

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Simeon Bankoff

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Simeon Bankoff conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on August 26, 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.

Simeon Bankoff is a fourth-generation New Yorker who first began working in historic preservation with the Historic House Trust, using his technical theater skills to light the Alice Austen House. He then worked at the Landmarks Preservation Foundation with Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel on the Cultural Medallions program before joining the staff of the Historic Districts Council in 1997, where he was among its first full-time employees. After another brief stint at the Historic House Trust, Bankoff returned to the Historic Districts Council in 2000 as its executive director, a position he held until 2021.

During this time, Bankoff worked to expand the organization's capacity, staff, and budget. He also reframed the council's advocacy as community education and outreach, making such efforts legible to foundations and, importantly, fundable. Under his leadership, the Historic Districts Council established new programs with a larger reach, including Six to Celebrate, and worked to document testimony given in support of landmarking historic districts and individual landmarks in an effort to make this information more broadly available.

In this detailed interview, Bankoff describes the many people who have been part of preservation efforts across the city, lauding in particular the invaluable role of administrative staff. He also describes and provides commentary on numerous preservation campaigns of the 2000s and 2010s that he was a part of, and outlines some of the challenges the preservation movement faces with regard to engaging and retaining the next generation of preservation professionals and community-based advocates.

Transcriptionist: Svetlana Kitto

Session: 1

Interviewee: Simeon Bankoff

Location: Brooklyn NY

Interviewer: Sarah Dzedzic

Date: August 26, 2022

Q: Today is August 26, 2022. And this is Sarah Dzedzic interviewing Simeon Bankoff for the New York Preservation Archive Project [NYPAP] Oral History. Okay. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Bankoff: Sure. I'm Simeon Bankoff. I am a fourth-generation New Yorker. And I have been involved professionally in preservation since 1993.

Q: Can you tell me about your family's background?

Bankoff: Sure. Again fourth-generation New Yorker. All my great-grandparents came to this country in the late nineteenth century. Like [Mayor] Michael Bloomberg, some of them strangely immigrated through Boston and then ended up in New York but they were all in New York by the early twentieth century. I have a public school education in New York in Brooklyn. I went to Mark Twain for the Gifted and Talented Junior High School in Coney Island and then I went to Stuyvesant High School, the Old Stuy, on 15th Street.

I grew up in Manhattan Beach in Brooklyn, deep coastal Brooklyn. My dad's family had been there from the 1940s or so until we left in 1993. My father is an archaeologist. He just recently retired from Brooklyn College. He had been an archaeologist—he was affiliated with Brooklyn

College since he went there as an undergrad. Both he and my mother went there in the '60s. He also told me recently that he was a child actor [at Brooklyn College in 1950s], when his older sister went there. So officially from like 1962 until 2022 he was at Brooklyn. He was the chairman of the department for several years. He, again, just recently retired. He's also worked at the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC] as the archaeological consultant to the chair since the late '90s. My mom is an art historian and a researcher. She had worked as a professional picture librarian for several years in a commercial picture library.

I've lived my whole life in Brooklyn not counting college. And weirdly for a New Yorker, I have actually only lived in six places. Three in Manhattan Beach and three in Park Slope/Windsor Terrace where we are now. We bought the place that we're in right now in 1999. So we've been here for some time.

Q: So before your interview when it was originally scheduled I had talked Franny Eberhart.

Bankoff: I know her. [laughs]

Q: Yeah! And what she said was that, when she met you, you were young but she was so impressed by your love of the city and surprised that—let's say that a lot of kids rebel from the things that they grew up with or that their parents do, but that you had seemed to embrace that. So how did you come to know and love the city and want to stay here?

Bankoff: What's not to love? I mean, it's New York, it's what you do. It's that simple. When you

grow up in, again, deep coastal Brooklyn—and I went to high school in the Village so that was an hour and fifteen minutes on the D train, and then the QB started running. And now I'm dating myself by calling it the "QB." [laughs] So that's an hour and fifteen minutes each way to school and you get to know it, you get to know the city, and you get to live your life in the city. And some of the kids I went to high school with—their experience of Manhattan was exactly the route between their subway stop and school. And I just thought that was really dumb. And in fact I would always go down to the Village to go St. Mark's Comics and stuff like that. I would hang out at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery as a [speaking with an accent] "yute," as Joe Pesci puts it, not realizing that I would later spend twenty-one years of my life there working there. So I got to know the city in that way.

We didn't have much money growing up, so we spent a lot of time in museums. My mom always loved the opera so we would go the opera. I mean, the reason we lived in Manhattan Beach was my dad's family was there and it was a good school zone. My mother suffered by living all the way out there for many, many years for that reason—honestly she's a saint. But you take advantage of the city, that's a very important part of it. And, I mean, there are huge chunks of the city I don't know. But then also going to magnet schools—Mark Twain was a magnet school from all of Brooklyn. There was actually a very famous anti-discrimination case that created it as a magnet school in the [19]70s. And then Stuy also drew people from across the city so I got to know a lot of people from the Upper West Side and the Upper East Side and Queens and the Bronx and even "Staten Island too," as the song goes. So I had a sense of the greater city. So where else would you want to live?

It was very funny when I went to college. I went to Sarah Lawrence College and everyone wanted to move to New York City. And I was like, of course we're gonna move to New York City. That's what you do—you live there! I've got one up on you. Something I would actually always do every year—you know, you move in at the end of August or whatever, but for Labor Day I would take everybody back to Brooklyn. I'd meet new friends and take them back to Brooklyn. And they'd be shocked. Just because you get on the Metro North and then you get on the train and you keep going and you keep going and they're like, "Wait, I thought we're going to the city. Wait, the train goes this far?" And then suddenly you're in daylight on the D train. I'm gonna call it the D train because it's the D train. It's the Brighton line. I think it's the B now—who the hell knows? Yeah, they've changed it. But it was the D train back then. And they're like, "Wait, what's going on? Why are we outside? Why are we—we're going further?" And then we got off at Sheepshead Bay. And then you take them over like a highway to walk there and they're like, "What's going on? Where are we?" It was hilarious.

Q: So you didn't go to the West Indian Day Parade?

Bankoff: No, I didn't go to the West Indian Parade. And yeah, just, it's the city. It's what you do.

When I got out of college I did theater for several years. I studied literature, poetry, and worked in theater. I did technical theater in college and I worked in technical theater. This is in the early '90s and there was no money anywhere. I was perfectly comfortable because I was like, "Hey, I'm going into theater, I'm not going to make any money." All my friends were like, "I'm going to be a writer!" and they all went into publishing and that didn't work out well for them. I was

like, I just know I'm not gonna make any money. I never got my union card because the best way to do that was to go on tour and I had a really great apartment and a girlfriend whom I later married and a job in the city. And I thought, "Well, I should go on tour and get my union card so I can come back and get a great apartment and a girlfriend and a job in the city. But wait! I have all that already. Why bother?" [laughs] So that's why I never got a union card and why I never probably continued in theater.

Q: So how did you get interested in historic preservation as a field to work in?

Bankoff: Well, again, theater, and there's no money in that. So I did technical theater and I was a facilities manager and a lighting designer and all that stuff. And my father, as an archaeologist, would do summer schools and he would do two sessions of summer school, one in New York City and then one if he had grant money in Eastern Europe, where I spent a lot of time as a child. So he worked with the Parks Department, specifically with the Historic House Trust [HHT], and they were looking for work and I got a seasonal position with HHT. This is when Adrian Benepe was the director of Arts and Antiquities. I worked with Mary Ellen Hern and Nancy Ziegler and Liz Leckie. The first thing that I did for them actually was, they were doing a gala on Malcolm Forbes's yacht, the *Highlander*, that was going around the city because Tim Forbes was a longtime board member of the Historic House Trust. My job was to light up the Alice Austen House, so I rented a bunch of theatrical lighting and lit up the Alice Austen House so that you could see it from the *Highlander* and nearly electrocuted myself because it rained during the day and I was running electric cords onto that lawn. That's where I met Mitchell Grubler, and that was in 1993.

And then I continued working at HHT doing events and membership, and administrative stuff. This seemed interesting, sort of civic stuff, and so on—so I interviewed at the Landmarks Preservation Commission for a job. There was a job opening there. I interviewed with Merin Urban, who was the executive director at the time. This would be in 1994 or so. It was either late '93 or early '94. I believe it's early '94. Then the seasonal gig with HHT ended and I worked for the trust itself for a bit, and went back into theater and doing odd jobs.

One day the phone rang. This was in June of 1994. And this voice on the other end of the phone says, "I hear you're looking for a job in preservation. I need help," and it was Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel. I was confused as all get out and I still am to this day. What had happened was Merin, I imagine, handed over my resume to Barbaralee, who at that point, was an art commissioner and was running the Landmarks Preservation Foundation. So I worked with Barbaralee at the Landmarks Preservation Foundation. I worked for her for two years. So that would be '93 until I got married in June of '95. So I must have been working at Historic House Trust in '92. '92 '93 I worked for Historic House Trust for Barbaralee '93-'95. Although strangely my notes say that I was working at HHT in '93. I don't know. It was right when [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani was elected and he was elected in 1993. I remember him giving a speech. So it must have been '93-'94, I was at HHT. And then '94 to—jeeppers, I only worked for Barbaralee in March of '94 according to my notes here. [laughs] It seems like so much longer. [laughs]

So I worked for Barbaralee—started in 1994 until June of '95. I worked closely with the late

lamented Judie Janey who later became a board member of the Historic Districts Council [HDC]. George Calderaro was pretty close and we worked together in the office after he left the Landmarks Commission. He had been the communications director at LPC and then when Giuliani froze all municipal staffing and said that he wasn't going to shrink anything but then offered payouts for everybody. Everybody except cops left and the Landmarks Commission shrank immensely. George did that. So he did some freelance work in the office with Barbaralee and me and Judy.

Barbaralee worked out of her home and me and Judie worked on 42nd Street, first in the Pershing Square Building—I will call it by its landmark name. I always thought of it as the Satellite Airline Terminals building because that's where the buses would go to the airports. When they finally cleaned it, I was surprised by its actual color. They moved us out of there about that time and then we moved into a building further up on 42nd Street which no longer exists. It was on Madison and 42nd. Part of the reason that we were there was because Carl Spielvogel, the late lamented, his office was in the Chrysler Building so we could always run stuff over to Carl's office and then the driver would take it up to Barbaralee's place on Park and 70th.

When I was working for BLDS [referring to Barbaralee] we did a lot of events. I worked on *Landmarks of New York III* [3rd Edition] which was published in 1998. She was very involved—she was on the board of the New-York Historical Society when it was going through one of its periodic explosions. And I was on the phone for some of those—those were fun. There was a thirtieth anniversary of Landmarks [Law] party—that's where I first met Franny and John

Krawchuk, who was her graduate assistant at the time. That's when I was stunned to discover that nobody actually had maps of the historic districts. This was back in the Year of Our Lord 1995—I kind of thought there'd be maps, little did I know. Barbaralee was also on the Landmarks Conservancy board and that's when Peg Breen was hired, in '94, because Laurie Beckelman then had left and gone to the Landmarks Commission. So Peg was hired. Susan Jones might have come back prior to that point briefly.

I also worked on the Cultural Medallions program with Nina Gray, who was an archivist and historian, also now sadly passed. She was an archivist with the New-York Historical Society. Barbaralee created that program around the thirtieth anniversary. We continued the street signs program. And there was just a huge amount of events. We did a birthday party at the Plaza for Philip Johnson because everyone was convinced that he was going to die any second—little did we know he was going to last another seven years. And the most fantastic fundraising that we did was with Mrs. [Hillary] Clinton during the midterm elections in '94. She was so very, very nice, and really gracious, you know, my name is Simeon and I was working with someone named Kirsten at the time. Those are not the easiest names to remember, and she made sure to come down to thank us and pronounce our names correctly. So she has my vote forever for that.

Q: Do you remember the conversation or any conversations around the Cultural Medallions program and signage?

Bankoff: I need a little more than that. [laughs] You see, I've got very complex feelings about plaques. And the Cultural Medallions program is one of the reasons I have complex feelings

about plaques. Originally Nina and I were writing the medallions and then Barbaralee would edit them. [sighs] The problem with plaques are that they are confined by the medium. So originally we were sort of kōan-like, in a Zen kōan kind of way. We had to keep it to like twenty words and that's probably what it should be. But it would be really tough to sort of sum up these very important people in twenty words, but we tried to do it to get the font the right size. Massimo Vignelli was the designer and he had very strong feelings about color and font and font size, and there's something to be said about, also, that you need to see it from a distance. So they were very, very small.

Years later when I was at the Historic Districts Council we continued working with Barbaralee on the plaques, mostly providing just administrative assistance and a sound system. They've gotten bigger and bigger and more and more wordy to the point where they're almost unreadable. It's tricky when you're suddenly at fifty words in a much smaller font but you still have to edit for it. It was modeled on the Blue Plaque program of London. The Blue Plaque program basically says the person's name, what they were known for, if they did something right at that spot, like Charles Dickens wrote *Bleak House* here. I am a big fan of that methodology of putting the name of the person, just saying "author" or "politician," and not talking about the importance of how this person voted on the Sherman Antitrust Act or something like that because you're gonna miss out.

For example, at one point many years later we tried to put a plaque on the Stonewall [Inn], a commemoration of the riot. It just became such a political hot potato that the plaque never ended up getting on Stonewall because we couldn't get agreement on who, what was happening, and

the wording of it.

Q: And was that Barbaralee's idea?

Bankoff: Yes, it was. It was Barbaralee's idea. And she had the Cultural Medallions program, again, modeled after the blue plaques of London. And she fundraised—"fundraised?"—sounds so strange when you say it. She raised funds for the first fifty or hundred of them. I believe there are now over 150 or so. But there was sort of a big push for the first chunk. And that's what we were doing a lot of.

Q: Alright, so let's get to you working at HDC. And I don't know if you want to start with this maps question or if we'll get to that.

Bankoff: [laughs] I started working at HDC in 1997, in June of '97. Franny was the executive director. Eric Allison was the president. I was the second fulltime employee, maybe third—I would have to ask Rebecca Binno if she was a fulltime employee or if she was a graduate intern. But it was Franny and me. [laughs] I remember meeting—at the time HDC was sharing offices at 45 West 67th Street with Landmark West!. We were in one corner and Landmark West! was in the rest of it. And Landmark West! at that time was Arlene Simon and a rotating rogue's gallery of interns, many of whom I'm still in touch with. In a complete, what you would call "open plan" situation. So you could hear Arlene talking. And she does talk—on the phone. She's remarkable. She's got remarkable phone skills. But she's not a quiet person.

Arlene was on the board of HDC at the time. She was, I believe, one of the founding board members, if you want to go with HDC's origin story as starting in 1987 or so, if that's your preference. I remember also she was one of the countersigners on the checks. If we had that situation of if it was over however much money—it was not a lot, it was probably over \$500 or maybe over \$1000, you need two signatures on the checks. And so Arlene was there because she was there. And I met with Franny and Ann Gaffney, and I want to say Carlyle Morris, but I could be incorrect, and maybe Eric when I interviewed with them and I started on June, like June 14, June 16, 1997. Because it was the same week as my wedding anniversary. So that's why I remember that.

And I was the other person [at HDC], like literally. So that's what I did. And I did everything. I especially did the conference, I worked on the conference a lot. And I worked on the Landmarks Lion [Award]. The Lion was still kind of a "let's all get together and have a lion and honor one of our friends!" And also on public review. At the time, the public review—well, we were in a strange moment of public review where Carlyle Morris, who was a friend of Eric Allison's from Fort Greene, would extemporize about whatever was on his mind at public review. My job was, we would go down, we would review stuff—we didn't review everything. I would get the agenda. I would call Katie McNabb, who was the community person at the time, and I'd asked her to pull the boards and things that looked interesting. Then the committee would go down, we would look at the boards, Carlyle would make decisions. I'd keep rough notes of this stuff. And then we would—he and I, because before I was there, it was just him alone—would go down and then just sort of speak from his memory of what happened. There was no record. I created a record of it. This became an issue later. There were one or two times when we got in a little bit

of trouble because he would take extremely strong stances and be a little controversial, and the board would discover later—because there was, again, no record, just my notes written down of what happened.

The other thing we did there, the biggest thing that happened, there was a big push—this was during Jennifer Raab’s reign at Landmarks. Jennifer sort of stopped doing historic districts. She did a few but really—Giuliani was not particularly pro-preservation. No New York City Mayor is pro-preservation. But she, in order to make her numbers, she was doing a lot of public buildings. It was like an endless supply of public buildings.

I remember one of the first testimonies I ever wrote was for Stuyvesant High School actually—hilariously enough. Jack Taylor called me up and said, [speaks in a booming voice] “Simeon! Stuyvesant High School, it’s very important. It’s C.B.J. Snyder, H-plan.” And I was like, “Oh, jeeppers, Jack! That old place? Why would you want to preserve that? I went to Stuyvesant.” “Then you must think it’s important!” And I’m like, “No?” [laughs] Hilariously, because Jennifer did so many public buildings, it later came back to bite the city when Bloomberg started selling off all these public buildings, but they were landmarked because they were easy designations. A number of schools, a number of fire houses. Then when they started getting rid of their surplus, they’re like, “Oops! It’s landmarked. That sucks.” Part of the reason why it’s easy to landmark schools is because the School Construction Authority, under its authorizing legislation, doesn’t have to even talk to the Landmarks Commission. School Construction Authority can rip down landmarks. They just [blows raspberry] have that ability, which happened on the Grand Concourse, for example. But when they sell the building and it’s a

landmark, “Oops!” It’s pretty funny.

So the big thing that we did, that Jennifer did, was the civil fines legislation, which Franny had worked closely on with Councilmember Ken Fisher from Brooklyn Heights, and it was a big hole in the Landmarks Law because, up until that point, the Landmarks Commission only could use criminal legislation, and it’s hard to find a judge who’s really willing to charge somebody criminally for messing up a building. And so Eric and Franny—Franny really—worked really closely with Ken to bring this forward. Jennifer really loved it because she was a litigator and a lawyer. She was an attorney at Paul, Weiss. She actually brought in Mark Silberman, initially as the Director of Enforcement, and his first job was to work on that civil fines legislation.

At the time, Valerie Campbell was the General Counsel. Jennifer had fired Dorothy Miner back in ’94, ’95. I want to say ’95. Everybody got very upset, which is kind of funny because actually, people were very upset with Dorothy when she was counsel, something that everyone conveniently forgets. Arlene Simon made Jennifer cry—or at least, in her telling of it, made Jennifer cry—at Arlene’s Lion. So I think that was ’94. But she’s like [speaking in an aggressive voice], “Why did you fire Dorothy Miner?” and she said Jennifer cried, which I don’t actually believe, but that’s the story.

Q: Why were people unhappy with Dorothy Miner?

Bankoff: Dorothy, again, a wonderful person but she was a take-no-prisoners type, and she also was deeply, deeply protective of the Landmarks Commission and the Landmarks Law to the

degree that activists and advocates would want the LPC to do things, and Dorothy's like, "No, we don't do it that way." Or, "We can't do this. That would be endangering the law." She wasn't political in that way but she was very legalistic, and so they felt that Dorothy sort of stood in the way of more active aspects. Then she left the commission and became a preservation stalwart and everybody's go-to person.

So back to the civil fines. HDC ended up not supporting the civil fine penalty at the last second. The board took a position against it because there were last minute additions or changes to the bill, and we felt it wasn't good enough. It was very much the "perfect being the enemy of the good." Jennifer was very angry with us. And Eric Allison hated the fact that the board voted against supporting it.

One of the things that was taken out was the demolition by neglect. Originally, in the original civil fines legislation, they took out demolition by neglect. And seven or so years later, in 2003, 2004, I was sitting around with Tony Avella, who was a councilmember from Douglaston, and he was a great friend of Landmarks and a great friend of the Historic Districts Council. And he said, "Well, what can I do? I want to do a bill. What can I do?" I said, "Tony, you could do a demo by neglect. I mean, that was just taken out. And the language is there. We can unearth that language." And he's like, "Is there any problem with that?" And I'm like, "Nah, everybody would be for it. And the people who are against strengthening the Landmarks Law are gonna be against it, but it's noncontroversial." So indeed, he actually did reintroduce that, and I want to say that was 2004, something like that. So that ended up getting back in.

The other thing that HDC did at the time was—back to maps, we overlaid the zoning of all the historic districts within the historic districts. Now, that seems really easy now. At the time, we employed Jennifer Morris, who is—I believe she’s still in Chicago and she worked as an architectural historian for AKRF. I believe she’s still on staff there, and she has been at AKRF for twenty-some odd years. She was a grad student and—literally, we got copies of all the zoning maps, which we only got because we were friends with Kim Stahlman Kearns, who was the assistant to Joe Rose, who was the planning commissioner. Kim Stahlman Kearns later went on to become the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation [Village Preservation, formerly GVSHP] after Vicki Weiner left. So we got Kim, who was a friend of ours—I think she went to Columbia, I could be incorrect about that—but we knew her. So we got all these giant zoning maps and Jennifer spent all summer, with a ruler and a pen, like drawing the historic districts on it.

Q: I was imagining some old ArcGIS.

Bankoff: No, no, by hand. It was bonkers and it took her weeks, and she had rulers and she had great penmanship, thank God, and a steady hand. [laughs]

So Vicki became the Executive Director of HDC, according to my notes, in May of 1998. She had been at Greenwich Village previously, and she was actually on the board—she was the secretary of HDC. Franny left because her daughters were growing up and she wanted time with them, and she traveled for a bit when she left. I worked with Vicki, and there was a change in the office. It was right around the time that the Neighborhood Preservation Center was coming

together. There were endless meetings about that—I didn't go into any of them—but there were endless meetings about that. There was a real push from board leadership to make the organization more professionalized, which manifested in good ways and not good ways. There was a lot of discussion about desks, for example, that is a not-good way. These huge '90s wooden desks that I ended up eventually giving to Greenwich Village.

Q: Oh god, because they have so much space for huge desks [said with sarcasm].

Bankoff: Right, yes. But you know that huge desk that Sarah Apmann had? And Anna [Marcum]? I can't remember. It's been so long. But yeah, those desks, we gave them those.

But one of the changes was in public review because there was concern about the fact that there were no records of what we actually said, and there was a bit of a problem where we complained about the Steven Holl addition to Higgins Hall in Pratt Institute and Eric, of course, was teaching at Pratt at the time, or with a Pratt student or something like that, and he had promised to sort of shepherd that through and our committee didn't like it. And then Carlyle went off on it. Having spent a lot of time in the Steven Holl addition at Pratt Institute, I still regard our position as totally correct. But that was my entire experience at Pratt Institute—basically room 316 in in Higgins Hall. [laughs]

So we revamped, and there was a lot of consternation around that. And that's also when we started working with Dumbo. That was the first time we actually said, well, the Landmarks Commission is not going to make Dumbo into a historic district because Jennifer Raab hates

industrial architecture—it just was a thing. She didn't designate Gansevoort because she broke her heel when she went walking in Gansevoort. Jennifer had many fine qualities but Belgian blocks were like her kryptonite. [laughs] So we said, they're not going to designate Dumbo. It's not what they're looking for. They had done a Vinegar Hill archipelago and that was a heavy lift for them. And they just [blows raspberry]. So why don't we make this into—and this is 1999, keep in mind, 1998/1999—why don't we get some money and do a National Register district? And then we can take advantage of the historic rehabilitation tax credits because, you know, I think good things are gonna happen to Dumbo and people are gonna want to move their companies in there. Yeah, we didn't see that one coming.

So we actually did—we got money from the Preservation League of New York State through their Preserve New York program and hired Andrew Scott Dolkart to do the Dumbo survey. Vicki had done Dumbo as her studio in Columbia in the early '90s. So she was familiar with place and there was a Dumbo Neighborhood Association with Marcia Hillis and Debbie—who lived next door to my friends, Tim and Becca, before Becca died—she was an artist, and Debbie then moved to Williamsburg. And Doreen Gallo was the third person there. That worked out well because Ken Fisher was the council person, who is a great friend of HDC. We also worked with Ken Fisher to route all this money into the preservation high school—the original preservation high school [Brooklyn High School for the Arts]. HDC was the pass-through for that.

Then I left HDC because I wasn't getting paid any money. I asked for more money and got a negative job review. So I said, okay, and I moved over to the Historic House Trust and went to

work for Scott Heyl. Nancy Ziegler was still there, she was the assistant director. Scott was the ED [executive director]. Liz was still there. Allyson Bowen, who later became the director of Dyckman House—she was one of the early directors of Dyckman House. The funny thing was, the first thing I did it at HHT—and this was March of ‘99—was write a newsletter article about the preservation conference that HDC had done in collaboration with the Preservation League of New York State, and HHT, and—maybe the Landmarks Conservancy, maybe not. There was a picture that went with the article and within eighteen months of that moment, everybody in the picture changed jobs. It was like “Oh, there’s Darlene McCloud, who is the head of Preservation League of New York State. And here’s Scott Heyl, who’s the head of HHT. And here’s Vicki Weiner”—they’d all changed within eighteen months. It was kooky. Preservation does that. Like, every five years or so, everybody just sort of changes jobs.

Originally, I was a development officer under Nancy. That was my original job. Then she left and then everybody left and I was acting deputy director, and my final position was manager of programs and acquisitions. But Scott Heyl left to become the president of the Preservation League of New York State. Nancy left to go to Old Chatham at the Shaker Museum. Liz just left. I literally had, for a couple of months, I was changing desks in the office just to log into the computers because we had a really great office in the Arsenal, and I just wanted everyone to see that all the computers were being used. Allyson left to go to Dyckman House—and I finally said, “You’ve got to hire somebody.” They hired Troy Segal, who was our administrative assistant. She’s now a journalist who works for investment, and she ended up working for Zagat for several years after the Trust.

I was going to all the meetings. This is right around the end days of Henry Stern before Adrian [Benepe] took over. So I would go to all the meetings—and I've got great stories about Henry—and hang out with Jack Linn, who was assistant commissioner in his office. You could still smoke in Jack's office in the Arsenal. This is 2000 and it was always a question: do I go up at five o'clock to hang out and Jack's office, have a cigarette, and wave the flag so he's still aware I'm there, knowing that I would be there for two hours and walk out with so much more work? Or do I go home? I was like [begrudgingly], I guess I'll go to Jack's office and hang out. [laughs] Jack, hilariously, lives across the street from St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. So I would see him regularly when I was working at HDC, and he became a donor at HDC, and he's a great guy. Wears all black, looks like one of the original beatnik cool guys. You'd see him sitting outside smoking.

So then Amy Freitag was brought in, in October 1999, and she hired a whole new team of people—because there was nobody there [laughs]. And Amy and I will always be friends because I had to introduce her to all of the houses, and so we would go on these crazy tours. And she'd be like, "Where are we going now?" "We're going to Staten Island!" And I remember we were like, we're gonna go to Staten Island first because those are some of the stranger houses. So we went to the Seguire Mansion and met George Burke. She hired a whole mess of people, including Dawn Gonik, who was the first—I don't want to say she was the first woman in capital, but it was so surprising to the Parks guys that like Amy hired a woman as a conservationist who could talk architecture. They were like, "Hey, little blonde girl, what's going on here?" She's great. And Sarah Landreth, who later went on to work at the Museum of the City of New York and the Seaport Museum, and now is the development director at the Transit

Museum. Mandy Ikert, who ended up working for city planning during the whole Sunnyside Gardens mishegoss.

That's when we did the event at Alice Austen where we actually took a ferry. We chartered a ferry from Manhattan to Alice Austen and used an industrial shipyard next to Alice Austen, and we parked it there and had everyone walk out, and I remember it was very dark on the lawn. I remember turning to Staten Island Borough Parks Commissioner Tom Paulo—"Tom, it's really dark. What can we do?" He's like, "Wait for it, wait for it." And then all the lights on the Verrazano went on. I was like, oh my God, you turned on the lights on the Verrazano! How did you do that? I mean, it was quite a moment.

Then I decided I worked there long enough and I wasn't thrilled, you know, just where everything was. So I was either gonna get a graduate degree or go be the executive director at the Historic Districts Council. I thought I might get a planning degree. I'm kind of programmed from my childhood to have a graduate degree—really very little choice about it. It's like salmon swimming upstream. And because Vicki had left in August of 2000—she had her kid, Griffin, and so she left to spend more time with her family—and Sue Radmer, who was an old MAS [Municipal Art Society] type, was running HDC as an interim, and HDC, by the way, had at that point left 45 West 67th Street and moved down to East 11th Street, after I conveniently left HDC. Right? I didn't have to do any packing. I always thought that was very clever of me that I didn't have to pack or unpack anything. I think it was one of the most successful professional moves of my life.

So David Freudenthal, he was on the board. We had known David—he'd worked for Ruth Messinger. He was a planner in Ruth's Manhattan Borough President's office. And then he later moved on to and still is, as far as I know, at Carnegie Hall. And he lived at 240 Central Park South, which was a major landmark fight just as I was coming in to HDC. So David was the person who was in charge of the search committee. Hal Bromm was the president of HDC at the time. I went and met with him, I started November 12, 2000.

The first evening was a Monday. I skipped an executive committee meeting, which Hal held against me for ever-so-long. Because I wanted to take my five-year-old sister to *102 Dalmations* at Radio City. I should have gone to the executive committee—Hal was very disappointed [laughs]. It was the premiere of *102 Dalmations*, I had a five-year-old, what can you do? At the time, Susan Cline was the administrative assistant, and, Sandy [Sandra] Levine was the advocacy consultant, who was pretty much fulltime but weirdly still on a 1099 for reasons.

I do remember saying, when I was having the interview, “Okay guys, the one thing is, I don't want to walk in and have to deal with the Landmarks Lion [Award]. That's an enormous amount of work and I know the HDC schedule and you should be having a Lion so I'm just gonna be [honest].” And they're like, Sue Radmer has got that under control. “Cool. Aces.” I walk in and, “We had to push the Lion to January, so you got the Lion.” I was like, thanks, that's great [said with sarcasm]. That was Joyce Matz's lion. It was at St. Bart's [St. Bartholomew's Church]. That's when I discovered I should always get a haircut before public events because I didn't and there was a picture of me in the *New York Times*. I looked terrible. C. Virginia Fields, the borough president, was there and Chris[tine] Quinn, way before she was City Council speaker—

she had just become a council member because Tom Duane had moved up to Albany. Kent Barwick was there, and he had had a fall so he was in a wheelchair, and I remember taking him around in that. So this is the start of 2001.

The big preservation things—HDC’s organization was a bit of a wreck at that point just because there hadn’t been any leadership. Vicki had left a while ago. There had been a caretaker in place. The finances were a mess because we had changed fiscal years. Originally, our fiscal year had been something really kooky. It wasn’t even on a municipal year—it was March to March or something, based on what the old NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts] had been, but then we changed it to being a calendar year. So there was this weird time and, as I mentioned earlier, there was like \$150,000 that we were routing to the preservation high school through Department of Youth & Community Development, which required so many forms. And remember, this is 2000—nothing’s online, everything is being done on typewriters. Anne Van Ingen would remember better, but I think NYSCA forms were still had to be typed on legal paper that was in landscape orientation, so you had to have a special typewriter for them because you can’t put legal paper sheet in landscape on a normal typewriter. I mean, I could be incorrect on that one, but I remember that in ’97 and I think it hadn’t changed by 2000.

And then, the biggest “preservationy” thing that happened was that Amster Yard got knocked down. Instituto Cervantes and the Spanish government had bought Amster Yard, which was an individual landmark on Third Avenue and 52nd Street, 53rd Street—maybe it’s 48th [East 49th Street]—and were converting this small, secluded cul de sac, which the Landmarks Conservancy, by the way, had an easement on as well—so it had an easement and it was a

landmark—and they knocked it all down during construction. I remember Michael Adams strangely knew about this and he told us about it, and we got David Dunlap involved while David was still writing for the *Times*, even though he was not writing preservation that much, but he was the preservation reporter. And I remember Christabel [Gough] going and getting all the demolition permits and the demolition drawings from DOB [Department of Buildings], spending money to get these enormous drawings. I wrote timelines about it and it was this big thing that took, like, three years to resolve.

And then, meanwhile, just trying to get HDC up to speed and organizing everything and blah blah blah, and then 9/11 happens. I remember watching it on this teeny little television that we had in HDC. It was still in the office in 2021 when I left HDC. And that was fun [said with sarcasm], and everybody freaks out. The preservation groups all came together at the World Monuments Fund downtown because they had a downtown office at that time, and the groups all said we need to do something. Everyone's freaking out. All the preservation groups said there's going to be a lot of redevelopment in the area and so we need to do a survey of all the areas, and let's create a new a new group, the Lower Manhattan [Emergency] Preservation Fund and everybody should kick in some money, like \$5,000. So I went back to my board and said, "They're all doing this Lower Manhattan Preservation Fund and they want us to kick in \$5000." The board said no. I was like, "Okay." So I said, "I'm sorry. We can't do it." They said, "Okay, well, we're just gonna do it on our own." So we worked with them and gave them information. And then the board held that against me for a very long time that we were not able to support the Lower Manhattan Preservation Fund. I was like, "You said you didn't want to give them money." [laughs]

Also, we were convinced—if you remember at all, in 2001—we were convinced that it was going to be a Democratic mayor because we were all sick of Rudolph W. Giuliani. It was a very long eight years. And we were like, “It’s gonna be a Dem.” So we worked with Arlene Simon on mayoral breakfasts. And it was Freddy [Fernando] Ferrer—oh, their names are escaping me, but there were four. Peter Vallone, Freddy Ferrer, the comptroller [Alan] Hevesi, and somebody else. I’m seeing him my head but it doesn’t matter. It’s some old white guy [Mark J. Green]. And we were just going bonkers! We were getting them all to show up and have breakfast, and we’re asking then hard-hitting questions, and it was a major political thing. And we all got together and worked on the preservation platform and spent a lot of time on that.

Then at the very end, we were like, you know, we should really do the two Republicans running also, which was Herman Badillo and Michael Bloomberg. I mean, they’re not going to win, right? And Badillo’s like, “[scoffs] No, thank you.” He’s like, I ran against John Marchi back in 1967. I don’t need to talk to you guys. We were like, you did indeed run against John Marchi in the ‘60s so, I mean, yeah, sure. I think you were Democrat back then but it’s fine. And Bloomberg was like, “Sure, I’ll show up!” So in August of 2001, we had this funny conversation with Michael Bloomberg, charming guy. And he was shooting from the hip, like “Yeah, I like landmarks! Preservation is a good thing!” We’re like, you’re funny, you’re not gonna win. Well, look at that, right? That transcript from that, we used that against him forever. But it was very poorly attended. It was right about now, in August of 2001. But we were like, whatever, I guess we should do that.

Oh! The other thing that we were involved with was the Dorothy Day Cottage in Spanish Camp that started in '99, 2000. Spanish Camp was a small area on Prince's Bay in Staten Island that was a bungalow colony, and Dorothy Day—who has been beatified but not canonized as far as I know—the anarchist, possibly vegetarian, former bohemian from New York, lived in a cottage in what was called Spanish Camp, and I could tell you the history of Spanish Camp but really no one cares about it. She founded *The Catholic Worker*, the newspaper and the organization, and she lived there for decades and wrote many of her works there. Some bad guy came and bought the place out and started knocking down the cottages, so we got involved and the Landmarks Commission got involved. David Goldfarb was very, very big in trying to protect Spanish Camp and they bulldozed Dorothy Day's cottage—the developer was a deeply unpleasant person, exactly what one thinks a certain type of developer from Staten Island/New Jersey of Italian extraction is like. The Landmarks Commission actually calendared the site and the city came down on this guy like a hammer—they calendared the site even though it was knocked down. They made it into a Forever Wild spot, not allowing development.

Years and years and years and years later, they did some small development there and [James] Jimmy Oddo, when he was Staten Island Borough President, ended up changing the newly mapped streets to be like Lucre Avenue and Greed Street. [laughs] You know, Jimmy knocked down a landmark building that everybody was pushing for, and we learned him, and he actually ended up being at least receptive to landmarking, but he did not forget slights. If you cross Jimmy Oddo—I believe I once heard him say, “Me and my boys are going to come and get you!” I think he said that at a public hearing. [laughs] He was classic. So that was 2000. It must have been '99 on to that because I remember hearing about it when I was at the Historic House

Trust, and then I inherited that.

So that was 9/11. Life went on. HDC was woefully understaffed. I reorganized the office and created people as “preservation associates” rather than “administrative assistants.” Let me just look at who was hired then [looking at notes]. Actually, in 2000, Catherine McNeur started working for me as an intern first, and then I hired her, and then she went to start working at Columbia in the history department, and then got her Master’s at Columbia, and then got a PhD. Now she’s teaching historic preservation out in Portland, which is great, and wrote a book about environmental law in New York City that had a review of it published above the fold in the *Times*. When I left HDC in 2021 we still were using Catherine’s filing system and she left HDC in 2004. She was very, very organized. It was remarkable.

Then, in 2003, me and Eric Allison had gotten some money. Funding at HDC was always very tricky and we didn’t have very many funders, but the Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation had been a funder in the past and as part of my, “Hey, I’m the new Executive Director! Howdy!”, I would go to all of our old funders who hadn’t re-upped. You know, the Andy Warhol Foundation used to fund preservation, the Astor Foundation used to fund preservation, and then Mrs. Astor passed and Andy Warhol moved down to Pittsburgh and just did the Andy Warhol Museum, so a lot of the major funders just dried up.

Q: Is that why HDC didn’t have many funders, or were there other reasons?

Bankoff: The reason why HDC didn’t have many funders—A) we were never very good at it, in

terms of foundation funding. B) we were so focused, because of board orientation on advocacy, but people don't fund advocacy. It took me years to figure out how to reframe our advocacy efforts into a fundable resource. And I did that eventually by saying it's community education. It's community outreach. Particularly because it's very tricky when you're doing advocacy to make that measurable and give it a benchmark, and it takes forever. Again, I'm going to get back to working with Dumbo, Dumbo wasn't made into a historic district until 2009. We started working with them ten years before. We started working with Crown Heights North in 2003 and they lucked out and became a historic district in 2006. Bob Tierney loved them. That was fast! And then they had to do part two and part three—took them another five, ten years. So it's really hard to do advocacy, that's why.

One of the things I did with HDC was, by reframing a lot of what we did, we enlarged our education programming. Franny would do workshops, I remember there was a community board workshop that she did, and Françoise Bollack played a fancy French architect, this role-playing position, and so we let her do that. That was a little before I started. But basically we did the conference, and the reason why HDC does the conference is that is what we hung a lot of our public funding on. It was a good idea to do the conference but it also was a way to get money. How we did the conference changed over the years but, again, by reframing—that's why we started doing preservation schools. The Six to Celebrate program, which we initiated in 2011, was because it was fundable. And we're working in the neighborhoods with a very important and actually successful program, but we're also getting public money for it.

So we go to Mertz Gilmore, who was also changing their name—they were getting rid of the

Joyce. They were just going to become “Mertz Gilmore” because that’s so much better than “Joyce Mertz Gilmore,” I don’t know. And they were trying to figure out what they were doing with their lives, kind of reexamining themselves, a little bit of a mid-life crisis kind of thing. And we said, “Hey, you guys! You used to give us a lot of money!” They gave us like fifteen grand or something like that at one point, but that was a lot of money for HDC because when I started at HDC in 2000, HDC’s budget was like \$200,000 a year or so. And we had about \$70,000 in the bank.

Q: And it sounds like eight or so employees. Six?

Bankoff: No. Two. Oh, I’m sorry. When I started HDC, Susan Cline was the administrative assistant and Sandy was the advocacy consultant. And then there was me. So three.

Q: Okay, that makes more sense.

Bankoff: I’m sorry. I’m throwing a lot of names out there. And then, unfortunately, Susan ended up getting sick and passing away. And then Sandy left in 2003.

So I went to Joyce Mertz Gilmore, whenever they got rid of “Joyce,” and they had decided that what they were going to do was they were going to focus their energies. Rather than giving \$15,000 here, \$20,000 there, they’re going to just do, like, six groups and really make a big thing of it. So I sat down and Eric Allison was with me, and we made a whole pitch. They said to us, “What would you like to see? What would HDC look like if you could do anything?” I said I

would hire somebody to do development and a deputy director. And they said, “Why don’t you develop a proposal around that? Write out a budget for what you’d like to be able to do and let’s talk.” So I wrote out a budget for \$300,000 a year—went from \$200 to \$300 [thousand]. And it talked about hiring a deputy and how they would work on development, and we’d be able to grow our programs by this, that, and the other thing. They’re like, cool, two-year grant. So they actually gave a capacity-building grant for two years.

[door buzzer rings]

[END AUDIO FILE A, BEGIN AUDIO FILE B]

Bankoff: So they gave us a two-year grant—\$75,000 for two years. So I hired a fourth person—third person, not counting myself—and that was very exciting. [laughs] And that was originally Jay Platt, who came to us from the Landmarks Commission. He ended up relocating pretty quickly back to California and last I heard he was a preservation planner in Hollywood in the Los Angeles area, where he was from originally.

So I’ve mentioned Crown Heights North, we started working with them. We started doing a zoning project again—redoing the zoning project, now that we had slightly better computers. We actually started analyzing that information and trying to compare what the zoning was in historic districts to the historic districts. That never really came to anything, although we did get rather involved in the Park Slope rezoning, which was represented by good old Councilmember [Bill] de Blasio, at the time, and that’s kind of what screwed up Fourth Avenue and made it ugly as sin. They later corrected that somewhat but we did at least get good mid-block zoning in Park Slope.

We started working in Stapleton in Staten Island, which had been a long-sought historic district, It was the third historic district and only the second residential historic district in Staten Island, the first one being St. George-New Brighton [Historic District], which was designated in '94 or so. Working in Douglaston also, and that was when Douglaston Hill [Historic District] was one of these—there was this weird moment in the early 2000s where the Landmarks Commission would reject things and then we'd push really hard on it, and then they would actually do it. It was very funny. That happened at 240 Central Park South where David Freudenthal lived, that lovely building next to 2 Columbus Circle. And it also happened in Douglaston Hill where they rejected it and then they came back and did it again, so that was kind of cool.

Q: Why do you think that was happening?

Bankoff: Those both happened around 2000, 2001. It was the end of the Giuliani administration. I think that political forces were at play. And Jennifer was one foot out the door to Hunter College, which is very strange that she's still president of Hunter College today. That is a really long time to be president for somebody who got a "no confidence" vote in the first two years of her tenure. Remarkable, remarkable. So, again, Sherida Paulsen became the acting chair. And she did Gansevoort [Market Historic District]. Sherida had much more appreciation for modern architecture than Jennifer did. And she was just acting [chair] so she did a couple of funky things.

Q: It sounds like maybe being the squeaky wheel or whatever—when they didn't really have a

vision themselves, if you were the squeaky wheel [you could get a designation through]—

Bankoff: If you're the squeaky wheel, and also, with Douglaston Hill, that was another case where we got them on the National Register. We were like, "Hey, why don't you get on National Register? Because if you're on the National Register, you could say, well, the state likes us. You can't say we're not meritorious." And the Commission's like, [grumbles] "Alright, I guess."

Q: Let me ask you a question about that.

Bankoff: Sure. Please.

Q: So I guess: Is it correct that the Landmarks Preservation Commission used to be an entity that would assist neighborhoods with taking these steps that would make them more appealing to actually being designated a landmark? But then eventually, it was actually HDC doing that kind of advocacy?

Bankoff: I'm going to stop my slow trudge through twenty-one years, of which I've only gotten to three of, to get a little more—

I don't know, I'm going to say I don't know. My whole career in preservation, people have harkened back to some golden age that I don't think exists. To listen to people talk about it, the best times were probably the Barwick era. Now, I'm older than I prefer to think about, so I was alive during the Barwick era but I was much more concerned about, I don't know, I'm gonna

say, probably, *The Empire Strikes Back* being in the movie theaters than “Kent Barwick doing great work on the Upper East Side.” In my memory, the Landmarks Commission is just there, and they’ve always—they say they work with people. You know, an agency is people. When Bob Tierney led the agency during the Bloomberg administration, I worked closely with Landmarks staff. And because Bob was Landmarks Chair for a really long time, he had a sort of continuity of staff, and we all just kind of get used to each other. I’m not gonna say we always agreed because we didn’t.

Bob stopped talking to me for a long time when we sued him. We sued him over a FOIL [Freedom of Information Law] request and he took it personally, and nobody else did. Because at one point they sent us a letter saying if you don’t like it, you can sue us, so we did! [laughs] It was not a big deal. I saw him years later and we’re great. But I was like, because you said if you don’t like it, you could sue us! It’s a procedural thing, Bob. You were not fulfilling your FOIL request, get over it!

But I remember being at meetings with LPC, talking to communities. And Kate Daly, when she was executive director, did a lot of outreach with neighbors but I don’t really know, exactly. They would always say that they would talk to people all the time. I don’t know if that’s true or not. When HDC was running on all cylinders, we were going out and counseling neighborhood groups on strategy, on how to approach it. I worked really, really closely with Sunnyside Gardens and Herb Reynolds, and his group of neighbors were incredibly thoughtful about how they were going about doing it. They would have community meetings and Barry Lewis would show up and lecture, and Barry can always draw a crowd, especially in Queens. And then when

it actually came to the Landmarks Commission, and we were very concerned about whether it was getting overturned at City Council, we had a whole delegation that we would go and meet with council people.

Similarly, Crown Heights North, Bed Stuy, we would sit around we would strategize about how to do that, how to move the Landmarks Commission, how to get them interested in it. Sunset Park was one of the more recent ones where we're like, "Okay, this is how you do it." We said, "Look, the LPC"—and this was under Meenakshi [Srinivasan]—"is really goofy about public support, so why don't you organize it like you're organizing a political campaign and have block captains?" Because this was also during the period of time when they were very into data. So show how many people support on each block, and blah blah blah. And they did that. They were like, "On this block, we've knocked on every door and we've gotten a 70% response. And of that 70% , 90% of the 70% are for it." And they were lucky enough to have people who were good at graphics and would show maps of this. Hilariously, with Sunset Park, at the very last second, one block that had not been included got very, very angry that they were not included and they sort of stormed the LPC, and I think they scared them in some way. The woman who I spoke with was the daughter of an old landmarks commissioner [Alison Weintraub, daughter of Lee Weintraub].

So in Dumbo, for example—because, guess what? The National Register did not save Dumbo. Surprise, surprise, surprise. And I was just excessively depressed about Dumbo. I remember going to a meeting there and we had just taken a real bad hit—it might have been when 184 Kent was turned down, the Austin Nichols building. That was just jacked by then-Councilmember

David Yassky, who made the mistake of talking to me in the men's room at the City Council and you don't talk—if you start asking hard questions in a men's room, you're gonna get hard answers. [laughs] Whereupon he says, "Simeon, how come everybody hates me?" "Because you're fucking us, David." You don't talk in a men's room! Come on, man! I'm gonna tell you the honest truth here. [laughs] But I remember being in Dumbo and just being very depressed and we just been smashing—really—our head against the wall for a decade from 1999 to 2009, and it was going nowhere. We came up with the idea that we could show, actually, based on the National Register, we could show the changes that have happened in Dumbo over the last ten years. Because we had all these great pictures from 1999, and here it was, like 2008, and this is gone, and let's take the exact same pictures. That seemed to work. Who knows where success comes from? But that was definitely that.

Also, getting new political representation with Steve [Stephen] Levin, who was really great. I remember me and Frampton [Tolbert] and Doreen [Gallo] just going knocking on Steve's door three weeks after he came on City Council. And he seemed like a really, really young guy. Doreen was like, "Well, I didn't vote for him." I'm like, "I don't care who you voted for! You are now his best friend." And she became his best friend and just harangued him about Dumbo forever and he did it.

Steve also—it was hilarious. He walked into the Downtown Brooklyn Heights—the Borough Hall Skyscraper [Historic] District—whatever the specific name is, and the one residential building in there was adamantly against being landmarked. The windows are defective and so they're under constant window repair—you go there, you look at it, and you can see, oh yeah,

they have people working on their windows constantly. And there's some very, very powerful people there. Arnold what's-his-head, who was the head of the Brooklyn Museum forever [Arnold Lehman], was a tenant there, and they were all co-op and very, very, very against it. This was proposed by the Brooklyn Heights Association and the Landmarks Conservancy—and maybe MAS—and it was always part of Otis Pearsall's dream of Brooklyn Heights. It was like the second part of it. And they proposed it and it didn't go anywhere, and then all of a sudden it showed up and the LPC was like, "Yeah, we're gonna do this." We were like, "Hey, cool. That sounds good to us." You know, we're not gonna say no. And then these people on Court Street—I believe it was Court Street—were freaking out, raising high holy fuss. The Landmarks Commission hears it. And the commercial tenants hated it, but whatever. I mean, they're commercial owners in Brooklyn—no one is taking them seriously. And LPC designates it, and then it goes to City Council, and they start doing this huge push on poor old Steve Levin.

Steve just keeps taking meetings with them, keeps kicking the can down the road, keeps kicking the can down the road. I sat with him and he said, "I know who all those people are. I know how many votes they have. I've counted it." Because every politician in the world—every politician, at least in New York, and I assume everywhere else—they know their district to a person, they know who their votes are, they know who's voted for them. That's their basic algebra. They have other concerns but they know at a deep core level. So Steve's kicking it down the road, and kicking it down the road, and kicking it down the road. We're like, "Oh my God, they're gonna cut this building out. This is terrible." I'm having a conversation with somebody and they say, "Simeon, what's going on over there?" I said, "Well, the people on Court Street, blah blah blah." And they say, "Haven't they expired their time?" And I said, "That's a very good question."

So then, I went back to the calendar, counted days. I call Steve. I said, “Steve”—called him on a Friday—I said, “Today it’s 129 days since the Landmarks Commission acted. The subcommittee isn’t meeting until Tuesday. Now, depending on how you count it, it’s gonna be 133 days. It’s automatically landmarked.” He’s like, “Are you sure about that?” “Uh huh, it’s in the statute.” He’s like, “Tell no one.” I said okay. So the next thing I know, I’m getting a phone call from Chris Quinn, who’s [City Council] speaker. And she’s like, “We are going to have a meeting on Monday to talk about this. And Judy Stanton from the Brooklyn Heights Association, and you, and maybe a few other people are going to be there, and don’t worry, it’ll pass.” I said, “Chris, you know.” And she’s like, “We’re not going to say anything about that.” “That’s cool.” So Monday morning rolls around—and I’m not telling Judy or anything like that—and we all show up in the Council cafeteria to have a meeting. Gail Benjamin was there and Chris is there. And she’s like, “I’ve been thinking about this and I think it’s very important that this happens.” I said, “I think that’s terrific. Thanks so much.” And Judy is like, “Oh, that’s great! Thank you so much, Speaker Quinn.” And we’re like, “Yeah, Chris, good for you!” [laughs]

Q: Took the win.

Bankoff: Yeah. That also almost happened with another—with [Cathedral of] St. John the Divine, if I recall correctly, which was a mess. And St. John the Divine was a case where, actually, the community fought against the landmarking because the LPC just wanted to landmark the close, back in 2003, and not the whole complex. So people got to then-Councilmember Bill Perkins and he rejected the landmarking on the basis that it wasn’t enough.

Eventually, they landmarked what they were going to landmark like ten years later but that kind of gave City Council the taste for rejecting things. So then they rejected the Jamaica Savings Bank in Elmhurst mostly because then-Councilmember Simcha Felder was just being a jerk about it. And no one cared, and then-Councilmember Helen Sears was asleep at the wheel. But that set the stage for 184 Kent, which happened right after Jamaica Savings Bank, and that was a mess.

Now, as everything works in the cycle—you know, the world is round and the cycle of life—184 Kent, by the way, has a preservation easement on it and has been restored meticulously using tax credits. Jared Kushner was involved in it—and it's been run horribly and there are nightmare stories about rats inside, but the building itself is perfect, is beautiful. The outside of it, anyway.

Q: Yeah, I know a few people who had studios in there.

Bankoff: Yeah. Ward Dennis from Higgins Quasebarth actually was a tenant there back during that whole fight.

Q: Well, let me steer you back to the—

Bankoff: —slow march through my chronology?

Q: I would call it: HDC building capacity, codifying some programs, and understanding that some of the programs were just the advocacy that was always part of the mission—and some of

the programs that we know and see more publicly became notable because they were fundable.

Bankoff: Yes exactly. Exactly.

Q: It wasn't necessarily new but just—

Bankoff: This is actually a problem of the preservation community in New York. You saw, I'm happy to tell war stories until the cows come home. No one pays for those, and they create what Randy Mason once called a "battlefield mentality." And the fact of the matter is, if you want to extend the military metaphor, the military plans. Most of the time, the military is not at war. They're doing other things. But a lot of board members in preservation—"preservationists" [sounding pompous]—don't care about that stuff. They're not engaged in the important educational processes. I mean, yeah, sure they are, kinda-sorta, but it's not what gets your blood racing if you're a preservation advocate!

You know, people are like, "Oh my God, you guys do all these wine and cheese parties"—people from the other boroughs, one or two people particularly, would snipe at HDC, "Oh, you just do parties, that's all you do." Actually, those parties are really important. They are times for the community to gather in a positive, friendly manner, and do the important work of being a community. Meeting each other and talking to each other. Meeting people who might give you more money, or meeting people who have important stories, or people who might be helpful to you in your preservation advocacy, which is the really important thing that you should be doing all the time. But it's like being a firefighter. It's A) exhausting and B) it's not what firefighters

do all the time—what they mostly do is they inspect buildings so when there is a fire, they're ready for it. The preservation schools, the walking tours, the award ceremonies, the publications, are all things that the public engages with—not the people who are self-defined as “preservationists.”

And something that is difficult to stomach—I'm gonna say that the New York Preservation Archive Project, who I'm a happy donor to, and I'm thrilled that this is happening kind of supports—is this “great man of history” theory. That it's Otis Pearsall sitting around and suddenly coming up with the preservation of Brooklyn Heights. And if it wasn't for Otis; if it wasn't for Kent; if it wasn't for so and so—if it wasn't for Arlene Simon—none of this would have happened. It's all based on the one person. This has caused a real problem in personality-based movement stuff, whereupon I am regarded as being “the kid” I'm fifty-two years old and I am regarded as “the kid.” That's not good. There should be people a generation below me coming up and there aren't. I mean, where are all the 30-year-olds? You have people going to grad school and graduating grad school in their late twenties—and then they disappear. And there's no room at the top. It becomes the situation that we have in America, also, with the Baby Boomers who just won't let go of the reins of power.

But more to the point, it's not about ageism, it's about “so and so had this idea and then they just did it.” No, they didn't have this idea. They were at an HDC board meeting, which is being run by a staff that got them all together and wrote the agenda, and then continued the long hard work of moving the action forward and convening everybody so that the great people of history could get together and know each other, and have those phone numbers. And Simeon is on the other

end of the phone, knowing who to talk to and giving you the phone number. I'm not saying that I'm making those phone calls for you—even though I usually was—but I am, at least, giving you the information. And I'm doing that, and Michelle Arbulu, who worked with me for eleven years was doing that, and Frampton, who was the deputy director for nine years, and Nadezhda [Williams], who was HDC's other deputy director and had worked for HDC for ten years, is doing that. Andrea Goldwyn at the Landmarks Conservancy is doing that. These people who've been there and just show up every day and keep the action moving forward, and track everything and make those connections, and do those wine and cheese parties. "Oh my God, I have to go to another one of those?" Yes, you do, because where else are you going to see Kent Barwick and bask in the warmth of his presence? And that's ignored, and that is not properly appreciated.

These people aren't well paid. I could embarrass myself and everybody else by explaining the long and boring history of HDC underpaying everybody for years. But suffice it to say, I worked for the organization for twenty-one years. Do you think I doubled my salary from the time I was hired until the end? No. Wait—I lie like a rug. I exactly doubled it. [laughs] Also, between the time that I left HDC in 1999 and then was hired in 2000, that was a difference of \$15,000 in salary because I was so underpaid to begin with. I mean, one of the big fights that we would always have would be trying to pay people enough. Because when you underpay people, it's impossible to actually bring them up to speed. You're like, hey, I want to give them a 10% raise. I want to give them a 20% raise. And everyone was like "Oh, that's so much!" They're making \$30,000 a year—20% is \$6,000 a year. That's not a lot of money. "Twenty percent?! We can't do that."

On the flip side, New York State Council on the Arts, who was one of the Historic District Council's longest-standing funders. And Ann Van Ingen is fantastic, we worked with her for such a long time. And we worked with Kristin Herron, who's really great. We slowly grew—our first grant couple of grants were like \$5,000 and then we finally grew to like \$25,000—but because of the issues of the state budget doing what New York State does, there'd be years where they'd freeze, right? Or cut 10% off. And then you'd go back to them and here's a grant for \$30,000. "But we can't give you that. I mean, you were making \$20,000." Well, we're making \$20,000 because we slowly crept up and then your funding was frozen for three years. "But we can't give you a 50% increase. That's just too large a percentage." Ahhhhhh!
[screaming] What do you do?

Something that people who are not employed in preservation don't appreciate is that you're running a small business. There's nothing wrong with that. That's a good thing. It's the American dream, as John Mulaney says, right? But that means that there are decisions that need to be made. There are things that you need to do to keep the business going. Talking to health insurance companies is something I loathe but I had to do it, you know? And that means that I'm not talking to people in Wallabout about how to become a historic district at that moment because I have to deal with the health insurance. And then the trickiness of registering to be a lobbyist, which I had to do. But no, people want to hear about the flashing on the steps in Riverside Park. "The Parks Department is just messing that up terribly. What are we going to do about that?"

I mean, I haven't even really talked about the C of A [certificate of appropriateness] stuff

because it's a grind. It's incredibly important. I'm very proud that the Historic Districts Council did that for so many years and tracked it and kept notes on it. Something that people are unaware of, I think, is that, in addition to getting up and testifying all the time, we kept notes on all that stuff! We had a database that we established of literally thousands [of entries]. When I left, it was probably close to seven thousand of all of our testimony from, like, 2003, when we started actually writing it. When I actually became Executive Director, we started writing our testimony—a little before that, actually, Vicki did make Sandy Levine's job just to go and deliver testimony. That was a major change, like, "Wow! Professionalism! We're going to actually write our testimony! Written! Weird, huh?" But we kept all that. And then we'd also keep records of what the commissioners' conversation was so we could track what they're doing. Us and Christabel Gough are the only people who do that. Everybody else just sort of shows up whenever there's a new rooftop addition on the Upper West Side and they're all upset about it. Or they're proposing something terrible for Central Park, or they're ripping down buildings in the Greenwich Village Historic District.

You have to show up and do the work and it's a trudge. There was always a tension on the HDC board of the people who got the importance of all that and the people who were like, "Oh my God, you're wasting so much time doing that like. Why are we doing that? Why do we pay someone for this?" I figured out that HDC was paying somebody to spend 75% of their time at the Landmarks Commission either preparing for it, writing it up, or being there. No one's gonna fund that.

Q: Because it sounds like it's somebody else's job, right? Like it's the Landmark Preservation

Commission's job. [laughs]

Bankoff: Right. [laughs] And we were there. And the Commission appreciates it actually. They actually do like when people show up. Staff, not so much sometimes. But the people who really do appreciate that work. But it's unfundable. "Here, give us \$500 and sponsor Sybil Young's day at the Landmarks Commission." That's crazy.

Q: I mean, it just exactly illustrates your point I think, that that in order to be able to make those connections, through having conversations, through your knowledge of all these different communities, that you need records for that too. No one needs to get an award for having all that in their head at all times. And indeed, when someone who's there a long time leaves, it's so important to have an existing record that can back up all that information and it can be a resource for new people that come along.

Bankoff: Precisely.

Q: And so I'm seeing how all of that work is—

Bankoff: And it's infuriating now, especially, when people are like, "Oh, if it's not on the internet it doesn't exist." That, actually, is why one of the things I did—much later than I should have—was sending out our testimony. We only started doing that in, I don't know, 2017. Let's see here. Kelly Carroll started working at HDC in May of 2014, and I know it's something that I asked Kelly to do, to send out our testimony. We're doing a lot of work here. People need to

know about this. And also, that way, we can be guaranteed that the commissioners see it before the testimony before the hearing. It's not a surprise. This isn't like a birthday present. [laughs] This is public testimony. We should send it out.

Q: But it is also that community education because you hear exactly what the arguments are for why this thing called preservation is important and, let's say, isn't just elitist, which its history is often categorized as.

Bankoff: Oh my God, if we were elitist, I'd like to be rich—but we're not! [laughs]

Q: [laughs] It's sounding like a lot of commonalities with archivists, basically. Here you are finding that you need to organize all this material and make it accessible but you're not necessarily trained archivists, but you need to make do so that there can be a resource for the future.

Bankoff: You know, it's so important to keep things accessible because that's how you introduce new people to things. I'm working currently with Save Harlem Now! And they just hired a new executive director, which is fantastic. He's a really great guy but he doesn't come from a preservation background, which is the best, actually. I can teach people preservation. You can't teach people like other things. I always used to tell people who say, "I want to be in preservation," "Cool, learn how to fundraise."

Q: Yes. Right.

Bankoff: Learn how to write well. Practice your writing. “What can I do?” I mean, look, I’ll give you the books. You’ll learn how to look at a building. It’s not that hard. I mean some people got it, some don’t—but you already want to do it, so it’s fine. Learn how to plan an event. Learn how to teach a class. Those are real skills that we need.

But the new executive director is dealing with this thing. He’s like, “I have these meetings and everybody’s talking about all these names and these things that happen. I don’t know what they’re talking about.” That’s what preservationists do; I was joking about Otis and Kent and I don’t even need to use their last names. This is ridiculous, okay? Nobody—of course, the readers of the New York Preservation Archive do know this and it’s niche, this is inside baseball. But it’s all inside baseball. And we need to keep things as accessible as possible. I’m not saying dumb it down but be prepared, like, “Hey, this is what happened in the past. This is why this is necessary.” You know, Nadezhda, whom I remain friends with, said to me once that it was several years before she figured out that Halina Rosenthal had passed away in like, 1992, because everyone talked about her in the present. She just figured that Halina was living in California or something, like she wasn’t involved anymore but she was still alive. I told her, no, Halina Rosenthal died in 1992 [1991].

Q: Right, they’re coming back out of history, right into the present, reaching further and further—

Bankoff: I legitimately had a conversation within the last two years where somebody said, “Well,

what we really need is a Jackie Onassis.” And I was like, no Mrs. Onassis has been laid to rest, what, thirty years ago? No, no. Stop trying to drag people out of the past for this. We need to be those people. We need to cultivate new people and we need to be those people ourselves. But there’s this hero worship that—yes, all movements have this, I’m just very involved in the preservation movement—but there is this crazy hero worship. And so-and-so does this—maybe they’ll weigh in about that. No! They’re busy doing their own thing. They’re busy trying to save the Upper East Side. They’re busy trying to promote good development in the South Bronx. They’re trying to rezone the Bowery. They’re not going to come in and help your issue. They’re all nice people and they’re probably, if they’ve got the time, are more than happy to talk to you about what might help. But they’re not magic. You just need to do the work. And I think everyone kind of knows that but they really prefer not to talk about it, and they don’t appreciate the people who do the work, who just keep trudging forward.

Q: So in a sense they want to reach up to somebody in the preservation field, as opposed to maybe a lateral reach to people who are also working on the ground because they live there, or because they’re the City Council person?

Bankoff: Yeah. I mean, how hard is it?

Q: Or because they’re staff at another agency?

Bankoff: How hard is it to pick up a phone and call somebody?

Q: Some people would say very, very hard. And that's the truth.

Bankoff: Other people live on the phone.

Q: Right, meanwhile—

Bankoff: And they're just expecting magic from certain magic people. And then they're like, "Well, I'm from Waldheim, Queens. They dump all over Queens. No one ever represents Waldheim." Well, it's true, no one represents Waldheim but that doesn't mean that you can't talk to your neighbors. If you can get five neighbors together and do this—this is basic community organizing—you can be successful, you can have a chance at success. There is no magic preservation bullet. There is no super secret wand or some password or anything like that. And sure, Tony Wood always talks about smoke and mirrors and that's part of it. You try to do the mystique. You try to say, "Well, the Historic Districts Council, our primary constituency is over five hundred neighborhood-based groups." Some of those groups don't exist and some of those groups are one person. And several of those groups are the same person! [laughs]

Q: That's true. [laughs]

Bankoff: But you can wield that as a as a nice cudgel and that is helpful. I'm probably giving away the secrets with that one. But at the same time, there's—I don't mean to sound bitter but there is a certain weird idolization. It gets back to what I was saying earlier about this weird golden past where the Landmarks Commission was the "good commission." It was not the "good

commission.” People are people. They haven’t changed that much, and they haven’t changed over my lifetime.

And then there’s the lack of information—I’m doing a research data study at the moment and it is shocking, I tell you, how little data there is on preservation throughout the country. I challenge you to figure out how many regulated buildings there are in Portland, Oregon. They’ve got a Historic Landmarks Commission. It’s staffed, I’ve talked to them. She said, “I have to look that up.” It’s not on their website. I literally was having a phone conversation with Portland, Oregon about this. So the data is deeply lacking, and that’s embarrassing. So, yes, we should get better on that point, and I’ve always said we should get better on that point. We need better measurables, we need better data just because—you can dispute data, but if you don’t have it, really you’re just, like, hearts and minds.

But people haven’t changed. And during the mythic Barwick era, St. Vincent’s Hospital tore down its most historic buildings. No one I’ve asked, who was at those meetings, remembers this. It’s hilarious. It was before Christabel got involved, like two months before Christabel got involved.

Q: Is that because all these meetings were happening at, like, midnight?

Bankoff: No! There was a public hearing where the Landmarks Commission said, sure! Take down—was it Elizabeth Seton? I think it was the Elizabeth Seton Building. You know at St. Vincent’s, the big brown buildings that they tore down to build up the condo? Those replaced the

oldest part of St. Vincent's in 1980 or 1979—it was during Kent's term as LPC [Chair]. He doesn't remember. No one remembers. Come on, guys, you tore it down! So it wasn't a magic era. Gene Norman, who was a great guy, didn't do any designations for years. Christabel wrote a whole thing about it. And then David Dunlap wrote it in the *New York Times*. And yes, there used to be better press, but again, how many times have I mentioned David Dunlap? That's one reporter in a city that had tons of papers. They don't anymore. The city doesn't have tons of papers anymore. All the local papers are run by the same conglomerates.

I remember in the early 2000s actually working with many reporters who had been on local Queens papers and local Brooklyn papers and it was very helpful. And then there was a period of time when hyperlocal blogs were active. Now, I don't know. Honestly, I don't. But that's a bigger issue. And if I could save the world, the first thing I would do would get rid of Juliette balconies because I hate them. And then the second thing I would do is fund a lot of local journalism because local journalism is incredibly important. And in fact, the Knight Foundation did a study that people trust local journalism. Something that should happen—if I were to say the preservation world needs—there should be a non-affiliated preservation-oriented newspaper. You know, like *The Architect's Newspaper*, but focused on preservation. And you've got the problem, of course, the second you start selling advertising, you end up kind of corrupted by it and trying to get shareholder value. But if somebody just said, "Hey, tell you what, kids. Here's \$500,000 a year in perpetuity to run a blog with a weekly paper, or something like that, and just focus on community preservation and building stuff. And don't be YIMBY—*New York Yes In My Back Yard*." That would be amazing. That would be very, very, very helpful. That's why HDC, for example, gave awards for Friends in the Media, just as a "thank you for covering us, thank

you for reporting out.”

Q: And that way it wouldn't just be the people who happen to be in a room with each other even though that is hard work that's helpful. But you will be able to learn about another community group like yours—

Bankoff: Exactly.

Q: —even if you couldn't make the events for ten years because of the age of your kids.

Bankoff: That is a monstrous problem. Again, getting to one of the—this is not just blaming people; this is me being slightly kind and reasonable—but people who are between the ages of thirty-five and fifty are busy! They have kids, they're working! So they're not available to go to these endless meetings. If they are concerned about stuff, then they are really locally focused. And that's just life, especially in this very expensive city that we find ourselves living in. You need to be working in order to do that stuff. But on the other hand, that means that there's a whole demographic, in like, Brooklyn Heights, that are not involved in preservation—adults—they're just not there. If I think of Brooklyn Heights, my demographic in my head of Brooklyn Heights are people over seventy. And I know that's not the case. There are lots and lots of young parents in Brooklyn Heights. I never see them in preservation.

Q: So let me ask you about bringing more people in. I wanted to ask you to talk a little bit more about Six to Celebrate and what that does, let's say, for the groups that are on that list. And also

the Spanish Language Fellows Program.

Bankoff: Oh! Yeah, well, that's a funny story. But the Six to Celebrate program was something that we established in 2011 for HDC's fortieth birthday because we did our research wrong and we thought at the time that HDC hadn't been established until 1971, and then I realized later, it was actually established in 1970—so we were lying about our age because it's impolite to talk about, you know?

So it came out of a combination of things. It came from the board. It also came as an idea to create measurable things—definable, measurable outcomes—because, again, you can't fund advocacy. It's terrible. You're like, well, we lost that one. How do you go to a funder and say, well, took us five years but maybe someone showed up. Instead, we were working—I was working with Frampton on this—and saying, how do we do this? What if we worked with a group and created plans for an organization that, at the end of the year, both they can feel good about it and we can go to funders and say, “We have accomplished our goals for this and our goals are...”

First, because there were certain members of the board who had ideas, we had to reject The Five. This was a variation on a most endangered list, kind of, but first they want to do five, and I was like, “No, we cannot do five.” “Well, why can't we?” “Because if we do five, you're going to insist on one from each borough and I'm going to run out of sites and people in Staten Island within three years. I'm just gonna. There just aren't enough activists in Staten Island, alright?” Nothing against them. “Okay, Eight to Designate.” I said, “No, that's terrible. One, we don't

have the power to designate, so that's failure right there. That's baking-in failure. The other thing is, eight? Are you out of your minds? That means, in four years, I will have thirty-two groups that, statistically speaking, they're not going to be successful. Can you think of thirty-two groups that are successful in four years? This is madness." So we went back and, "We can't do seven because there's Seven to Save." And I said, "Okay, six." We landed on six. I think I was pushing for four but we landed on six.

Then we said, well, let's make it self-nominated. Have people—not compete for it—but even the process of filling out the application was originally meant to get the process going of people organizing their thoughts. Because no one organizes their thoughts in our field—they just don't. I mean, they probably don't organize their thoughts in reality or in life, but I was only dealing with preservation in New York City, okay? Maybe they do it really well in Jersey? I don't know. But in New York, they're like, "I don't know! Landmark me!" Cool. How are you going to do that? "I don't know?! It should be landmarked!" Right. So the very idea began with: we asked questions. They're easy questions. What can HDC do to help you? What are you looking to do? Who are you? Will two people be the contact people? It's so much fun to deal with groups who are like, "Oh, no, no, no, Judy deals with that. Judy is going on vacation to Spain for six months." There are groups where just nothing gets done over the summer because they all go somewhere. They just disappear off the map. What happened to them? We were in the middle of something.

Then we had a really fun party for our fortieth birthday, which was actually our forty-first birthday that we were lying about, and we did the first Six. We, at one point, engaged an outside

panel of experts and Ann Van Ingen was on it, Lisa Ackerman, and one or two other people I can't remember. And we're like, "Here's all the information! What do you think?" And none of these people are on our board, which is the best part. They're like, "Cool! This is so much fun!" I remember, even some of the groups that we didn't make our Six to Celebrate ended up becoming groups by themselves or moving the action forward because of just the process of doing it. There's a Historic Ships Coalition that formed. Because we love ships, ships are great, we love all you people—but no, we can't really help you, this is not what we're good at. But we put them together. They all got in touch, they start having meetings. I don't know if they still exist but they formed.

Q: They do.

Bankoff: Cool! So the *Lilac* and the one in Red Hook with PortSide New York [*Mary A. Whalen*]. And they all started talking to each other, which is really great.

The other thing is people still think, "Oh, okay, so you're gonna be landmarking this?" "Yeah, totally. I'm landmarking it." [said with sarcasm]

It's like my family: "Oh, you're still with the historical society." That was a joke around the office. I mean, my family knows who I worked for but it took them a while. It took them a while. [laughs]

Q: Try being an oral historian.

Bankoff: Right? “How’s the history?” Yeah. “The historical society? We’re doing great. We had a constitution day and talked about citizenship. It was wonderful.” [laughs]

So each group was looking for something different. We ended up raising helping Gowanus raise some money to forward their National Register district. They ended up not being able to complete their National Register district because of politics—literally so bad. It’s a terrible but great story. There were evil property owners in the area who actively were against putting it on the National Register, so it is permanently in limbo. SHPO decided to keep them as eligible because they knew that there were enough evil forces arrayed against them that they would have to reject it, but as long as it’s eligible then we can do all the regulatory stuff that needs to happen.

We were working with the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative to do programs—they just didn’t know how to do programs. We were working with Preservation Greenpoint to get them more involved with their community board. We were working with Sunset Park to get them landmarked and they got landmarked. I no longer have the information off the top of my head but I think we got at least eight locally designated historic districts, dozens of individual landmarks happened, a couple of National Register districts, surveyed thousands of buildings by raising money or sponsoring surveys, doing meetings, stuff like that. It’s a pretty impressive collection.

And of course, the fun part is we never got rid of anybody. It wasn’t like you were one and done. Once you’re a Six to Celebrate you’re Six to Celebrate for forever. So all of our friends at the

Bowery Alliance of Neighbors, who were part of the initial class in 2011 were permanently like, “Simeon, help!” Some of them were self-generated. Occasionally, we would sneak things that we were working on into it. So we did the Heard But Not Designated landmarks because we were spending so much time on the backlog issue, so we said, let’s use Six to Celebrate to push that forward, we’re spending so much time on this, we should do it that way. We did cultural landmarks, which I still believe you spoke at—

Q: [laughs] I trust you.

Bankoff: I will look it up later. [laughs] But I think somewhere on the HDC website there is a transcript of it.

That’s the other crazy thing. That was something I always felt very strongly about, which I didn’t do as successfully as I wanted to, which is everyone’s like, “Oh, I went to that meeting.” Everything is a meeting. People would come up to me and say, “You were at that meeting?” “Sure. You mean the grassroots events? Were you drinking?” “Oh, yeah, no, it was a great meeting.” I’m like, “You were drinking heavily. I remember that.” We’re good at that. That’s what HDC did really well. We had open bars. People appreciate it. And frankly, you don’t drink that much—it’s not that expensive. So yeah, that “meeting.”

Q: Open bar.

Bankoff: Open bar. Very, very key element, open bar. But something I feel very strongly about is

how do you capture the information for the people who weren't at that meeting? You've got to have a take-home. You've got to have a recording of it. And just putting it on YouTube is not good enough. Sure, maybe it is now because we all spent the last two and a half years just glued to our screens having nothing else to do. But you need to behave like a professional and an adult. You go to a conference and you come back with, like, binders full of material that then sit somewhere and gather dust but at least they exist, and then years later, you can go back to and look at. So that was always one of the things about the Six to Celebrate—that's where the guide books came from. And they helped. They would help kind of crystallize that and give people things to hand around. And paper—paper is very exciting, people love paper.

And sometimes they were very misused, like when Councilman Brad Lander would look at the Gowanus guide book and say, "I don't see why you're yelling about this building. It wasn't in the guide book." And I was like, "Because the guidebook was sixteen pages and there was a certain page rate and, okay, it's not on the plaque, stop it." It's like the people who would show up at the Landmarks Commission and say, "This isn't mentioned in the *AIA Guide to New York [City]*" [sounding pompous]. Yeah, you know what else isn't mentioned the *AIA Guide to New York*? You. So leave. [laughs] There's a whole editing process. But yeah, that was something I always wanted to do with our conferences more, is somehow capture them in a better way. And I was never really successful in doing that except for in this cultural landmarks, which is one of the Six to Celebrate, which I, again, believe you did do a presentation.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about cultural history alongside architectural history, archaeological history. Of course the Stonewall [Inn] is like a huge turning point in so many people's minds

for—

Bankoff: You know, it was a landmark before the riots? People forget that. It was actually designated before the riots. So when they broke that glass they were—

Q: —actually destroying a landmark. But can you comment on how that—did you sense that change? How did that change start to—

Bankoff: People have been talking about cultural landmarks since day one. This is a hobby horse I haven't ridden in a while. Okay, so the problem with New York City is that we've got a really good Landmarks Law. However, that is not the be-all and end-all of preservation. Preservation is more than landmark designation and regulation. But because we have such a good Landmarks Law people are like, "It's landmarked, or not. That's it." And people at the LPC will admit to and even embrace the fact that they can't do everything. That being said, because the only way we do preservation in New York is through the Landmarks Commission, it's like trying to fix everything with a Phillips head screwdriver. Phillips head screwdrivers are really great, they do their job really well, but you can't fix everything with them. But who am I to tell generations of preservationists in New York that they're wrong?

Yes, everything, actually, is a cultural landmark in a certain way, if you look at it from the point of view of aesthetics. Why do I think this is an important building? I think it's an important building because of what happened in it, because of who designed it? Why are they important? They're important because of cultural meaning. Anything—there is no culture or everything's

culture. What is it they say in *The Incredibles*? Was that the film? “If everyone is special then no one’s special.” Honestly, from a certain perspective, everything is cultural. Be that as it may, it’s like [trying to define] pornography: we all know what cultural landmarks means. It’s an undistinguished building or site that has resonance for a specific section of the populace that is smaller than the national interest. That is to say, Hamilton Grange? Hamilton lived there, everybody likes Hamilton. On the other hand, Jackie Robinson’s house? I mean, what the what? What’s wrong with using the Landmarks Law to designate these things, as you should, frankly—because if it’s gone, it’s gone. There’s no other way to save it. You can be like, “Jackie Robinson, he used to live where that parking lot is.” That’s a depressing thing, right?

How do you regulate it? That’s an interesting question. The Landmarks Commission doesn’t care about what goes on in the inside of the building. Points for that. Is it better to look at a building that O. Henry lived in that’s been remodeled since his death? Or to not have that building at all? I would say, it’s better to look at the building that he lived in and say O. Henry lived there. It didn’t look like that when he was alive. Maybe someone will return it to what it looked like, maybe they won’t, but at least you’re passing a place and being like, he lived here. And we’ve decided as a culture that he is important enough to commemorate in some way, and the best way to actually understand history is to physically encounter it, so this is an important thing. Is everything important? Yes. Everything is important, for God’s sakes.

Now, the question of cultural landmarks is there is an added importance of you need to figure out how to communicate its cultural importance to someone just walking past it. Otherwise they’re not gonna know, right? How do you do that? Through signage? Well, we’ve talked about

signage—eh, it's tricky. Plaques? On the other hand, if it's not there, you can't put a plaque on it. So you probably want to save it and then figure out some way to communicate its narrative importance in the larger narrative of the history of the space, or the people, or the population that you're talking about. And it's not that hard.

I mean, again, using the same Phillips head screwdriver that we're used to for everything in New York City, they should just landmark these things and don't sweat the details when someone comes in about how to regulate it—you do it by the same kooky ideas of appropriateness that you do. The LPC has as this tendency to try to adopt a notion of “period of significance,” which I think is dumb, and has led to problems like all of the painted brick buildings in Greenwich Village are now all brick, and historically speaking, yes, they were built as brick and then someone painted them, and now they strip them all, which kind of creates a false narrative. But that can be readjusted, you can figure it out. At least the buildings are there—you can paint them or not paint them. You can have long arguments with otherwise good friends about these things, and you can go and talk to architects who are like, “Well, once you paint a brick building, you can't remove the paint because then you're gonna remove the actual coating of the brick and it's all going to crumble.” Shut up, I know that. If you say “freeze and thaw cycle” one more time, you're gonna have to leave the room. “I wasn't gonna say that, I was gonna say ‘spalling’.” You're just keeping that in your back pocket. “Spalling” is a fun word to say. And don't even talk about mortar mixes. But you can have those conversations as long as the building is there.

It becomes interesting. For example, the landmarks Commission's recent actions on LGBTQ buildings I think are very important because that is an invisible history that is not acknowledged

within the canon of New York City history. By the same token, it doesn't mean they shouldn't be designating things that are actually in danger because all those buildings are already in—they should do both, expansive. They should write their little designation reports about the Lesbian Herstory Center, which is pretty close to here, which is in the Park Slope Historic District. Right, cool, right away. Have a party. We've all been locked down with COVID for two and a half years, you're paying people to work, they should have been doing that. But they should also designate the Lower East Side, which they haven't, which is embarrassing. Also they should designate the Chester Alan Arthur House. He was, after all, a United States President, and that is, after all, where he took his oath of office and lived for ever-so-long. Any other city in the country would have protected it. Instead they're like, "Well, I don't know. It's Kalustyan's." Okay, cool, cool. Kalustyan's is great too—designate it, okay? "There's no historic integrity." It's got integrity with Kalustyan's! I'm sure that Chester Alan Arthur would have appreciated Kalustyan's, you know? But someday Kalustyan's is gonna leave, maybe move to Eataly or something like that, or Sunset Park, and someone's gonna buy that building and knock it down, and then we won't have the home of the U.S. president who got his oath of office there.

Q: Better to have the building.

Bankoff: Better to have the building. [laughs] It's not that hard. There was a movement that our friends at Place Matters tried twenty-five years ago: Lucky Corner, where Vito Marcantonio did all of his speeches. That's not a landmark, that's a corner—put a plaque on it. That corner is not going anywhere. And the regulatory capacity of the Landmarks Commission is not—just put a plaque on it. Make the Public Design Commission do something. Anything. Please. Cultural

landmarks, it's not that hard.

Q: Because it's everywhere.

Bankoff: Yeah, it's everywhere. Why is Frank Lloyd Wright important? Well, because in our culture, we have decided he's the best American architect ever. That's our culture.

One of the funny things, when I went to Pratt for preservation school, for their grad program, Pratt has a very international student body, and one of our professors had us go outside and walk around Clinton Hill and take a look at the buildings. I'm like, this is mean, okay? These people are from Delhi. They don't know from Brooklyn brownstones. They don't recognize this as "historic." This is not like a history of New York class—this is a materials class. This is not what they're culturally attuned to—I am but, you know, I'm from Brooklyn. So again, we've decided that Frank Lloyd Wright is important because we are culturally attuned to believe that his architecture is important.

Q: And the same thing with brownstones, these buildings that are just brown to anybody else—all brown.

Bankoff: Yeah!

Q: If you say so.

Bankoff: If you say so. I mean, I have fights with people about Neo-Tudor and Tudor Revival. I don't like them. I think they're silly. I don't hate them, but I'm like, yeah, whatever, but that's because I'm from deep coastal Brooklyn, from Manhattan Beach, where we are just awash in that stuff. Other people can wax rhapsodic about Tudor Revival, and God bless. If they think it's important then I will defend their right to think it's important. Bungalows are another thing. Tenements. That's a classic, right? There is a weird prejudice—not weird—but there's a deep prejudice against tenements in New York City. Tenements and modern architecture, particularly brutalism, are just poo-pooed by everybody. But tenements even more so because you don't even have the flaky architectural nerds, who really dig brutalism in some sort of weird stick-it-to-the-man way. No one feels that way about tenements, pretty much. They're just like, "Tenements? I mean, yeah, my grandparents lived there. Smells like stew."

Q: I just went voluntarily and was doing all this research about tenements and how they changed their layouts over time, so I guess I'm that person.

Bankoff: You got pre-law, old-law, new law, dumbbell tenements. The Landmarks Commission actually has criteria of what is important for integrity purposes of tenements and it has to do with their doorways, cornice, and window enframements. But if they're missing that stuff, they're like, whatever. See that tenement later.

Q: So I'm like cultural history, it's everywhere, this is important! And they're only looking at architectural history and can't check the boxes.

Bankoff: Yeah, it's embarrassing. Again, like the Lower East Side. How can they not have designated the Lower East Side? A) it's really threatened. B) Solidly 30% of Americans went through it at one point or another? Come on.

Q: So let me remind you, or move you on to the Spanish Language Fellowship.

Bankoff: Oh, yes. We got a grant that we didn't anticipate getting, so we thought that was a good idea. It's as easy as that. We thought it would be a great thing to do. Okay, cool, sure. There's this money out there. It was a Regional Economic Development Grant. Oh, that was funny—me and Adrian Untermeyer, who was my deputy director at the time—and historically the deputy director became the sort-of chief development person.

Q: He's the one who asked me to ask you about this.

Bankoff: And Adrian's all hot to trot on this idea. And I'm like, cool, it's a good idea, it is something that we should be doing. Is it our top priority? No. But sure, let's go for this grant. So we get this grant, and the kicker is that we laid out a whole schedule for what we do and how we train this person, and on and on. They don't tell us we get the grant until the beginning of February, as I recall, of the year we got the grant. It was a twelve-month grant, and as part of it, we'll get notice and we'll look for the person in October, and then onboard them, and they'll be ready to go on January 1st. We get notice on February 14th, sometime around Valentine's Day, and I was like, okay, so that put us on our back foot to begin with. And we got a person and then they did not work out so well, and then they left to go to preservation grad school at Penn. But

then we had to bring in Diego [Robayo], like in the middle of the grant. And Diego is fantastic, he's a lovely person and has learned about preservation, and we've trained him and we made him into a permanent part of the staff.

I would have liked to have been able to integrate the Spanish language more into the mainstream of HDC's programming and just never had the resources or the time to really do that as much as I'd wanted to.

Q: To essentially make programming and education bilingual?

Bankoff: Exactly. And it was pretty tough—it was a little bit of a top-down decision to try to do—it wasn't a necessarily organic way of reaching out to that community. So I don't think it was as successful as—I mean, it's great that it exists and the capacity is there. And I know that Diego is working very hard at it but it felt, because of preservation—getting back to putting out fires all the time—a lot of the energy of the organization is putting out fires, and this is not a putting out fire kind of thing. Also because we didn't have any native board involvement, there wasn't—I mean, Angel Ayón, who's on the board of advisors, is Cuban, and I believe that they brought Elena Martínez, who works with City Lore, on to the board of advisors too. So that's a little more about—but there wasn't anybody who was intimately connected with a Latin or with a Spanish-speaking community that could be like, “Hey, we're trying to do this.” So there was not a natural fit there. I think it's worthwhile, it's a good thing. I would like to see it, again, be more mainstream and more integrated.

Q: And I think you've described the problem with so many cultural institutions of being aware that a lot of programming is directed towards a particular part of the—

Bankoff: Fancy white people.

Q: —full constituency. And then trying to redirect, but essentially all solutions are from the top down if they're coming from grant funding, more or less.

Bankoff: Exactly. For example, if HDC had reoriented to get somebody who specialized in LGBTQ outreach, there would probably be a similar problem—except I think that there is a much more natural alliance there within the preservation community. You have a number of board members who identify as LGBTQ, so you'd have similar problems but you'd have natural inroads with those that organize community, more so than the Spanish-speaking people of New York—who, by the way, that is an enormous community! I have a friend who is Puerto Rican and he works as a translator in the court system, and he's told me there is a profound difference even in the Spanish that is spoken between Dominicans and Haitians—Haitians don't speak Spanish—Dominicans and Trinidadians and Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, very different.

Q: Absolutely. Okay, I'm just now getting off my first page of notes. [laughs]

Bankoff: Okay.

Q: But the two other main categories of things that I wanted to talk to you about—and you

touched on this a little bit—is what it was like to work under each of the commissioners. And then also some of the preservation wins and losses that that happened.

Bankoff: Okay.

Q: And I have a list here, which came from a few different people that I had asked about what's important, and some of them have already come up.

Bankoff: So let's do commissioners. That's easy enough to do.

Q: Okay.

Bankoff: Jennifer was not a preservationist by any stretch of the imagination but she really took regulation very seriously. And had a great dress style.

Sherida was Acting Commissioner but was much more attuned to preservation, though I felt she made a number of decisions that were very damaging with regard to regulation. For discretion's sake, I will stop there. She got preservation, I just don't know if she practiced it.

Bob was not a preservationist by training—or really, I think, by inclination. I think that he liked history but he was also given a reasonably free hand by the Bloomberg administration, and empowered his staff to do a lot of designations and regulation. As I said, every single New York City mayor, since the history of everything, doesn't like preservation and is driven by real estate.

That's that. I think probably the administration made it known to Bob when to get out of the way, and he got out of the way. I don't know if they ever even had to say anything. I think they just knew. Under Bloomberg, there were a frightening number of designations—it was just really kind of kooky—that were driven by the communities, but they seemed receptive.

Meenakshi was given the task of hobbling the commission and she did that very well. There were powerfully few designations. Most of the designations that Meenakshi could claim were all holdovers from Bob because they had calendared so much. I've got charts that I can show you. Meenakshi was not there to do the work of the commission.

Sarah [Carroll] is still in office. So for discretion's sake, I shall not say much about her except that I don't like what the commission has been doing lately. There have been a number of decisions on a regulatory basis and a lack of designations that are very troubling. Very, very troubling. I believe that, since the de Blasio administration—so de Blasio, now coming into [Mayor Eric] Adams—there have been more community-initiated lawsuits against the Landmarks Commission than in any other period beforehand. Used to be it was real estate suing the LPC. Nowadays, it's community groups suing Landmarks.

There have been some extraordinarily troubling and very bad decisions made by Landmarks. The South Street Seaport, 250 Water Street, terrible. The 250 Water Street is a new building that was approved—actually, two new buildings that were approved, one that's never gonna get built and one that is solidly 250 feet taller than is allowed by zoning. Not in keeping with the low-scale nature of the South Street Seaport Historic District, which is probably the oldest section in

Manhattan still extant. Yeah, just putting that out there.

And 14–16 Fifth Avenue, which are two low-scale buildings in Greenwich Village that are getting knocked down to put up the Robert A.M. Stern high rise—not super high rise but high enough. They’re just knocking them down. There’s been a lot of split votes. I was working with Christabel and this is one of the things that we talked about all the time, just the number of terrible decisions that have happened. [laughs] Those are the two that spring immediately to mind. I don’t want to open up my computer and start looking—I’ve got a list.

I’m very worried about West-Park Presbyterian Church because it’s a hardship. And ordinarily I would say that it shouldn’t be a problem, but I don’t like the way that the commission’s leadership is trending these days. Sarah, her entire professional career has been at the LPC. I felt that Meenakshi was an existential danger to the commission—that if she could have dismantled the Landmarks Law, she would have. And so when Sarah was brought on, it was like, oh thank God, she’s not gonna kill the agency. But instead, there have been a number of, like I said, really disturbing regulatory decisions and a lack of designations that are sort of stunning when looked at in their whole collectiveness. My mind has no memory for pain so I think it’s not that bad, and then I look back on it, and working with Christabel, and holy moly, this is really bad stuff.

Q: Do you have a sense of where that’s coming from?

Bankoff: Oh, well, it started under de Blasio, who really hates preservation. He thinks it’s an elitist thing. Mister “I own two buildings in Park Slope.” I mean I had a meeting with de Blasio

when he was running for mayor up at Arlene Simon's. He was my councilmember for years and he was totally unresponsive. He's a crap retail politician. All the problems of the Clintons with absolutely none of their charm. And so he really gave the back of his hand to preservation, thinking that it was some sort of elitist nonsense.

And Mayor Adams—I don't think the jury's out on Mayor Adams; I think that it's obvious which way his bread is buttered. He appears to be very cozy with vested interests, and I don't think he's really focused on landmarks. But I do know that when he was Brooklyn Borough President, he was not very helpful. Ever. He was pretty much absent. He was not very responsive to the community boards, and that's really the borough president's only job in all reality. And I knew people on the community boards, who said he's absent, he's, like, not there.

I'm currently president of the Fine Arts Federation. And the Fine Arts Federation has a charter-mandated responsibility to nominate Public Design Commission commissioners. We are responsible for nominating candidates for seven of those seats. And I've been working with people in Mayor Adams's administration and they've been forwarding who they would like. So I've met them. Some of them are great. Some of them not so much. They seem lovely but just don't have the expertise, or really the interest, I think.

Okay, preservation wins and losses.

Q: Okay.

Bankoff: By the way, I've known Sarah Carroll for a very, very, very long time. Actually, her first job with the Landmarks Commission was as the public information officer, and she was officially paid for by Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel as part of the Landmarks Preservation Foundation, and that was while I was working for Barbaralee. So, yeah, I met her in 1994. Obviously, she's a lifer at the agency. In that one sense, that's why I thought she would be a good chair.

Q: Yes. So I don't really have these organized—I think I had them organized chronologically.

Bankoff: That's fine. Chronologically, alphabetically, geographically. How'd that make you feel?

Q: There's a couple that I think make sense together. But the earliest one, and one that you mentioned offhandedly, was 2 Columbus Circle.

Bankoff: Oh, yeah! Well, yes, that was a long time in my life. That was a case of really bad decision-making starting with Rudolph W. Giuliani hating that building. Mr. Giuliani, in addition to his many other foibles—which I believe America is familiar with now in a way that they were not before—occasionally would hate buildings. He would really honestly hate buildings and just decide they needed to go away. And he did that with, for example, the Purchase Building on Front Street underneath the Brooklyn Bridge. He just decided it needed to go away and he made it go away even though it was part of the Fulton Ferry Historic District and a lovely Art Deco WPA building that is now an empty field under the Brooklyn Bridge because you can't use it

because it's not safe because things fall off of cars. So you need to have a shelter there—even though it's part of the Brooklyn Bridge Park, you can't have people picnicking under there because things fall off of cars on the Brooklyn Bridge—fall down, hit people, not good. So you need a building there. You know, like the Purchase Building.

Regardless, 2 Columbus Circle was another one he hated. I got involved with 2 Columbus Circle—the first time I really remember getting involved with it was the World Monuments Fund under Felicia [Mayro]—Felicia was very involved in this—did a gingerbread house competition, and, I want to say, Laura Hansen made a 2 Columbus Circle with lollipops on it. I could be incorrect. That used to be where the Department of Cultural Affairs [DCLA] was, but they left and then the Dahesh [Museum] was trying to get in in there. Vicki bought—it was an auction of the gingerbread house—so we had this decaying gingerbread house that was turning all sorts of weird colors by the end, and we just shouldn't have kept it around for that long.

So 2 Columbia Circle, we'd gotten very involved. And Ned Kaufman over at the Municipal Art Society was also very involved. We were all like, [implying mania] “We need to save 2 Columbus Circle, we need to save 2 Columbus Circle.” Meanwhile, there were shenanigans going on where they'd been rejected by the commission in a private meeting, and that ended up becoming public through FOILs. Then Laurie Beckelman got involved as a lobbyist for the Museum of Arts and Design, who were gonna move in there. And that's when Landmark West! got involved. They got involved—that's like 2002 or 2003. There had been stuff going on about 2 Columbus Circle since the late '90s. And then just endless, endless. I could talk about that building for hours, and I don't want to.

We would have panels, we had press conferences, and Kate Wood got Tom Wolfe involved. Arlene Simon devoted endless energy to it. There were engineering reports about the failure of the curtain wall because the whole thing was a curtain wall—actually, people were not aware of that. And then what's-his-head, who ended up fucking over the building with that giant “H”—it's just really ugly. And you couldn't actually tear the building down—you could, but you couldn't build anything bigger than it, so that's why they just actually cantilevered it. That's actually a cantilever, which is meaningless and really complicated for no apparent reason.

Also, I was there with Arlene when we did the FOIL. We had FOILED the Landmarks Commission on all this stuff, and that's when a commissioner at the time called Landmark West! and HDC “the Landmarks Taliban.” And then, later on it came out that Laurie and Bob had been talking on email, so we got there as those emails. And then Tom Wolfe started going weird with it. And I'm friendly with Laurie, and she still doesn't talk to Arlene about that. I mean, it was terrible. She felt that Arlene was accusing her of having an affair with Bob—it got mean. And it was 2 Columbus Circle all the time. It got on everyone's list. It was an Eleven Most Endangered, Seven to Save, blah blah blah. I mean the New York Preservation Archive Project has a whole archive of Kate Wood's 2 Columbus Circle stuff.

Oh, years later, somebody did a china pattern based on 2 Columbus Circle. I think Kate got some of those. I remember that there was a fundraiser in some fancy Upper East Side place—strangely—for 2 Columbus Circle. It was an auction. It was all over but the screaming at that point. I've got a 2 Columbus Circle t-shirt upstairs—HDC paid for 2 Columbus Circle t-shirts

that were designed by Nicholas Blechman, who is R.O. Blechman's son. Oh, it was a mess.

Q: Why was it so bad?

Bankoff: Well—[pauses] it was bad on a number of levels. One was that Landmark West! went on a complete warpath and you were either for 2 Columbus Circle or you were dead to them. And so everybody had to go full speed. I love Landmark West! and Arlene is an old friend but everything in preservation was about 2 Columbus Circle, which just sucked all the oxygen out of the room to a degree of genuine madness. People stopped talking to each other over this stuff.

At the same time, the city inherited this crappy Giuliani decision that was very complicated. It had to do with Fairleigh Dickinson and they had rights to the building and stuff like that. So there were shenanigans—legitimate process shenanigans—above and beyond the Landmarks Commission, like how the city was disposing of it. I always said that the Landmarks Commission should have held a hearing, designated it, and then just allowed them to do what they wanted to, and we'd all be sitting there looking like fools. But because the commission made that decision in the late '90s to not do this, they just stuck to their guns on it and people just beat up on them.

And it really soured Bob against the Upper West Side. Honestly, you haven't seen many designations on the Upper West Side as opposed to like Greenwich Village, right? And it's not that Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation—now Village Preservation—are any less combative or any less advocates than Landmark West! It's not. But Bob just got soured on

Landmark West! and it did not do them well as an organization. I mean, it was tough, in a word, and I really feel like everybody kind of got thrown under the bus on that one. The preservationists didn't look good. The LPC didn't look good. No one looked good on it at the end of the day. It was just a giant firefight that just kept going and going and going. It just kept going.

Q: Seven years or something?

Bankoff: Well, 2002 to 2005 was the real height of it, but it started in the '90s, like '98. So yeah, that's seven years. This is a solid seven years. Ada Louise Huxtable got involved, and honestly it sounded like Ed [Edward Durell] Stone rejected her—she was pouting like a rejected paramour. “The ‘lollipop building’.” And it's not Stone's best work, and it was a modern building, which was really tough too because it just brought out everybody who had a feeling about modern architecture, like the modernists versus everybody else. In point of fact, I always felt, honestly, it made a very nice composition with Lincoln Center. Not that you could ever visually see them the same way, but you could go from Lincoln Center—actually, leave Lincoln Center, walk and look down Broadway, and there was 2 Columbus Circle, and you're like, okay, this is something that's going on. It was a good-looking, weird building.

Q: Okay, some other places.

Bankoff: Hit me with them.

Q: You mentioned other bungalows on Staten Island but the Cedar Grove beach bungalows. Maybe this is also a story about the Parks Department.

Bankoff: I had the most lovely day there. Me and Frampton and Nadezhda, it was the most beautiful day. The bungalows—Cedar Grove Beach Club—they were very rare bungalows because they were actually on the beach. You could walk out of the bungalow and you'd be on the beach. Most bungalows are typically separated from beach by a boardwalk or something like that. These were on the beach, as compared to the [Far] Rockaway [Beach] bungalows, where there's a berm there.

It was a very weird place that was owned by the Parks Department. But people had been living there, had seasonal rentals there, for close to one hundred years. It was like ninety-five years that the same families had been vacationing there. Literally, they'd vacation for the summer from elsewhere on Staten Island. [whispers] Very funny, it's very weird. And the beach is beautiful. They cleaned the beach and kept it just pristine. The Parks Department hated them. They had been saved—Robert Moses wanted to knock them down and they managed to save them from Robert Moses. But Tom Paulo, who was the Staten Island borough commissioner—who turned on the Verrazano Bridge for me—hated them and felt that these people were privileged and they were camping out in Parks land.

The thing to understand about Staten Island is it's over-beached. They have too many beaches. They don't get use. So they're not like, "Oh yeah, whatever. We need beaches." From the point of view of the Parks Department, they were like, "You're not allowed in it. They don't let people

use the beach.” They also kept that beach really clean. They never chased anybody off. But there was a real feeling of “these people are privileged and they need to go.” And yeah, that’s what happened. It’s painful because people had been going there for generations. Their grandparents, their great grandparents—that was their beach house—multigenerational families. It was such a lovely place. And they didn’t renew the lease. And then they used it for *Boardwalk Empire*, right? Then one or two of the bad hurricanes or nor’easters just destroyed them, once they evicted everybody. But it was a really shitty thing. And it was like, why can’t you let somebody have something nice? They were actually taking care of it and you’re doing nothing with this.

Q: I hear, in a lot of preservation interviews, a lot of bad things about the Parks Department. So I guess I just want to say—

Bankoff: I’ve worked for Parks when I worked for the Historic House Trust. Initially, in ’93, I was a Parks employee, and when I was at the Trust again, I worked in the Parks Department. Parks people—“parkies”—generally speaking, love the city. They’re the most knowledgeable people about the city that I’ve ever met, even more so than like Landmarks staff. I mean, they’re just all over the city. But you have a problem, which is there’s never any money to maintain anything in Parks, so everything needs to be done as capital budget, which means it has to be new. And when Giuliani privatized all the parks—started these conservancies, which Bloomberg just went whole hog into—you then have donor-driven projects. And it’s donor-driven capital projects. It’s not like, “Hey, we’re going to clean!”

A good example of a parks conservancy is the Prospect Park Alliance, by and large. What

they've done to the Nethermead, what they've done to—not The Ramble but—they worked for years. Then at the very end of Mr. de Blasio, actual Human Giant, he decides to give the Prospect Park Alliance \$40 million to screw over the Vale of Cashmere for no apparent reason. Thanks. So that's another example of, "Oh look, here's some money. Let's not fix it, let's put it into capital projects." Which, by the way, that means ten years from now it's gonna have to be redone and let's just plow something over.

Another great example is what they were proposing to do with the ramp in Belvedere Castle. "Central Park Conservancy, we need to make Belvedere Castle handicapped accessible." Do you really? Is that really why you're doing it? I don't think so. But this massive ramp that is going to be used so that they can rent it out for parties. I mean, it's tough. There's no money, the process is poor, and when there is money they put in the wrong places.

Q: It sounds like it's fundamentally at odds at odds with preservation.

Bankoff: Preservation. Yeah. The whole Parks Without Borders that the absentee Commissioner Mitch Silver was doing screwed up a lot of stuff. There was that whole Fort Greene mishegoss that was really being driven by the developments across the street, and they were going to get rid of an area that had been used by the people in order to park food trucks on. They screwed up a whole mess of Robert Moses-era stone in Jackie Robinson Park uptown, just for no reason. Like literally, why are you doing this? Yes, you need to fix the stairs, they have been crumbling because you haven't fixed them in twenty years. So fix the stairs—don't rip out all of the old stone.

Q: Okay, let's talk about Backlog 95, which I think may make sense also to talk about Intro 775-A, and the Lady Moody House.

Bankoff: Sure! Okay. Backlog 95. The commission, historically speaking, hated the backlog. The commissioners—every single Landmarks Commissioner—tried to get rid of it. Bob, actually, brought a number of things forward. Meenakshi, when she was giving her marching orders, it was like, just gonna take them off, we're just getting rid of them. She called me to tell me this. It was on Election Day so she wasn't working. She called me from her cell phone. I said, "Don't do that. We're gonna come down on you like a hammer." "Oh, well, Simeon, it's bad policy." I was like, "Don't do that. You will get people so pissed off." And so she proposed to do that, so we went to the newspaper. And Matt Chaban was at the *Times* at that moment and was a friend and a good contact. So it got a lot of press. It was just a really foolish thing for her to have done.

We pressured and got hearings on all of them and got people out to speak on all of them. I got a copy of staff recommendations about them. Some of them really did not speak well for the position of the Landmarks Commission because it's internal documents, and they were fairly frank about political issues. After a lot of testimony, bless her, Meenakshi realized which way the wind was blowing and realized that she had herself a real mess. So she let us do all the testimony, we got everybody out to testify. HDC and the Landmarks Conservancy, I think, are the only two groups that did testimony on everything. They designated a third of them. They dropped two-thirds of them, like the Chester Alan Arthur House, which I don't like them for.

And one of them got turned back at City Council, which was exceptionally unfortunate. Was it the Lakeman[-Cortelyou-Taylor] House on Staten Island? It was a very, very old house, like seventeenth century kind of thing. And it was, you know Staten Island, [exaggerating a New York accent] “You can’t tell us what to do with our property. We’re gonna take care of it. We’ve taken care of it for sixty years. I love that house.” Then why don’t you landmark it? Oh right, no, can’t do that. So that was that was pretty crummy.

People were like, “We got half.” I think thirty-two of the ninety-five were designated and it was pretty unnecessary. I really feel like they weren’t doing anybody any harm. And Bob’s way of dealing with it, which is bringing things forward periodically—oh wait, we haven’t been designating enough to meet our quotas, let’s revisit this. You know, the Bed Stuy district was calendared for twenty years because when Laurie originally proposed and calendared it, the community got very upset with her because she wasn’t doing enough so they just walked away from it. But it was calendared for twenty years and every time somebody was doing something, they’d have to call the Landmarks Commission. And so the Landmarks Commission was regulating it-ish for like twenty years. It’s pretty funny.

Lady Moody House. Yes, yes, and yes. It’s unfortunate that the owners are—it’s that part of Brooklyn that’s sort of like Staten Island. The wrong owner owns it and it’s a problem. But I’m very glad that it is designated it should have been designated years before. And I was extraordinarily pleased—I knew that house from childhood.

Q: So what happens when something like this gets dropped into your two-year plan of what

you're doing at HDC?

Bankoff: [laughs] You stop what you're doing and put out the fire. That's the issue.

Q: Ninety-five fires.

Bankoff: You're like, well, we're gonna be honoring Tony Wood with the Landmarks Lion this year. I've gotta do seat assignments. Oh, wait! They want to tear down St. Vincent's. Okay, I guess I'm taking my seating charts to the Landmarks Commission. I'll just do the seating charts and balance the budget while testifying that you shouldn't tear down St. Vincent's. And let's have a lot of meetings and see whether or not we're gonna sue. [sighs] I still have seating charts, I still have to do job reviews, I still have to do all these other things. And that's part of what I did—that's why getting more resources and bringing more people in was important, so that somebody could be sitting in the corner doing that. So that Frampton could be working on the grants while I was going to 2 Columbus Circle meetings constantly. And Nadezhda could be just dealing with the Landmarks Commission while Michael Henry Adams was calling me on the phone because something terrible was going on in Harlem.

Q: Yeah, you need that staff that's able to—

Bankoff: You need the staff to keep the action moving forward. Because otherwise you have situations where everything stopped in Landmark West! because they didn't have the staff. So they just did 2 Columbus Circle for years. I mean, God bless, they had Arlene who was just a

dynamo. So she was their fundraiser, and Kate was very organized but there's only so much you can do when you don't have the staff and you're being called on to respond—and your board is like, “You gotta do this!” There's always this, “What are we paying you for? I would do it myself but you're being paid to be there.” Okay, but there's also this other stuff—I wasn't just sitting around waiting. I'm not a dalmatian in a firehouse.

Q: So 775-A.

Bankoff: I hated calling it 775-A, that was a misbrand. We needed to brand it somehow. That's the one where they put the caps on the landmarks? That's the two years and then it gets taken out?

Q: There was a five-year moratorium on anything being added to the list.

Bankoff: Oh, well, yeah, we got rid of that. That was madness and horrible. And a REBNY [Real Estate Board of New York] dream bill. And so we punched really hard on that. Again, my mind has very little memory for pain, but there were a lot of City Council hearings and a lot of lobbying. The problem was it was a bad bill overall and then we had to get the worst parts out of it. The two year—how it automatically stops being under consideration for two years was unnecessary. I did all of this work—I actually counted, for all the historic districts, how many years it took. I did the average mean of this, and the median, and all this math gook that I hadn't done in years—it was a lot of fun, I like spreadsheets sometimes. But City Council didn't really look at it. This was not about efficiency. This was throwing a bone to real estate.

The problem was that our foes in many cases were the progressives because they had absorbed the de Blasio idea that preservation is elitist. So we had people like Brad Lander thinking it was a fine thing. He'd be like, "Well, you know, I was chair of the landmarks subcommittee," and I was like, "Yeah, and you turned back like three landmarks while you were there." "Well, we don't rubber stamp things. We need to hear things on merit." You're terrible on Gowanus and you represent more Landmarks than any other Brooklyn councilmember than Steve Levin but you've done nothing, you are completely absent on this issue.

So that was another painful kind of, like, show up, yell, campaign against it, get everybody very excited, get everybody to write their councilperson, push and push and push them. But the problem was that they were dedicated to getting something done, and they were using the notion that this is good government. And it wasn't. It wasn't good government. It was a weakening of the Landmarks Law, but it was being cloaked as "we're just being efficient." This is government streamlining. No one's been suffering because of this. It's not anyone's problem. This was a solution in search of an answer—you're making this up. Organized real estate wants this and nobody else does. The commission didn't want it. And then the problem was that the Landmarks Commission was in a position of not being able to defend itself.

Q: Let's talk about the Clock Tower [Building].

Bankoff: Okay. Long Island City clock tower or Tribeca clock tower?

Q: 346 Broadway.

Bankoff: Okay. Bad decision. [laughs]

Q: Yeah. I mean you mentioned the certificate of appropriateness aspects of the Landmarks Commission's responsibility.

Bankoff: Yeah, it was a crappy decision. One thing that we have seen in recent years has been good ideas that happened in the '70s and in the '80s—when people had the occasional good idea—getting undone. The good idea in this case was this was a rare interior landmark that actually encompassed a huge portion of the building when it was a city-owned building. Then they sold it and it was still an interior landmark but they basically demolished an interior landmark. It was for reasons, but the LPC decided that they didn't want the power to regulate this. They didn't want to offend what's-his-head, the owner who de Blasio shook down for money for One New York—Don Peebles. But he ended up being a whistleblower on de Blasio's campaign shakedowns. So he got his way. And it was a really, really poor decision. That's why the judge kind of agreed with us. But the Landmarks Commission was like, "Nope, this is what we're gonna do!" It's painful to watch the commission when they have the outward authority to do something and they don't want it. [pauses]

[END AUDIO FILE B, BEGIN AUDIO FILE C]

Bankoff: There are two aspects to the LPC. There's trying to get it to do something—trying to

get it to designate, in other words—and then, its regulatory powers. And in some municipalities, that’s actually separated into two different groups. In New York City it’s under one chair—more often the case is it’s under one chair—but when they screw up their regulatory policing power, it hurts everything. It’s one thing to yell at the Landmarks Commission that you should have designated 2 Columbus Circle. Reasonable people can disagree. And government agencies are basically built to say no. So that’s one kind of struggle.

The kind of struggle, on the other hand, of like approving the Clock Tower, or when they allowed the Dean Sage Mansion in Crown Heights North to get all crudded up, or 250 Water Street—you’re like, [exasperatedly] “Guys, you are cutting your own knees off. You have this ability. This is your mission and you are failing your mission. It’s even worse than when you’re not doing what I’m asking you to do. You’re really not doing what—you have this power.” Any reasonable person will say, “No, you shouldn’t do that.” And you’re not, you’re like, “Oh yeah, sure. Cool.” And that’s it. That is really bad for preservation and that undermines the power of preservation—the power of the law—in a really ugly way because precedent does exist. There is this, “Nah, there’s no precedent.” No, there’s lots of precedent. And it’s also really bad for everybody. How am I going to convince somebody in Ditmas Park to put in the right expensive wood windows that cost three times as much when you’re allowing these fancy pants developers to just destroy their landmarks?

Q: Did you see that kind of impact happen?

Bankoff: You hear it. And it creates, I think, a feeling because mostly it’s the staff dealing with

getting the right windows in. That doesn't rise to public hearing. No one in a public hearing says, "Well, you allowed this!" But there's a feeling of disgust and anger that you hear at community boards and stuff like that. Most people don't look at the whole city. They just will remember—particularly at committee boards—they're like, "Well, how come I'm not allowed to do this when somebody down the road got this?" They're not like, "In the Bronx they just ripped down an entire historic district."

Q: So it can be bad for preservation not just because the inner workings of the clock are different but because people's attitude about preservation starts to change and the memory of it starts to change.

Bankoff: It does. It's got a very negative ripple effect.

Q: Let's talk about some wins.

Bankoff: Okay.

Q: So let's see. Addisleigh Park.

Bankoff: Oh yeah! That was nice. That was cool. Actually, Christabel had worked with Addisleigh Park for ever so long. When I first met her in '97 she had been talking with them and we were chasing some national—we actually got a couple of different fundings from that. I think we got a Preserve New York and an African American Heritage grant from the National Trust

[for Historic Preservation]. And then-councilmember, now State Senator Leroy Comrie is convinced that he gave us money towards that and he did not. But he was there holding the big check that Erin Tobin from, then, at the Preservation League of New York State gave us, so he thinks that he gave us that money. It's fine.

And actually, Leroy had a local constituent named Greg Mays, who later went on to form a community nonprofit called A Better Jamaica. He was from Addisleigh Park and had come back home to live, to care for his parents, I believe. And he contacted Comrie's office because he was concerned about something and Comrie's office put him in touch with us. I knew Comrie—he'd been sitting on the landmarks subcommittee and I used to testify in front of the landmark subcommittee all the time. So we got the money from Preserve New York and we started having meetings and Frampton kept going out there too, driving around, because I don't drive. We actually hired Jane Cowan to write with that money and she did a report on it. I knew Jane—she had been the ED of Friends of the Upper East Side in the '90s before Lisa Kersavage was, and then Jane went to work at the Landmarks Commission for a hot second. But she was mostly a preservation education person. She was very, very good with kids' education. And now she just is a teacher, a kids' teacher. And so Jane wrote something up.

We also got someone to do an oral history with some of the longtime residents there. It's a very interesting history. This was where all the jazz greats—forgive me—“parked their wives” because they were on the road all the time and their families were sick of them being in Harlem because when they would come home, they would just be jamming all night. “No, you're on the road like two hundred days a year—when you're home, you should be home, and by the way, I

would like a yard like real people.” And so, because of the LIRR [Long Island Railroad], you could actually commute out to Harlem that way. So they would buy family homes and live out there. It makes sense when you start thinking about the Hollywood Hills, where all the film stars would have their families, even though they’ve worked in the city. So there were a lot of you know [William James] Count Basie, Illinois Jacquet. One of the women who we were working with was his ex-wife or widow or something like that. And surprisingly, Bob Tierney was a huge jazz fan, and suddenly they decided do it. There’s a really fascinating social history involving easements. There were racially exclusionary easements—it was one of the last ones that did it, actually—they got broken. It was not the one that made it illegal. It didn’t get up to the Supreme Court but it was one of the last ones before they had the court case at the Supreme Court that totally invalidated them—that we had to have that is embarrassing, but we did it, thank God.

I remember at the very last second at Addisleigh Park, one thing that happened was the Landmarks Commission was into it, Bob was into it, they were about to do it, and then a group of neighbors on the other side of Linden Boulevard were like, “Hey, how come we’re not [included] as well?” And we’re like, “Oh, you’re not part of the original—were you part of the original development?” “Uh huh.” So we’re like, “Hey, Landmarks Commission, they’re part of the original development too and they want this!” And they were like, “Okay!” And they put in like two extra blocks on the other side of Linden. That was fun. That happened pretty quickly.

Also, we were very lucky, Nick Hirshon who was a writer for *The Daily News*—I think it was *The Daily News*, it might have been *Newsday*—really loved it. And so we could feed him stories because it was like a human interest kind of thing, like, go see where Lena Horne lived.

Q: You mentioned that Christabel Gough had been in communication with them for a really long time. Is there anything that can replace that kind of person to person—

Bankoff: No. I mean, community works person to person. Even the people she was talking to were not the people—in fact, by the time we got there, I believe the gentleman who she had spoken with may have passed away because I do remember she was talking to them in 1997. And we did Addisleigh Park in 2006, nine years later, ten years later. But she was aware of it—people were aware of Addisleigh Park. It wasn't a completely [makes surprised sound]. If you look hard enough, there are very few surprises in preservation. People are aware of things. When they designated the H.H. Richardson House in Staten Island, everyone's like, "There's an H.H. Richardson house in Staten Island?!" People who really knew were like, yeah, we knew about that. The Commission was like, yeah. And Andrew Dolkart is like, yeah, we kind of knew about that. And Christopher Gray is like yes, and it's been completely re-sided, it shouldn't be landmarked. Thank you, Christopher Gray, that is a fairly typical thing for you to say.

Q: But it's much more rare for things to rise up through to get media attention and then also to get the designation.

Bankoff: Yeah, and it was it was very fast. That was actually a very nice, easy-ish thing that was—nobody was really particularly upset about it.

Q: Well, Tin Pan Alley, different kind of story

Bankoff: Different kind of story. I got a call from someone who lived on Tin Pan Alley, Leland Bobbe, who's a photographer, and he was concerned—it was very funny because they were all living legally-ish. It was very complicated. It was one of those Loft Law things, and they were trying to make it into a Loft Law, and they were involved in a very sticky situation with the owner.

The owner himself was one of those really dodgy guys who had done some really bad stuff in New York, and was actually not allowed to sell property anymore. He had a legal injunction to sell property—Yair Levy. I ran into his name—he'd gotten into a big fight with Kent Swig—just read a book about him too, one of the big titans of New York real estate in the early 2000s during the Bloomberg days. Anyway, so this guy couldn't sell the property but at the same time it was being held by his wife, and he was enjoined against selling and dealing in property because he's just that kind of bad guy. But they were suing him also in order to get legally conforming—to be able to live in these houses they've been living in for such a long time, legally. And there are also shenanigans going on with the air rights around Penn Station that were potentially going to be moved—all that could be moved all the way over there. Yeah, that far. And I talked with them for a long time and we got a story in the Associated Press [AP]. And when you get a story picked up that the Associated Press writer wrote, it went all across the world, and just everywhere because it was AP.

Then, Tin Pan Alley, people—the Great American Songbook, the level of deep fondness for *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* and *My Darling Clementine* and all that stuff is a little shocking.

So we beat back the immediate concern. And then, for years, we would go to the Landmarks Commission saying you should just designate Tin Pan Alley. Just designate Tin Pan Alley, I would say. We convinced then-Councilmember Dan Garodnick to support it. Dan walked it with us. We brought Sarah Carroll out there when she was director of preservation. The city just was not going to do it. They were like, “Nope, uh uh.” And then George [Calderaro] got involved when he moved into the neighborhood because he moved there from Battery Park City where he had been living previously, and he’s just a dynamo. And he got John Reddick, and, I think, Andrew—he put together a really good meeting. And here’s the weird thing. We brought Sarah out when she was director of preservation and she was kind of like, “womp womp,” but then once she became chair she’s like, “Oh yeah! I love old music!” Okay. Maybe it’s because John was Black and he was talking about the intersection of African Americans and Tin Pan Alley in a way that kind of fulfilled the de Blasio desire to bring that level of cultural element into everything. So all of a sudden, boom.

And then what happened was good old Ken Fisher shows up and starts on how this is a really racist thing, which was unspeakable. Just unspeakable. He even brought up one of his lobbyist friends who is an African American woman—who now is in position at City Hall—and she’s like, “I feel hinky about this.” And so we had to get Claudette Brady from Bed Stuy to come out and say, “This is bullshit. I’m Black and I have no problem with this.” Ken Fisher, no, this is really unspeakable. I don’t believe you’re actually doing this. You’ve done very bad things in the past but like this is really, really, really beyond the pale.

LPC, God bless them, made sure that City Council didn’t get stupid about it. But it took a lot. It

just took longer than it should have because they had to do all this anti-racist stuff around it only because you know Ken had put that out.

Q: In my notes, I had written “professional opposition.” It’s not what preservation needs.

Bankoff: No. And also, his little lobbyist friend, whose name is Tiffany Raspberry, she testified—maybe she was doing it as a volunteer but you are a lobbyist and you have not reported—I mean, maybe there’s no money passing hands but you still should be reporting this. I was familiar with that because I had to register as a lobbyist and when you testify in front of the Landmarks Commission on designations that counts as lobbying, legally. [laughs]

Q: Were there ever any other landmarks processes that involved something like that?

Bankoff: Well, Ken Fisher also did that to 184 Kent, the Austin Nichols building. You mean being called racist?

Q: No, bringing up some kind of opposition that’s clearly—

Bankoff: Oh, sure. All the time. I mean, 250 Water Street. Those cretins from Open New York did a concentrated push to say, “Yes, yes, yes, build, baby, build.” And a lot of the support in the South Street Seaport was people bussed in by the union. Sandy Lindenbaum, the infamous departed dean of the Real Estate Bar of New York City, he’d just occasionally show up at Landmarks hearings. He wouldn’t even testify, he’d just stare and scare the hell out of people.

[laughs] Anytime Valerie Campbell is involved for Kramer Levin, for example—she is the chief counsel for West-Park. And I have to tell these nice people that say, “She used to work for the Landmarks Commission. This isn’t fair!” And I’m like, “It’s so nice that you’ve lived to be the age you are and you’re still surprised by this. Cool.” I mean, it’s really tough to actually hire professional help in New York City because so many of the lawyers work for the real estate industry. Higgins Quasebarth work very closely with the real estate industry. That’s who hires them. I mean, they do tax credit stuff but they are basically expeditors at the Landmarks Commission, which is always embarrassing too because everybody is like, “Oh, look, there’s my professor. He’s saying why this is appropriate.”

Q: I also want to hear you talk about Admiral’s Row.

Bankoff: Oh, sure. Sure. I’m gonna try to keep this clean and not use the phrase “shit show.” But I mean, it was a nightmare. Admiral’s Row was decided during the Giuliani administration. Again, another case of Mr. Giuliani deciding he just doesn’t like buildings, that he was going to knock them down. Now, we got involved early on with a volunteer lawyer who was an environmental lawyer, nice guy, Ted Wolff, who spent a lot of time trying to figure out who actually owned Admiral’s Row. It was a very complicated scenario where the National Guard didn’t quite own it. It actually was owned by the Department of Defense. And so their process was complicated and we spent, like, two years kind of pointing fingers at each other over who owns it. Who are we dealing with? That all ends up getting eventually sorted out and it didn’t really matter. But we went into a Section 106 situation with a huge group of people and I spent three years in those hearings. It’s only time I’ve ever really disagreed with [Letitia] Tish James,

who is a terrific person, one of my favorites, but she was on the wrong side of that one, very strongly.

And meanwhile, the whole area was being developed and they had been losing supermarkets on Myrtle Avenue because of the development, so it was decided that it was gonna be a supermarket—that's what was gonna happen. And they would get people from the projects—the Whitman Houses and the other houses across the street—would come in and be like, “We need a supermarket!” Meanwhile, all the preservationists, and Pratt—we had a Pratt professor doing sketches of what could be done with those buildings, and everybody had different ideas about those buildings. Scott from BOMB, Brooklyn's Other Museum of Brooklyn—good old pirate Scott—he would do this weird outsider art, and he lived down the road. And somebody else was like, this should be for the veterans. And we were all kind of united around, “Stop it. Just save these houses.” Meanwhile, the houses were crumbling. I mean, I watched them literally crumble. They were fine when the process started but [whispers] they were left alone to the elements.

They kept changing the people at the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation because they were involved too because it was a Section 106, and they'd bring someone new in and we're like, “Shut up, we've been doing this year and a half now. Don't tell us our jobs.” And meanwhile, the Iraq War's going on. So the people from the Department of Defense are just trying to keep civilians away from dead soldiers—remember when that was all going on? You weren't allowed to take pictures of dead U.S. soldiers when they were shipping them back to the States.

Q: No.

Bankoff: It was a really exciting [President George W.] Bush initiative—who, by the way, is a war criminal, and regardless of [President Donald] Trump, Bush is a war criminal and we should never forget that. So yeah, on the one side, they were dealing with the people coming back who'd been blown up by IEDs and taking care of that, and then they'd come into Brooklyn and get yelled at about ripping down some houses they couldn't care less about.

And it was the most infuriating two and a half years—maybe longer—and they just refused. The folks at the Brooklyn Navy Yard just pawned it off on the Feds until they couldn't any more. But they were just deflecting with the Feds. The Feds were just trying to do our process. And it was a nightmare. And the saddest part was people in Brooklyn, really, they'd be like, "What's going on with that?" And I was like, "This is terrible." They were gonna save one of them, they were gonna save the timber shed, which was the only existent Navy timber shed in the country, which was literally a shed that they used when they were making masts—they would use it to dry them. It was falling down, like bricks [makes falling noises]. Just trees were growing out of the buildings—the backs of the buildings were completely falling apart. And at one point, we discovered they're ripping down all these buildings for a parking facility. It wasn't even the stupid supermarket. That was not on the site of the buildings. They decided that they couldn't keep the buildings because of access reasons. I mean, the end result was they refused to figure out how they would reuse them. Because the Brooklyn Navy yard is a closed site so they would have had to do something involving their traffic engineering and they were just uninterested in that.

And, God, I remember going down there when they were actually tearing them apart. And I think Fox News or something called me about that. They're like, "Well, what can be done there on Admiral's Row?" I was like, "Nothing, you people. I mean, it's gone, okay?" And people were like [softly complaining]. It's just gone. Good old Scott would be like, "Landmark Admiral's Row!" It's not gonna happen, buddy. I mean, you've been in the same meetings that I have. We watched people die, old Korean War veterans who wanted to reuse that eventually passed away during those—not in the meetings itself—but just because it was going on for such a long time. Yeah.

Again, it was just painful that Tish was on the complete wrong side, and she knew it. I met Tish when she was working for then-Assembly member Roger Green at a Society for Clinton Hill meeting in, like, December of 2000. It was raining and we were at the same meeting. She's good people, she really is good people. And one of her deputy AGs [attorney generals] is Jennifer Levy, who we worked with at South Brooklyn Legal Services on the [227] Duffield Street house. She was the lawyer for Duffield Street. We gave her an award. We gave Tish an award too. She's one of our friends in high places. [laughs]

Q: All right I guess this is the last of the wins-losses: Dorrance Brooks Square.

Bankoff: Oh, that was great. That was actually stunning. Because we were asked there by Yuien Chin, who's the Hamilton Heights West Harlem Community Preservation Organization. Also who works with closely with Ron Melichar—that's their thing. And Yuien had gotten Dorrance

Brooks on the National Register, working with Marissa Marvelli as the consultant. Marissa used to work for BKSK [Architects] and was on board of HDC and stuff like that. Now, I think she's relocated to Kingston permanently, but she's great. And so I went up and did my dog and pony show there and met Keith Taylor who's really terrific, and he lives in the district. He's the Dorrance Brooks Property Owners & Residents Association—Dr. Keith Taylor, stand-up guy.

And there was a little bit of hostility. A little bit of like, "What's going on here?" But Keith had done a really good job of organizing the neighborhood and people were pretty positive about it. Also, the area was under such threat. I remember him telling me that of the 150 buildings in the National Register Historic District, a third of them had been flipped recently and were owned by LLCs. That's like hyper-gentrification. It's one thing if fancy people are moving in, but at least they're people. But when investment companies are buying the buildings, that's completely beyond the beyond.

And so we're working with them and everything's moving pretty quickly. Now, the problem was—I'm gonna get this wrong. The church on Edgecombe [Avenue]. There are a couple of churches. And there's one lovely one that actually had a connection—Mount Cavalry? I'm terrible with church names. It was the Mount Calvary United Methodist Church. But they had a connection with Shirley Chisholm. That was actually where Shirley Chisholm had been a teacher before she ran for Congress. And the so-and-so, who's a local Harlem-based developer bought the place, ripped it down. Or was gonna rip it down. Forget if it's ripped down or not—I think it's ripped down.

At that point, actually, our only problem—LPC was into the historic district—our problem was that the councilmember, Bill Perkins, was mentally declining and you could never be sure what he was gonna say. And it wasn't like somebody got to him. He was having dementia problems, sadly, and he had been a real a real friend to preservation and Historic Districts Council. Michael Adams is very close with him and he actually employed Michael for a couple of years. So we're like, "Umm, can't really depend on Bill." So like that was kind of tough.

So the church was within the boundaries of the historic district and then they pulled a demo permit, so the community was like, "You've got to keep it in the boundary of the historic district." And we did a call to action and got, I want to say three hundred letters from people in the surrounding area to send letters to LPC. Then we had this great Zoom [video call] with Landmarks with three dozen people saying why you've got to—and we were working really closely with Keith on why it's necessary to keep the site in. We were like, "We understand you can't save the building. Shut up, we got it, we get it, stop saying that we understand this. But the fact is that we want control over what gets built there." Right? And they did it and I don't think that they really prepared for a Zoom meeting full of African American neighbors? I think they were a little like, "What?!" That was very remarkable and we had so many people supporting this.

The designation hearing itself, Keith did a marvelous job really bringing people out and people were very, very strong. And it was early days of the pandemic too, if I recall correctly, so the LPC was stunned. I mean, I could be misremembering—maybe it was even in person. There was a brief moment when we were doing public hearings in the summer of 2021, during a hot second.

Q: Sounds right.

Bankoff: Again, I have to look at my notes, but that was really remarkable. And there were so many crummy things that happened to that poor neighborhood too. There was another church that was like, “We don’t want to be landmarked either!” Stop it. And then there was, behind Keith’s house, there was the sculpture studio of Augusta Savage, who was a Harlem Renaissance sculptor. Actually, there was a retrospective on her work right around that same period of time, I think at New-York Historical or maybe—I don’t think it was MCNY [Museum of the City of New York]. Augusta or Roberta Savage? I remember her last name was Savage. And he would just watch it getting knocked down. And I was like, “I’m so sorry, man.” I mean, because Keith came from a law enforcement background, he had been a police officer, detective, and then he taught at John Jay [College of Criminal Justice], I believe. So he was fairly hard-nosed about these things. He knew what he could and couldn’t do. And then he ran for Bill’s seat. That was the Bill Perkins seat was one of those messy, messy, like nineteen people running kind of things. And the woman who won is some sort of Democratic Socialist, whom nobody knows and everyone’s like, “What’s going on?”

Q: Do you think there’s a way to—you were talking about precedent before, maybe in the negative connotations—do you think there’s potential for a district like this and community support like this to set a new precedent for sites with African American cultural heritage significance and sites that are named after other African Americans?

Bankoff: LPC just did two little blocks in Queens—Cambria Heights?—cute blocks, and they whiffed it so badly on community support. They just did not get their act together to reach out to the community. And they finally did designate them and I think that they did their best to make everybody calm. And then, of course, everyone's like, "Oh, East Flatbush, East 25th Street."

Julia Charles—that whole process went very quickly and it was an African American community. HDC worked with them. They were one of our Six to Celebrate. Julia, now, I think, is on the HDC board.

[referring to the arrival of his cat] His name is Inky and he's a bad boy.

You want to see meritorious districts with community support. I don't really care who's there. As I was telling the folks at Save Harlem Now!, you're actually in a pretty good place at the moment because you're in Upper Manhattan, majority African American organization, and we've got a Black mayor and the LPC is doubling down on its equity, which means we're going to try to do things that we've done.

I mean, 14 million years ago—i.e. in 1996, '97—Michael Henry Adams and Carolyn Kent did a study of landmarks of basically above Central Park. And it's embarrassing. There really are six boroughs in New York City—there's the four, and then there's Manhattan below Central Park and northern Manhattan. And it's that simple, and it's just an ugly thing. There is a huge amount of very, very good architecture and an enormous amount of history of all kinds above Central Park that has not been protected to the extent that it should be and that is profoundly under threat because, historically, property values have been lessened up there. So all the money started going

up there and just pulling down things—St. Thomas the Apostle for example. I could talk about churches for hours, but St. Thomas the Apostle is this gorgeous church that the Catholic Church, they throw up their hands and “we’re going to knock it down,” and they knocked it down. I don’t even know if they ever did the affordable housing, senior housing, that they promised to do.

At one point, Scott Stringer, when he was Manhattan Borough President, did a study of the Harlem area, and he found something like nine acres of empty land up there that could be used for housing, empty. Nothing on it. A lot of that has been built on since then but there are just profoundly important places in Harlem, in northern Manhattan, that are also aesthetically delightful, that are unprotected and at extreme risk because it’s so tempting.

Q: Yeah, absolutely. I just want to pause and say thank you for sharing so much information. I know we’ve been talking for a really long time.

Bankoff: [laughs] It’s fine. I haven’t even talked about anything past 2010, really. [laughs]

Q: Some of the other kinds of reflective questions that I have are things that are kind of coming up through you talking through the history of HDC, so I’m not sure if there’s anything else that you feel super important that you want to cover here.

Bankoff: I think that the thing about HDC—getting back to that one—look, I am the third executive director of the Historic Districts Council and the longest serving one by a real yardstick. They’re only on the fourth now. There is a real feeling at the Historic Districts Council

of board leadership—who the president is doesn't really affect—here's the funny part—it doesn't really affect the organization but it really affects the board. For example, when Eric ran the place—he was president for ten years—he hired Franny, the first executive director. He really professionalized the organization. He was like the personal advocate. Like Franny—and she'll support this—she was not a very strong advocate because that's not what they wanted her to be. They were like, “The board is the advocates! Franny, just take care of the other stuff.” So Franny did all that work that I was talking about—putting together the programs and working in the communities and stuff like that—but in terms of the yelling at the Landmarks Commission and that sort of thing, and to some degree, going out to the communities, the board felt like that's what their job was.

Eric, hilariously, actually moved the board away from that, so by the time Vicki came—when we went from Franny to Vicki, I worked under both of them—there was a deliberate decision to professionalize the organization, which the board was never sure about because they had so much fun, you know, doing the fun stuff. Then, Hal took over, and he was more of a personal advocate, though he didn't want it to be his fulltime job, right? He was doing his own stuff. So Hal would give directives and then leave. And then, David Goldfarb, was president, and he, again, was kind of struggling. I was there at that point and I was like, “Hey, you guys want me to be professional so I'm gonna be professional. I'm gonna be the spokesperson for the organization. I'm not saying you shouldn't be, but you're not here all the time, and you're not in touch with all the communities—I'm the one running meetings and meeting community groups and stuff, like you asked me to, so I'm doing that.” David was very focused on Staten Island—or tried to be. And he was also a lawyer, and we tried really hard to put in a demolition delay

ordinance—that was David’s big thing. And that went nowhere except for the fun of having a lawyer testify against the proposal who was representing NYU, REBNY, and the Catholic Church—they all went in a lawyer together. That was amazing. [laughs] And then Paul Graziano, and the board didn’t like Paul and didn’t treat him well. Paul was very focused on planning and Queens. He’s a planner. And his style did not get along with the board at all.

Then Françoise, and Françoise loved meetings, but by this point, everyone had settled into it being a professional organization being run by the staff. But the board always—they wanted to do more but they didn’t know how to do more. And they’re probably going to read this and say, “You wouldn’t let us do this, Simeon.” But we would have meetings but no one would do the work in between the meetings, you know? You’d have meetings and then I would report out the work I did, and then the meeting was the thing itself. It’s almost like—in planning school, which I went to for a year before I changed to preservation school—I actually had a planning professor talk about how the process is part of the work. I’m like, “No, it isn’t. Sure? No, but maybe for you? I think the finished product is part of the work. That’s the work done.” Otherwise, it’s just like, “Wow, what a great meeting!” And so Françoise was a “big picture” person. She liked “big pictures.” She liked meetings a lot.

And then, Dan Allen was president for a very long time, for six years. And he’s an architect, he’s a principal in a large firm and he’s like, “Okay, we hire good people. They’re gonna do the work. Board members can be deployed as they wish to be, and they should be as interested as they want to be, and if they want to get involved, the board should come and bring issues to the organization—but you got to let the staff do the work.” Then the following president didn’t feel

that way and all of a sudden, went through this weird connotation of: “shouldn’t the board be more activist again?” That’s the internal trajectory of it, of the leadership.

HDC did three strategic plans while I was there and we always just ended up doing what we were doing anyway. But they felt the need to have the plan. And then Eric Allison did two plans also. And the plans—good things came out of the plans, new products, new programs came out of the plans. But especially trying to get the board interested in things other than advocacy was always very tough, and they’d be like, “Oh, well, I mean the conference. We never have anyone good speak at the conference.” It’s not directed at you! Some board members have been on the board since 1986, I can’t teach you anything about preservation; it’s directed towards the new people that we’re trying to teach.

The big challenge always—aside from the board—is what are our programs? Are we church or are we school? No one goes to church to learn anything new. You go to church because that’s what you do. You go to school to learn something new. And different constituencies want different things. A lot of preservationists want church. They want to hear the same thing. They want to do the dogma and hear the same thing repeated back to them and feel comfort. They’re preservationists—change is scary. I fight change professionally. [laughs] And that’s what they do—they’re brought on as board members of preservation groups—fighting change professionally. So trying to evolve becomes a very tricky thing.

Q: What sort of observations were you able to make about how the other organizations that HDC was working with—how they were changing their goals or going through similar kinds of—

Bankoff: HDC was unique. I've heard it described as "a council of Indian chiefs." Everybody had their stuff. Susan [Tunick] was the materials person, Arlene—who's hasn't been on the board in forever—but would be the Upper West Side person, etc. I think—the Landmarks Conservancy is a fascinating organization. It's very professional. Peg [Breen] runs an extraordinarily tight ship and is kind of corporate in its functionality. And I think that the board is more corporate-minded, thoughtful—it's more like a real institution, right? I don't know what the Municipal Art Society does. I've seen the Municipal Art Society from the outside for twenty-five years, and it was one thing under Kent and it was another thing under Vin [Cipolla]. And Gina [Pollara] was there for a hot second. And it's another thing under Elizabeth [Goldstein]. So I don't know what they do, just, honestly, beyond me. They could be doing great work. I'm not sure.

I think that Friends of the Upper East Side, previously under Anne [Millard], and now under Franny, they do great work. I think that they're a really great, solid organization that does classic historic preservation. It kind of feels like one good arc from its founding under Halina—and people can go, "No, Halina was a Titan from the past, and nowadays, they just do this weak sauce zoning studies." No, they do really great zoning studies. They're very smart about it. They deploy their very limited resources, and they've got a really tough problem, which is that they are in this really, really, really wealthy area but they're counted as [implying diminished importance] the community group. So people will give bags of money to the Metropolitan Museum and they'll be like, one hundred dollars to Friends, fifty dollars to Friends. Guys! Rachel and Laura are doing terrific work! Franny is doing terrific work! They're doing really

great work. Tara Kelly did great work. Matthew [Coody] did! Come on! [pretending to sob] Support them, please. We want these people to continue and be paid what they deserve to be paid!

Landmark West!—Sean [Khorsandi] is doing great guns but he does not have the resources he needs to have such a huge amount of work. And while Arlene severed ties with Landmark West!, it had become so strongly affiliated with Arlene that it got the benefit of all of her strengths and the deficit of all of her weaknesses, and that has been just a tough struggle for the organization.

Brooklyn Heights Association doesn't really do much preservation anymore. GVSHP, which I will call GVSHP because gosh golly, gee willikers, I called it that for a very long time. Village Preservation!

Q: It's filed under G.

Bankoff: Right! Village Preservation does great work. Andrew [Berman] is—I mean, I worked in the same office with him for like twenty-one years. Andrew is expansive. He's an incredibly canny strategist. He's a great writer. He's a nice guy. He's a wonderful fundraiser. It would be great if—and I know that he tries, he really, really tries to expand their constituency into activism. It's really funny—they get huge numbers for their nonactivist stuff. And he does bring out people for activist stuff but not as many—not as many as the huge numbers who show up for their educational programs or their cool tours and stuff. And I think that must be a struggle. Save Harlem Now!, they just hired, like I said, James [Singletary], who's their first executive director

so they're finding their way. I'm working with them on that. And then everybody else is pretty much volunteers.

And the volunteer groups have a real problem with next generation, bringing new people in. I'm not even saying they have to be young people—I'm just saying it's the same people for a really long time. And that's cool, but you want to bring new people because people move on, they want to go live someplace warm, they want to go on vacation. Like Crown Heights North Association, I love them to bits, they're the best—they admit that they just have a problem. Poor Deborah Young is still the president! She doesn't want to be president! She retired. But it's still Deborah and Ethel [Tyus], and [phonetic] the Vals—it's the same people and they're like, "We've been doing this for a really long time, Simeon. No one ever told us this is for life." [laughs] When I've known people for twenty years and you're still volunteering for the same organizations twenty years later and you don't have anyone new—that's the crazy part. You just need more people! Don't get rid of the old ones, just bring more in.

Q: And sometimes having to rethink whether volunteering is—I mean, volunteering isn't sustainable for so many different reasons, but especially when you're looking for younger generation, who can and can't volunteer is—

Bankoff: Who have got time constraints, money constraints—this is an expensive, smelly, loud city and you have to work in order to live here. They want to get on with their lives. You want people who can bring new people in. That means that they're talking to new people. [laughs] When the preservation crowd becomes the same people talking to each other all the time, you hit

a capacity for fundraising because it's the same folks. Are there any unique donors to NYPAP? And, again, NYPAP is a funny situation where it's very specific to the field, and I'm not throwing shade at NYPAP at all. Whereas, you have geographically-based donors to Greenwich Village and to Brooklyn Heights and Upper West Side and Upper East Side, the larger groups—who do you get your funding from? Are you competing with each other? Is anyone bringing someone new to dinner parties? Or are you gonna have the same conversation again and again?

Q: Yeah. I'm kind of at my last question.

[cat meows]

Bankoff: Okay.

Q: If that feels okay for you. There's so much—

Bankoff: That's fine. I can talk so much. I can talk professionally—and again, I haven't even really talked about HDC from 2010 to 2021 but, I mean, that's fine. [laughs] I touched on things.

Q: Yeah, I don't want to leave that out.

Bankoff: That's fine.

Q: We'll talk to Brad about strategy. So I just I have a quote from you.

Bankoff: Sure. Okay. I have been known to say things.

Q: [laughs] And I just would like to maybe hear you elaborate a little bit on this.

Bankoff: Anything's possible.

Q: So I think this was in the context of Admiral's Row.

Bankoff: Sure. [cat continues meowing]

Q: Talking to Nate Kensinger. So you said: "When you lose a sense of the past, you actually lose a sense of the future because without a past it's hard to imagine that what you are doing now will have any effect." So—

Bankoff: I did say that. I also said: "A place without a history is an ugly thing." No, I feel very strongly about that because it's incredibly important to have a sense of accomplishment, even negative accomplishment. Even tragedy means that something happened. If you don't have a sense of a past—of things that happened in this place, let's talk about it in terms of place—you can become like a cat, where the cat is screaming at the door because he doesn't remember if the door was open or closed. He's just lost in this terrible sense of "it's always going to be like this." And without that knowledge of someone lived here before, somebody had an effect on the place, you're like, "Why would I bother doing anything? I could just sit here." If anything I do is going

to be immediately forgotten, what's the point of doing it? It's easier to let inertia take its way. I'm just gonna go lie down for a while, you know?

Whereas, [thunder claps] you're like, "Hey, we worked really, really hard on something and, maybe the building's gone, but I can show you documentation"—I have the memory of having worked really hard on that building. And when I pass that place, I'm filled with anger because we tried so hard to save 2 Columbus Circle and it didn't work. Next time, I remember at least that I can build on that. I can make sure that the next time I do it, it will succeed. And even if you have failures, your successes are that much better. You're like, "A-ha! That's a thing that I did!" If you don't have that sense of continuity, you're like, "Why bother?" And that is a terrible way to go through life. I mean, probably you would have much lower blood pressure. Might even be happier. But "why bother doing anything?" That's land of the Lotus-Eaters stuff. And that's no way to build a city and that's no way to have a society because if you don't have things that you value, then what do you have? Again, you should just go lie down, it's much calmer, close your eyes, it's fine.

Q: But in a sense, you're also saying that historical narratives are important because they also drive us forward?

Bankoff: Yes. The precise quote is: "to let the influences of the past drive you through the present to build a better future," which is corny as hell to say out loud. And it's only through dint of long, long advocacy I can say things like that without completely stumbling over my words. But especially now, having a sense of a history—that you might not share, that you just learned

about—enriches everything.

I believe that people experience history in a very personal way, that your vision of historic New York is the first time you saw it, and it's probably been going downhill ever since. But nineteenth century New York? None of us lived in the nineteenth century—we don't know what it is, right? It's when we first got here—that's the New York I remember. But knowing that, if someone can then explain or you discover for yourself the stories of the place, it's like you're discovering something new even though it's already there, and that's an enriching quality. You suddenly know more about it. That story then belongs to you—it becomes your story. It's your version of the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House.

It is your version of why people have backyards. Or, what the hell?, that on-street parking only existed since 1940. Actually, legally since 1950 in New York. Can you imagine that? “Whoa! You mean you couldn't put cars there? What did it look like?” And then you're like, “Wow, if they didn't used to have cars there maybe they don't have to have cars there again. What would that look like? This is now my idea. Sure, they didn't have that before but now it's my idea.” Or “God, that's a stupid idea. What do you mean because I'm a different national origin than you I couldn't live there? That's appalling! Someone changed that, right? Okay, good. Let's keep that change.” [laughs] And those are ways—otherwise you're like, “La dee da, this never happened.” It did happen. There were big, big, big ugly buildings on the lower west side that no New Yorkers ever went to except for if they had to, and then someone flew airplanes into them it was horrible. But you can't forget that.

And if you came to New York for the first time and you didn't know that, and someone's like, "Hey, look, here's a picture of these big, big, big ugly buildings," you're like, "Whoa, where did those go? This happened? Really?" And now their eyes are open to the idea that sometimes people fly planes into buildings. "That's a terrible thing. Did we do something about that?" Well, actually we didn't—we invaded another country. But that's a whole thing—you now have experienced the profound boredom of whatever they call it, One World Trade Center. Is that the proper name? They keep changing it.

Q: I think so.

Bankoff: Yeah.

Q: The Freedom Tower?

Bankoff: I keep thinking it's the Freedom Tower. But you now experience the profound boredom of that building in a completely different way.

Q: Because you know what used to be there.

Bankoff: Right. And you're like, "Huh, that's a thing. Weird."

Q: That is so much how I feel about Admiral's Row—famously known as the Wegmans parking lot—an extremely important chapter of my life was spent alone with this stretch of buildings.

And it just doesn't, it's not—yeah.

Bankoff: And that is why preservation is important because the best way to understand history is to physically encounter it. And getting back to your question about cultural landmarks earlier, sure, you put a plaque on Admiral's Row, but they're gone—the buildings be gone. And five-year-old children are never going to really understand what was there, and that is a permanent thing.

When you're in preservation—contradicting completely what I said earlier about the fact that preservation should change and expand and evolve—we are in the “forever” business. That's why it's so upsetting when the LPC makes bad decisions is because landmarks are forever. The city in its wisdom or not, has said, “Look, this is a worthwhile physical thing that should remain.” And then someone comes along and says, “No, not really. Take a picture.” No! You said it was gonna remain! It's not naming rights on Lincoln Center now—it's only good for twenty years. [laughs] I didn't lease it; you declared this as a landmark. And a lot of people fought really hard to get it that way, and then a bunch of other people spent time in meetings talking about it, and then a few other people spent some more time in and some more meetings and then they voted on it and it's done, right?

Q: And that provides us with a tangible sense of what forever means.

Bankoff: Yes, exactly. It's a continuity, and human beings crave continuity—not everybody, there are lots of weirdos in this world—but by and large, they crave continuity. I used to use the

example of Manhattan Beach of why preservation is important because my family lived there for fifty-three years—I go back there and I can't recognize anything. I mean, the streets are the same but the buildings have been slaughtered. You want to be able to take some younger child that you have—or have abducted or borrowed for the night or something like that—and say, “Look, this is where you know your grandma lived.” And they can be like, “Oh, wait, when we first came to this city/country/planet, they would go up those stairs and live in that window?” You're like, “Actually, no the windows weren't vinyl. They were actually probably steel case—okay, basically, yes.” [laughs] “And they should really fix that stair. Oh god, it's really bad.” But you know, that sort of thing. And so that way, you can be like, “Wow, that's cool.”

It's funny—my grandmother went to Ellis Island and she saw all the names—she said, [gasps] “This is this is where we came from.” And my mom's like, “No, no your mother had a second-class ticket and she debarked at 42nd Street like normal people. This is only for people in steerage—“No, this is where we came from!” “No, she went through customs like a normal person and it was fine.” “It's like home.” Sometimes you've got to print the myth.

Q: But that just speaks to the power of place.

Bankoff: It does. It really does. And it can feel compelling even if it's not entirely accurate. It's like, “The demise of Penn Station caused the Landmarks Law.” No, it didn't, but okay, sure, totally. That was Krypton exploding that sent Superman out—that's what happened. They couldn't save Penn Station so they made a Landmarks Law, and Jackie Kennedy had something to do with it.

Q: That's why we need her back.

Bankoff: Yes, we need her back. Someone dig up Jackie Kennedy. No, don't do that. That would be really gross and disrespectful.

Q: Well, I was gonna say I think it's about time to end the interview but that is a weird place to end the interview. [both laugh]

Bankoff: That would be disrespectful. Yeah.

I found something the other day. This was from, actually, my letter to get hired for HDC, September 1, 2000. And my final paragraph was: [reading] "When I was first hired by HDC in 1997, I told the person interviewing me that I wanted this job because I cared about New York City. I still do. I'm applying to be executive director because I believe and agree with the mission of the historic district council that our communities and neighborhoods are valuable resources that must be preserved and encouraged."

Q: Still believe it?

Bankoff: Yep.

Q: Thank you.

Bankoff: My pleasure. Thank you for giving me all this time.

Q: Yes, absolutely.

[END OF INTERVIEW]