

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Jeremy Woodoff

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jeremy Woodoff conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on March 20, 2023. 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.

Born in New York City, Jeremy Woodoff spent his childhood in Stuyvesant Town before relocating to Aiken, South Carolina, at a young age. At Oberlin College, a course on the architecture of cities sparked his interest in urban history. After obtaining a Master's degree in city planning from Harvard Graduate School of Design, Jeremy began his career in Savannah, Georgia working on community planning and development, focusing on historic districts and low-income neighborhoods, and was involved with the Community Curator Program.

Woodoff moved back to NYC and worked with the Landmarks Preservation Commission's Olmsted Project researching and preserving the works of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. His tenure at the Landmarks Commission in NYC from the early 1980s to 2000 encompassed his meticulous review of Parks Department projects in Central Park and other landmarks. He also oversaw street reconstructions, sidewalk work, and historic lighting in a pivotal role reviewing Department of Transportation (DOT) projects. Through this work, he created "DOT Guidelines," a comprehensive set of standards covering street surfaces, sidewalks, curbs, lighting, etc. These guidelines, although not formally adopted as regulations, have influenced public projects since, and have resulted in the restoration and reintroduction of historic lampposts like the bishop's crook and the F post.

In this interview, Woodoff speaks in detail about the inner workings of various city agencies, as well as the work he carried out as an employee of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Department of Design and Construction. He also describes the successes and challenges of inter-agency projects, and his career-long advocacy for historic preservation amid shifts in funding, staffing, and agenda, notably during the administration of Mayor Rudy Giuliani. He also speaks passionately in favor of preserving public timepieces, his involvement as a member of Save America's Clocks, and several notable clocks that the organization has worked to restore and protect.

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne

Session: 1

Interviewee: Jeremy Woodoff

Location: Brooklyn, NY

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic

Date: March 20, 2023

[clocks ticking in background]

Q: Today is March 20, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Jeremy Woodoff for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Woodoff: I'm Jeremy Woodoff. I live in Brooklyn, New York. I've lived here since 1980. I was born in New York City, lived in Stuyvesant Town until I was about nine years old, and then my family moved to a small town in South Carolina. Aiken, South Carolina.

Q: What was your family's lineage and their relationship to New York?

Woodoff: All four grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe. They came in the very late 19th to early 20th century. My dad grew up in the Bronx, my mom in Brooklyn, and they met after the War and settled in Stuyvesant Town, which was brand new at the time.

Q: What was it like for you living in South Carolina? What were the characteristics of that place?

Woodoff: Well, it was a real culture shock to move down South. I was nine, and so I was

beginning to be aware of things. I really liked New York. I liked Stuyvesant Town, and I think living there gave me some perspective in later years. I also remember thinking it was much more interesting walking through the East Village to go to school, which was off Avenue B on Twelfth Street, and how the tenements and the storefronts were all fascinating, unlike Stuyvesant Town, which was in a way boring, architecturally, although I came to appreciate it later on. And it was certainly wonderful living there as a kid, having all that car-free open space.

Aiken was actually, although I didn't realize it at the time, was a very beautiful town. It was a winter colony for Yankees. And so in the early 20th century, many of the very wealthiest families from New York and other places had winter houses down there. Cottages, they called them. Not quite the cottages of Newport, but big, fancy houses nonetheless. The town had been laid out by the railroad, which came in, I think it was the 1850s. It was laid out with broad, planted medians on all the streets downtown. So it was very green, very open. And later on, when the winter colony folks came, they built horse training tracks, and polo fields, and fancy stables in various places. There's a very large woods, Hitchcock Woods, that's right downtown, that has riding trails. So, as I said, although I didn't realize it at the time, it's quite a wonderful place. Now, most of it I think is listed on the National Register, and there are some local historic districts there. Also, in my later years, before leaving for college, I began to be interested in the old houses that lined the streets of the old part of town.

Q: Can you tell me a little about those houses?

Woodoff: Well, they were mostly somewhat restrained, a lot of colonial revival. A couple

approaching Beaux-Arts, or certainly neoclassical in design, and a few early Victorians. My mom actually lived for a while in one of the older houses, in a little Victorian cottage that she lived in during my college years. And for one of my classes, I actually did a little project there, which involved surveying the town, taking photographs, which I just recently donated them to the local historical society, because they were photographs of Aiken in the mid-1970s, and they had very little documentation of what the town was like then.

Also, my first experience sort of looking at historic houses in a serious way happened when I was enrolled at the local university branch, a community college, for a semester before I transferred to Oberlin College, from which I eventually graduated. It was, at the time, the branch was in one of these old neo-colonial houses. A big columned portico, or two-columned porticos, and beautiful grounds. I was standing in line, I think, waiting to register one day, when an acquaintance of mine pointed to the house and said something like, “Isn’t that a wonderful colonial revival house?” And I thought to myself, “Colonial what!? You mean this thing has a name?” And I decided I really needed to find out about this, and what this is all about. So this was one of my first ventures, although I didn’t actually do anything about it at the time. It was my beginning of the understanding that there was really something out there that was of interest that I needed to look into.

Q: Can you tell me about deciding to go to Oberlin? What drew you there?

Woodoff: It had been recommended to me by a friend when I was in high school. Actually, a friend of my parents. I didn’t really pay much attention to it, but she was a fiery, liberal person

from Pascagoula, Mississippi. I don't know why I didn't listen to her. But I wasn't happy with the first college I went to, which was Rockford College in Illinois, a very tiny, very conservative, liberal arts school. I decided to look into Oberlin, went to visit it one day, and just fell in love immediately. It happened to be the first beautiful, spring day in April, after what was undoubtedly, a very long, dismal, northern Ohio winter. Everybody was outside, and it just was great. The campus was beautiful. It was an old campus, full of 19th century and early 20th century buildings. And I knew it was a very socially liberal place. The first college to admit women on an equal basis with men. The first to admit African Americans. It just seemed perfect. So I got in, but had to wait a semester. That's why I ended up at the local branch in South Carolina for a semester.

At Oberlin, I was a sociology major, but I took a class called, The Architecture of Cities, in the art history department. And that was probably the second thing that kind of opened my eyes to preservation because it was about the history of cities, and the history of urban architecture. Some of the assignments that the professor gave us were to walk around Oberlin, which was a little Victorian town, and look at the streets, explain why the streets are as they are, and what makes them either good or not good. To look at the buildings and what makes them interesting or not. Those exercises really taught me to see cities, or towns. And although I didn't know, really, that there was such a field as historic preservation—it really was a very young field at the time in the mid-'70s—I decided to get a master's in city planning. I think I was probably thinking that the things I was learning to appreciate about cities and towns, and older buildings, is something that I could sort of work on in the field of city planning. That didn't exactly work out, but that's what I was thinking.

Q: What was it like to learn about cities at a time when a lot of cities were in financial distress, and a lot of buildings were falling down, getting burned down?

Woodoff: Well, that's one of the reasons I really thought city planning would be a good field, because I thought the direction things are going in is just very bad. In between college and graduate school, I read *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Power Broker*. Both of those things really sort of opened my eyes to what had been happening and thinking about ways to sort of change the direction of things. So I went to city planning school at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, which included programs in architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and city planning, which was by far the largest program. And in my two years there, I think there was not a word spoken about historic preservation. It was just not on anybody's radar. It did not interest anyone, and that was very disappointing.

But someone did come in from outside the school and put together a program—I think it was my second year there, so it would have been 1975, '76—about preservation activities in cities across the country. Other than using the space of the school, which they probably had to pay for, I don't think it had any affiliation with the School of Design. But it was a fascinating program. At that time, there were all these innovative things going on in cities around the country. Preservation was changing from, you know, the restoration of significant houses—George Washington's house and Thomas Jefferson's house—and turning into more of a community-based field. I probably couldn't have afforded the cost of the program, but I helped out with the logistics, so I was able to get in for free. And that was the best part of my experience there, was that program.

I also took a course in the college, called The Shaping of Urban Spaces, taught by Eduard Sekler. I didn't realize it, but he was a very distinguished person in the field. It helped me with my increasing interest in open space, and landscape. That was my first introduction to Savannah, actually. We each had to pick a city and do a project about spaces in that city, and I picked Savannah. I'm not sure if I'd been there at the time. I did visit Savannah once before moving there and saw it very briefly, but that was a very important course and an important project. I still have the project I did for it to this day.

Q: What was the focus of it?

Woodoff: As you know, Savannah was built around a series of twenty-three squares or twenty-four—I think twenty-three—starting in 1733. And through some amazing series of events, the city continued to develop with the same pattern, for the next, I think, 175 years, up to the mid-to-late 19th century. And the story of that, which I wasn't fully aware of at the time, but have since have been looking into, is fascinating. And the restoration of the city over the past twenty or thirty years is also fascinating. My first job after graduate school was in Savannah, so I spent three years there working for the city's community planning and development department, as a planner. That department received federal funds targeted to low-income people. And at that time, other than the very heart of the historic districts, historic parts of Savannah were largely low-income and minority, especially the Victorian historic district, which had just been recognized. So working there meant that I was fully involved in historic buildings and historic neighborhoods. My office did some designs and projects in Forsyth Park, and we completely

reconstructed Dixon Park, which was in an African American historic neighborhood, just off of the main historic district. In fact, one of the buildings on that park is the Carnegie library that was built for African Americans in the early 20th century, and that was Clarence Thomas's library, which he has spoken about. So the experience in Savannah was quite invaluable and a wonderful experience. And I've always just been fascinated by it as a place. I hadn't gone back in thirty-five years until a few years ago, and kind of reacquainted myself with it. My amazement at its existence is even greater now than it was.

But I always wanted to come back to New York. So after three years, I found an advertisement for a job in the *New York Times* classified, for a city planner at the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. And I thought, "Well, this certainly sounds perfect [laughs]," so I applied and I got the job.

Q: So what was that like? The return to New York City, and also the Preservation Commission at the time?

Woodoff: Well, it took a year from the time I was told I had the job until the time they actually could bring me on. And that was a bit of a harbinger of how things work in New York. In fact, I was warned by my boss in Savannah. "Are you sure [laughs] you want to go there?" But I did. And the job I applied for and was offered, was as one of the two planners on the Commission. It was the job of Walter Thabit, one of whose roles was to write little plans for newly designated historic districts. So, for instance, things like how the zoning should be changed to better reflect the character of the neighborhood; what infrastructure needs it had; other kinds of needs for

development the city might want to look at. The other planner, who was one of the people who interviewed me, Edwin Friedman, dealt with environmental review and similar issues. I was also interviewed by Lenore Norman, the executive director at the time.

So, in the time between my hiring and my starting, the Commission decided that it really didn't want to do these little plans anymore for historic districts. It was sort of the city planning department's job. Maybe they were told they shouldn't do them. I don't know. So when I started my job, I had a position and a salary, but no job, and they basically didn't know what to do with me. So it was a little awkward for the first year. I had to try to figure out what to do with myself. But on the other hand, that gave me the time to actually learn a bit more about preservation, because I wasn't trained in the field at all, and I hadn't been in New York for a long time. I didn't know that much about the city. And that turned out to be an advantage. One of the first things I did was to work on what was called the Community Curator Program that was run by Adele Chatfield-Taylor—who, I don't know formally what her position was but she dealt a lot with grants. And so there were some small grants, but really not a lot of funding for this program. So I put together some brochures, and went to community meetings in new historic districts, or proposed historic districts.

I worked some with another aspect of the program, which was the Rowhouse Manual that Frank Sanchis was working on. At the time, I think, he ran the Façade Improvement Program. He may have also, during that period, become the director of preservation. Or, I think, he was actually one of the heads of the geographic areas, which I'll get to in a minute. And he had put together a series of beautiful drawings for that manual, and had done some of the text. I wrote some of the

text, and also took some photographs, and supervised another person who took other photographs for it. That manual was finally, eventually published, but many, many years later, after several chairs had come and gone. There was also a proposal for a newsletter. I don't know if I made that proposal or not, but I worked on it, and that also happened many, many years later, finally. So there was that.

And there was the Olmsted Project. The Olmsted Project was funded by a grant, but run through the Landmarks Commission, and at the Landmarks Commission. The head of that project was Gail Guillet. She had hired some staff members, and Mary Ellen Hern was one. I think that Jay Shockley started under that grant program, and there may have been one or two others. Their goal was to research Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, and at that time, in 1980, I think it's true that there was not very much awareness of their work. At various times since they were active, there had been more or less interest in Olmsted parks, but I think that was kind of a low point. People really didn't understand them. There had been a lot of inappropriate alterations over the last ten or twenty years in their parks, and this was an attempt to sort of reassess their work, and sort of bring it back to the forefront. So there was a goal of putting together documentation, both written and illustrative photographs and drawings. So the Commission has a great collection of that material. There was a hope that it would lead to designations of more of the Olmsted and Vaux works in New York. There had already been several parks designated, starting in 1974 when the law was revised, to allow the designation of scenic landmarks. But there were others that were not protected.

So during this project, Riverside Park and [Riverside] Drive and Fort Tryon Park were

designated either during or shortly after the project. It had been intended to designate Morningside Park, but that didn't happen—and I can go into that in a minute, if you like. And the project was to culminate with an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and that happened in the courtyard of the American Wing. That happened in either 1981 or 1982, I think. And a catalog, which I actually have here, which I brought out just in case I need to refresh my memory. This was published by the Landmarks Commission. So there was a real serious interest at the Commission in this project. And I think Kent Barwick, if he didn't initiate the project, he certainly would have been very much in favor of it. So because I had time on my hands, I offered to help.

I had already started to have, as I mentioned, an interest in landscapes from my work in Savannah, and I had also, shortly before moving to New York, had spent some time in Prospect Park. I had an aunt who lived in Brooklyn, but I had never really been to Prospect Park. And even though it was in terrible condition in 1980, I was just floored at what a wonderful place it was. So I was just very happy to work on this project. I had the luxury of spending time reading the documentation that this project had brought in, and just staring at the old photographs and drawings, which is perhaps the best way, along with some reading, to really understand what these parks are about. Or were about.

So at this time, during the Olmsted Project, the city was just coming out of the fiscal crisis and its aftermath. For years, there had been no money spent in the parks at all. Even though several of them were scenic landmarks, there were no projects, so the Commission had not really had anything to review in terms of regulation. But that started to change during the period of the

Olmsted Project, and in my early years at the Commission.

The first projects were coming in from Central Park and from Prospect Park. There were master plans underway in both parks, and some of the people working on the Olmsted Project were also involved in these master plans. So for instance, in Central Park, there was Bruce Kelly and Phil Winslow. Bruce, especially, worked on the Olmsted Project and has an essay in this catalogue. Marianne Cramer and Judith Heintz were, I think, both landscape architects. Marianne may have been an architect. They worked for the new Central Park Conservancy on the master plan. I don't recall who in Prospect Park was working on it—that may have still been outside consultants—but Rex Wassermann was an architect who was in the new Prospect Park Alliance that was formed in the very early 1980s. So because of the Olmsted Project, and because we were starting to see actual projects coming in from the Parks Department, I actually got to meet and work with all these people who were great Olmsted scholars, or very sensitive architects and landscape architects who understood these parks. And because the Commission had no idea how to regulate these scenic landmarks and projects that were coming in, I sort of offered my services.

That came about in part because, at that time, Kent Barwick decided to reorganize the agency. This has been talked about, I know, by others who have spoken to you. So instead of having a preservation department that covered the whole city, and a research department that covered the whole city, he reorganized it into a series of three teams to cover different geographic areas. The team I was put on was the Upper Manhattan and the Bronx team, Team C. Upper Manhattan and the Bronx at that time had very few designated landmarks, so we didn't have a lot to do. But we did get Central Park, because it was sort of gerrymandered into Upper Manhattan. The first

projects that came in, came to Team C, and Jay Shockley and I, who had been working on the Olmsted Project, kind of were assigned to review these. And we had to figure out how that would work. Eventually, that turned into a whole procedure that we both worked on, and I think later I mostly worked on myself, as Jay went on to other things. It applied to scenic landmarks wherever they came from, whatever part of the city they came from. So we put together these procedures that told the Parks Department what kinds of projects we need to see: what things were ordinary maintenance as opposed to reviewable projects; what projects would go to public hearing, as opposed to being reviewed at staff level; what kind of materials we needed. This was all put in writing and shown to the Parks Department, and I felt strongly that this was for us to decide. We were the agency that did the review so we got to develop the procedures, but Parks, as I remember, had no issues with any of it. Eventually, I made the case that since I was doing the reviews for Central Park, as projects in other parks began to come in, I should really do them all, because we were dealing with the same group, the same people at Parks. The expertise was in our little unit, and it just made sense to do them all. It took some convincing, but eventually, that's what happened.

So beginning in the early '80s, I was essentially the person who reviewed projects in all scenic landmarks throughout the city. And that stayed the same through various positions I had at Landmarks until I left, or shortly before I left in 2000. It was quite a wonderful experience, and I think it was one of the most—certainly the most interesting for me, and I think the most useful things I've done in my career, was working on those projects.

Q: A question about Central Park, was that the first one to come up because—well, let me put it

this way: Why was Central Park the first? How much of this is just a result of coincidence that Central Park was under your purview, and how much was it maybe more of a strategy or deliberate?

Woodoff: Do you mean bringing all the parks into my—

Q: Yes. How much of it was a coincidence? How much of it came through you, and how much of it came from the folks at Central Park?

Woodoff: Well, I think Central Park came first, partly because of the founding of the Conservancy by Betsy Barlow, at the time—then, Betsy Barlow Rogers. Of course, it was Manhattan, so there had always been more interest in Central Park and more money. At the time it was built, it had far more resources than the other Olmsted parks, like Prospect Park. And it had fallen into extreme decay, partly because it was very heavily used. So the opportunity was there, the interest was there, and the money was there, eventually, so I think that's why it was first. The other parks tried to sort of piggyback onto that interest, and so the Prospect Park Alliance was formed shortly after.

I think the reason that it developed that all of these applications came through me, essentially, at the Landmarks Commission, is it just made sense. It did take some convincing, but I don't think there was a lot of interest among the staff in scenic landmarks. Their backgrounds were in architectural history, or historic preservation as a field, or in architecture. They didn't really know what to do with the parks, and most of them were extremely overworked. They've always

been overworked in the regulatory end, and just didn't have the time to put into understanding the parks and how to regulate them. So I think it made sense from that point of view, and, I guess that the people from the Parks end, as far as I know, didn't have any serious problems with the way the Commission decided to handle things.

It's also very important to understand that the people we were working with at Parks, and the new Conservancy and Alliance, were all preservationists. They had a real love for these parks, and many of them had a good understanding of Olmsted and Vaux and what they were trying to do. We had Bronson Binger at the Parks Department, the director of capital projects. I think he was an assistant commissioner in charge of capital projects. We had Bruce Kelly and Phil Winslow and others at the Conservancy, and Betsy Barlow. We had Tupper Thomas at the Alliance, and Rex Wassermann and others there. Charles McKinney at Riverside Park. These people were all coming in from the point of view that these parks needed to be restored. That has changed somewhat over the years, but at the beginning, we all worked very comfortably together. Certainly, the Landmarks commissioners at that time—the chair was on board because of the Olmsted Project, and the other commissioners were also very much interested.

The Public Design Commission [PDC], which shared the Landmarks Commission's review jurisdiction generally deferred to us. Their mandate is not historic preservation, but they had, at various times, people who were interested in historic parks. For a time, Nicholas Quennell was the president and he was a landscape architect, very much involved with park restoration. So it all worked very well together. We were all mutually supportive. Parks was essentially self-selecting their projects. They just didn't come to us with terrible projects, because they wouldn't,

so we could be supportive because they always had other constituencies they had to watch out for—users, the Parks Department, politics. If they felt they needed to do things that may not have been the best in terms of historic preservation, we could sort of push back against that, without seeming to be obstructionist because essentially, we were all on the same side. It was just a very good working relationship.

Q: Was it all scenic landmarks that were coming under your purview, or did it start with parks and then—

Woodoff: Well, all scenic landmarks are under the jurisdiction of Parks, although some of them had their own conservancies or alliances that often funded projects. But they all had to, eventually, be signed off on by the Parks Department, which is sort of the owner. Well, the city is the owner, but the Parks Department has the jurisdiction. There are a few other parks that are not scenic landmarks that, I believe, I also became involved in. For instance, Fort Greene Park is an Olmsted Park in the Fort Greene Historic District. It isn't a scenic landmark, but it's an Olmsted park, so we would have looked at that. And then there are a few other scenic landmarks that are not Olmsted. Bryant Park, Verdi Square. I don't remember specifically, but I think I was typically involved when there were projects in those as well, just because they were parks.

And my responsibilities as Part of Team C involved other things as well. It wasn't just scenic landmarks. So the whole concept of the team approach, was that all the staff on each team would do various things. They would do research, write designation reports—I wrote one or two of those. We would review projects, we would do surveying. So we were all involved in all that,

and I know that many of the staff did not like that setup. They felt it denigrated their particular areas of expertise. It happened to be good for me, because it exposed me, since I wasn't a professional preservationist—I hadn't been to preservation school—it really helped me learn a lot about the different aspects of historic preservation. I think others were less happy with it. And that organization was changed under the next commissioner, Gene Norman. He went back to the older setup of a preservation department and research department, and eventually a survey department. But through all of that, even though I was no longer on a team, and actually wasn't part of any of those departments, I think I kind of went back to be a free-floating city planner at the agency. But I still kept all of the scenic landmark reviews, even though I was not technically in the preservation department. I don't remember exactly how that happened. But again, it partly had to do with the fact that everyone was so busy with their work reviewing projects on buildings, that it just made sense for me to keep that, and so I did.

Q: And it sounds like you also cared and wanted to do it.

Woodoff: I found it to be a truly fascinating job and one in which, again, I'm not a landscape architect, but I worked with landscape architects and architects who work on building in these parks, and there are some instances when I think I actually was able to improve projects. I could point out things from the background I had in Olmsted parks and their history that maybe should be done a little differently. And often, my suggestions ended up being incorporated, which was very gratifying.

Q: Is there an example that you can give of that happening?

Woodoff: Well, yes, there are a few. They tend to be small, and that's partly because, as I said, the projects we were getting were, on the whole, very good. There is one in Prospect Park early on, [chimes ring] which involved the reconstruction of the ballfields, which are at the—there's about six ballfields at the southern end of the long meadow. When we started, they had a lot of fencing backstops, outfield fencing, and bleachers. The idea was to get rid of a lot of that stuff, and make them as minimal as possible, so that it would read more as a continuation of the Long Meadow. The plan came in with one of the backstops located at a very critical part of the landscape where the lawn met with the start of the watercourse that threads its way throughout the park and the woods. So this was an area where the three main aspects of the park—turf, woods, and water—came together. So it was something that, because Olmsted spoke about those being sort of the main structure of the park, where those came together would have been a very considered part of the design. And the proposal came in with one of the backstops right there in that spot, where the Long Meadow met the water, and met the woods. So when you walked on the path that sort of intersected those three, you would have been right next to a baseball backstop. [chimes ring] So I said, "Why don't you reorient that field, and move the backstop to the other side of the field?" And they did. And that's how it remains today. So it's not a big thing, but it's something that I think really helped.

There is a project in Central Park, the restoration of Cherry Hill, which is near Bethesda Terrace. It has a wonderful little cast iron fountain. It was a carriage turnaround with a view over the lake, and this project restored that fountain, which had been horribly abused. Most of it was not even there anymore. And this was Phil Winslow, who was a great landscape architect. He was lost to

the AIDS epidemic, as, unfortunately, a number of the early architects who worked on these early designs in these parks were. A loss that we've never recovered from, actually. There's a path that runs along the lake that you see from Cherry Hill, and he had proposed a series of benches along that path. So when you're standing in Cherry Hill and looking at the lake, you would see the backs of these benches. I suggested to him that, really, this should be a sweeping view down to the water, with no interruptions. And I suggested that he take those benches out. And Phil was not someone, who I think really appreciated advice coming from someone, especially someone who [laughs] was not a landscape architect. But he said, "Yes, you're right," and he took them out. So that was a change. Another small change, but one that I think was somewhat significant.

There are many, many other examples like that, mostly not even that significant, but where I could talk with the designers, and we could sort of hash things out. I spent a lot of time in the design offices at the Conservancy, and at the Prospect Park Alliance, and with Charles McKinney at Riverside Park, talking about things like that. Either things that were being designed in-house, which was being done a lot, or things that were being designed by outside consultants.

Q: Can I ask a follow-up question about Phil Winslow?

Woodoff: Yes.

Q: You said that preservation still hasn't recovered from the loss. Could you say a little bit more about him and his contributions?

Woodoff: Well, he worked on the Master Plan for Central Park, along with Bruce Kelly and others, and he wrote about Olmsted in the Master Plan. He really understood how to design to bring back lost parts of the Olmsted design. I worked with him probably less than some of the others. I remember Bruce Kelly was an extremely gifted landscape designer. He was very good with plant materials. He really understood what it was like to walk through these parks, and to see them as they were meant to be seen, which was actually in motion. Olmsted set them up as a series of sequential experiences, visual experiences, and he understood that very well. I think Phil did as well.

Rex Wassermann, who may have been an architect and not a landscape architect, was at the Prospect Park Alliance, and he was absolutely wonderful. He was a bit obsessive, and that was a good thing. He made sure things were perfect. I remember working with him on a project to produce perimeter signs for the park, that would have maps and other information. And I remember sitting with him and talking for hours about the design of these signs, and about how to place them, so they wouldn't interfere with the classical entrances of Prospect Park, but would be quite visible. So we moved them a foot here, a foot there, just to make sure that they were perfect. And there are things that have happened, unfortunately, in Prospect Park since, that he would never have allowed. He would have laid down in front of the bulldozer. So they were very, very important to the early stages. And there were consulting firms. Quennell Rothschild was one, and Tony Walmsley was another, although I don't remember the name of his firm. They were all very important.

Q: Thanks. What about Morningside Park? You mentioned that it had been excluded.

Woodoff: Yes. The Commission wrote a designation report for Morningside Park. Possibly, Jay Shockley wrote it in the early '80s. The Commission held a public hearing, and intended to designate it, and was pretty much, I think, blindsided by the community, or an aspect of the community. This went back to the Columbia demonstrations from the 1960s, I guess '68, that stopped the construction of Columbia's gym in the park.

Q: Yeah, when you said laid down in front of the bulldozer—

Woodoff: Right. Although the Commission, of course, never would have wanted to have seen what Columbia was doing, and would have tried to stop it itself, we just were looked upon as another official presence that was there to kind of thwart the community, and it just turned into a disaster. And basically, politically, we could not designate it. So the Commission stepped back, until 2008, finally, it was able to designate the park. The Parks Department, fortunately, didn't do anything terrible in those years, I don't think. Eventually, they restored the site of the gym, without the help of the Landmarks Commission, and I think did it quite well. But that's why that took so long.

Q: Let me ask you about what I mentioned before we got started, about the Public Design Commission. When did they become part of the process for reviewing scenic landmarks?

Woodoff: Okay. So this may take a while.

Q: [laughs]

Woodoff: The Public Design Commission, which used to be called the Art Commission, and has been around since around 1904 or something like that—they are responsible for reviewing all work that is on city property throughout the city. They always have been. This is including artwork and buildings, public rights of way, anything that is occurring on city property. They don't deal with interiors, unless it's artwork, but everything else. Oddly, they don't review demolitions. They do review removals of artwork. But if they approved a building somewhere, and the city wants to demolish it, they don't approve the demolition. They don't review that. Anyway, so they always reviewed work in parks in what would become scenic landmarks.

When the Landmarks law was changed in 1974, to allow the designation of interiors and scenic landmarks, the Commission was given certain jurisdiction over scenic landmarks. And PDC, or the Art Commission, retained its jurisdiction. On top of that, the Landmarks Commission had jurisdiction, and the section of the law that discusses that talks about the fact that the agency responsible for proposing work in scenic landmarks has to apply to the Commission. And the Commission responds by issuing a report to that agency. And that's essentially all the law says. It doesn't say who writes the report, how it's written, if a public hearing is needed, it says nothing about any of that. It also doesn't say anything about the relationship between the Landmarks Commission and PDC. The PDC part of it remained the same.

So in the early years, when the Commission started reviewing work in scenic landmarks, we

went first, partly by tradition, and partly because the Art Commission, or PDC, had binding jurisdiction. The project couldn't go ahead unless PDC said okay. Whereas the Landmarks Commission's jurisdiction was somewhat less clear; we just had to write a report. So what would happen is, we would write a report and the reports were essentially always favorable. The reason for that was, first of all, the projects we got from the Parks Department were usually pretty good, because of what I discussed before. But also, because if they weren't so good, or there were problems, we didn't stop there. We talked to the Parks Department and said, "Look, can you fix this? Can you make this better?" And either I did that as a staff person, or if it came to a public hearing—because it was of a certain scope that we thought it really needed a public hearing—the commissioners would say, "This may be good, but this is really a problem. Can you change this." And so they would send the Parks Department away, and the Parks Department would make changes and bring it back. And at some point, the commissioners would say okay, this is either great or maybe it's not perfect, but it's appropriate, it's good enough.

So we would issue a report. And as I said, they were generally very positive. This would be sent to the Parks Department, and the Parks Department would forward it—or we forwarded it, but it was technically—our reports were not reports to the Art Commission or PDC, they were to the agency doing the work. That report would get sent to PDC, and they would review the project in the light of what the Landmarks Commission had to say. But beyond that, I always went to PDC, to their meetings. I was there practically every month. And I was there to explain what the Landmarks Commission's thinking was, so that if PDC didn't understand what we were saying, or had objections, we could talk about it. We could talk our way through it. And I really don't remember any instances where there was a conflict that was so bad that we couldn't work things

out. They really did defer to us, and I don't mean that in a negative way. They deferred to us because we were the experts on historic parks. They recognized that. I think when Nicholas Quennell was president, he probably had more to say, but since he was a preservationist, it generally followed along the same lines. So that was the process, and it worked that way for years. No problems, really.

The other kinds of projects that had dual jurisdiction, which were, let's say, city-owned buildings that were landmarks. I was also, actually, the liaison between Landmarks and PDC, so I also dealt with those. So if there were issues that came up, that PDC didn't understand why the Landmarks Commission said what it did, we could work those out. So I think that the city agencies that had to go through both reviews sort of didn't like that, because it took some time. It was more work, and they had to pay the consultants extra. But there was really not a problem. The process worked, and it was just not a problem that needed solving.

But when the Giuliani administration came in, they decided it was a problem, and so they changed the law. And even though I was the person who was dealing with many of the reports that Landmarks was issuing, and I was the liaison between Landmarks and PDC, of course, nobody talked to me about this. The law was changed so that projects of city-owned landmarks that had to be reviewed by the Landmarks Commission, would no longer be reviewed by PDC. So the jurisdiction that the Landmarks Commission had had, which was defined by these reports, all of a sudden became binding. So the law, basically, said that jurisdiction for formal binding review that had been with PDC for these projects, would now be with the Landmarks Commission. So these were all landmarks that were city-owned, whether they were parks, or

buildings, or streets, or anything. Anything except artwork, which retained the dual jurisdiction, and most work in scenic landmarks. And I think the reason for the artwork exception makes sense, because the Landmarks Commission does not have expertise in works of art, and that is what PDC's expertise is. And the Landmarks Commission never really reviewed the aesthetic merits of works of art. They reviewed, sort of, location and scale. The things that sort of would affect the landmark, but really didn't involve aesthetics of the artwork—that remained with PDC. Scenic landmarks had the exclusion, because Nicholas Quennell was president of PDC at the time. He was a landscape architect and he basically insisted. He said, "We want to retain some input into work on scenic landmarks." It was limited to landscape and new buildings, but work on existing buildings in scenic landmarks remained only with the Landmarks Commission. So that change is, in practice, extremely confusing, and most people sort of don't understand it. I mean, if you really look at it, you can get it, but it is very confusing.

So the Landmarks Commission began issuing what they called binding reports for work that was now fully under their jurisdiction—and no longer involved PDC—and advisory reports for work that PDC would also review. And that distinction for scenic landmarks was a change that really wasn't a change, because the process for scenic landmark review never changed when the law was changed. It remained exactly as it had always been. But I think, partly, because we were now calling them advisory reports, people began to think, "Well, the Commission is just advisory. Really, the important reviewer is PDC." And that was the beginning of a really awful change in the way Landmarks reviewed scenic landmarks. At that time, for a while, despite the change in terminology, the review process remained the same. I was still doing those reviews, and we still worked closely with the Parks Department on making sure the designs we got were

acceptable. But once I was taken off those projects, and once I left the Commission, the whole attitude seemed to change. The Commission started looking at these scenic landmarks reviews in a much less rigorous way. And that was the start of a change that I regret to this day, and I think still needs to be looked at.

Q: I'm going to take a look at what Christian said and maybe we can kind of correct the record here [referring to 2021 oral history interview with Christian Zimmerman].

Woodoff: Okay.

Q: So he's responding about the procedural process the Prospect Park Alliance goes through, [reading from transcript of interview with Christian Zimmerman] "Then we go to the LPC and then we go to the Public Design Commission. And then we're finally done for the first round. And then we have to go back and do it all again. Most of it again. And here's the interesting thing. I don't know if you knew this, but Giuliani changed the structure. So everyone thinks Landmarks Preservation has binding control over Prospect Park because it's a scenic landmark. It doesn't. The Public Design Commission does. He rewrote it. And I speculate that he was so angry at Landmarks for some reason, and I don't know what it was. There's got to be something." So it seems as though he is kind of stating the thing that you said the attitude change is, which is that all of a sudden it seems like LPC had less control over what happens with scenic landmarks. And that isn't necessarily the case. The law uses the language that makes it seem that way, but in actuality, that's not exactly true.

Woodoff: So there are two things—I have to try to remember both. One is that as far as I know, there was no issue with the way the Landmarks Commission was handling scenic landmarks before. That that wasn't the impetus.

Q: Nobody got mad.

Woodoff: Right. Nobody got mad at Landmarks regarding scenic landmarks. I mean, there might have been some occasional distress, but I don't think that was a big issue. I think what it was, is that Giuliani was looking for more control over all of his agencies, and the dual jurisdiction meant that he had to deal with two agencies, in terms of controlling of certain projects. And he didn't like that. And also, I think, people were probably making the case that why have two agencies review the same projects, for design reasons. And I can understand that, although I don't agree with it in this case, because I think the two agencies have different expertises and different things they're mandated to look at. And as I said before, I don't think it was really a big problem, timewise. I think he felt that, or his administration felt, that taking certain projects away from the Art Commission, PDC, meant they could focus on the Landmarks Commission, where they wanted to control things, and not have to worry about focusing on two agencies, and they would leave PDC with somewhat less a role for reviewing other projects. They could just deal with them on those, and not have to worry about Landmarks. So I think that was probably the reason for that change. It had more to do with control than anything else.

The other issue that Christian raises—I'm not sure if I'm remembering what that was about—was that when they have to go back, he said they have to go back a second time. That's because,

generally, the first review that these agencies do is more conceptual or schematic. You want to make this big landscape change, you want to put this new building here. We don't have the exact designs, but is this an appropriate thing to do in concept? But then, if they get the go ahead, then of course, they have to do the detailed design. God is in the details with these things. So those agencies review the projects when they're in fully developed form, and that is typically done at the Landmarks Commission, at staff level. So even if the Commission reviews a project at a public hearing, at schematic level, if they approve it, the resubmission is done at staff level. And so it's a much simpler process that can occur while other things are going on. It's not like everything stops while the staff is looking at something. And I think the process is pretty much the same at PDC as well.

Q: Thank you for clarifying that.

Woodoff: I will say also, just going back to the whole process we put together for how the Landmarks Commission reviews these things—because the law was so unspecific about how the Commission deals with these things, how they issue reports, we looked at these projects the way the Commission has always looked at buildings. That is, if it's restorative, it can be done at the staff level. If it's a major change, it goes to public hearing. Even if it's restorative, but it's something that we think would be of public interest, we would bring it to the Commission. And that was something I made sure that we did, because I've always been, since my earliest days in Savannah, a believer in involving the public as much as possible in these things. I think it helps the cause of preservation, even though it may be more time consuming and more difficult. So an example of that would be the Commission being asked to approve, say, the restoration of the

Delacorte Theatre, which they were just asked to do recently. Even if it was an absolute perfect restoration of what was there, what had been built in the '60s, I would have argued, and at that time, I was in no position—I had no function in that regard—I would have argued that it may be restorative, but we really need to bring this to the attention of the commissioners and the public. Because this is restoring something that is not original to the park, that was considered an intrusion into the park. It may be beloved by many people, but it's still something that really deserves that higher level of consideration. So that was written into the procedures. Anyway, that's what I wanted to add to our discussion about how we review these projects.

Q: Thank you. I think that the era that you've just talked about, you've described as, or at least part of that era, you described as really a golden time for preservation. Can you talk about a couple of the attributes that made it that way from your perspective? And then maybe you can also talk about what then happened to change it.

Woodoff: Well, the term, "golden age of preservation," actually came from Joan Geismar, who is an archaeologist, who I worked with a great deal. She did a lot of work as a consultant for the Commission in the '80s and '90s when I was there. And at that time, we had commissioners and chairs of the Commission who were very strongly pro-preservation. We had mayors—Mayor Koch and Mayor Dinkins—who basically left the Commission alone. I mean, not entirely. There was always politics involved. But they were generally supportive, not only of their commissioners, but I think of preservation, just as a concept. We still had people like Jacqueline Onassis there in the background, who did an enormous amount of good for preservation in New York. She saved Grand Central. She got us through the St. Bart's lawsuit. And those mayors and

those commissioners and those individuals—those sort of giants of the early preservation movement—are gone. And preservation has, to an extent, turned from a movement—it used to be referred to as the “preservation movement,” and it’s become more an everyday part of the city bureaucracy. And in a way that’s good, but in a way it’s not good. Because with all of the countervailing forces, it really needs to be a movement, in certain respects. It really needs to have individuals who will fight publicly and openly if they need to, or behind the scenes, if that’s better. And we just don’t seem to have those people anymore, and that’s a real shame, and a real loss.

So what was the rest of that question?

Q: Well, actually, I interviewed Joan Geismar last week.

Woodoff: Oh, okay. Oh excellent.

Q: And she did in fact say that, yes, the “golden age of preservation in New York City.” But she hadn’t described it in that way that you have. So you each have very different descriptions of what made it.

Woodoff: Well, I’ll have to listen to what she had to say. I am amazed. I’ve listened to some of these interviews. I mean, they’re fascinating, but they’re good because they actually confirm a lot of what I had been thinking, that I don’t have some crazy idea that nobody else had. These are now things that happened thirty and forty years ago.

Q: Yeah. Well, the other part of the question that I had asked, was how things started to shift in a way that was less favorable to preservation? So you mentioned that maybe it becomes more of an everyday thing about procedures, and professionalization of the “movement,” in that sense. Let me link that also with something that you said about the way that Giuliani’s administration wanted to have—their thinking about LPC was to focus its control over LPC. So what do you mean by that?

Woodoff: Well, the whole Giuliani era is something that will have to be studied, if it hasn’t already been. But I think he was all about control and loyalty. And I believe that the new commissioner, Jennifer Raab, was given the instruction to basically break the Commission. And that was abundantly clear, I think, when she began firing people she could fire, like Dorothy Miner, the longtime counsel, Joan Olshanksy, and eventually, Alex Herrera. And people like me, who she couldn’t fire because I was civil service, just had our responsibilities removed. Generally, we were made miserable, and eventually left on our own.

I should tell you just a little anecdote about Dorothy Miner, who I, in various roles at the Commission, I actually worked with fairly closely. She could be difficult to work with, as I think other people have said. When it was announced that Jennifer was firing Dorothy and getting a new counsel, my thought was, “Well, that’s a shame. But really, a new chair—if she wants a new counsel, that doesn’t seem unreasonable to me, someone who she has to work with that closely.” And I kind of gave her the benefit of the doubt. Apparently, there was basically almost a staff revolt, though, at this. And I remember one day, Jennifer actually came to every floor. We were

at that time at 100 Old Slip, the old first police precinct. So we had five floors, it was a small building. She walked to every floor, which she never would do otherwise. And I remember when she came to my floor, she stood in the stairwell doorway and had the staff gather around her, and was telling us, explaining, I guess, why she was making this change. I don't remember what she said. And I was still thinking, "Well, you know, I can kind of understand that." And I'm sort of embarrassed now to have to say that because I think I didn't fully understand at the time how important Dorothy was to the Commission, both then and over the previous couple of decades. And I also didn't understand what exactly Jennifer was intending to do by bringing in a new counsel, and making other changes—that the whole point, as I said, was to break the Commission. And the new counsel that she brought in stayed a couple of years and sort of learned how things worked, went back to her law firm with that knowledge, and became the counsel for developers. And the assistant she brought in, actually, is still the head counsel at the Landmarks Commission, all these decades later.

So the attitude became: expertise and experience were downgraded among the staff in general. And they weren't just downgraded, but they were looked upon with suspicion, because if you were experienced and you had expertise, you might have an opinion. And that opinion might not be the same as the administration's opinion, and that was not good. Because even before you might want to discuss your opinion, and what alternatives might exist out there, you were viewed as being disloyal if you should so much as express something else and try to discuss it. The loyalty had to come first. And some people are better at doing that than others. They stayed, and the others left. And that's sort of the heart of it, in my view.

One of the particular things that happened, which I thought was especially unethical, is that we had a long history in the preservation department, which I had, by then, moved to—I was a Deputy Director for Preservation. The staff met once a month before the hearings to look at all the public hearing projects, came up with a consensus, and wrote recommendations to the commissioners for the public hearing, sort of in the form of a motion. They could accept it—which they usually did, but not always—and if they didn't, they wrote their own motion. Well, under Jennifer, those staff recommendations started to get revised to reflect the views of the administration, but they were still presented to the commissioners as if they were the staff opinion. And I found that to be highly unethical. It's still what's done, going on through all these new commissioners since then. And I think when that is changed, and it goes back to the commissioners getting the actual views of their professional staff, then the Commission will perhaps be on its way to getting fixed. But until then, it just is reflective of a whole attitude and process that is just not right in my view.

Q: Thank you for explaining that so clearly. To flip it back a little bit, did you feel that your and the rest of the staff's opinions were being valued, and your expertise was being valued, prior to that?

Woodoff: Yes. Yes I did. The staff used to actually give training sessions to new commissioners, because most commissioners are not professional preservationists. Some may have an interest or some background, but they're there to represent the public in various aspects, both geographic, and in terms of professions. So we did these training sessions. The chair would talk to the staff about things. And yes, I do believe that. People who were higher up than I was, you know, the

Director of Preservation, would probably be able to answer that a bit better, cause they had more day-to-day contact. But I remember frequently being in meetings with Kent Barwick, and Gene Norman, and Laurie Beckelman, and talking about projects, and that never happened later under the other commissioners. So yes, I do think they valued the staff. And they've said in the interviews they've done, that they valued the staff and I think they're being very honest. I know Gene Norman came in saying he was not a preservationist, he really didn't know how things worked. And to his great credit, he realized that, "Well, now I'm chairman of the Landmarks Commission. It's my job to understand preservation, and to advocate for it." So he learned from Dorothy, and he learned from the other staff. And I think most people who worked through that period view him as probably the most, and in some ways the best, and the most sympathetic. The best chair to work for. He was quite wonderful. Not to denigrate some of the others, but he had a particular appreciation for his sort of underlings, and how to set up the agency, how to work with them.

Q: Well, I know that you left and—I'm trying to phrase my question in a way that isn't completely leading [laughs]—it seems like you are, and have been involved in a lot of grassroots preservation organizations, or small organizations that are not necessarily confined to New York City, or are national in scope. When did you start to become involved in those? I'm thinking of the—well, go ahead.

Woodoff: Well, I guess it started in Savannah, when I was on the board of the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project. And I think I talked about—well, maybe I didn't. Did I not talk about that? That was a program to acquire and restore houses in the Victorian historic district in

Savannah. And then rent them to people using Section 8 subsidies so that they remained low income and largely minority. It was a very innovative program at the time. So they asked me to join the board. And the program that was replicated in some other places and still has some relevance today for all of our—the affordable housing crisis. So that was one.

I've been involved with the Victorian Society New York, which now has a fairly active preservation committee. Save America's Clocks, which is another very small organization that deals with historic public clocks, among other things. I did want to, if we could, go back, if there's time—there are a couple of other things that I did at the Landmarks Commission which are worthy of note, and I'll try and make them short, if that's okay.

Q: Yes, yes. Go right ahead.

Woodoff: And then we can go to what's happened since then.

For a couple of years, I was the Director of Environmental Review. I was still doing scenic landmark reviews. But I also was doing—this was Eddie Friedman's old job, the planner who had hired me. And it turns out that that work was done under CEQR, City Environmental Quality Review Act, and that can be a very powerful tool for preservation, and unfortunately, isn't used that way, for the most part.

But two of the big projects I was involved in there, one involved 17 State Street, which was a new office building near Battery Park. The developer there needed some sort of special permit or

zoning change, and so we had to go through CEQR, and CEQR identified that his site was the site of an early house that was occupied by a Jewish merchant, and no doubt had significant resources, like buried in old cisterns and privies in the back yard, that would have been a very important historic resource. There had not been any excavations of a similar property. The developer, while he was in the midst of the CEQR review, got an as-of-right demolition permit and excavation permit from the Buildings Department. So he destroyed the site. And this is not allowed, because you're not allowed to segment projects like that, although the Buildings Department probably could legally give him this permit. So the Director of Archaeology, Sherene Baugher, who was the city's first archaeologist hired by Eddie Friedman, and I got together and figured out what kind of mitigation can we do for a site that's been destroyed. And I think Frank Sanchis was the director at the time. So we went to him with the idea that, "Well, you know, we really need to make a statement about what archaeology means, and what this loss was."

So we required the developer to build a museum of archaeology. It was called New York Unearthed, and it was in the plaza behind the building. You went down underground into a little room, which had exhibits explaining sort of the history of New York, from the street surface down. And it had a little glass booth with archaeologists working on restoring—Joan Geismar may have told you about this—restoring artifacts that the public could see, and probably ask them questions. The developer was required to build it and fund it for five years. It was operated by the South Street Seaport Museum. It apparently made quite a splash. It was in the papers, it was on the tourist circuit. It was quite wonderful. And after five years, the funding stopped. The Seaport, which has been perpetually on the verge of closing for lack of funds, couldn't run it

anymore, and that was the end of that. So that was one thing that CEQR did that I was involved with.

Another thing was MetroTech, which was a big development in downtown Brooklyn. That was one of the last old-fashioned urban renewal projects that the city was going to undertake, until the recent Penn Station Project. And it was just basically a slum clearance. You know, clear everything out of the way and build these new buildings. So I did a survey of the area, and of course, being on the edge of Downtown Brooklyn, it was full of 19th century and early 20th century significant buildings. And we found in particular, a street, Johnson Street, that had four little houses. One of them, an early, like 1840s Greek revival frame house, very intact. And I remembered showing pictures of these to Frank Sanchis, and he did [laughs] what he often does when he's surprised. He like took his palm and slapped his forehead, as if to say, "Oh my God. We're going to have to do something about this." And we told the developer, "You have to save these houses. You have to move them." And he did. He moved the four of them together, around the corner, and down the street, onto Duffield Street. And he had to restore them, which he did kind of not wonderfully well, but well enough. He was supposed to provide a compatible use for them—which he apparently never did, or did for only a very short time—and they're now sitting empty and deteriorating. But nonetheless, that was done through CEQR.

We also required that the developer participate in the salvage program, which we had still at the time. So any architecturally significant material was taken out and was brought to our warehouse, and we required that he pay for photo documentation of every building in the district, which we have—the Landmarks Commission still has—and I believe we're going to—actually,

they were lost for a long time, but they were found, and are probably going to be donated to what used to be the Brooklyn Historical Society. Now those pictures are forty years old. And I remember going with our Director of Salvage into one of the old, early, flat houses in the district, and finding, I think, eight apartments. We found seven marble mantels, and they all came out and went to the salvage warehouse.

So CEQR can be a very important tool. It's not used the way it should be. Essentially, any discretionary project that the city undertakes—and that includes capital work on historic buildings, whether or not they're landmarks—but if they're eligible, or national registry eligible, that should trigger CEQR. And it means that if the city wants to build an addition to a historic Carnegie library that isn't landmarked, it should go through CEQR, and somebody should look at it in terms of the effects of the additions or the change on the historic resource. That is almost never done. CEQR is only used for things like zoning changes and major developments. I tried in my last job to get that to change, to make sure somebody's doing the CEQR reviews when the city wants to do work on historic buildings that are not landmarks, and it hasn't really gone anywhere yet. So that was one of the things I wanted to talk about that was one of the aspects of my Landmarks career.

And the last one was my work with the Department of Transportation [DOT] and public rights-of-way. When I returned to the Commission after a stint of parental leave, when I had my first child, I was made a deputy director in the preservation department, so I continued my work with scenic landmarks, supervised people who were doing other work in the agency, and one of them was responsible for DOT projects. So street reconstructions in historic districts, sidewalk work,

street lighting, all of that. And I had always been interested in that, actually, from the time I was a kid, and historic lighting, and gradually took that on. That person who I supervised eventually left, and I became responsible for reviews of all DOT projects and scenic landmarks. So one of the first ones I remember coming in was the reconstruction of Greene and Mercer streets in the Soho Historic District. They were paved with cobblestones. Probably some of them had been removed or covered over, but they were definitely there. The city was doing a complete reconstruction—new underground utilities, new pavements, new curbs, new lighting. And DOT wanted to take out the cobblestones and pave them with asphalt. And I said—and I had absolutely no authority to say this—I said, “You can’t do that. This is historic material, this is a historic district. You have to put the cobblestones back.” And to make a long story somewhat shorter, they complained and moaned, and said, “We can’t do it, it’s not safe, we have no money.” Eventually they put the cobblestones back. And part of that reason may have been that there were some federal funds involved, which gets other entities involved in the review. But we also had them put in cast iron reproduction bishop’s crook lights. There were a couple of historic ones left, and we made them fill in the rest with that lighting, and we made them put in granite curbs and pigmented sidewalks, where they had to replace the sidewalks. They had to keep all the granite sidewalks that were there. We figured out a way to do crosswalks that would be accessible. And actually, that part of it didn’t work out. But subsequently, a better design was found.

So that was the beginning of this idea that street right-of-way work that’s publicly funded in public areas of historic districts, needs to be treated as part of the historic district. It needs to be compatible with and support the character of historic districts. So I developed a set of guidelines

for DOT to use for street surfaces, sidewalks, curbs, lighting, signals, fire hydrants, all of these public things. It was called the “DOT Guidelines.” It actually went to the Landmarks commissioners, who approved them. It went to PDC, which said, “Fine.” DOT was okay with them. We had a great ally, several people, at the DOT. Frank Addeo, was absolutely a wonderful ally. He worked in various jobs in the commissioner’s office. He started off working with public artwork in street rights-of-way, and he was, as I said, a great ally. There was also an ally in the street lighting division, Pierre Neptune. He was not the chief, but he was the deputy chief. He told me he started his job at DOT probably in the ‘50s or ‘60s, documenting the removal of historic cast iron streetlights throughout the city, when the city was installing the new steel highway lights. And he said he wanted to end his career returning as many of those historic designs as possible to the city’s catalog. So he helped with that.

Anyway, we came up with these guidelines. They were all but approved and turned into regulations, when it just didn’t happen. And I don’t remember exactly what happened. Either the chairman changed and wasn’t as interested anymore, or there were other things that got in the way, and it just never happened. They’ve been used more or less as de facto rules ever since. But in recent years, there’s been some slippage, and the Landmarks Commission is just not as interested in these things anymore. Or, if they are interested, it’s a very sort of formal rote way: you can’t remove bluestone sidewalk, and if you do want to remove it, you have to go to a public hearing. But they’re not concerned about a new sidewalk that you put in. It doesn’t have to match, or things like that. It’s more tied to their rules, which really don’t fit very well. So that was another very significant thing that I worked on at Landmarks. Essentially, my responsibility for that was taken away in the year or so before I left, along with parks, and it has just never been

quite the same since.

Q: Yeah, you had mentioned a couple of the specific lampposts. Were you working on those under the purview of your job at Landmarks?

Woodoff: Yeah, at Landmarks. I was helpful in bringing back three historic types. The bishop's crooks had been brought back when the Helmsley Palace was built, privately. I think they put four of them in front of the building. So that pattern-making had already been done. So those were available, and they were used in some of the earliest street reconstructions that I worked on publicly. The Greene and Mercer Street and Sixth Avenue, through the Village, got those bishop's crooks. But we realized that there were other streets that they really weren't right for. Because the street was wider, and it really needed to have something that extended over the street.

So our opportunity came when the Atlantic Avenue Business Improvement District wanted to install some new lighting on Atlantic Avenue, and part of that project went through the Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights Historic Districts. They wanted to put pedestrian lights on the sidewalk—park poles, basically. And I thought, well, park poles are really not appropriate for sidewalk lighting, they belong in parks. If you wanted to go back to something that looked like gas lights, that would be something else, but that has another whole series of issues. So I thought, well, maybe we could find this appropriate—and I think this was probably all done at staff level—but it makes no sense to put these fancy park lights in amongst the cobra head highway lights that are there now. So maybe what you need to do is figure out an appropriate historic

lamppost to replace those cobra heads with. So we said, “Why not the mast-arm post or the type M post?” which was probably as common in the city as the bishop’s crook. Actually, it was the same except for the fact that the top had a ten-foot arm that extended over the street with some nice scrollwork, and so on. So they said okay. And my friend at the DOT street lighting section said okay. And the problem was the chief of street lighting, who was not a friend, he really didn’t want to do it, or he said he was forced to do it, “Well, okay. We’ll give it the same characteristics as the cobra head. It has to be thirty-feet high with an eight-foot arm.” And we looked at that and I said, “Well, proportionately that’s all wrong. It’s just not going to look right.”

So I remember, very distinctly, we brought the chief of street lighting into the Landmarks Commission offices. Merin Urban was executive director at the time, and she was wonderful. To this day, I can’t believe she was willing to do this for this kind of thing. She brought him into her office. We sat down and fought over every inch of this pole, and got it to the point where he agreed to increasing the height—I think it was three feet or three-and-a half feet over the historic height—but everything else about it was the same. And I thought, even so, I just wasn’t sure. I thought it was just going to look wrong. And it was, in fact, first installed around Prospect Park, at the perimeter, where there was a big Park Street construction project there. And they thought it was a great idea to put these historic type M mast-arm lights around the perimeter sidewalk. And it was going to be installed there first, so I remember riding the subway an extra stop for a few weeks, because it let me out at the point where I knew the first one was going to be installed. And I’ll never forget the day I walked out of the subway, and there it was. It was just perfect. Nobody would ever know the difference. So that was a real wonderful [laughs] day.

And after that, we were able to bring back two others: the F post, also called the reverse scroll bracket. That was done because the director of the Eighth Street Business Improvement District, Honi Klein, wanted a special light for her street. So I said, “Why not the F post? It was used in the Village.” So she said, “Sure!” And we got that done. And then the last one was around the Municipal Building. McKim, Mead & White had designed a special post there that was very classically designed and detailed. I don’t remember what the project was, but we got at least the top of the old lyre post redesigned that had been there. It had a big anthemion at the top, and works very well with McKim, Mead & White’s design. The other one, the historic post that’s been brought back, is the Fifth Avenue twin, around Bryant Park, and later at the Coney Island boardwalk. That was done by others. I think the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation actually had that one restored for the park.

Q: It really does so much to a sidewalk, a pedestrian’s experience, to have that kind of historic lighting. And it’s something that in other cities, I notice—sometimes it’s one of the first things I notice.

Woodoff: Right. There’s a story about Savannah. I don’t want to go too long about this. But the first time I was in Savannah, which was in the ‘70s, on Bull Street, which is the major north/south street with squares in it every few blocks, I noticed the remnants of what looked surprisingly, like bishop’s crook lights. The tops had been changed, so the crook part wasn’t there. But I later found out in looking at historic pictures, that they were bishop’s crook lights, and I just couldn’t believe it. I mean, bishop’s crooks are the iconic design for New York street lighting, but there they were in Savannah. And I’ve been trying to find out how that came to be,

but haven't gotten there yet. But they were installed very early, in the early 20th century. And when I went back after thirty-five years, I found that the historic ones had been restored. They had installed the new reproductions, just like we have in New York, all up and down Bull Street. It was just a great thing to see. I have other street lighting stories, but maybe we should go on to other things to make sure we get to them.

Q: [laughs] I think we have to move on actually.

Woodoff: Okay.

Q: I wanted to ask about when you left Landmarks. How did you think about what you wanted in a different job, and how you wanted to, I guess, apply your knowledge, and just feel at work?

Woodoff: Well, at that time, I'm sorry to say, I really just had to leave. I really had to get out of Landmarks. There aren't a lot of—the skills that I think, or hope, I have, and the background isn't really relatable to a lot of other jobs. There were not many agencies in the city that have historic preservation offices or functions. But DDC, the Department of Design and Construction, was one of them. It had a small historic preservation office, and I was asked to join it by someone I knew there. Unfortunately, at the time, there were three people in the office. They had an opening, but couldn't fill it for one reason or another. So I left and joined the cultural institution's unit as a project manager, where I stayed for a year or two before they could transfer me over to the historic preservation office. That office works on project design and review for all of the many city projects that DDC is responsible for, both infrastructure and, mostly, public

buildings. The office had been much bigger and more powerful. It started off under Adrienne Bresnan. She was assistant commissioner for historic preservation, and had a staff of five or six. Adrienne was quite a personality, and that's what was really needed there because she basically made historic preservation happen for the city at DDC. When she was, I guess, demoted or forced to leave, the assistant commissioner title went, the number of staff people went. Eventually, with retirements, it got down to two people. So when I retired a few months ago, it was just two of us. And we still, you know, had a role. But preservation—for none of the time I was there, and certainly even less in recent years, it was just not a priority in the agency. So that was rather frustrating. We were able to do some things, but not a lot of what we should do.

Q: Can you talk about some of the projects that you worked on there? Maybe some examples where you were able to shoe in some preservation?

Woodoff: Yes. Well, one of the things I did when I was still a project manager was, I was responsible for the Weeksville Heritage Center restoration of the four historic houses there, and the master plan for the whole site, which was to include a new building for offices and education, and gallery purposes. So I stayed with that, even after I transferred to the historic preservation office, as project manager. So I oversaw the construction and the detailing of the design first, and then the construction of that restoration. I also became involved in the furnishing of the houses, because nobody had thought, "How are we going to do that?" And I figured out a way to use the city's capital funds to pay for that, which isn't typically done. That was a fascinating process. The contractor, as many DDC contractors, was not the best, especially for historic preservation work, so there were problems with that restoration. But those houses had been sitting—the

restoration was on again, off again. They had been sitting half-finished for decades. They would partly finished, they would be reopened, and then they'd end up being used for storage. This finally got them to a point where they could be opened for tours. Unfortunately, the maintenance was not there. Problems with the construction revealed themselves. They fairly quickly deteriorated, and they were the subject of a couple of minor restorations that were done privately. So I wasn't involved in those.

And when I left DDC a few months ago, there was, yet again, a redesign for restoration of those four buildings. Weeksville had come to us about six or seven years ago, saying, "We're really having problems with the roofs on a couple of these buildings. There are leaks, there are other problems. We need help. We need to do this quickly." Seven years later, the project is still not out to bid. They've had to have emergency funding from the Landmarks Conservancy to fix some things.

The whole capital process is as dysfunctional as you can image, not just for historic buildings, for everything. And it's especially bad for historic buildings because the rules for capital funding are such that you basically can't do preservation and conservation work. That's considered ordinary maintenance. And there's no money in the city for ordinary maintenance of anything. Parks, buildings, nothing. Some of the larger agencies have some maintenance funds, like libraries, and Department of Citywide Administrative Services, like for some of them. Borough halls and court houses probably have some, but not a lot. But the smaller buildings are just—they have nothing, and they have trouble raising money privately.

So Weeksville, even before I got to DDC, was something I had worked on at Landmarks, and has been a constant presence, if not actively, then in the background, with some good stuff and some not-so-good stuff. I think it's an incredibly important site. Those houses are just wonderful. They're like the anti-Morris-Jumel Mansion. The anti-, I don't know, Hamilton Grange. But so important, and I just can only hope that this latest project will finally move forward.

Q: Let me ask you a question about that. When you say that there's essentially no money for restoration-type work. In theory, what is there money for, and what are the implications of that?

Woodoff: Well, the city has a big capital budget, but it's generally—except for infrastructure, which seems to have a way of getting funding like for sewers and water mains and street work. Any agency that operates buildings, whether it's libraries, museums, even the police and fire departments, they have to go begging to their council people, to the borough presidents, or to the mayor for capital funding. Every year there's a process that they do that. And so it's a competition. And the winner, as you can imagine, is not based necessarily on need, [laughs] it's based on politics. It's based on who can shout the loudest, who has the most vocal constituency, and what the proclivities are of the people you're going begging to.

So the first thing is that it means there's no long-term strategy, no long-term source of funds. So that's the first problem. Then the process takes a long time. So if you discover you need something on your building, you have to first go begging for money, and that takes a while. Then you have to get it put into the budget. Then all the transfers, all the paperwork takes a while. Then you have to go procure design work, that takes almost a year. Then you have to do the

design, which in theory, especially on preservation projects, shouldn't take that long. Often you barely need a designer, you just need someone who understands building construction. But we have to hire designers because this is city work. So that ends up being reviewed. Then it has to go to bid, and that takes a long time. And you're dealing with low bidders, so you often have to reject the low bidder, or they get the job and they do crummy work.

But then, one of the main problems is the Office of Management and Budget [OMB] has these rules for what's capitally eligible. So in a historic house, say, one of these Weeksville houses, if you need to replace twenty percent of the clapboards because they're rotten, and the whole thing needs to be painted, and a few of the windows are bad and need work. Well, none of that is capitally eligible. If you want to do the work, you have to replace all the clapboards, or all of the windows. And you can only paint because you're replacing all the clapboards, you know? So there's a push from the project managers, who have to get these things through to say, "Well, let's just replace all the clapboards." And from a preservation point of view, you say, "This is historic material, you can't do that." And so that's what I was saying a lot. "No, you can't do that." Then they come back and they go away for a few months and say, "Well, OMB is still saying we can't do this." In the meantime, a lot more of the clapboards need to be replaced because they're sitting there without paint on them. So it's a multi-faceted disaster.

What these houses need is a dedicated source of funds for maintenance, or a dedicated crew, which is what the Historic House Trust was supposed to do for houses under the Parks Department's jurisdiction. But I'm sorry to say—and it was such a good idea, and had such a hopeful start—but they failed miserably. As far as I know, they still have no crew, or no longer

have a crew to do any work in the houses. They're basically another administrative hurdle for people. So anyway, those are the problems.

For buildings that are less fragile, like some of the Carnegie libraries, for instance, if there's an addition designed for one that's not a landmark, our role was to try to get the addition to be appropriate. What we would consider appropriate, based on Landmarks' commission standards, or National Register's standards. And that was always a fight, because the agency is mostly—the architects are modernists. That's what they know, and they just don't understand anything else. And unfortunately, PDC doesn't seem to understand historic preservation. I was involved in a couple of things where they actually pushed the designers away from historically appropriate additions, and towards things that they viewed as being more confrontational with the historic architecture. So that was a constant struggle.

Q: Was that their word or your word? "Confrontational."

Woodoff: I was told that for one project—this was the Bushwick library—that they thought the design should "confront" the historic architecture. And so what we had worked out with the designers was what I thought was a fairly sympathetic, modern addition to the top and the sides of that building, turned into something quite different. And we weren't in the room when that decision was made. Our PDC liaison just went and talked to PDC, and presented the project. And, you know, nobody was able to tell them why the design was what it was, and why we thought it was important to go into that direction. So they didn't have that information. There's no one in the room when it comes to PDC anymore. And DDC doesn't seem to feel that that's

necessary to sort of bring it to that level. They are just content to let the two of us—now just one, for the time being in the historic preservation office—make our comments, as other reviewers—the engineers, the architects—make their comments on these projects. And if the designers and the agencies want to respond positively, they can. And if they don't, they don't. And that's as far as it goes.

Q: It does sound tough. Tough fall from the golden age.

Woodoff: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. So let's talk about clocks [gesturing around the room] [both laugh]. How did you become interested?

Woodoff: Well, I first became interested in domestic clocks, antique clocks, when I was thirteen, and I saw someone's collection. He had been in the service, and had brought clocks back from Europe for free, and had this wonderful collection. And somehow the confluence of the mechanics of clocks, and the decorative arts of clocks, just really came together. At that age, I had always been interested in mechanical stuff, taking stuff apart and putting it together. And I was beginning to become interested in decorative arts and what things looked like, and probably buildings and houses at the same time. So it's been a lifelong hobby since then.

I never was really that overly interested in public clocks until I got to New York, and someone at the Landmarks Commission thought it would be a good idea to designate the remaining cast iron

sidewalk clocks in the city. There were about six or seven of them. It wasn't me. And that was the kind of thing that the Commission would do in those days. They would look at quirky things that other people wouldn't think of, and designate them. Like little bridges, the Carroll Street Bridge is another thing. And so those reports were written, and those clocks were designated.

Sometime later, I became involved in an organization called Save America's Clocks. I don't know how that happened. It's essentially, the organization is a board of directors and a website, and it's mostly the president, Tom Bernardin. Their goal is just to sort of identify public clocks across the country, both new ones and old ones, and try to help to encourage people to keep them running. With the idea being that a public clock that doesn't work says that nobody cares, nobody's home. And I think that's a good thing. But they've also focused a bit on historic clocks, and worked on a few of these New York City sidewalk clocks.

Actually, I think their first project was to get the clock in the tower of the Jefferson Market Library working. Before it was the library, when it was a vacant building, Tom Bernardin knew Margot Gayle. Margot was a great early preservationist, who formed the Friends of Cast Iron Architecture, and was very instrumental in saving that building. And the first thing that she wanted to do was get the clock and the bell working, figuring that that would sort of make people look at the building, and discuss its possibilities for restoration. And that eventually happened. So Save America's Clocks and Margot Gayle were involved with the sidewalk clock on Third Avenue and 85th Street, the Yorkville clock, which was in terrible condition, and was restored. That clock actually appears in the movie, *The Lost Weekend*, and has a cameo role in it. And also, it was interesting that at one point, someone in the city administration sold the clock to a

private owner, who took it down. When that was discovered, all hell was raised. It was bought back by the city, and restored and re-installed.

And we've also been involved in restoring the Steinway Street clock, and most recently, the Jamaica Avenue clock in Queens. Mostly, we really provide kind of cheerleading and some technical expertise, and maybe occasionally, a very small amount of money. But we're really not an organization with money. And help others raise money and get enthusiastic about these things. The Jamaica Avenue clock was subject to a recent article in the *Times*, by John Freedman Gill, that actually talks about all these historic clocks. And I've become also more aware of clocks in public buildings, like City Hall, and Borough Hall, and the Harlem Courthouse. And trying to make sure that when the city does work on those buildings, that the clocks are properly treated. I also know the city's clock master through Save America's Clocks, who actually still goes around and maintains these.

As part of my job at DDC, doing infrastructure reviews, I was involved in the redesign and reconstruction of Bogardus Garden in Tribeca. So because that's in a historic district, I reviewed the design, which is a modern design, but sympathetic to the surroundings. The Friends of Bogardus Garden, that were raising much of the money for that project, had a donor who wanted to put a sidewalk clock in. I convinced them and said, "Instead of buying a modern clock out of a catalog, why don't you look for an antique sidewalk clock, which are around, and more expensive, but nonetheless it would be much more impressive and more authentic to the period?" They said, "Okay. We'll do that." And then I said, "Instead of having an electric movement, why don't we find a historical mechanical movement and use that? And it will be the only sidewalk

clock in the city that has an original mechanical movement in it.” And they said, “Okay. We’ll do that.” So that was done, and that project was finally finished a couple of years ago. The clock is there, a Seth Thomas, two-dial sidewalk clock. It has a mechanical movement that’s wound every week. I still go by when it needs some maintenance, along with the city’s clock master, and do that. People love it. And anytime I’m there and have the door open, and you can see the mechanism, people stop by and stare in and ask about it. It’s an object of great interest.

Then, of course, there’s 346 Broadway, which is a project I got involved in while I was at DDC, but it had nothing to do with my work there. I did hear about this project, I think, through a community board meeting that I went to that involved a project I was involved in through work. This was a building in city ownership. It had been the headquarters of the New York Life Insurance Company, built by McKim, Mead & White back in the very late 19th century. At that time, these insurance companies were the wealthiest companies around, and just built this incredibly elaborate building. It had in the clock tower one of the most magnificent mechanical clocks that was made in the United States at the time, by the E. Howard Company.

So the city had bought the building as part of its ill-fated, thank goodness, civic center redevelopment project. It allowed the building to run down. It was in terrible shape. I think, in the Bloomberg administration, they decided to sell it and several of the other landmarked buildings in the area. They sold it to a developer to convert it to condominiums, and as a concept, it wasn’t bad. It’s probably a building well-suited for that use, and it desperately needed the infusion of capital funds. It went through an environmental review that the Landmarks

Commission did. They looked at it and said, “Well, the building is a landmark. It also is an interior landmark, including the clock tower and the clock mechanism. So really, there won’t be any adverse effects because the Landmarks Commission will look at it and we’ll make sure nothing bad happens.” Well, maybe at one time that would have been true. But the Landmarks Commission had a public hearing. And as I was saying, I first heard about this at a community board meeting. The woman who had been Jennifer Raab’s counsel, was there representing a developer. And my first thought was, “Well, this isn’t going to be good.” And she said, “Well, part of this project is we’re going to make the clock tower one of the penthouses, and we’ll have to move the clock mechanism.” And I actually spoke at the community board. I wasn’t planning to—I had no official direction to speak. But I said, “This is a landmark. You can’t do this.” And it happens that the Tribeca press, *The Tribeca Trib* was there, and the community board heard this. So there began to be some interest in what was going on.

Anyway, this eventually came to the Landmarks Commission public hearing. They basically approved the project, including some some sort of iffy work on the interior landmarks. One of them was actually going to be dismantled and moved to another part of the interior, and the clock tower was going to become part of this penthouse apartment. And in order to do that, because the mechanism was in the middle of the room, and the hand shaft ran from the mechanism to the dials, right at eye level, they had to be taken away, because otherwise you couldn’t use the room. So I think at that point, they had been talked out of getting rid of the whole movement entirely. They were just going to remove these hand shafts, and put little electric motors behind the dials, to actually operate the clocks.

And the Commission approved it, with one “no” vote by Adi Shamir-Baron, who was one of the three commissioners who was recently ejected from the Commission. She seemed to be the only one who understood that not only was this inappropriate, because the clock tower and its mechanism had been designated specifically because it was a historic mechanism that still operated in the way it always had. But the commissioners approved it. And we all testified against it. The city’s clock master, the people from Save America’s Clocks, the Historic Districts Council [HDC], I think. And they approved it anyway. This was under Meenakshi Srinivasan’s tenure. We were just devastated. And I actually still can’t believe that they approved it. The project was not in the slightest bit dependent on this. It would have gone ahead easily if they had just left that room alone.

So we we’re all sitting around wondering what to do, and we got this call, and I think it’s okay to say this—I mean it wasn’t generally, publicly known, but I think it’s probably known now—Christabel Gough, who was a long time follower of the Commission and a preservationist, called up and said she’d like to meet with Save America’s Clocks. So Tom Bernardin, the president, arranged a meeting at Julius’, of which he is the informal historian, and likes to have meetings there. It was my first time in Julius’. So we’re in there, and Christabel comes in and she says, “Would you like to sue?” And we just couldn’t believe it. So we said, “Sure!” [laughs] So there was a lawsuit. And there were several petitioners: Save America’s Clocks, HDC, the Tribeca Trust, and one or two others. And our lawyer was Michael Hiller, who I believe Christabel had worked with before. A terrific lawyer, and a real believer in the cause.

We went to the court, the first court. I guess that’s the New York State Court, whatever the

lowest level is, and we won. We went to the Appellate Division, and we won. And then we got to the Court of Appeals, which is the State's highest court, and we lost. It was a split decision. It actually was a split decision but in our favor at the Appellate Division, so it went as-of-right to the Court of Appeals. Our attorney could barely get his name out before he started being attacked by the Justices. So it was pretty clear that they were against it. And I think that the majority really didn't understand the case. They didn't understand the law, the Landmarks Law. They didn't understand what preservation was about. The dissenters wrote a dissent that was just beautiful. It was longer than the opinion, and they got it exactly right. Of course, it's in my opinion; I'm sure not everyone's opinion. And so we lost.

The developer went ahead, dismantled the clock, put in these electric motors, which for the past few years have not worked. We finally complained. Save America's Clocks wrote to the agency's counsel, Mark Silberman, and the chair, Sarah Carroll, and said, "What about this? You promised this at the hearing, that these would be kept operating, even if electrically. You promised that there would be inspections by the Commission, yet you've never done an inspection. What's going on?" We also got *The Tribeca Trib* interested and they ran a story. So the developer said, "Well, maybe we'll call." I guess the developer is still selling units in the building. "We'll call the company that installed them." And they did, and apparently they got them running. So for now, they're operating. But why the public should have to complain about this, I don't know. But it just goes to show that another reason it was a bad decision.

Q: Of the organizations that you're part of, so many are just a few people—like you said, a board [laughs] and a website. I'm just thinking about how difficult it can be to make those

organizations sustainable over time. Are there any that have any kind of strategies or mechanisms in place that are particularly effective for transitioning? For staying on top of work, maybe transitioning to different generations?

Woodoff: Well, HDC, the Historic Districts Council is the big one in the city, and they've done a wonderful job with doing just that: with nurturing other organizations, with reaching out for both designation and preservation, with going to grassroots groups, with going to elected officials and the press. I don't know where we'd be without them. And that's the best example. I'm sure they probably are not as well-funded as they should be, but New York, eight million people, you'd think that there would be more of that in the city. But there isn't. Probably, it's partly because there are so many other, just big issues that preservation is not one of them. And as I said earlier, we no longer have the champions who knew when and how to step in, when needed.

The Victorian Society, which has been around for some time. Margot Gayle was the founder of the nationwide organization, and then the New York chapter has been doing more. It doesn't have any paid staff, but it's a fairly active organization. They encourage research in all things Victorian. They do lecture series, they have tours, they encourage young scholars with the young scholars program. And there's a preservation committee, which I serve on, which had been somewhat active, more in the designation end of things, for years. But recently we've begun testifying at almost every Landmarks Commission hearing, which are now almost every week, mostly on proposals for work on historic buildings, and in scenic landmarks and interior landmarks. We've become much more active. We testify off and on, on as many as half the projects that come forward. Of course, New York is really a Victorian city, so probably the

majority of our landmarks are Victorian era, although we occasionally will stretch the boundaries. We testified on the Lescaze House proposal, for instance, and on 60 Wall Street, the postmodern building, when we think there are issues that are kind of broader, or a building is just particularly important.

So that's been a good thing, certainly, for me, to keep me involved in preservation, and because I think the Commission really needs another voice speaking to it. HDC still looks at all projects and speaks at every hearing, and occasionally other groups that are more local. So Friends of the Upper East Side districts will speak on projects involving them. But many projects would have no speakers at all if it weren't for HDC and the Victorian Society. How much they'll listen to is a little hard to gauge, especially because everything is remotely done now. We are occasionally referenced by the commissioners, which is always lovely to hear. You know, they'll say, "As the Victorian Society testified—" That's just, you know, music to my ears.

We did do one thing that was a bit surprising and successful with the Commission. One of the things we talked about earlier, about how the Commission has just really minimized its role in the regulation of scenic landmarks in recent years: they stopped having public hearings. So even big projects that were beyond what the staff could review, that needed the commissioners to review before a report was issued, were not going to a public hearing. They were just going to a public meeting of the commissioners. No testimony was taken, no public input. And when I found out about that—this was actually just before I joined the preservation committee—I just couldn't believe it! I mean, how could they do this? These are some of our most important landmarks. And how can you have a commissioner discussion without allowing public

testimony?

So I wrote a letter to Mark Silberman and Sarah Carroll—I think it was Sarah, yes—expressing astonishment and explaining how it was done differently in the past, and why it was done that way, and how they had turned scenic landmarks into like second-class entities. And that even if they think their review is only advisory, PDC doesn't have the mandate or the interest. So essentially, these wonderful landmarks were just not being reviewed by anybody in any meaningful way. So I wrote this letter. And besides the Victorian Society, I got nine other, both citywide and local preservation organizations, to sign on. I remember putting all the logos on a letterhead. It was so impressive-looking [both laugh]. We all signed it, and we sent it over to them. And it was probably Mark Silberman who contacted us, and said, "Well, we can meet on this." We had a virtual meeting, and they actually changed the policy, which was almost a shock to me. But they did. And now they're back to having public hearings on it.

The public hearings don't necessarily do a lot of good, because they still don't ask the Parks Department to change anything. They'll issue a report that says, "Well, some of the commissioners thought this was pretty terrible." Or even, "All the commissioners thought we shouldn't do this, but, you know, go ahead, take it and do what you want." Rather than going back and telling the Parks Department, "This is really not appropriate. Come back with something better," and pushing it as far as they can, which is what they should do. They're the Landmarks Commission. It's their responsibility.

Q: So in a sense, do you think that they've given you in an inch, while presenting it as a much

larger concession?

Woodoff: I don't know that they've thought about it so much in those terms. I mean, I don't know why they won't push back at the Parks Department. And certainly, what they're getting from Parks isn't as good as it used to be. Because some of those great preservationists and landscape architects are not there. And because the Parks Department has so many other constituencies they have to worry about aside from funding issues. I'm not saying they're insensitive—you know, Central Park and Prospect Park Conservancy do historic preservation, but they have to worry about other things. They get money from a councilman who says, "We want this." And if it's not appropriate, they may have to do this. But I don't know why the Commission—I think it's just another example that they want to have all the control. They don't want to upset the cart. They don't want to go against any elected officials. They don't want to have to explain to the mayor why we're holding up this project that this council person wants, or that this Parks administrator wants.

Q: Mm-hmm. Sort of streamlining the public out of the process.

Woodoff: Yeah.

Q: Well, let me take a look at my final questions here.

Woodoff: Okay.

Q: So one thing that it sounds like you mentioned they have done, is to be able to go back to the way that things used to work, and make those suggestions going forward. Are there any other ways that you see—using the wisdom and knowledge that you have—any other ways that you see could be applied to make preservation, I guess, functional [laughs]? Or a little bit more action-taking in support of that in the city.

Woodoff: Well, I'm afraid, not really. I think to a large extent, the problems are—or the solutions—would be dependent on some very high-level changes. That is, we need a mayor who is interested in preservation. Or we need some important people on the City Council, or borough presidents who have that as a concern. Or we need to develop some private sector people who really are pushing for that. It does seem to come down a lot to individuals. You know, if you have the right attitude, and the right goals, if you have a bad process, you can usually work around it. But if you don't have those people and you have a good process, you still can work [laughs] around it. You can avoid the process. So I don't know how much can be done.

I find it's easy with my retired status to do a lot of complaining. That's easy, but it's not very helpful. I've thought about how to try to get the Commission more involved in scenic landmarks, and even the city's historic houses, which are in just terrible shape, as a rule. And when we testify on these things, I always try to point out, "This is a serious problem." Even with the historic houses, I remember, there's no maintenance funds on them. It's very bad for preservation. Why doesn't the Commission look into this? Why don't they sort of make a comment about it? Why don't they go to the Parks Department and say, "You really need to address this." They just—it seems to go nowhere. But we'll keep saying it.

Litchfield Villa, which is a magnificent A.J. Davis house in Prospect Park, is also in terrible condition. I've raised this when the Commission was reviewing a project there. I've raised the question of the condition, and they would not follow up on it. I've decided to see whether maybe—and this is not my forte, I've never done this—but maybe we could get some kind of committee together from the outside to try to push the Parks Department, the Alliance, and the city in general, to looking at what can be done about this building to restore it. Restore the interior, which has really never been done, to open it up more to the public, which is excluded from it. In any community, this would be one of the major historic houses, and it's basically abandoned. It's used by the Parks Department's staff. So maybe looking at something in a more positive way as a very long-term project. I'm trying to get myself into that mode. It's certainly not addressing the larger, the global problems.

There are groups like the Tribeca Trust or Human Scale New York that have been involved with the Seaport Coalition, and the lawsuit against the tower in the Seaport [One Seaport], that I think could be very useful to work with. And they're trying to get some traction on the idea that there needs to be some reforms at the Commission. That's really the only thing going on now that I think is looking at systemic reforms. And I hope to work with them a little more on that. Actually, I think I've helped them by explaining some of the things we've talked about today, that things, even under the same law, used to be done differently. It's not like it's a big "you've got to go in and change the Landmarks law," although they do want to do some of that.

Q: Well, we're kind of getting to the final thoughts section [both laugh]. So I think you have

spoken to some of the points that I have here about how things have changed over time since you've been involved in the field. But are there any other thoughts that you wanted to add about anything that we've talked about, or anything that we haven't talked about?

Woodoff: No, I think I'm pretty well talked-out. You know, in dealing with the Landmarks Commission, I just should say that even though it's been twenty years since I worked there, I actually, as an organization, I really think it's very important. I really love the organization, and I love the Landmarks Law. Even though we can get very angry at it, it is such an important thing for New York. It's such a strong law, if it were properly utilized, that I think we need to be, at some level, very supportive. The staff has always been terribly underpaid and overworked, and it still is, and that's something we all need to work towards. But at the moment—it used to have a very good working relationship with outside groups, with all the historic district organizations, with outside preservationists. It was a real alliance between the Landmarks Commission at the city's end, and these other groups outside the city. And the relationship, ever since Jennifer Raab's time, has turned adversarial. Now instead of an alliance, everyone hates the Commission. It's constantly fighting with lawsuits by these organizations. Whereas the lawsuits used to come from developers, now they come from preservationists. There's something wrong with that. I met the current counsel, who goes back to the Giuliani administration, on the street one day, and I said, "Don't you think there's something wrong with this picture, that every preservationist in the city hates the Landmarks Commission? [laughs] I mean, why don't you think about what you can do about that?" I don't think my words had any effect, but that's kind of how I feel about it.

Q: Yeah. Keep saying it, I guess.

Woodoff: Mm-hmm. That's really all I can do at this point is keep saying it, and make alliances where it's possible.

Q: Mm-hmm. Last week, talking to Joan Geismar, and speaking about how PANYC, the [Professional] Archaeologists of New York City, and the LPC came together to come up with how archeology could be incorporated. And I kept sort of saying, "But how? How does that happen?" [laughs] "Can you explain that again?" Because you're right, that the frame that it has, the presence that it has, is so different now.

Woodoff: The other thing I wanted to add is that, and despite frustrations with the Commission, most of the people there, especially those not at the top, are really dedicated people. They work very hard. I mean, the current archaeologist is an example of that. And I know from talking to them that many of them continue to be very frustrated by the management of the agency and what they have to do. But they're kind of stuck, because if you want to be the city's archaeologist, that's the only place you can go. And the same for the people on the research staff and in the preservation department. In no way should their efforts ever be shortchanged. It's just that they're not able to do what they need to do, in many ways.

Q: I'm glad you had a chance to clarify that. Well, I think that might be it.

Woodoff: Okay.

Q: Okay, thank you.

Woodoff: And thank you.

Q: Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]