of work, protecting contemporary, some contemporary. I mean thirty-four years, that's a layer that needs to be preserved. I mean no one thinks twice about architecture having at least a few pieces throughout eras, modern and different layers. But landscapes—you know, Dan Kiley, Lincoln Center, or Peavey Plaza got changed in Minneapolis. Why wasn't that important? I know people like Charles Birnbaum, Cultural Landscape [Foundation], the project where he was battling with [President Barack] Obama. But that's an Olmsted landscape. But contemporary, there's definitely a place for saving some of those, just for a historical sake. And it's a different design and it's a good design. It would be a different aesthetic. There's some old landscapes that don't really—we sometimes preserve things that don't, I'm not sure—I think the interesting thing more and more is we are preserving cultural landscapes, because something important, historically, culturally, Harriet Tubman's homestead. It's not so much the design, it was the activity or what took place and trying to keep it that way, I think, is really important.

What I've had my archivists do, a historian, over the whole COVID era/Black Lives Matter era is—Grand Army Plaza is a huge gathering point for cultural rallies and meetings. So I asked her to do some research to document, see if you can find all of the things that have taken place in Prospect Park culturally. During the war, World War I I'm pretty sure, we had a platoon camped in Prospect Park. There's pictures of military in tents staying there. I know, it's crazy but there

were rallies. Charles Lindbergh landed at the Parade Ground after his flight across—so she started doing this deep dive of the cultural. She's been focusing in. So we documented this because in a period of time, someone's going to want to know that during this period, there was big upheaval, change, people were speaking up. And it wasn't violent. Although certain people wanted it to be but it wasn't violent, it was this group of people who wanted to talk, who wanted to rally and voice and we get that. So we're documenting that piece of cultural landscape and it's important. She's working on trying to identify why is it the gathering space. They all meet in front of the park's entrance, at Grand Army Plaza where the big columns and eagles are, and then march and head off to the Brooklyn Bridge or wherever.

So these landscapes are both aesthetic, recuperative and important civic spaces for public discourse. It's amazing that they can do that, that we do that.

Q: Yes, it is amazing how they support each other.

Zimmerman: Yes, right? There's not a conflict, I don't think. They do support.

Q: Yes, it's been interesting to hear you talk about layers, maybe instead of eras or styles or something—

Zimmerman: Yes, I like layers.

Q: Yes, it makes a lot of sense also because there's so many uses along with that, that you don't

always see with style. Sometimes you might see with eras. So it's been interesting. I think the language that you've used has kept that in the forefront, at least for me listening to what you've shared. And I want to thank you for sharing so many details and examples of how this works, really behind the scenes.

Zimmerman: Hopefully, I won't get into too much trouble.

Q: [Laughs] We certainly don't want to get you into trouble. And just as a closing question, I would just like to ask if there is anything that you would like to add that I haven't asked you about.

Zimmerman: No, the only thing I want to get back to just because of how close we are to it, what's interesting and why these spaces are really important, they're places also that people feel safe. And after 9/11, I was still here in this room. So the jet stream, all the clouds, all the debris flew over and fell into the park, not all of it but a lot of it. I actually have—that piece of paper up there, that's kind of frayed on the end? That's from the tower. That landed in the park. It's just a memory. But what's interesting, days after the event, I'd walk out my door and look and you'd see people, vigils and individuals quietly hugging and holding, just this moment, being really quiet. The park was so quiet, except maybe a child would make a sound. They wanted to be someplace safe. They wanted to be with people or next to people, not necessarily with people. It wasn't big gatherings. It really was small little groups and it was a little nod, you okay, are you doing okay? And the park provides that kind of experience and that safety. I think it's why we have so many commemorative trees that are for celebrating births, a death, a marriage. The

connection, the individual visceral connection to this landscape overwhelms me, honestly, when I think of that. I feel blessed to be having spent my career here, essentially, to see all of that and experience it. And as many as people get angry and do all kinds of crazy stuff, there's ten times that where this is special, that this is important for celebrations, for memorials. It's a beautiful thing. I hope no one ever takes it for granted. There you go.

Q: Yes, thank you and I certainly need to visit again soon.

Zimmerman: Yes, you need to call me then.

Q: Okay, [laughs] I will. I will indeed.

Zimmerman: I can give you more perspective.

Q: Yes, that would be amazing. Well, thank you again so much for sharing all this information. It's super helpful and also just for your perspective, it was really nice to hear how you spoke about these things. So I really appreciate that.

Zimmerman: Well, thank you. Thank you for letting me talk.

Q: Absolutely. And I'll be in touch shortly and until then, take care.

Zimmerman: Okay, take care. Bye-bye.

Q: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]