

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Alex Herrera

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Alex Herrera conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on July 21, 2022. 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.

Alex Herrera began his career working in architecture, gravitating towards projects that involved older buildings. He furthered this interest at Columbia's historic preservation program and within a few years, he got a job at the Landmarks Preservation Commission working in the preservation department, eventually becoming Director of Preservation under Gene Norman. During his time there, he was instrumental in developing a more clear and efficient filing system for permits, and committing to writing the Commission's rules governing alterations to windows, brownstone, terra cotta, cast iron, commercial awnings, signage, fire escapes, stoops, and iron work for buildings in historic districts, which he did alongside Dorothy Miner.

After nineteen years at the Commission, Herrera moved to the Landmarks Conservancy, where he worked as the Director of Preservation Services. In this role, he assisted the public with residential projects, such as upkeep and repair to brownstones, and also directed the Conservancy's work at many sites around the city, including the St. Ann's Warehouse Theater, Moynihan Train Hall, the Olmsted-Beil House Park, and the TWA Terminal. Herrera won the Sloan Public Service Award, the only person ever from the Landmarks Commission to receive it, as well as the Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award, which he was awarded for his remarkable career.

In this interview, he describes the early days of working in the field before preservation professionals and architects had knowledge and resources about technical restoration, and also reflects on changing attitudes towards architectural styles over his long career. He speaks in detail about the function of zoning resolutions 74-711 and 74-79, providing examples of where they were important in the work of the Landmarks Commission. He also describes working with the different chairs of the Commission on their major landmarking projects, as well as the sites that he stewarded while working at the Landmarks Conservancy.

Transcriptionist: Sarah Dziedzic

Session: 1

Interviewee: Alex Herrera

Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic

Date: July 21, 2022

Q: Today is July 21, 2022 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Alex Herrera for the New York Preservation Archive Project. We're doing this interview remotely via video call. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Herrera: Of course. I'm Alex Herrera and I am now retired. But I spent a good forty-one years in the field, so I have, I guess you could say, seen it all. Today I'm very grateful to have been asked by the Preservation Archive Project to talk a little bit about my history in preservation and the people I've worked with and how things have changed. So I'm very pleased and happy to do that. I could never say everything, of course, because it's been a long, long time and there's been so many players and so many projects—it's been incredible. Wherever I go in New York City, I see, oh yes, that project, this project. [laughs]

Just to start off, I went to school to study architecture at the University of Virginia. At that beautiful school and that campus, with the buildings designed by Thomas Jefferson, and McKim, Mead & White, it really showed me how historic buildings can function and work and establish a sense of place. I had wonderful professors, both of architecture and of art history. Frederick Hartt was my art history professor, he wrote the book that all undergraduates used throughout the country on the history of art. So he was our professor. And then also, I studied under Mario di Valmarana in the architecture department, and he of course is from the family that commissioned

several villas by Palladio, which we went to visit. The University of Virginia was amazing. It opened up a lot of scenarios for me.

Afterwards, I got a job at an architecture firm. What I was drawn to the most was the projects involving older buildings, and they were not projects that other architects were particularly interested in, so I was put on them since I was the low man on the totem pole. But it worked out fine because I was actually interested in them, more so than in the giant houses that they were designing for the ultra-wealthy. And then I decided to pursue it, and so I went to Columbia University and entered their Historic Preservation program, and that was like a whole new life; that opened up a series of ventures and lifelong friends, and it really cemented the fact that this was my calling. And so that's what I did.

After Columbia, I got a job with a fellow named John Meadows, and we were working at the Plaza Hotel, and the idea was to do the as-built drawings. They could not find the original drawings of the Plaza so they didn't really have drawings. My colleagues and I would spend weeks measuring every room [laughs]—in the basement, in the bowels of the Plaza—to create the drawings. So that was an interesting first job.

Then I got another job with John Young Associates in architecture. Then around the end of 1979, there was a dip in the economy and work started to dry up, and I think the project we were working on was coming to an end and someone said to me, "Oh, you know they have an opening at the Landmarks Commission?" And I thought, oh, that would be a hoot to work at the Landmarks Commission and to be there for a year or two to see what they do. Because it's such a

mystery how they do everything. So I said that sounds like fun.

So I went down, I made an appointment, and I met with Lenore Norman, who was the long-time executive director of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. I got the job right away! And it was so unusual because someone else was online to get that job and the paperwork took so long—the City of New York was so dysfunctional in getting the paperwork—that he just walked away. He got fed up and took another job. So they had a line and no one to fill it. It was one of those [laughs] being at the right place at the right time things. I started working there the next week, at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and I stayed for almost nineteen years.

Now, the Commission at that time, we had an office at 305 Broadway, which is a beautiful Neo-Romanesque skyscraper. And our office I think, in those days, could be described as a dump, but this is New York in 1979, 1980—everything in New York was decrepit at that time. I was there for a short time. We moved to new offices under the chairmanship of Kent Barwick, who had been recently appointed by Mayor Koch as the chair of the Landmarks Commission—I didn't know him at all and I didn't meet him through the interview process. In fact, at first, I found him a little aloof, but since he was the chair, that was appropriate. I was just the new kid. But then I quickly got to know him and work with him.

I started work in the preservation department, which is the department that reviews plans and reviews proposed alterations to landmarks and then writes permits and reports on it. So that's where my architectural background really came in handy because the whole job consists of reading plans and doing it quickly and knowing about these things. So that was good. And the

director of preservation at the time was Margaret Tuft. She was the director of preservation for a while until Kent replaced her. So she was my first boss. Now, at the time, and for many years, the Landmarks Preservation Commission was really run by three women, and we on the staff used to call them the *troika*. It was Lenore Norman, who was the executive director, Joan Olshansky, who was chief of staff, and Dorothy Miner, who was the counsel. And these three very formidable ladies really ran the Commission through various chairs. That was my start.

I still remember my very first project. Margaret Tuft put it on my desk. She said, here, deal with this. It was the restoration of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. The sculpture on top of the arch, which is a chariot with a goddess and four horses, the goddess had been knocked over by a bolt of lightning and was on her side and the whole thing was just falling apart. It was symbolic of the state of the city at that time. Anyway, it was a wonderful project. I wrote a report and thought it was great that the Department of Parks & Recreation was restoring the arch. Interestingly enough, two years ago, I saw that they were doing it again. So if you are around long enough [laughs] you actually see projects that were done being done again because, after forty years, the sculptures needed new work done on them. There were other projects in those early years, like the Villard Houses, which were just coming online, part of the Helmsley Palace Hotel. That was very interesting.

Once I was there, I realized that the whole department needed to be reorganized because we were not keeping track of the permits in a very efficient way. In fact, they were still filing by street name, which is completely impractical, especially as new historic districts came online. I figured out, along with Frank Sanchis, a new system of filing under docket numbers. You know, this is

just the nuts and bolts of the department, and I've never told anyone this, but I figured out this whole system, and we had these big ledger books, like from Dickens, and we'd write in them—not with feather pens but they might as well have been—wrote down all the entries way before there were computers. Then, when the Commission did become computerized, they used the same system. And they just kept the database in the computer. So that was interesting. Of course, at the time, we wrote permits freehand, gave them to the typist, the typist would type them with carbon [laughs], and we would send it off.

Early on, after I'd been working there maybe six months or a year, a fellow came on. I didn't know him—he wasn't from New York, I think he came from Ohio—and he became an assistant to Kent Barwick to replace Adele Chatfield-Taylor, who was somebody I knew from Columbia. She was, I think the title was “confidential assistant”—I love that title—“to the chair.” So this person's name was Anthony [Tony] Wood. I met Tony, it must have been back in '81, and so I've known Tony for a long, long time. And we hit it right off, he was so nice. It was just great to have somebody more or less my age to chat with and to be friends with.

So Kent. Kent was an interesting character to work for. I like him very much and I think he's as smart as anything, but it was difficult working for him sometimes because he liked to hold public hearings way into the evening. So we would start these hearings at 9:30 in the morning and they would go all day. We'd have an hour for lunch, maybe, and then it would go on until 11:00 at night, sometimes till midnight. And he used to say, “You know, things start out slow but I really catch on fire at 11:00 PM.” And after 11:00 PM, they started to do the motions and approve the various things they had seen that day. It was a good thing I was young because going in for these

twenty-hour days, or eighteen-hour days, was exhausting. So this is one of the quirks that he had.

One of his big achievements—he had several—but one of his big achievements was the designation of the Upper East Side Historic District. I think actually that was one of his big goals, just to get this done. The area along Fifth Avenue between roughly 61st Street and 79th Street—everybody knows the huge mansions on Fifth Avenue were mostly all torn down except for a handful that are now institutions, but the houses just in from Fifth Avenue were very well preserved, being one-of-a-kind mansions and houses. Very historic, they all had historic associations, beautiful architecture. And of course, even back then, there was pressure—starting to be pressure—of redevelopment. There wasn't much development in the 1970s because the city was bankrupt and in a bad way, but starting in the 1980s, it started to pick up. There was fear that there would be just wholesale demolition of that historic fabric and that it needed to be designated. And of course, it was very difficult because this is very, very expensive real estate owned by very, very influential people. So people thought it was impossible, just impossible.

Somehow Kent, and his connection to the Municipal Art Society and other places, they did get the historic district through. And then at the last minute, at the City Council, there were negotiations that led to special rules governing Madison Avenue. And another thing, which is sort of odd, which is any building that is described as no-style could be demolished, which was not the intent of the people writing the report. It was just that some houses, especially brownstones, had been stripped and had been stuccoed over, and so those were called no-style. But they were mid-nineteenth century or late-nineteenth century houses—they were historic. So those two things were part of the horse-trading that happened at the last minute in order to get the

historic district designated. It was a huge achievement and nobody thought that it could be done. So, you know, kudos to Kent for that.

And he did call me in for meetings sometimes, like when he was meeting bigshots like Robert Stern. One day, he said I want you to come to this meeting we're having at this place called India House. I had no idea what that was. He said it's a private club and we're going to talk to them about a proposal to transfer unused development rights from their club building to a property across the street and it's going to be a huge transfer. These transfers, by the way, at the Landmarks Commission, are done through a zoning process called 74-79 [Transfer of Development Rights from Landmark Sites], which I became an expert in working very closely with Dorothy.

So we came to this club, India House in Hanover Square, and it's a very unusual building because it was initially the Bank of Hanover, and there aren't any other banks from that period that survived in the Financial District from the 1840s, 1850s. It had been converted to a private club and this place was a real trip. You walk in and there were model ships everywhere. There were ships in bottles. There were ships in aquariums. There were paintings of ships. They served us coffee in china that had little ships on it. And the members were, I would say, older financial types. They were all Wall Street types. And just to cut to the chase, the reason I was invited was because he couldn't bring Margaret Tuft because she was a woman. And women were not allowed even to set foot—do you believe that?—in the club. It was really one of these antediluvian clubs. Well, I guess all of the clubs were like that back then. And so we talked about this transfer of development rights deal, which did happen, and it resulted in a windfall for the

club.

I think the building was best known because in the basement there was the pub, Harry's Restaurant and Bar, which was a favorite of the Wall Street crowd. Later, when the Commission moved to 100 Old Slip, we were right down the street from Harry's. And I always say that when I would walk home at night—this is before the internet or anything like that—I would know whether the stock market was up or down depending on the noise coming out of Harry's [laughs]. If there were happy sounds, it was one thing. If there was silence and unhappy sounds, it was another. Anyways, so that's Harry's in India House. That was my long-winded story about that.

At some point, I was promoted to deputy director [of preservation] and the chairmanship was taken over by someone who was new to us named Gene Norman. And he came to us from the Harlem Urban Development Corporation and we really didn't know him. It was a coincidence that he had the same surname as Lenore Norman. So for a while we called ourselves The Normans. Gene was wonderful. I think, of all the chairpeople I've worked with, I'd have to say Gene was my favorite, just because I guess we worked so closely. He really relied on me a lot as deputy director. And then at some point, the director of preservation at that time, Frank Sanchis, went off, I think to work for the National Trust [for Historic Preservation], so I was promoted as acting director while they searched for someone who was smart enough to be the actual director [laughs]. So that was all under Gene Norman.

Gene had several very important projects in his tenure, including the designation of the

Broadway Theaters, which I was involved with the whole time. It was really amazing. And the St. Bartholomew's Church [St. Bart's] hardship case [*St. Bartholomew's Church v. City of New York*]. So those were two things that I remember very well from Gene Norman's days, though of course, there were a million other things that he did. He was a great advocate. He didn't really know a lot about preservation but he was a quick study. And I think he relied on Frank and me a lot, and so that was really great.

At that time, the department started to grow and we started to hire more people because there were so many more properties that had been designated. The Upper East Side alone was a huge number of properties, and then we went on to designate other large districts, including the Tribeca districts, a lot of districts in Brooklyn, Prospect Heights. And so, we did grow, and a fellow by the name of William [Bill] Cary was hired as the director of preservation. I went back to being deputy under him. And you couldn't ask for a nicer person than William Cary. He was just a wonderful and brilliant man. He came to us from Weeksville Heritage Center and he had been their architect there along with Roz Lee. You know, these little houses that had been discovered through aerial reconnaissance—it's a great story, about Weeksville—that had been saved. Bill had been all over the world. He did a lot of restoration in Yemen of all places. He and I really got along, which was good because sometimes there can be a little friction between somebody who was acting. So William was there for several years, and when he left, I finally was promoted to director by Gene Norman.

I wanted to talk a little about St. Bart's.

Q: Yes, I think it would be great if you could give some examples of, in your role, what were you doing around this particular site.

Herrera: Okay, great. St. Bartholomew's Church came in, I think around 1985 or 1986, with a proposal to build a 57-story office building, a skyscraper, on the site of their community house and garden. The designation of the church included three pieces: the church itself, and the community house, and the garden. This is the ensemble designed by the [Bertram] Goodhue Firm—all of a piece! So they came in wanting to demolish the community house to build this building. The congregation was split but the rector was very gung-ho about this and wanted, of course, the revenue that would come from this. And they wanted to use the base of the building—the cellar, sub-cellar, and a couple other floors—for their activities. They thought, this is a win-win. I went to many of the meetings with the architects, but when it came forward to the Commission, nobody thought it was a good idea. And of course, the community people were besides themselves, and after a long process of review, the Commission denied it. And they came back with a shorter tower, I think a 42-story tower, but it was really the same thing so the Commission denied it.

By denying it, they opened the door to the next step, which was to come in under hardship. The church did make a filing of hardship and a very serious lawsuit really challenging the constitutionality of the designation of religious properties, both in terms of the freedom of exercise of religion, and also the taking. So their argument was that the community house was no longer adequate to serve the various functions that they wanted to have, including a school, and a gymnasium, and pool, various conference rooms, and meeting rooms for various groups like

Alcoholics Anonymous and the other groups that would meet. They gave us this whole breakdown of how much space they had and how much space they needed and how it was inadequate.

One of the first things I had to do, was to take my trusty tape measurer from the Plaza Hotel days, and I went in and I measured every room of the community house to come up with base drawings of what the community house was. I worked very closely with an architect who was one the board at the time, Frances Halsband, and she's with the firm of Kliment Halsband. She and I worked together on these drawings and we found out that the information they had given us was erroneous, that the community house was much bigger than they said. Really, it was perfectly adequate to house all the activities that they wanted. It already had a gymnasium—a huge gymnasium—it already had a pool—a huge pool—and it had, on the upper floors, it had tremendous space where you could have a conference center, you could have a school. All of this could be accommodated. Plus, we found, from the original architect's plans, that it had been built specifically to take additional floors, so if the church had wanted, it could add a floor or two on top, and the building was designed to take that load. So it was adequate for their current needs, and if in the future they wanted to expand, they could expand the building.

So based on that, and the fact that their submission to us was erroneous, and that their current building was perfectly adequate to meet their needs, the Commission turned it down. And this was a huge step. It was a very courageous thing for the Commission to do. And so of course it went to court, and the lower courts upheld the Commission. And it then finally went to the Court of Appeals, and I think it wasn't until 1989 or 1990 that the final Court of Appeals upheld the

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Finally! It was based just on the facts as we saw them, but there was fear at the time that it would go to the Supreme Court because it was really a question of constitutionality.

But by that time, I guess the steam had gone out of the folks in the congregation who wanted this project. The rector had left. And so there was no longer the desire on the part of this congregation to pursue this project, and it just died. How lucky for the Commission and for New York City that the community house was not torn down. And probably the building would not have been built because there was a downturn in the economy at that point. So it would have been a disaster, really. A disaster. So that was averted, I think, by the very courageous action of my friend, Gene Norman, and by people on the board at the time like Frances Halsband and the others who were there: Elliot Willensky, Anthony Tung, I think Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel was still at the Commission at that time. She was certainly there when I started. So that was one of Gene's big victories.

The other project that I was very involved with was the theaters. A couple of Broadway theaters had been demolished: The Helen Hayes Theater, the Rialto Theater. There were a couple of beautiful historic theaters that had been demolished to construct the Marriot Marquis hotel and another hotel. So it was felt that the remaining historic theaters were so important to the cultural history of New York City—and even, you could say, of the United States—that they should be designated. I, at the time, being director of preservation and being wary of all the trouble this would bring [laughs]—I said to Gene, “I don't think it's a good idea to designate all the Broadway theaters. Designating all of them is a little much.” But it was bad advice. He felt that

you have to designate all of them. And he did designate all of them. But in order to do so, there had to be a deal struck with the theater owners and guidelines were put in place for how theaters could be changed for a production. I think the example for that was the production of *Cats*, and how the theater was completely redone to look like a garbage dump or whatever the cats lived in, and then afterwards it would be completely put back. And so the rules were set up. There were certain theaters where the interiors were not designated, and others where only the interior was designated.

One of the theaters where the exterior was not designated was the Palace Theater, which is currently in the news because it's being raised thirty feet up to be in a new building. It's the same site except it's been elevated thirty feet. So that's an incredible structural tour de force. But again, the interior was protected by that designation. There's another theater that's on 42nd Street that was put on rollers and rolled down the street. So the designation really, I can tell you, it just effected that area so, so much that 42nd Street became unrecognizable. Now, some people bemoaned that fact because they felt that the old 42nd Street with all the pornographic movies and the cheap electronic stores was better. But I think most New Yorkers felt that it was an improvement.

The first real big theater that was restored was the New Amsterdam Theater, which is such a beautiful building and it's the only theater that I know of in the city that's Art Nouveau, so it's a very rare Art Nouveau style in New York City. It's breathtaking. when I first walked into the New Amsterdam, there were mushrooms growing in the orchestra on the floors. There were big holes in the ceiling. It was a disaster! It was the worst place—you could almost say it was too far

gone. But the Walt Disney Corporation bought it. I have to give them all the kudos in the world. Their team was really great. So imaginative and so great. And they restored the thing. And they put back the ornate boxes that had been taken down long before. The original murals were rolled up and stored upstairs in a damp room and those murals were restored and put back up. An original light fixture was found behind one of the fake walls, and so that was used as a prototype. So it was a wonderful restoration. Just unbelievable, it was a breathtaking restoration. And that sort of set the tone for the other theaters. That was Gene Norman. That's how I'll always remember Gene—for those kinds of projects. And of course, also for designating so many new districts.

With the increase in permits came problems in regulating. You have to understand, in 1980s New York, preservation was not a thing. There were not contractors necessarily who were specialized in it. It was very difficult to find anyone who could do this kind of specialty work. So our frustration at the time was just how do you restore? European craftsmen came over and really saved our bacon. They were craftsmen from Italy and Spain who came over to do stucco repair of brownstone façades. Unfortunately, many of the houses in New York City were built of the worst possible building material, this brown sandstone, which was chosen because it was soft—easy to carve—but it did not do well in New York City climate. And then we had Polish workers coming over, experienced from the reconstruction of Warsaw, and they knew their stuff. They knew stuff that we didn't know. And so these people taught a new generation of craftsmen and, pretty soon, people did come up that knew how to do these projects.

One of the issues that kept dogging the Commission, kept hounding us, was the question of

windows. New Yorkers did not want to keep their old double-hung windows, especially in apartment buildings, especially at Fifth Avenue, which had been designated in the Upper East Side Historic District. Everyone on Fifth Avenue wanted the big windows, the single-pane windows, to maximize their view but also to eliminate noise and dirt. So it was just the biggest, ongoing—it's like hitting your head against a brick wall—every time we went to a hearing there was another proposal. And then also, people who lived in brownstones, when they renovated their houses, spending lots of money to renovate, they wanted new windows.

So it became apparent that we needed some kind of rules to govern these windows. So Gene asked Charles Hasbrouck to write rules governing windows, and Charles, at the time, I believe he was director of survey or something like that. Very smart fellow, wonderful guy, everyone loved him. Died very young, unfortunately, as so many others did, of AIDS. So Charles wrote, but unfortunately what he wrote just didn't work. It wasn't workable. He didn't work in the preservation department. I said to Gene, if you want rules, you need to have somebody who works in the department write them—I said, "I'll write them. I should write the rules." And he looked at me like, okay, in your spare time you're going to write the rules? So I did. I wrote the rules based on my experience at the public hearings and what the Commissioners approved and what they didn't approve. So I wasn't inventing the wheel, I was just recording it. Usually, people come in with this type of proposal, they don't get approval. If you want to get approved, you have to come in with this kind of proposal. And I noticed that the Commission treated apartment buildings differently than row houses, so that's why the rules were written that way.

It became a real flashpoint. Really controversial. Many in the preservation community hated

them because I think they just wanted us to say no to everything, which is not practical in New York. You just can't do it. We were already being sued by some fancy Fifth Avenue co-ops. Dorothy was pulling her hair out over this. We had to come up with something. And thank god, fortunately, the window industry saw that this was an opportunity to make a lot of money and so they did start coming up with products that could work in historic buildings.

The whole process of adopting these window guidelines took about two years and at the time—I started as acting director and then I was director. People were just so antagonistic. Fortunately, I have a very thick skin and I just explained to people that this was nothing new. This was what the Commission was doing anyway, it's just written down. Finally, finally, it was approved by the Commission. So the Commission had these written rules that in the end we called guidelines, that was a huge step for the Commission and I felt very proud that I had written them. We even did a special category called special window and I sat down, using my old drafting talents, and I drew the windows. Not only did I write them but I illustrated them, and they were a thing.

This came in handy because windows were not the only thing that were contentious. There were lots of other things. How do you restore terra cotta? The words terra cotta elicited fear in the hears of architects. Architects didn't learn about these things at school! We had no idea what terra cotta was, nobody made it. It was just a weird, very troublesome building component that nobody really understood. And it was years later that companies started up again, making terra cotta. There was a whole 180-degree shift, and architects are taking apart the old buildings and looking at old architectural standards, starting to understand how the terra cotta was manufactured, how it was installed, how it failed. Slowly but surely, we got a handle on it. Cast

iron. How do you deal with cast iron? So there were a lot of things like that. The Commission had to really get a grip on this and do some rules.

I didn't talk about the offices—we started off at that office at 305 Broadway, and then Kent moved us to 20 Vesey Street, which was a landmark, I think the former Evening Post Building. It was a lovely office overlooking the World Trade Center. And then from there we moved to 225 Broadway, which was the building directly next to the Woolworth Building, and those were probably the most magnificent offices the Commission has ever had.

I remember one day at 225 Broadway, Dorothy Miner walked into my office and said, “Alex, I need to talk to you.” And I thought, uh oh, what now? She said, “We need to come up with rules—for everything.” I said, “Why?” “Well, the City Council will not ratify the Tribeca Historic District”—or whatever historic district—“without us having rules.” Not just for windows, not just for Madison Avenue storefronts, but for everything. So Dorothy and I sat down and we started to list all the things and to write the rules. I would write the drafts, she would go over them, and in about a month, we had all of these rules written to cover all of the items that we would ordinarily see. Items like brownstone, terra cotta, cast iron, commercial awnings, signage, fire escapes, stoops, iron work. So if you go to the Commission website today, those rules have been rewritten, and they're much more legalese, but they're basically the same rules that Dorothy and I wrote back in the early 1990s under pressure from the City Council.

Of course, the City Council reviewing the designations and other things as an oversight body was a big change because when I started at the Commission, all of that was reviewed by The Board

of Estimate. It consisted of the mayor and the four borough presidents, and maybe one other person—the comptroller maybe—they were the six men in a smoke-filled room that made the decisions. And that was found to be unconstitutional because Brooklyn had one representative with two million people and Staten Island had one representative and 300,000 people, so it was found to be unconstitutional. So the Board of Estimate, which dated back to colonial days, had to be dissolved and all the oversight shifted over to the City Council.

I remember Kent being concerned about this because he could deal with five men. Difficult as they may be, you would kind of have a handle on them. But the City Council was like a herd of cats. So people were very frightened about the City Council. “What will the City Council do?” But actually, in this particular instance, the City Council saying that we needed rules, they were absolutely right. And for somebody like me, in my position of director of preservation, it was so important because, by this point, the department had grown. We were ten or eleven people in the department and everyone had their own idea of what preservation should be. So to have standardized rules was so crucial in every way. So thanks to Dorothy, we sat down and we got these rules out. And that was mostly under Gene Norman.

Q: When you wrote these rules, was it similar to the windows, where you were bringing some sort of transparency or written format to how the Commission already operated?

Herrera: That’s exactly right. There were some things that we just had to go with the best practice because the Commission didn’t see as many items that we would see at staff level. But yes, we were basically just ratifying or writing down what we were already doing, and what we

had years and years and years of experience doing as the largest historic preservation commission in the country. It was a heavy lift. Again, there was resistance, not just from the Real Estate Board but also from the Historic Districts Council. You get resistance from both sides. I think that's what made it difficult for chairpeople like Gene to sort of maneuver.

After Gene stepped down and went off to a fabulous job, he was replaced by David Todd, who was a longtime-serving commissioner and was somebody I admired greatly. And David, he was an architect and a very sophisticated man, native Manhattanite, just a terrific person, and so smart. And retired—he had a practice but he was retired, and he was no spring chicken, but very spry and very smart. David had particularly good knowledge of churches because he was a deacon at Trinity Church on Wall Street, so he was kind of a hotshot layperson in the Episcopal hierarchy, so he knew about churches.

That was good because under his tenure, we had a lot of issues with various churches, such as the church of St. Paul and St. Andrew on West End Avenue, and other churches that were losing congregation that had these enormous maintenance bills to pay for. He was a wonderful steward at that time for that work. At the time we started working closely with the Landmarks Conservancy and they set up a Sacred Sites Program, where churches would be given matching grants. That helped, even though it might have been somewhat symbolic because the grants were not huge, but it was still something. So David Todd was great for that.

The other thing I remember David Todd for was for the designation of Tribeca. It was David Todd's idea to separate the Tribecas into separate manageable bites [laughs], manageable meals,

because it was too politically charged to do the whole thing at once. So Tribeca West, I think was the first designation. And for that, the City Council wanted rules just for that historic district. And so the next rules that I wrote were the Tribeca West Guidelines—and I think they're still kicking around somewhere. That was under David Todd.

David was replaced by Laurie Beckelman, who was the next chairperson I worked for. Laurie was an absolute gas to work for. She just was an amazing person. I'd never met anybody like that. You'd go down to her car—she'd say, "Can you help me bring this down to my car?" So we go down to the car and we open the trunk and in the trunk were evening gowns that she would put on because every night she had one or two events—after work! So she was just a dynamo. Some of my funniest stories about Laurie involved a car, the company car and her driving. After a while, I told Laurie, "Laurie, I'll drive." [laughs] Because she would be driving the car with one hand, talking on the phone with the other, rolling down the window with her elbow and yelling at pedestrians. She was—multitasking. After a while, I said, "I'll drive." She was great.

Laurie did a lot. And she came to the Commission from the Conservancy, and she was appointed by David Dinkins. And when David Dinkins didn't get a second term, Mayor Giuliani came in and he replaced her—I think she was the last commissioner to be replaced. She was there for almost a year after Mayor Giuliani [was sworn in]. Part of the reason for that was the person he wanted to replace her, Jennifer Raab, was on maternity leave. As soon as Jennifer was able to go back to work, Laurie was replaced. And so the last chairperson I worked for was Jennifer Raab. You might know of her, or have heard of her—she's now the president of Hunter College. Another mover and shaker, another brilliant chair.

I think the Commission was very lucky to have these people. It's not a high-paying job. And people sometimes think, "Oh, being Chair of the Landmarks Commission, that's like being Ambassador to Luxembourg." It's like this [laughs] plum assignment that's just prestige and not a lot of work. They couldn't be more wrong. Being a chair of the Commission is trying.

I just wanted to, briefly, before we go on to Jennifer, talk about the process of 74-711 and 74-79, which are these two things that I'm not sure if everybody understands how important they were, and what an important part of the job of the Commission, especially of the preservation department, these two things were. It gave enormous power to the Commission, especially 74-711, which gave power to the Commission to override zoning. The rationale would be, in order for the landmark to survive, it needed to be put to a use that was counter to the zoning. And this was particularly true in cases of areas like Soho or the Fulton Ferry District, which were zoned manufacturing, and the manufacturing use was just leaving New York. There was just no way around it. They were going to places near the city but outside the city, where they could have their plants in one story, where there was room for the trucks, and these buildings were emptying out.

If you're my age, you remember Soho as being a tumbleweed—there was nobody in Soho—it was like a deserted neighborhood. I remember going down there with friends from Columbia and saying, "Oh my god, this neighborhood is amazing! Who knew about this? There's nobody here!" But actually there were people there. There were artists who, being very savvy, realized that these big empty spaces were being left empty by the hat manufacturers and shoe

manufacturers and other people that had left, and they had started living there and making art—illegally. Because the two things that the zoning did not allow in Soho—I always say this—was residential and retail, [laughs] which are the two things that define Soho today. But those were the two things that were not allowed.

So through the 74-711 process, we were able, one by one, to allow these artist living-working lofts to be made legal, and for the retail establishments to be make legal. Now, the retail that existed in Soho, prior to the designation, was grandfathered in. But once a store left and a space was vacant, you couldn't have another store go in. So the Landmarks Preservation Commission took a very active role in zoning issues in New York during those years because the most active place was Soho, and I think the City Planning Commission was a little bit miffed about that. They had never envisioned this provision of the zoning law to have this kind of impact on a whole neighborhood. And you may wonder, why didn't the zoning department [Department of City Planning] go in and revise the zoning, as they have just done recently? It was because of politics, and there were very important, powerful groups in the city that did not want manufacturing leaving the city, and didn't want the city kind of encouraging manufacturing to leave. But stopping buildings in Soho from being used was not going to encourage manufacturing not to leave. So that was all through the 74-711 process.

The other one, 74-79—

Q: Before you go on, how was 74-711 identified as a tool that could be useful in this situation?

Herrera: You know, that's a good question. I don't know how it first happened. I think that maybe in the old days there was a lot more cooperation between city agencies, and the Department of City Planning agreed that the Landmarks Preservation Commission, as a land use agency, could take over this role in the rare instances where the zoning was incompatible with the preservation of the building. But we realized that this is what could help Soho and Tribeca.

Spearheading that, of course, was the legal mind of Dorothy Miner. She was both a lawyer and a planner, so she was like the ideal person to really figure this all out. And I have to say that I'm so privileged to have been by her side. It was the director of preservation and the counsel who shepherded the 74-711 and 74-79 projects through, and they were a huge part of the job. It wasn't just windows—it was also strategies for keeping these buildings alive. What we inadvertently did—we didn't realize—was we changed the whole character of the historic district, so it just became this whole new thing that Ada Louise Huxtable, in her last book before she passed away, that she railed against. So everything has a double edge. But on the whole, I think that what the Commission did was for the good, even though it had its downsides. Working with Dorothy very closely on these land use regulations was really a big part of my job.

It's too numerous to list examples. I mean, I talked about India House earlier, and there were a lot of instances like that. The most famous is Grand Central, where there were unused development rights. And the unused development rights is not just an add-on to the Landmarks Law—it is crucial to the finding of constitutionality that the Supreme Court based its decision on, the fact the owners of landmarked property could sell their unused development rights. So people who said we should do away with that didn't understand that it saved the Landmarks

Law, in a way.

Anyway, let me take a breath before I move on to the last chair. Ask me any questions. Am I talking about the wrong things?

Q: You're talking about exactly the rights things. Just cruising through my questions, answering them before I get to ask them. It's super helpful to hear about each of the chairpersons and what that experience was like. And I just want to clarify that the unused development rights is the 74-79 zoning—

Herrera: That's the 74-79 provision and the 74-711 provision is for the use—mostly for the use.

Q: I know I interrupted you before you were about to go into the 74-79 provision so if there's anything you'd like to add to that, please do.

Herrera: Well, 74-79 buildings are always difficult because what the Commission needs to do in that case is to find a harmonious relationship between the landmark and the new building. And how do you find a harmonious relationship between a six-story 1840s bank and a 57-story new high-rise? So it was always sort of bogus. One of the examples is 60 Wall Street, which was the building that was designed by Kevin Roche, and is right across the street from the old Custom House, now Cipriani's [55 Wall Street]. And that magnificent building, which is two layers—the lower layer was Isaiah Rogers and the upper stories were McKim, Mead & White, with a magnificent interior. So that transferred development rights across the street to 60 Wall Street.

And the architect there, if you look at it, designed columns that mirrored or echoed the landmark, and so the best they could do was to have the base of the building echo or be harmonious with the landmark, and the rest of the building you just didn't see because it was way up there.

So 74-79 was influential, and at the time, Dorothy would request an easement be given to the Landmarks Conservancy to ensure that these buildings would be maintained. And that's something I didn't have anything to do with at the Commission but I had everything to do with when I went over to my other job at the Conservancy.

But the last chair was Jennifer Raab. I remember meeting her for the first time. I was in the city car and I went to pick her up at her law firm, and Joan Olshansky had set it up, and I was going to give her a drive through a historic district. She was very interested and she wanted to go to Brooklyn Heights, so we cross over the Brooklyn Bridge and through Brooklyn Heights and we chatted about a bunch of stuff. And of course, she was a very quick study. I have to say that she was grateful to me explaining and all of that.

And she brought on Valerie Campbell as counsel—a very controversial step of removing Dorothy Miner, something that I think the preservation community never forgave her for. And she did it rather abruptly, it's true. But I remember when Valerie came as a student intern under Dorothy, so Valerie knew, because she had worked with Dorothy. So at least she brought in someone who knew about preservation law and that sort of thing.

What Jennifer did, which was really her big achievement, was she tackled the designation of the

buildings in the Financial District. The buildings in the Financial District, with the notable exception of the old boys' club, India House, resisted designation. This is still the stronghold of capitalism and the big bank buildings did not want to be designated, and yet, they were some of the most wonderful skyscrapers from the golden age of Art Deco and the Jazz Age. These buildings are magnificent! Like 14 Wall Street and 1 Wall Street and 74 Pine Street and all of the great skyscrapers. And what Jennifer did, she set out to romance the presidents of these banks, to chat with them, to put them at ease. We would have breakfast meetings with them.

I'll never forget a lunch we had at the Banca Italiana, which was a beautiful building just across from India House. I forget now what it was originally built as but at the time it was an Italian bank, and they invited us for lunch. It was like being at the Medici's. I mean, this is the way that bankers in Italy lived! We were in this room, this beautiful room with silk wallpaper, and an exquisite lunch is brought to us with Italian wine and I thought, "Why didn't I go into banking?!" [laughs] But it worked! They agreed to landmarking and so did the other buildings, 1 Wall Street and the others. So her big achievement was the designation of those big skyscrapers.

Towards the end of her tenure, I left. I was getting burned out. Too many permits, too many—and I felt that I had made my contribution to the Commission through many ways, so I decided to try a new thing. My buddy, Roger Lang, who had come to testify at the certificate of appropriateness hearings on behalf of the Landmarks Conservancy, was the one who told me about the position at the Conservancy being open. So that was my segue to the Conservancy, thanks to Roger.

The last year I was with Jennifer, I won the Sloan Public Service Award, which is a very high honor, and I was the only person ever from the Landmarks Commission to receive it. I remember that from the Jennifer Raab years too, and that was a wonderful achievement. And it actually came with a cash prize, so [laughs] it was quite wonderful. So I considered it would be a good idea to leave on a high note, and I think having received that award helped Peg Breen at the Conservancy feel that I was an okay person [laughs], that I was reputable, and that I could be good for them. So that was the segue to my other career at the Landmarks Conservancy.

Q: Before we move on to that, thinking about your time at the Commission, how did things change there during that time? You mentioned the economic state of the city—what about the visibility of preservation to people who lived in New York? Any other things that you can ascertain as big changes? Also you mentioned really making some of the processes and rules more transparent.

Herrera: Well, when I started out as a student of preservation, I saw that New York City was full of these wonderful old buildings that needed help. And I figured that any architect that goes into the field, it's work for life because this is such an incredible opportunity. And I was right.

During the '80s, the whole attitude shifted away from leaving the city to coming back to the city and rediscovering these wonderful neighborhoods, which were not like Fort Apache, but were actually very nice livable neighborhoods both in Manhattan and in Brooklyn and Queens. So you had this whole new generation of people, and I remember—I guess younger people were just bored with the Upper East Side and they wanted something more trendy, more different, and I

think that historic preservation was really a factor in the rebirth of the city. And the work we did at the Landmarks Commission, I'm very proud of. I think that it really did help. It's a cliché to say it was a renaissance but it really was such an important part of how New York City improved after the fiscal crisis. It had to come back in more ways than just financially, and I think historic preservation was really the way to go.

And I think architects, for the first time, started to educate themselves on how to restore buildings. Buildings that had been darkened with soot were cleaned and people were astounded at how beautiful they looked once they were cleaned. The whole area of Lower Manhattan—when City Hall was cleaned, the Tweed Courthouse was cleaned—it suddenly became this white Beaux Art city. Which, before, it had been kind of grungy, which, some people like that! But anyway, it was a transformation and preservation was the right thing at the right time, and we saw the rebirth of so many neighborhoods. I mean, in the old days, the only nice neighborhood to live in was the Upper East Side, and that's it. Maybe Central Park West. There were not too many other options that were nice places to live. And that changed so radically. The whole idea of the historic district was such a brilliant idea. I have to give a lot of credit to people like Otis Pearsall. It wasn't the city who thought of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District—it was the people who lived there. And then in Greenwich Village. They started a trend.

And of course, everything changed. Superficially, they changed from the days of big books that you wrote in by hand and copied letters on carbon with mimeograph machines [laughs] to the modern world, where there's just no comparison. I just can't believe that nobody had a computer on their desk until 1992 or 1993. Everything changed. And I think it changed to favoring

preservation, not only for residential districts but also for former manufacturing districts that, through the good offices of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, were able not only to gain a new life but also to be restored. Then people started to get the fervor. They really were fervent about it and wanted to restore the light posts and cobblestones—they went beyond what we at the Commission were really thinking about, which was just to cover basic problems.

But again, with the advent of the rules, I think it made the regulation process more rational. And it's still difficult, but I think nobody ever did what Kent did, which was to keep people there until midnight. Sometimes under Gene with St. Bartholomew's we would stay late because St. Bartholomew's was such a bear.

I wrote some notes here.

Q: Okay, take a minute to see if there's anything else you'd like to add about the Commission.

Herrera: I wrote that the craftspeople from Europe saved us. Really true. Because nobody in New York City had a lot of restoration experience. And of course, if you went to the carpenters union or the plasterers union, they didn't do this work, they did plywood. All of the window companies just sold aluminum windows that had big panes of glass. That was, I guess, what people wanted, so naturally that's what they sold. But then, when there was this political and social pressure, I have to say that the business sector stepped up to the plate and realized that there were profits to be made by catering to preservation needs. I think that was the biggest change, to see that you could actually select between appropriate replacement windows. And there are actually three

companies that make terra cotta! And other things that sometimes are better than terra cotta in certain instances because terra cotta is awfully heavy, and sometimes for cornices that project out, you want a lighter material. All of that was worked out by architects, once they started understanding this. It really brought this whole world of expertise. And of course, today, architects are taught preservation at school. So it changed completely.

Q: So let's talk about your role at the Conservancy and what role you stepped into there and how it was different from your role at the LPC.

Herrera: Well, it was very different. For one thing, it was private sector, so I was on the other side now.

For many years, I had heard Roger Lang from the Landmarks Conservancy come in with his testimony at public hearings and I was always impressed by the caliber of his testimony. I wasn't sure what my role was going to be, but I felt that that was good—I could sort of define what it would be—and that's what happened. I interviewed with the wonderful Peg Breen, was hired, and started work as the director of technical services, that's what it was called but that sounds like I was dealing with the computers. Everybody thought that I was the IT guy. And so I changed it to director of preservation services to better reflect what I actually did.

One of the first projects I remember Peg and I were involved with was the Tobacco Warehouse in what's now the Brooklyn Bridge Park. The Tobacco Warehouse at that time was a ruin, and it was not a stable ruin—it was a ruin that was dangerous. It was owned by the state at the time and

they wanted to demolish it because the roof had collapsed and it was just basically sticks inside. This was New York in the old days. Everybody that crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, the first thing you saw was this collapsed warehouse.

I thought that it was a very important building to save, so we met with [New York State] Parks. They were hysterical; there was a hurricane coming and they needed to take it down this weekend. And we said, no, let's just chill with this. Let's get Robert Silman [Associates] in here to look at this, and we promise if Robert Silman says that it has to be demolished, we will not stand in the way. But if Robert Silman says that's it's fine and that it can be saved, you have to promise us that you will at least consider it. Silman did go in. They said the walls are fine, all the timber structure needs to be removed but it's not going to effect the stability of the walls. So that's a long story made short of how the Tobacco Warehouse was saved.

It was, for many years, just walls—it was a shell. But it was very beautiful. And people loved taking pictures of the bridge through the arches. And so I was very happy that the Conservancy was really at the forefront of saving that. Of course, now, it's being used as a theater. It's the St. Ann's Warehouse Theater. I don't know if you've ever been there. It's really a cool theater and they have very interesting plays. It's really played an important role in the cultural life of the city—and it was supposed to be torn down that weekend. “There's a hurricane coming and we have to tear it down because it's never going to survive and we want to put a lawn here. That's what we want—a nice lawn.”

A lawn would have been nice but Brooklyn was once surrounded by these buildings. It was

surrounded by giant brick warehouses. I read somewhere that Brooklyn was referred to as the “Walled City” because it had a wall around it of these giant warehouses. And there are very few left. And there were these few and I thought it was important to save them, and so they were saved, and so were the more intact warehouses, the Empire Stores, which were adjacent. That was one of our first projects.

Another early project—one of the things we did at the Conservancy was pass-through projects. Sometimes the Parks Department gets bogged down with bureaucracy so they give us a license fee to do projects and we can do it like that [quickly]. So we did the restoration and repainting of, of all things, the Little Red Lighthouse, which is right underneath the George Washington Bridge. That little lighthouse was in bad shape, and we went in and we got it restored, and got the cast iron pieces that had been missing and had it repainted red and all of that. It was just to reopen it, especially for school kids to go up to the top. It’s almost like a toy lighthouse. It’s such a tiny little thing. It’s adorable and it’s a landmark. So that was one of our early projects.

Another project that I seem to have been involved with for a decade was the Mount Morris Fire Watchtower, which is another great structure, which was built for lookouts to see where there were fires and to alert fire companies of where there were fires. So interesting to read about how they did it—they used a series of coded bell rings where certain rings meant that fire was in this sector or that sector. That function was replaced by the fire call stations that were built—the little cast iron stations that were put on the sidewalks so that people could call. But evidently the people of that neighborhood the Mount Morris area—this was at the turn of the last century—they were so attached to the bells and to the tower that they saved it, they didn’t want it torn

down. Good, there's another example of a historic structure that was saved by the locals. And when the bell rang then, on Sunday, it was to tell everybody to go to church. So it only rang [laughs] on Sunday. So that's how it was preserved.

When the neighborhood shifted over to be an African American neighborhood, it was so interesting: the people felt exactly the same way about the Fire Watchtower. This was their watchtower and they felt very possessive of it and they wanted to save it, but it was difficult because it was a little cast iron structure, it was all corroded. So there were a lot of technical and political—mostly political—issues that were very difficult to maneuver. I think the Conservancy worked as a kind of broker between the neighborhood and the Parks Department, which were kind of—the neighborhood didn't have trust in the Parks Department. That was an interesting project.

The other one—I'm talking about ruins here [laughs]—but the other big ruin was the Smallpox Hospital on Roosevelt Island, which is owned by the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, RIOC. They own all of Roosevelt Island. They are a state authority—state authorities are like mini totalitarian states. They have complete authority, nobody can challenge them, it's very strange. Only in New York State. So there it was, again, with the cajoling and we shouldn't take it down because it embodies all this history. You know, smallpox is one of the few diseases that mankind has conquered. We conquered smallpox through vaccines so it's really important. So we talked them into keeping it, stabilizing it. It hasn't been one hundred percent successful because there's still so much more work to do in there in terms of stabilizing, and hopefully someday, it will reopen it to the public.

There was a wonderful proposal to have it be a smallpox memorial. It was a beautiful design. It would have been done on the ground inside the ruin with a spiral, and it showed how it went from so many cases of smallpox down to nothing, no more cases. It would have been very moving. Maybe someday that will happen. But at least for the time being, we saved the Smallpox Hospital.

We were also involved in Blackwell House on Roosevelt Island. You know Roosevelt Island used to be called Blackwell Island? It was owned by the Blackwell family. And this, astonishingly, was their house, built in 1799 and still standing by the skin of its teeth. It's just been restored and it's been opened up as a community center. That was a good, successful project. Again, adding a handicap access ramp to go up to make it ADA accessible, telling the Department of Buildings that no, we couldn't change the original eighteenth century door jambs to make them two inches wider—getting those exemptions.

Another project was the Erasmus Hall Academy in Brooklyn. We finally, thanks to then Borough President Eric Adams, it was finally restored. It was such an important building—one of the most important historic buildings in the state. And Moynihan Station [Moynihan Train Hall], a long-running project. So that kept me occupied at the Conservancy. That, plus the easements that we talked about earlier that we had a portfolio of, these easements that I always called the Dorothy Miner easements because they were for 74-711 and 74-79 projects. Mark Silberman, who has been the long-time counsel now at the Commission, didn't do that. He did away with that requirement. There haven't been any new ones with regard to the new 74-711 process. But

the old ones are still in effect.

But what happened in, I think around 2009 or 2010, was that this group started selling easements to homeowners as tax shelters and it became this huge thing that everyone wanted to get in on. It was easement mania. And this group, called the National Easement Trust—the name was very easily confused with the National Trust. In fact, the National Trust sued them. But they were a group out of Washington [D.C.] and their thing was to sell preservation easements, to take a cut, and to give the homeowner the tax advantages of a charitable donation. You know, for wealthy people with a lot of income, it was a good tax shelter. I thought that this was really not the greatest use of easements. First of all, most of these houses were already protected because they were in historic districts, so it seemed kind of marginal, to say the least. But there were certain cases—I got a lot of calls and I turned a lot of them away. But some of them I thought would benefit from easements. We did have, I would say, thirty easements or so. The other group had hundreds of easements. We took about thirty easements. But then, the IRS really cracked down on easements and put them out of business. Fortunately, our thirty easements were all pretty solid.

Our biggest easement was the Plaza and we took an easement on the Plaza because we thought we needed it, especially because it had been purchased by an international developer. I don't know if you recall that it was bought by El Ad [Properties] and they really didn't have a real understanding of how important the Plaza was. So we spent months trying to educate them as to how they couldn't just trash the Palm Court, they couldn't just trash the Edwardian Room, that these were places that had very deep cultural associations with millions of people who were

married there, who remembered the Plaza, who stayed there. And so the Conservancy did help save all the major rooms. We saved the Ballroom, the Terrace Room, the Edwardian Room. That was a major coup for the Conservancy. And we got Ronald Lauder involved and he knew the principal at El Ad and they were able to talk, mogul to mogul. So we tried everything we could. But in the end, El Ad actually lost money on the project, so they couldn't use the charitable deduction because there was nothing to deduct! I mean, the IRS did audit them—I was involved for a long time with all the audits, but what we did was perfectly transparent.

And of course, history repeats itself. At the Waldorf Astoria, it was bought by another international development company, Anbang [Insurance Group of China], which is a Beijing-based company that was buying up American real estate like it was going out of fashion. I always knew this was going to be trouble. And again, they had no idea. To them, a historic building was the Forbidden City, which is six hundred years old, and they didn't think that a building that was built in the 1920s, 1930s was really that historic. Again, we did the same thing. We didn't take an easement on it, but we did manage to get the Commission to designate some of the interiors as interior landmarks.

But that still remains a mystery. What is going on inside the Waldorf Astoria? I see all of the glossy ads for the new gazillion dollar condos but no one has been inside recently. I've tried to get myself invited but no dice. So that still is a big question mark. I hope it turns out as relatively successful as the Plaza. I'm sorry that the Plaza had to convert to part-condo because it wasn't that great of a conversation. The apartments aren't that great. I think people aren't that happy to be there. It was a much better hotel. But given that, we did the best we could. At least it is

partially a hotel. And the Waldorf will be partially a hotel as well.

So the very last thing I want to talk about in terms of my life-long projects is the TWA Terminal at JFK Airport, a fabulous building. I remember going there as a child with my father. We were waiting for my uncle to fly in from Japan, and that's where the international flights would come in from TWA. I remember a kid, going in there like, wow. It was like, hallucinatory. I couldn't believe there was a building that was like that. I'd never seen anything like that. And of course, there was nothing like that. So I had very early childhood recollections of that.

And so, when I was at the Commission under Laurie Beckelman, she took the very courageous decision to designate the TWA Terminal. The Port Authority is a very difficult organization. They're another authority like the Roosevelt Island authority. They are their own authority, they're like a little totalitarian nation amongst themselves. But Laurie, I've got to give her credit, connected with the head of the Port Authority. He loved her, they had a rapport, they went to lunch. He told her that he would take her on his private helicopter to go to the TWA Terminal. So she really got our foot in the door.

I remember that they invited us—the Port Authority—to a lunch at the International Arrivals Building. It was in some large space upstairs in the International Arrivals Building. It was just a big room and it had a big table and there were all these honchos in the Port Authority, and they invited Kevin Roche, who was the architect along with Eero Saarinen. And of course, Kevin Roche is known for the Temple of Dendur wing at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] and the Ford Foundation, and the building we were talking about before on Wall Street. He was the most

courtly architect. The most Old World gentleman. I was in the Kevin Roche fan club. I loved Kevin Roche. And so were at that lunch and he was explaining how important this was to the history of architecture and the Port Authority guys were like, “What?” But, you know, that helped!

By that time, I was doing the driving [laughs]. Kevin Roche turned to me and he said, “When you go back to Manhattan, tell your driver to avoid the Van Wyck [Expressway] because it’s a lot of traffic.” And I say, “I will tell my driver that. Absolutely, Kevin.” He’s this aristocratic man. He just had a way about him. He was a lovely person. To make a long story short, that was my beginning involvement with the building.

I had a meeting with the engineer for the Port Authority, in my role at the Commission, and the very first thing he said to me was, “Can I tear this down?” He didn’t even say hello. He just looked at me and said, “Can I tear this down?” I said, “No. You cannot tear this down. What’s your next question?” [laughs] “But it leaks, it’s full of asbestos. It’s a disaster. We don’t have any place for security.” It was a disaster from the use point of view. I mean, it was designed for a completely different era of air travel. If you were to design a building that was completely unsuitable for modern air travel, that would be it. It was all steps. When you walk in it was just stairs, stairs, stairs, stairs, stairs, stairs. It had no place for any kind of security. It had very limited luggage handling—it was designed for a different era, another size airplane. So I could understand how they were not happy about it being designated.

Being that the Port Authority is a bi-state organization, anything that is funded by them had to go

through the whole [Section] 106 review process. When I was at the Conservancy, I was in that review process. It lasted about eighteen years [laughs]. I should write a book on the TWA adaptive reuse, or maybe a ten-part miniseries for Hulu, something like: *Murders at the TWA* [laughs]. Because it was really a difficult project. The Port Authority hated the building. You have to understand, from their point of view, the real estate fronting the tarmac is extremely valuable. Every inch of that frontage is what they need to service the airport. And here is this big albatross sitting there, taking up all of this space, not doing anything. So finally, the idea of building the new terminal in front—building it to front the tarmac was what saved the building. So JetBlue built that new building, which works very well. It's the opposite of the TWA terminal; it's a modern terminal. And the Port Authority got what it wanted. It got its frontage on the tarmac and its use. But the question was, what to do with the old one?

Q: I have to say, I actually saw it after all these years waiting in the middle of the night in the taxicab line. "Wait, there it is!"

Herrera: Did you go inside?

Q: No, I couldn't get out of the taxi line!

Herrera: You should go there and go inside and have lunch. There's a very nice restaurant called the Lisbon Café [Paris Café and Lisbon Lounge] and see the exhibits. They have exhibits of really interesting flight attendant and pilot costumes during the years and how it changed during the different decades, how it kept up with the fashion. And then downstairs they have a facsimile

of Howard Hughes's office [laughs]. It's a very interesting place. And of course, it's a hotel. The hotel is a very nice hotel, state of the art. Can't hear a thing. You can't hear the airplanes at all. And there's a rooftop pool in the new building. I think it exceeded everyone's expectations and it turned out really well. But it took a lot of effort. I was always a proponent of changing the use of the airline terminal because I just didn't think it would work as a modern terminal without a lot of changes. The Municipal Art Society had a different view. They wanted it to remain a working terminal. It was just unfeasible. I think they were just looking for an idealized thing that was never going to happen.

But what really was interesting about that whole project was that, at some point, the Port Authority became enamored of it. It suddenly became their symbol, their trademark. "This is us." And I think what happened—I will tell you the story—was that there was a meeting of various airport officials from across the country. I guess they meet annually at various airports so they were meeting at JFK and they decided to have the meeting at the TWA Terminal. Well, everybody was so agog at this terminal—all of these honchos from airports all over the country just were totally enamored—that the Port Authority was like, "Yeah, this is ours. Yeah, it's been a lot of work but it's nice." Suddenly they realized—it was such a great moment to see this epiphany and these hard-bitten guys who were all about, "[grumbling] Gotta get people in, gotta get people out," understanding why we crazy people on the other side of the table wanted to save this building. It was really, really great.

I think that does it. I don't want to talk anymore. I'm talked out. I'm usually somebody who's fairly laconic, I have to tell you. You brought out the blabbermouth in me.

Q: Well, it was so wonderful to hear this history and everything that you've been involved with, and hearing it in such detail and your stories is super helpful. I did have a couple more questions.

Herrera: Sure.

Q: Do you want to take five minutes? Ten minutes?

Herrera: Let's do that. Five minutes is good.

[BREAK]

Q: So I wanted to ask, regarding your time at the Conservancy, how was it decided where your attention would go? You mentioned a lot of big, notable locations, and my understanding is that you were also getting calls from the public as well.

Herrera: Most of the work was dealing with the public on small projects, consulting on brownstones, a lot of work uptown in Harlem and in the so-called brownstone belt in Brooklyn. But the Conservancy was involved in some major projects like the TWA Terminal, the Tobacco Warehouse, and most of all, Moynihan Station, which was such a huge project. And so incredible that the state wanted to repeat its error that it made in the 1960s and have Madison Square Garden destroy yet another magnificent landmark. And so we went to—architects have drawings made, and they did not comprehend that Madison Square Garden would not fit inside

the Moynihan building because the Moynihan building is set back. It has these enormous moats and so it doesn't take up the full width of the block, and so anything they built comparable to Madison Square Garden would have to be cantilevered out—it would stick out. It couldn't be contained within the walls. It would have been a disaster. And so we're so happy that instead, it's turned out so beautifully. And it turned out that they went in for tax credits so the State Historic Preservation Office kept a really strict eye on them and all the restoration work was done beautifully. And the new station is very nice, the new Amtrak station.

And the Tobacco Warehouse, which is part of the Brooklyn Battery Park, that whole project took on a whole life of its own. This great new park that's built not without controversy. That overlapped with my work at the Brooklyn Heights Association because they were very involved with that project as well.

[PORTION OMITTED]

But in the Brooklyn Heights Association, my main contribution was getting the [Borough Hall] Skyscraper Historic District designated and working with Otis Pearsall and Tom van den Bout. Otis said, originally, there was every intention of including these buildings in the original historic district, but it was felt that in order to get it through—this was the early days—they would just keep it to residential and they wouldn't include the commercial part in the district. But that area is just as much Brooklyn Heights as the residential area. So it was, in a way, making up for that oversight and including these wonderful Art Deco office buildings in the historic district. It's a very interesting sense of place there, a little mini skyscraper district, financial district. To my

amazement—I think in large part, thanks to Otis—the Commission designated it. That was an enormous thing that we got accomplished. So from my years at the Brooklyn Heights Association, that was my contribution.

Q: I wanted to ask too about collaboration within the preservation community. You mentioned the Port Authority—not necessarily a collaboration! But how did things work between, whether it was during your time at the LPC or at the Conservancy, juggling who’s going to do what, who’s going to come at this from which angle, or who has the resources to assist with this? How did that work?

Herrera: That’s an excellent question. I think fortunately our goals of the various groups are the same, so that helps a great deal. Most groups have their fortes, and so I think it’s fairly natural the way things work out, cooperating with the various groups. Sometimes there’s a little bit of competition. For example, with the Waldorf Astoria, I think there was a competition with the Historic Districts Council as to who would actually save—we both saved it. There’s enough to go around, and besides, nobody has saved it yet.

With the TWA Terminal, the Conservancy was at opposite sides with the Municipal Art Society because the Municipal Art Society wanted to keep the terminal as a working airport terminal and they wanted JetBlue to take it over, and my conversations with JetBlue were very clear. They would rather die. It wasn’t just a “we’ll think about it.” It was “absolutely not.” So I couldn’t understand. What is it about “absolutely not” that is hard to understand? This was really, I thought, almost irrational. And I was the proponent of the adaptive reuse because I always feel

like adaptive reuse has been the cornerstone of American historic preservation and so there's no shame in it. That was an instance where we both kind of diverged, but then towards the end we were on the same page in terms of the new hotel and how that could work within the TWA Terminal.

Q: I noticed that you were involved, in one way or another, with a lot of restoration projects in Staten Island, so I wondered if you could talk about how preservation activities in Staten Island have changed during your time working in the field?

Herrera: Right. I don't know. Staten Island is a challenge and it's an ongoing challenge. I pass that along to the younger generation to see if they can have better luck with Staten Island. I worked with Historic Richmond Town one time when a car drove into one of their little eighteenth century buildings. We helped them stabilize it and fix it up, and we helped them with various grants over the years. Sailors' Snug Harbor—difficult to help. You know, we offer help but they don't particularly—maybe they feel that our help is not enough, at the Conservancy anyway. So it's been hit or miss.

One of our biggest successes on Staten Island was the Olmsted House [Olmsted-Beil House Park] where, when I first went out there, it was just an overgrown weed patch and a big sign saying "Landmark: Keep Out," which was a great sign [said sarcastically]. And because of our efforts, and because Peg, particularly—she was great at fundraising. We did a Kickstarter campaign and raised a hundred thousand dollars, and we were able to do some emergency stabilization work because the Parks Department had zero interest. To say they had no interest is

almost overstating it. They had zero interest in the property and that was obvious by the lack of maintenance on the property. But then, the really amazing thing was that a local group became energized. Now there's a whole Friends of the Olmsted[-Beil] House group and they go out there every weekend and they bring Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops to help them clean up the site. It's really, really great. It's almost like what historic preservation used to be like, and so that was very encouraging.

And Staten Island has such wonderful historic resources, and especially the big cultural groups like Historic Richmond Town and Snug Harbor are always in financial trouble and there's just never enough funds to maintain vulnerable buildings. That's sort of an ongoing problem. We were just out to look at the [Staten Island Range] Lighthouse on Lighthouse Hill, which is still owned by the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard wanted to donate it to the [National] Lighthouse Museum on Staten Island. They would keep the light, and they would keep doing the light, but the building itself would be donated to the lighthouse museum. So we went out there to just look at the lighthouse to see how much work it needed. Fortunately, the lighthouse is built so solid. It's in great condition even though it hasn't received a lot of maintenance, and the cast iron parts need to be repainted.

Right next to the lighthouse is the Frank Lloyd Wright house, Crimson Beech. I'll never forget going there with Anthony Robins, the architecture historian, when the LPC was thinking of designating it. We went there and we visited the woman who owned it, she and her husband had called Frank Lloyd Wright and they commissioned the house. She's passed away now but at the time she still lived there. She still had the original Frank Lloyd Wright furniture. It's a stunning

house. From the outside it looks very low but it's actually banked on a hill so the views are magnificent.

So I have had great experiences on Staten Island. They have such wonderful things. I heard that the house had just sold and a lucky new family is living there.

Q: I'll have to see if I can get a peek at that the next time I'm on Staten Island.

Herrera: Yes, you need a car. It's right in the middle Staten Island so there's no way to get there other than by driving.

Q: Let me ask you my last question, which is before we started recording you mentioned how much the preservation field has changed and I wanted to give you space to elaborate on that.

Herrera: Oh, it's changed so much and become so much more inclusive not only in terms of LGBTQ issues but also bringing African American and immigrant history into the mix. When I started, it was the Upper East Side and Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights, and it was not terribly inclusive. So the change in that regard has been extremely positive and very dramatic.

Also, the understanding that buildings from a later period, from mid-century, are important.

When I was a young staffer at the Landmarks Commission, we were presenting some proposal of an Art Deco building and one of the architects said, "That's not historic! It's Art Deco." Because to his generation—he was in his seventies at the time—Art Deco was just kind of tacky [laughs].

So to see how things have progressed and how people have changed their attitude is interesting.

People think of preservation as not changing anything, and it couldn't be further from the truth. Everything has changed. At least in my job at the Landmarks Commission, it was all about alterations and change, which made the job difficult because I think it was unheralded work. I think that everybody loved when the historians wrote a new designation report. This was like having a new baby. But for us, when we killed ourselves to save certain buildings, it wasn't really—I think the preservation department was sort of unheralded or un-lauded, which is too bad because they really do a lot of difficult work.

I haven't mentioned in all of this, all of the wonderful colleagues at the Commission, including the board members who I worked with, including Elliot Willensky, Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, Pablo Vengoechea, Joseph Mitchell, and so many others. That really added so much to the Commission over the years. Of course, the colleagues there, not just Tony Wood, who heads your organization, but also so many others, like Joseph Bresnan, Ann Friedman, Caroline Kane Levy, Andrew Dolkart, etc. They were wonderful. The current chair was someone who was in my department when she first started, Sarah Carroll. So they were all terrific. Mark Silberman, Valerie Campbell, John Weiss, these are all people who were really top-notch people who worked at the Commission who helped steer it, helped guide it. That's really what I wanted to say.

Q: Thank you so much for all your time. I want to congratulate you also on the Moses Award that you were awarded this year.

Herrera: Wasn't that amazing?

Q: Yes!

Herrera: At 68, this is so encouraging. Maybe I'll go into this field?

Q: [laughs]

Herrera: I got the Sloan Public Service Award twenty-five years ago. Every twenty-five years, I get a nice award.

Q: This interview will provide so many details for why those were so well-deserved for anyone who didn't know you and work with you personally.

Herrera: Okay good! Well, thank you so much for being so patient and listening to all of my stories.

Q: Thank you!

[END OF INTERVIEW]