INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Brad Vogel

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Brad Vogel conducted by Interviewer Adrian Untermyer on May 30, 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.

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne

Session: 1

Interviewee: Brad Vogel Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Adrian Untermyer Date: May 30, 2023

Q: Well, here you are. This is Adrian Untermyer here with Brad Vogel and Sarah Dziedzic. Brad, where are we?

Vogel: We are at Hal Bromm's gallery here in Tribeca.

Q: Yes. Surrounded by oysters, and horses on twos [both laugh].

Vogel: A display of mackerel.

Q: A display of mackerel. A great metaphor for your time at NYPAP and in the preservation community. But we're here today, on Tuesday, May 30, 2023. We are just a few minutes away from Brad's official sendoff. His official going away—for now—party at NYPAP. And we're here to reflect a little bit on your life and your legacy so far, with the understanding that your life, your legacy, none of those things are over. You have so much impact left to give. But before you go on to do all those things, and all that, we wanted to reflect a little bit on your time with us at NYPAP.

And we also have Hal Bromm who just walked through. [Speaking to Hal] Oh fantastic! Thank you. We're just beginning the oral history now, so we'll just be chit-chatting here for a bit. And Brad, I was hoping you might just start out by telling us who the heck you are and how you got here. Where were you born, and what's your deal?

Vogel: Yeah. So I was born in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, of all places, at St. Nicholas Hospital. And I grew up nearby in a small town called Kiel, Wisconsin—K–I–E–L—which is named after Kiel, Germany, as most of the settlers were German. It was a town of about 2,500 people growing up, so definitely a small town—Wisconsin, rural, dairy farming—but really, in many ways, the sort of quintessential American small town. And I really feel like I was lucky to grow up there, in many ways. It was a place where there was a real sense of community. It was a place where I went off with friends building forts in tree lines, canoeing in the marsh, and just having a blast, you know, living life through the four seasons every year.

But it was also a place where there was a certain way that things worked. And I was always a kid who was not necessarily great at sports. I ended up playing sports almost all my way through school [both laugh], but it was really not my forte. It was sort of my junior year where I started sloughing off the sports and taking on other roles. That's really when I started to shine, I think. I ended upon the board of the Kiel Area Historical Society when I was sixteen years old or something like that, which is a real sign of just how far [laughs] down the rabbit hole I was willing to go, you might say. But really, in terms of how did I get to NYPAP from there, the person I have to mention is a man named Ed Majkrzak. And Ed was the town historian for Kiel, unofficial in many ways, but then later, in some ways, official. But Ed was a very interesting character in that he had grown up in Northern Wisconsin, speaking Polish growing up. He

tended bar and mixed lead paint, and helped run the farm during the Depression. A really interesting and hard-scrabble life. Got about a sixth-grade education, and then ultimately, moved to Chicago to work at like a service station or a mechanic shop. And some interesting stories—I recall him telling me about the mob there, and provision of services.

Q: Okay [laughs].

Vogel: But he ultimately made his way to Kiel, and he actually suffered from Guillain-Barré disease, which nearly took his life.

Q: Oh my goodness.

Vogel: And when I came to know Ed, there was a gentleman named Melvin Ruh, who was a WW II veteran, presenting on his time in Papua New Guinea, at the Kiel Community Center. And I remember after that presentation speaking with Ed, who I saw there, and really having a great chat because there were so many things I was interested about in the main drag of my little home town, that Ed had answers to. He knew about all the back stories, and he was in the midst of researching even more.

So that's what really got me hooked, and I started hanging out and becoming Ed's sidekick, essentially. He had lost some fingers, he could not really walk very well, so I ended up being his assistant in a lot of ways. I would go over to Ed's house. [00:05:00]. And Ed would literally have to slide himself down his basement stairs to his desk, and all of his books and shelves, of all this historical material. So I would go down there with him, and we would just sit. And it

was very much this sort of old school teacher, mentor-mentee relationship, where Ed would just pull out stuff. Or I would pull out stuff that looked interesting, and he would start talking about it. And then I would say, "Well I know this about it." And he'd say, "Well do you know this?" Then I would ask questions. And it was this very intimate and incredible opportunity, to have someone share wisdom, and lore, and knowledge, about a place that matters. So I really went all in on history. That is where that bug bit hardest.

But I had the benefit too, of especially my mom, really kind of getting me out into the world in places like Chicago or Milwaukee. Or family trips with the Astro van and pop-up camper, going out west to Yellowstone National Park, and Utah, and Philadelphia, and all over the place. And I feel very fortunate because I've certainly grown up to know people who did not have opportunities like that growing up—to go and take an architectural tour in Chicago, or to try to hike Angels Landing in Zion National Park. Not everyone had that. And I am incredibly grateful for the fact that I had some of these experiences that really spurred an interest to learn, and to get out there in the world, and really to value special places. I think that's what really comes back around in my life many, many times. It's this sense of, there are incredibly special and rare, and impossible-to-replace-things, or experiences, that are out there in the world. And something about those really locks on when I find them in my life. I've tried to look back at my own life, and I keep seeing that theme over and over again.

Q: Well, you mentioned sloughing off, which is a great prelude to NYPAP [both laugh]. But before we go there, back in Kiel, were there any buildings in that community, maybe, on the main drag, that really spoke to you?

Vogel: Yes. There's a mill pond in Kiel, where the Sheboygan River runs through, which is the river I grew up—down behind my grandmother's and grandfather's house, right below the dam, I would go down there and go after crayfish, and just play amongst the big old willow trees and things like that with my siblings, and with some of the other neighborhood kids. But yeah, the Kiel Mill was this fieldstone 1880s structure that replaced an earlier, wooden sawmill. And that's really why Kiel existed, was this guy named Colonel Henry Belitz, who came over from Germany when the 1848 revolutions failed. He was a '48er, these sort of like very radical and intellectual Germans, who settled a lot of eastern Wisconsin. Very free-thinker kind of folks. But Belitz wandered up from Sheboygan, and saw a waterfall on the river, and realized, "Oh, there's a place here for hydropower. We can build a sawmill, we can start a settlement," etc., etc. So that's what happened.

And Ed and I, later, actually revived an old German book from the 1890s, called *Yellowbird*. It's this interesting quasi-mythical but partially true story about the founding of Kiel, and how Native Americans came to the aid of some of the early settlers to keep the dam in place, lest the whole settlement sort of disappear. It's interesting trying to parse through what's apocryphal and what's real. It does serve as this interesting repository, though, of some of the like Native words, and even memories of things like the passenger pigeon—which are now, of course, sadly long gone. Anyway—

Q: We're bringing 'em back.

Vogel: Right. But anyway, the Kiel Mill is definitely sort of an anchoring presence in downtown Kiel. And that has always transfixed me from when I was skating on the mill pond as a kid, or canoeing. My dad had a canoe called *Chipper*, which was his nickname. And I basically grew up

in that canoe on the mill pond, on the marsh, desperately attempting to make it, on spring flood, down all the way to Lake Michigan from Kiel, which I did accomplish a time or two, despite nearly dying many times with my crazy friend, Brian. But yeah, the main drag in Kiel was really this sort of frontier boomtown, 1850s onward, downtown. [00:10:00] And a lot of the buildings, literally, have this boomtown façade, where you have this sort of extra, false pediment over the triangular roof, just to, you know, keep up appearances.

Q: Oh sure.

Vogel: As if one was a respectable establishment.

Q: The toupee on the proverbial head.

Vogel: Yes. [laughs] And the railroad arrives in Kiel in 1872, so you have all these other buildings that then grow up on the western end of the main drag to attempt to capture some of that traffic. And there was an ice house on that end of the thing, made out of Cream City brick, which is a local type of, sort of yellowish white brick from the clays in eastern Wisconsin.

Milwaukee is known as the Cream City because of Cream City brick. So this is sort of a regional architectural feature that I have certainly come to love over time. But the ice house was demolished after I left town, and so that was a real loss. But the Kiel Mill continues to exist, and I did my best to help Markus Ladd, the current owner, with the recent renovations of that

building, and getting it on the state and National Register. So two totally different cases, one at each end of the main drag—or "the gut" as it was known. According to my dad, to cruise around in your car, back and forth between these two buildings on the main drag, was known as "bombing the gut." And you would, of course, stop at the Dairy Queen [laughs].

Q: To literally bomb the gut [both laugh].

Vogel: Yes.

Q: And just noting for the record, counsellor, your parents' names were?

Vogel: Jim Vogel and Shari Vogel.

Q: Fantastic. They did a hell of a job.

Vogel: And my stepmom, Sandy, also is a fixture in Kiel. She worked at the bakery on the main drag, Roeck's Bakery, for many, many years, and is part of the Kiel Municipal Band, which has been around since 1928. It's one of these classic John Philip Sousa-esque street marching bands, and their really great song—which I hope will go on forever—"Invincible Fidelity."

Q: And any early memories of advocacy, either on your part, or on the part of people in town?

Vogel: Yeah. I mean, I think the things that I can really recall that began to move me in a preservation direction were helping to restore the grave of Wilhelm Belitz, who was Henry Belitz's brother. He had also served in the Civil War. And I did a presentation on him in high school, to the historical society, because he sort of opened this whole window for me, where I had known about the Civil War as a sort of caricature. Yes, the Tennessee stuff. Yes, the Virginia stuff. Gettysburg. Sort of the standard issue story. But I knew nothing about the Trans Mississippi-West theater of the war of Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma—or what became Oklahoma. And so, helping a man named Roger Zorn fix his gravestone, and put that in the historical house, and then doing the report, really got me to thinking about how physical touchstones are so crucial to actually catalyzing one's ability to go and dig for history, and find history that is beyond your own ken.

And then I also did work just trying to get people to recognize Henry F. Belitz as a character, as well as a historical figure. You know, trying to get a street named after him—and my friend, Jake Janssen and I, who were known as the Duelin' Doolans, [00:13:41] as we were third cousins on the Irish side [both laugh]. We also had a postcard business at one point. Life has been very interesting, I will say [both laugh]. But Jake and I really started something called Founders Day in Kiel, which became this sort of big community event. There were canoe races on the river. There was a wreath laying ceremony at Belitz's grave. It revived interest in Belitz.

Then I also helped with celebrating the Kiel sesquicentennial, where I worked on a bunch of articles. It was basically taking a lot of the work that Ed Majkrzak had done and transforming them into articles for people to sort of begin to understand Kiel history in a broader sense. So all that, again, was like much more in the history vein, but starting to lean towards advocacy, in that

it was attempting to engage the public. And then also really looking at what are the physical reminders, what is the historic fabric, or what are the historic resources that are actually there for us to springboard all of this engagement from.

Q: Wow. Looking at fabric in a mill town. I love it. [00:15:00] You mentioned you were living life in four seasons, but you eventually made your way here to the land of the Four Seasons, and Grand Central Terminal, and the Chrysler Building. How did you make your way to New York?

Vogel: Oh my goodness. It was a long journey [laughs], but a good one. I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison for my undergraduate. It was quite a ride. I worked at the Wisconsin State Capitol all four years that I was there, in the legislative office. Certainly learned a lot there, and that helped pay my tuition. And I made so many good friends, and had so much activity on campus, and with campus college newspapers, with student organizations, you name it. I was deeply engaged on campus, and really took a smattering of courses. It was sort of a renaissance person's array of courses, from soil science, to poetry, to you name it. It was really formative. And I love the ferment of Madison, the like true intellectual whirlwind that I encountered there. And it did its work on me, as college should.

At Madison there's this saying, or a phrase, "sifting and winnowing" towards the intellectual truth, and an environment like that is really important. I've absolutely found that to be true, and I think that's become just a bedrock part of me. Yeah, it was a good thing. I mean, the critical thing that happened at Madison, and in my life too—in terms of sifting and winnowing towards my own personal truth—was finally coming out to someone as gay, at Madison, in the spring of

my senior year. So it took a lot of [laughs]—the corrosive force of Madison had to work its way down through many archaeological layers of resistance, to actually get to the real me. But it did, in fact happen, for which I'm forever grateful. Ultimately, I then had some inklings about what I wanted to do, but I wasn't entirely sure. So I went out after the year of graduating, and I worked on a political campaign.

Q: For—

Vogel: For a state senator, the one I had worked for at the Wisconsin State Capitol, named Joe Leibham. And that was eye-opening, just to sort of see, for real, how a campaign works out in middle of America. This was also an interesting time for me, because I was working for my home state senator, who was a Republican, and it was also the year that Wisconsin passed an anti gay marriage amendment. Caused some pretty deep and profound reflection for me out on the trail, I will say. And when we came back, I worked briefly as a legislative aide, but then went off to be a business magazine writer.

Q: The magazine being—

Vogel: It was a Madison area business magazine. It was relatively small.

Q: Lost to history [both laugh].

Vogel: I remember doing an article about business interruption insurance, and I thought to myself, "I don't have the first clue about this." But I was thankful, having been to the journalism school at Madison, that I was able to find a way through. And I think that's another thing that comes up [phone rings] in my life a lot, which is, not having knowledge of something is not a bar. Not having experience is also not a hurdle that cannot be surmounted, if you have the will, you have the enthusiasm, and you have sort of this unquenchable desire to learn. And you simply apply those, however you have to, to get through the next thing. And especially, if there's no—as we'll see in my story!—if there's no budget, there's no administrative structure, there's no staff, and there's no plan, we can [snaps fingers] absolutely make that happen. We will build the plane as we fly it, if we must.

Q: So you have [this] hodge-podge of careers, all sort of speaking, in general terms, to what you do later in life. But then you sort of gravitate to the law and to New York City. How did that all happen?

Vogel: Yeah. So in Madison, I then worked as an office assistant at a law firm. I was interested in the law, and I wanted to see if that was something I actually wanted to do. It was a good experience. Then I started applying to law school, and I was still waiting for a bunch of schools to get back to me, but I went down to New Orleans. [00:20:00] This was May of 2007, so not even two years had passed since [Hurricane] Katrina. And I'd been to New Orleans once, on a mission trip, in 2003. I remember being in the rectory of a church in Canton, Mississippi, watching the Iraq War unfold on a TV when we were there helping people rebuild their homes. And we took a side trip to New Orleans and we were there for about four hours in the rain, and that was enough to hook me. I looked off down the side streets from Bourbon

Street, and thought to myself, “This is a truly fascinating place. I need to come back here at some point in my life.” And I had not traveled abroad at that point. So New Orleans, really, in many ways, was my first foray into a European city, I will say, and a Latin American city in many ways, too.

So anyway, once I went down to New Orleans, I wandered around the city on foot, all over the place. And it was in bad shape. It really was at that stage of “it’s not really clear that this city is going to come back.” It was down on its knees. The streetcar was not even running, there were piles of debris everywhere in the streets, homes destroyed here and there. Hundreds of thousands of people had left the city. So it was a weird, truly post-apocalyptic place, and yet there were certainly little sprigs of life and resilience all over the place. And I thought, you know, I’m not even going to wait for the other schools. I feel like I need to be here. There is something calling me. And let’s be honest, also, it’s well over a thousand miles from home, and I need to just get out there and sort of spread my wings and become my full self.

Q: Yes.

Vogel: And so I went to the office, signed on the dotted line at the law school, and that’s how I came to go to Tulane for law school. I was there from ’07 to 2011, and just, oh man, I learned more from that city than I had learned from law school by far. You know, people have this caricature of New Orleans as being Bourbon Street, and hurricanes, and hand grenades, and piano bars. And yes, it is that, but it is many, many, many other things. I think it was a *New York Times* writer who put it, at some stage while I was there, it’s really a “cultural archipelago.” There are many deeply distinctive islands of culture all crammed into

what is New Orleans, and in many ways, they don't interact. And that's in some ways sad, but in some ways really important for them maintaining distinctiveness as these subcultures within the city. It's one of the few cities where there are multiple distinct accents, even within the city itself. So I really felt like I'd stumbled across a treasure trove. And I made some incredibly good friends there, friends for life, people who are like family to me.

And yeah, law school was definitely a struggle for me in some ways because it was, I think, a bit too left brain for me. I think there's just a little bit too much imagination and creativity churning around in me. And I think I knew that, though, and that was another part of the selection of New Orleans: this is a big enough counterweight that is constantly here for me, that I can balance out the drudgeries and the intensity of law school with basically a vacation to a different island every month of the year. So it was fascinating, and I had a lot to learn, you know? I had a lot to learn about people, about life.

So I was in law school for three years, and then I was about to go up to New York for my law firm job, but I got deferred because this was in the midst of the recession. And I had gone up in 2009, on pins and needles, working as a summer associate here in New York City, living on Avenue C and getting to know the city a bit. But they had trained us, and then they didn't have enough work for us. So they said, "You know what? Go out and do public interest work for a year." Well, turns out during my 3L year, I had started doing some work because there was this giant hospital project in New Orleans, post-Katrina, where instead of rebuilding within the shells of this grand old, art deco, charity hospital, and the VA hospital, they said that they had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, which was not really true at all.

Q: The old pretext.

Vogel: Gigantic pretext. And then that pretext was used to use eminent domain, and lots and lots of federal, state, and local governmental pressure, to destroy seventy acres of city adjacent to downtown—basically in a National Register historic district. [00:25:11] So I started out coming to this, all from this point of curiosity, saying, "Okay. Here they want to build hospitals, and they say it's in this area that's blighted." And I thought, "Well, we need hospitals, so okay." But I went down to check it out because I kept seeing the story in the newspaper, and as I started walking around, originally with my friend Curtis, I thought, "If this is blight, then this whole city is blight. There's something off here. This seems strange. Also, this area seems way too big. Why aren't they just reusing the buildings downtown?" I had met this lady named Sandra Stokes, who was pushing this plan to rebuild within the shell of a charity, and showing that it was feasible—this incredibly detailed and comprehensive study.

So I started documenting all the houses. And these are like camelbacks, and shotguns, and Creole cottages, and all the weird vernacular sort of appendages and iterations of buildings that one can find in New Orleans. You know, in my opinion, *good stuff*, fascinating stuff, in terms of the built environment. And endemic to the place, crucially. Distinctive. Not found elsewhere. And when you look at what sustains New Orleans, it's the port and tourism. And when you destroy the bones of the tourism industry, it's a bad idea! You know, in 1915, when the French Quarter was, quote, "a Sicilian slum," end quote, they wanted to demolish it then too. And look how that turned out. Good thing they didn't, in so many ways.

But anyway, as you can tell, I quickly became less of just a documentarian on my blog, which was called Inside the Footprint. And I was really inspired to do that blog by someone named Karen Gadbois, who later became a journalist. She really was the sort of investigative blogger in New Orleans. I remember meeting her at Buffa's Lounge in her brown turtleneck, and her hair with chopsticks, and she was like smoking a cigarette.

Q: Just like when we met. [both laugh]

Vogel: Yes. Minus the Permafrost. Yeah, she was someone who was just your average citizen who cared, and felt like something was wrong, and decided to act, and to do something. And I was really inspired by that. So Inside the Footprint really went from me being someone documenting historic architecture to me being an out-and-out advocate. As I met the people inside the footprint who were there—some of them using FEMA money to repair their own homes, only to have those homes then get destroyed or expropriated—it was crazy to me, truly crazy. And I helped with legal efforts, I helped with political efforts. We saved buildings. We forced them to move gigantic masonry structures off the site. We forced them to move a hundred homes off the site, when it was not contemplated in the Section 106 process. I mean, we were really going, like rabble-rousing, going to town. And this was people like Mary Howell, a civil rights attorney, Sandra Stokes, whom I mentioned, Janet Hayes, Brad Ott, Derek—man, the list goes on. Yeah, people in the footprint though, like Wally Thurman, and Bobbi and her husband. Everyone was there as a community, trying to make a go of it in this post-Katrina, crazy landscape. And then to have all the levels of government conspire against them, to come in and take their homes. It was really eye opening for me. It made me realize that when you see concentrations of power doing the wrong thing, even though it is a David and

Goliath fight, you have to act. Like pick up your sling, and pick up the stone, and give it a shot. Because in this country—if we are, ostensibly, a democracy or at least a republic—like you as a citizen, you as a person living in this country must engage, even when you do not want to, if everything is at risk.

So anyway, that was one hell of a fight, and that went on for the whole year that I was working there. Because what I did was, I took the money I was getting from the firm and went to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. And I said, "Hey, I'm already doing this work on the side, I'd like to make this a full-time fellowship." [00:30:00] And they said, "Sure." They had pulled out their last full-time person on the ground, Walter Gallas. And I was very lucky to work with a guy named Gate Pratt, who was sort of a part-time point person for the Trust, who was definitely a new urbanist and an architect. I learned a lot from him on the side. But yeah, we did everything we could. I was involved with blight policies—

Q: —pro-, I would imagine. Pro-blight? [laughs]

Vogel: [laughs] Decidedly not!

Q: Okay.

Vogel: The city was trying to find ways to run up the numbers, or stats, to show progress, understandably, post-Katrina. But it was, again, trying to take this learned wisdom of the past and say, "Yes, I know you want to clean things up, you want to show progress, but also, don't throw the baby out with the bath water." The bones of these houses are still good. And I was

working with a lot of people at one point to try to even come up with an urban homesteading policy as a way to save the housing stock, bring people back. And really, at that point, a critical emerging concept was just, "How can we put down roots of any kind, aka, people living here, so that this whole thing doesn't totter away?"

Q: Right.

Vogel: But yeah, it was a wild ride. I mean, at one point, there were press conferences where the mayor would get into a bulldozer and we'd be screaming about, "How much does it cost?" And he'd be yelling back, saying, "You're not even from here!"

Q: Wow.

Vogel: It got a little wild and crazy [laughs] at times. But that was also a point where I lived, for that year, in a neighborhood called St. Roch. I had lived uptown near the Tulane campus for three years, but then moved downtown to Saint Roch. And St. Roch was a whole 'nother world.

For me, it was a place where I learned, again, even more. Because I was definitely in a pretty significant minority as a white person living on St. Roch Avenue between the market and the firehouse. And it was a very crazy time down there. There were grifters moving into some of the abandoned houses and starting them on fire right behind us. There were abandoned houses just overgrown with cat's claw all over the place. There were people breaking into houses at night. And there was a twenty-seven-year-old white male, living alone, got killed in a half shotgun down the block from me, during a night break-in. And I was like, "That's basically my exact

profile, and that happened two blocks away. That's a little frightening." But you also learned so much about people who don't have cars to even go get groceries, and you learn to live in a community in a different way than I had ever known. And folks who were homeless, who you became friends with, celebrated and had a Memorial Day cookout with and then realized they were homeless. Then end up having to make that decision, like, do I let you keep your stuff at my place for a while or not? And all these interesting challenges and conundrums that I, as someone who had come from a small town, had really never faced, and had to process anew. And really, I think I came away from New Orleans with a profoundly more broad and deep understanding of the range of human experience [phone rings]. And a lot of my core beliefs and sort of tropes, I think, had been challenged, shaken, and rebuilt [voices in background] in a really good way, like very healthy when I look back at it. So yeah.

Q: Fantastic. And your movement to save the fabric of that city, did it have a name, or at least a slogan?

Vogel: Yeah. I should say a few other things. I mean, the area that was at stake was sort of called Lower MidCity. It had originally been called Back of Town. But some of the groups that I worked with included Foundation for Historical Louisiana, and Louisiana Landmark Society. We had sort of a host of different little coalitions that gathered through all of that. The Preservation Resource Center was involved, and I actually had my office there at one point.

Q: Fantastic. [voices continue in background]

Vogel: Yeah, it was a whole range of things. And one other person I have to mention is Bill Borah—William Borah—who was a land use attorney and a really venerable part of the preservation fabric in New Orleans. He had led, with his friend, Dick Bombach, the fight against the [Robert] Moses-designed elevated freeway that would have run through the front of the French Quarter. And they went through a crazy battle in the [19]60s to defeat that effort, along with a host of other players. [00:35:03] But Bill was a real mentor to me both in how he lived, as this person who found joy in life in many, many ways—really in a very New Orleanian way— but also as someone who had learned the hard lessons of being an advocate in the public square, and holding an unpopular opinion, when the business community, the social hierarchy, etc., etc., were all arrayed against him. And he was ostracized. As someone whose father had been Rex, King of Carnival, in the 1940s, he could have had life handed to him on a silver platter. In many ways, he was shunned by a lot of those folks for decades *because* he had been this outspoken advocate opposing the freeway.

And that was a really important lesson for me, is that there are consequences to standing up and doing this work. I don't know that that's deterred me from doing it in any way [both laugh]. But it was good to know—to sort of vulcanize the steel going in a bit, and get it ready—that there are consequences to being engaged in some of these fights, in a democratic society. And you have to accept that in advance if you're going to stick with something for the longer haul.

Q: So many shades of your future advocacy in all this work.

Vogel: Yeah.

Q: I can't wait for future historians to delve into that.

Vogel: Yeah!

Q: But before we continue delving, I will caveat this conversation—we discussed business interruption insurance—we are in an active business, there are some interruptions right now, we're in the gallery. So for those listening, please forgive us with the background noise that we may hear. But Brad, you mentioned that pivotal summer associate year on Avenue C, in New York, where you sort of fell for Gotham. Was that your first trip to New York City?

Vogel: Well, that was the interesting thing. My first trip to New York City [laughs] was in 2005, coming back from World Youth Day to see the Pope in Germany. My life has had so many turns. I, at one time, was in the Young Knights of Columbus, while I was on a college campus. I went to Cologne, Germany, and saw Pope Benedict arrive on the papal barge under the Cologne cathedral. I mean, it's been a life.

But on the way back from that, even though everyone was wildly jetlagged, we took the train into New York City, and literally, we almost all fell asleep on the subway. But we got out in midtown, late at night. I remember walking from the subway station, looking down Broadway, and seeing the sort of glowing reactor core of Times Square at a distance, and the Ed Sullivan Theater was nearby. And we walked into Hell's Kitchen, and went to a little rinky-dink, Italian, red-sauce restaurant that one of the chaperones knew of. Ate dinner, almost passed out in our food, walked back, got on the train, and that was my first time in New York City [both laugh].

Q: You make it all sound so glamorous.

Vogel: There was not even a suitcase [both laugh]. Yeah. And then the interesting part was—that was ‘05—and then when I was interviewing, I was looking at—because Tulane Law, you have to pick, by your second year, whether you’re going to do the civil law track to stay in New Orleans, or go to another civil law jurisdiction, or the common law track. And I had not yet fully fallen in love with New Orleans, so I picked the common law track.

Q: Good move.

Vogel: And I talk about this often with my friend, Curtis, in New Orleans, who has really become a lifelong friend.

Q: His last name, cause you’ve mentioned him a few times.

Vogel: Yes, Curtis Pursell. And Curtis, yeah, it’s sort of funny. He was aiming for New York, and then, seemingly, I convinced him to stay in New Orleans. And then I sort of ended up going to New York but almost wishing I had stayed in New Orleans, in some way. So it was a really funny interaction there. But all that to say, I interviewed all over the place, and I had job offers in a couple of different cities, and felt very lucky amidst the recession about that. And then on one of those trips, to Minneapolis, I had to have the Heimlich maneuver performed on me by the person interviewing me! [both laugh] Thankfully, the baby bok choy was dislodged, and I am here today.

But at any rate, I picked New York in the end because I thought, you know, let's go do some interviews there. We did the interviews in Times Square, and I interviewed with this guy from the firm that I ultimately summered with. [00:40:00] And I realized, because I was staying with two of my friends from Tulane up on 116th Street, in what at the time—this is pre-Airbnb I'm pretty sure—this was just sort of a little illegal rental, whatever it might be, Craigslist. But we stayed there and I realized that the next day, we were going to have interviews, and I had spent a sum total of perhaps two and a half hours in New York City prior to that. So I walked all the way from 116th Street down to Houston [Street].

Q: Wow. Oh my goodness.

Vogel: And I took in what I could of the city, so I had something to talk about. So in the grand tradition of "fake it till you make it" in New York City [both laugh], I did, in fact, have something to talk about. And I was not lying the next day when I had these various things to talk about. Ultimately, I got the offer for the summer gig, and then that turned into an offer for the job.

Q: And the firm's name, just for the record.

Vogel: The firm's name is Clifford Chance. At the time, it was certainly one of the largest, and may still be, one of the largest firms of the world, based in Britain. But this was the New York office. So I moved up to New York in 2011. And I was going to work for this firm, so all of my stuff had been shipped up in a POD—which, again, I did arrive with a suitcase this time. But I was driving a blue Mustang into New York City.

Q: Driving!

Vogel: Yes. Well, here's the thing. You know, I ordered a Chevy Aveo, the cheapest thing you could possibly get, cause I thought, "All I have is a suitcase, everything else has already gone up. And I'll visit a few friends on the way." And I got to the car rental place in New Orleans, and he said, "Well, we have two cars left." And I said, "Oh. Well, I ordered a Chevy Aveo." "It's gone. So you get to pick between a Chevy Suburban or a blue Mustang." And I thought, "Well, the blue Mustang at least has better gas mileage, so let's go with that." [both laugh] So what a bizarre way to enter the city, I will say.

But here's the thing. I got into working at this big firm, and it was really—whatever they wanted us to do, we'd do it. Their litigation team had been sort of decimated during the recession, so I had started working on transactional stuff. So that's really how I went down that path. And I was working on mostly banking and finance-related transactional work for about three years there. But here's the thing. During that time, I was also—as of about December 20, 2012—I joined the board of the New York Preservation Archive Project. And how did that happen?

Q: Hey, I'm asking the questions! [both laugh]

Vogel: Yes. What's the question?

Q: Do what you need to do, c'mon.

Vogel: So when I had been writing that blog, Inside the Footprint, and trying to stop the mass demolitions, a writer had come to town and talked with my friend, Sandra, and said, "Who can show me around the footprint of this hospital fight. I want to know what's going on." So I took Roberta Brandes Gratz around in my car. We looked at the site and were collectively aghast and dismayed at everything that we were seeing. But Roberta is really the person who said, "As soon as you get to New York, I don't care if you're working in a law firm, I am going to introduce you to people." And literally, within a few weeks of—maybe even less than a few weeks—I was sitting at the Century Association across from an imposing battery of some of the top preservationists in the city [laughs].

Q: Do you remember who they were?

Vogel: Aw, man. I mean, I know Anne Van Ingen was there, and Tony Wood. I'm trying to think of who else was there. I can't remember if it was Andrew [Dolkart], Simeon [Bankoff]. It was a real "who's who" sitting across from me. But of course—imagine that—the person who got his claws into me was one Anthony C. Wood. [laughs].

Q: That would be a first, he never—[laughs]

Vogel: There's no Tom Sawyering instinct in Tony Wood.

Q: Right.

Vogel: But Tony made it clear that even if you aren't able to do much, why don't you join the board, and at least get to know the landscape of preservation in New York City, based on everything you've done? And I went with Tony and Liz McEnaney, actually, and sat on a thesis jury of a student of Tony Tung's at Columbia. And that was an interesting thing because it focused on post-Katrina New Orleans. So that was sort of my early entry into things. [00:44:59] And I was on the board of NYPAP from 2012 up until 2018. I went on to work at another firm here in New York City, and over a lot of those early years—and that was another three and a half years at Thompson Hine—but across those sort of six and a half years of working as a corporate lawyer, and practicing law, I did not do that much, or as much as I would have wanted, in the preservation field. But something I did do during that time was help with the incorporation of a number of small nonprofits. And one of those that I vividly remember was the Beachside Bungalow Preservatory.

Q: That was a Six to Celebrate, I believe.

Vogel: Yes. And working with Richard George, and making sure that there's some sort of plan in place for the future of these remarkably extant Rockaway bungalows, out in Far Rockaway. It is to me a true wonder that those buildings exist, and that there's even a collection of them anywhere, given that they were not built to be manses, to serve as arcs through time. They were built as summer homes for people who were working-people in the city. So it's really remarkable that they're still there.

But, all that to say, I ultimately swung into the role of Executive Director of the New York Preservation Archive Project when Matthew Coody, my predecessor, let me know that he was

going to be departing in the fall of 2017. I was walking to the law firm through Bryant Park, and I remember stopping there in the morning, and saying, "Hmm! I think it's time. [laughs] I've paid down my student loans enough that I can go do something other than this, and I'd like to." And so I let the board of NYPAP know, and went through the process, and became the executive director, which has really been a great thing over these past five-plus years. It's been great. And it's been interesting because part of the gig with NYPAP is making sure that we are open enough to all, in terms of being a sort of general resource on the history of the preservation movement. Which part of that means watching your p's and q's a little bit, in terms of whether NYPAP, itself, is taking a position on a preservation advocacy-related matter. But I have certainly done preservation advocacy work outside of that, in my own personal capacity. So I don't know which way you want to go on that, because both of them are story arcs.

Q: I actually think it's important for us to get both. But why don't we start with NYPAP because we're all fond of saying "you can't spell Bard without Brad," right? And you can't spell Brad without Roberta—you shared that origin story with us. But let's go back to those early days of NYPAP. What were your first projects, some of the first people, first impressions?

Vogel: Yeah. I mean, my first impressions of NYPAP were the Bard Breakfast at the Manhattan Penthouse at 14th and Fifth. It's interesting looking back on it because it was a smaller affair back then than it has since grown to be. Perhaps a bit more intimate. But I vividly remember Tony Wood on one of those days, where it was snowing and you had these sort of huge, rounded, arched windows up there looking out over the city, and Tony welcoming everyone by saying, "Welcome to our Manhattan snow globe," as the snow was falling all around. It really felt kind of magical. And as I chatted with people, in the line to get my French toast, you start

realizing that, “Oh, there’s some people who have done some important work here at this event.”

Another early thing was going with Roberta when she received the Landmarks Lion at the Four Seasons. It’s funny looking back on a lot of these early events, that are now a decade ago, and I’m like, “Oh, I sat next to Frank Sanchis. Now I know who that is.” [laughs] Or Kyle Johnson. And all these things. But it is fascinating to have been there for some of these things. And later, you know, back to the Four Seasons, when celebrating the Landmarks Law anniversary, with Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel up there, and Fran Lebowitz was there.

Q: Oh my goodness. That was a controversial one.

Vogel: Yes. But so glad, in retrospect, that I happened to be in some of these places because you don’t realize how swiftly they might disappear. And that’s certainly been something that’s impressed on me, in my time in the city, is that if you think it’s interesting or of value, go do it, because it literally might [snaps fingers] slip from our collective grasp the next day. [00:50:09] One never knows what the currents will do here [both laugh].

Q: So you mentioned Tony “Volun-told” Wood. Let’s linger a minute on Tony. Tell us about Tony.

Vogel: Tony has been a phenomenal mentor for me, and I feel extremely lucky to have met him, and to have gotten to work with him for so many years now. And in many ways, I look at how I operate in the city today on a multitude of fronts, well beyond preservation—whether that’s in

the broader waterfront realm, or the poetry realm, or any kind of general sort of civic realm—and I think the key thing that Tony taught me, and that I have internalized and now bring to bear, repeatedly, is the sense that whenever an opportunity presents itself, you have to have the cement mixer of your mind going for years, for days, for months prior to that, with all the variables that you've gathered from whirling through the city. And when that moment arrives, you are ready. You can whip up a plan to make something happen—something of substance that will suffice on the drop of a dime. And I think that, in this city, is a phenomenal thing to have in your back pocket. And I really do credit him for teaching me how to do that. It's almost like Tony has this sort of traveling salesman kit of stem cells with him. Whatever you need. Do we need a lung cell? Do we need an ear cell? [snaps fingers] We can make that happen. And poof, you have the germ of an idea for an event, for a fundraiser, for a protest, for a lawsuit. Whatever is called for, Tony, I think, is a masterful worker here in the city, for the cause of preservation, in that he knows how to gin something up—out of nothing, often—in a way that has profound impact. So I'm forever grateful for that. And Tony, you know, just—wow, we are lucky that he has been involved in preservation for as long as he has.

He also brings such a critical element of humor and levity to all that he does. His wit is hilarious. I love going to meetings with Tony because I know they will be fun. They will have life crackling through them. They will have jokes, they will have puns, they will have references to Broadway plays, like, it's going to be a good thing. And I think that's so critical. Because in a life where there's a thousand variables and people have a million things going on, getting people to coalesce around anything, for any period of time, is really difficult. And I think that's only been exacerbated by the pandemic, and the move into a virtual world, certainly.

Q: A couple of other names you mentioned. Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel.

Vogel: Yes. Barbaralee is a force to be reckoned with. She is really something. And I feel, again, lucky to have been part of some of the grand convenings that she's put together. Even if, on occasion, I have been yelled at, for talking in the back of the group, during a tour [laughs]. I personally blame Sean Khorsandi for that, which he will now proceed to blame me for, I'm sure.

The great thing about Barbaralee is, for all of her vast engagement and productivity on the scene, I think the part I've enjoyed best about working with Barbaralee is the little almost entirely overlooked things. Like the fact that she and I have bonded over poetry, which is not necessarily readily apparent. But when she was doing the plaque for Wallace Stevens's home in Chelsea, she had Marie Howe there to read a poem, which was a fabulous experience. Like truly memorable. But she also sees and cultivates talent. And I said, "You know, I have a poem that was inspired by Wallace Stevens that sort of reflects some of my own thoughts from working in the corporate realm, as he did—he was an insurance executive who wrote poetry, I was working as a corporate lawyer, writing poems, one of which was actually a little bit inspired directly by Stevens." [00:55:02] And she said, "Oh, well, you should by all means bring that poem and read it." And so I did. And it's little things like that, where she certainly had no need to have me involved, and gave me a shot. And I think she's done that for a lot of people. So that's been really important, I think, across the broader preservation landscape.

Q: Right. Now you had a lot of personal projects going on at this time too, Brad—Walt Whitman, Gowanus. I mean, talk about "a Jack of all trades." How were you able to squeeze those in, and how did you pick 'em? I mean, what resonated with you, and why?

Vogel: Well, as I've said to you before, I don't tend to pick a task unless it's rather daunting, it seems. [laughs] Sometimes to my own detriment. But I do often survey the broader civic landscape. And I think there are many people who are willing to take on some of the big and extremely important, and I would argue, perhaps, more mainstream causes. Like there are literally millions of people in this country who are out there working to find a cure for cancer.

And working in the attendant ancillary nonprofit realm that's trying to generate the funding to do that, and the public support to do that. And I feel like my mission is oftentimes to go in the other direction. Say, where are the causes where there's no one doing anything, or not enough people focused on this? Because my job is to take this from .01 to like ninety percent, even if we don't get all the way there, even if we don't succeed. If we can move the needle on this so that there is public consciousness about this thing that I think is critically deserving of more attention and advocacy, I will throw my will at that thing and hammer away with the non-budget, and the non-staff, and the non-organization that I have, to try to get it there. And again, perhaps to my detriment [laughs]. But it's a thing that I seem to keep doing. So hopefully, some of those other things will come along.

But yeah, the Walt Whitman House of 2017. I learned about it in 2016, from the NYC LGBT Sites Project. I didn't know that there were still any of his houses standing in New York City, and didn't know that it wasn't landmarked. I was at the Jefferson Market Library during one of the early presentations, learned about it, and thought, "Holy man! How is this possible? This is crazy." And in high school, I was actually sort of hostile to Walt Whitman. I even wrote these satirical poems sort of hating on Walt Whitman for destroying poetry, getting rid of rhyme.

Q: I'm sure those found a *huge* audience.

Vogel: Yes. How dare you get rid of form and structure? But it was interesting, because I certainly had come to know a little bit more of his work later on. And then, really, when I learned that his house was standing and not landmarked, it caused me to take a pretty deep dive into his oeuvre again, and all of his work, in a way where I thought, "Wow. Now this really resonates. This is profound stuff. I have lived enough life to understand this, and to find deep value in it, and relevant value in it." And I mean, he was certainly queer in some ways—using contemporary parlance—talking about being gay before it was possible to do so because the words had not yet coalesced, quite frankly. The lexicon was still in development. And he's out there basically, I think, very bravely, putting some of that out there for the world. But that got me thinking all the more about how important it was. When you think that there were over thirty different residences of Walt Whitman in Brooklyn and Manhattan and they are all gone, except for this one house. And that this happened to be the house that he lived in when he first published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, which of course goes on to become, in its many iterations over the next fifty years, this canonical and profoundly impactful work for international literature. And how this city sometimes tends to do that—it just does not seem to care, where in any other city, you would have had a plaque up. And you know, Barbaralee actually tried to get a plaque on that building, too. [00:59:44]

But I met Karen Karbiener, a professor at NYU, through the Sites Project, 'cause we were both sort of tending towards the same end, at the same time, in parallel. And Jay Shockley said, "Well, do you know Karen?" And I thought, "I don't know. Who's Karen?" [01:00:00] And we sort of met right at the moment when I was submitting an RFE [request for evaluation] to try to

get the house designated, and it took me a year to find the time to actually sort of mount the campaign. And Karen is an incredible human being; really wide array of talents all combined in one human being, and just a really good soul. [phone rings] So we started working together on that effort. I was sort of the coalition to landmark Walt Whitman's house, and she was the Walt Whitman initiative.

Eventually, the coalition—which included a host of different things like HDC [Historic Districts Council], the Sites Project, and all these tons of different organizations—ultimately wrote letters in support of designation, from the Bureau of General Services Queer Division, to Ample Hills ice cream company, to the Brooklyn Historical Society. You had people like Robert Pinsky weighing in in support, and ultimately, Martin Scorsese wrote a letter. I mean, it was a huge groundswell. It was everything from tiny little grassroots local neighborhood organizations to big names. And we pushed for it to get designated, and the LPC [Landmarks Preservation Commission] rejected us. And I then, in a real fury, that December of 2017 wrote a thirteen page, heavily researched rebuttal, looking through as much of the track record of designations as I could, citing all these examples of how what they were arguing did not apply. They didn't do much of anything with that.

And we mounted further attempts. We got attention from every which way to Sunday. And ultimately, it still has yet to be designated. There's been waves of activity where we try, and then we try again. I think that a part of preservation is to keep at something well after most people would have thought that you had left with your tail between your legs and gone home. And then, "Whoop! There they are again. [both laugh] They're back at the LPC again, like waving signs in the seats!" And then pop up at the designation hearing for Julius' and note that, "Well, if you're

gonna do this for LGBT sites for a site that's been altered, then what about another LGBT site that's been altered?" There's always an opening. So I have no doubt that we'll continue on that path. And I've since become a board member of the Walt Whitman Initiative, and we've done all kinds of different Walt Whitman related events, especially across his two hundredth birthday in 2019. You know, I just have to say it for the record, at one point, we had a letter of support for designation from the entire LGBT Caucus of the City Council, which at the time was Corey Johnson as Speaker, and the local person, who was representing the area and all these other—it's almost as if there's nothing more you could have done right to make this happen, and it still wasn't enough.

And that just gets down to LPC, I think, not having an understanding of what is valuable. I think there's been way too much rigidity with how they determine what is of benefit, and of value, under the Landmarks Law. And I think, an overemphasis on this need for a building to be pristine, and preserved in amber, to be eligible or worthy of designation. And I think that's ridiculous. I think that sometimes the accretion of layers and stories actually enhances the value of the building, or the structure, or piece of historic fabric. And I saw that in New Orleans. There, I think there's a few times where it's actually valued, because it tells multiple stories. And it's interesting with, like 227 Duffield, that has the 1830s or '40s rowhouse that has a 1930s addition on the front, and they found a way to figure that one out! I remember being out in the street during the pandemic, with a bunch of people out there from lots of different organizations, fighting to landmark that building. I'm so glad that it did, ultimately, get designated. And I even remember seeing Christabel Gough in the street, in the crowd there.

And it's really interesting when you look at preservation—there's so many people, especially sometimes people who are not likely, or who you don't think of as being a relevant player, who are acting behind the scenes. [01:05:02] And who are pulling levers here and there, and using what goodwill and chutzpah they have, to move the ball. So, I do love that about the preservation movement—despite friction between various personas, there are often these unseen moments of grace that do, in fact, help move the collective thing down the field.

Q: And as someone who bestows us with so many of those moments, my reaction to hearing you say that is, "It takes one to know one." You're one of those forces. I mean, you so eloquently spoke about this critical tension at the heart of NYPAP, and it will exist as long as NYPAP exists, which is, we are *of* advocates, but we are not an advocacy group.

Vogel: Right.

Q: And you've done a good job of explaining for us, the purely NYPAP, and the purely personal. But there are so many initiatives you've engaged in that check both boxes. I'm thinking about your [George] McAneny work, and your work with the fortieth anniversary of *Penn Central vs. New York City* that we did. Or even your Penn Station work, which there's an advocacy component, but you've done such a good way of stitching in the NYPAP angle, as well. How did you straddle that line in your career?

Vogel: Yes, it's very careful. I mean, the number of times I have had to remind people, or feverishly ask people to remove the fact that I'm the Executive Director of NYPAP, from a publication, or an e-blast, or a social media post—they're legion. But I think it's been worth it.

And I do think that people realize that I wear the two hats very distinctly. And I will make that very clear, whenever I have to. Before I get into the Penn Station stuff, I did want to go back to the Gowanus stuff.

Q: Please, absolutely.

Vogel: Only because Gowanus really, in many ways, is a battle that is still going on. I moved to Gowanus in 2016 from Manhattan. And I moved there because I wanted to be able to go canoeing as a sort of karmic offset to working as a corporate lawyer in Manhattan [laughs]. It's almost like a form of chemotherapy to go canoe on the Gowanus Canal—or at least at that time. But chemotherapy for the soul. Let's try to keep it to that. And I'm knocking on whatever wood is available here that I have not yet tipped in the Gowanus Canal, in my years of paddling, and many, many hundreds of voyages at this point.

Q: And we know that because your hand hasn't burned off.

Vogel: Correct, yes, yes. I served for five years as the captain of the Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club, and it was one of the truly wildest rides of my life. And I could go on for like an entire podcast worth of episodes from that. During the pandemic, getting a drag queen to sing opera in an oyster boat, accompanied by a quartet of french horns in canoes, amidst a fleet of canoes, dinghies, motorboats, the artist Duke Riley on hand, artists painting live in boats and on shore, with a crowd of several hundred people. I mean, this is late October of 2020, when people were

still so craved for any kind of cultural or outdoor activity that could be pulled off. But anyway, that just encapsulates one of the moments of being the captain of the Dredgers.

But Gowanus is a special place. It is *really* layered in its history. Going all the way back, it has been abused as an environmental location for a hundred and fifty years. For me, it was a place that was actually idiosyncratically different than anywhere else in New York City. It had its own persona. I got involved with city planning efforts when they were starting to think about rezoning Gowanus in—certainly by 2017, maybe even earlier. I remember being in some of these sessions and just realizing, like it's the same as back when I served as the city council rep, when I was in high school in Kiel. They did a comprehensive planning process. And I remember thinking, "This plan has nothing to do with us. It is not generated by us, or about here. It is a boilerplate plan that's as if it's like an alien came down from a spaceship, and imposes it on us. It is ridiculous." And everyone just sort of went along with it. And I thought, "Man, in New York, planning can often feel very much the same. This plan doesn't seem to account for most of the things that I find to be valuable about Gowanus. Its weird feral pockets. The things that make it an unusual location that is not like every other place." [01:10:07]

So I really started getting involved there. And I got involved with—and helped start—the Gowanus Landmarking Coalition. It was me and Linda Mariano, who was a friend of mine, who sadly passed away. Linda was a feisty, feisty advocate.

Q: She was legendary.

Vogel: She took no shit. [laughs]

Q: Just ask some of the council members, who will remain nameless. Bradford Lander. [both laugh]

Vogel: Yeah, I got involved with that. That was Simeon Bankoff and Kelly Carroll at HDC, and Linda and Kim Maier at the Old Stone House. And even Lisa Ackerman helping behind the scenes, given her longstanding love for Gowanus. And Genny Schiel. But we worked to get some buildings landmarked, and the critical thing we pushed for was to get them landmarked *before* the rezoning. Because in other rezonings, they were sort of designated as this morsel thrown after rezoning had happened. So we did manage to get them landmarked before the rezoning. The thing is, they only landmarked five buildings, instead of the, say, fifteen to twenty that we had been asking for. Oh, and Peter Bray was also deeply involved in the coalition.

Q: Peter. Absolutely, a good friend.

Vogel: But that was one example where we actually did get buildings landmarked. And most of them were obvious ones, like the Bat Cave—which was just reopened in a restored form—and the Brooklyn Power and Rapid Transit power station. What else? The ASPCA building, the American Can Factory. And I know I'm gonna forget one. Then, of course, there's the beloved Carroll Street Bridge, which is like one of my favorite historic landmarks in the city. That was already designated long ago. I think Jay Shockley worked on the designation report in 1987. But there was one building in the collection that they designated that surprised me, which is this warehouse building on Second Avenue, in the very industrial part of Gowanus, that's done in the American round-arch style. It has really great brick work, but it was like one of those anomalies

where you're like, "Oh! Where did this come from?" [both laugh] Clearly, someone on staff thought this was worthwhile, and has been watching this or something. And I would put my money on Matt Postal, personally, given that he, I think, more than almost anyone else, is responsible for the Coignet Stone Building at the corner of 3rd and Third getting designated well before this rezoning. But anyway, the rezoning was really a knock-down-drag-out fight though, over the fate of Gowanus. So after that designation, there was still the rezoning itself.

I got involved with the Voice of Gowanus, which was a group that emerged very much during the pandemic, and was opposed to the rezoning on a host of grounds, most of them being environmental, actually. Flood risk because it's a very low lying area. Toxic land, like wanting to put housing on a former manufactured gas plant site with an aquifer of carcinogenic coal tar down below it that's only being partially remediated. I mean, I could go on. Deeply unwise, in the sense that the city on one hand is saying, "We need to retreat from flood-prone areas. Let's literally buy up land to have people move away from it." And then with the other hand, to put massive, dense numbers of people into extremely repeat and historic flood zones, and then building up land that's going to funnel water into the bowl at the end of the Gowanus Canal, where the public housing is. Imagine that. So just many, many things about that that were deeply unwise. And it was difficult for me to watch a number of organizations in the neighborhood essentially sell out and get behind the rezoning, when I thought, "If only you had decided to join the other side, we might have had a coalition big enough to stop this." And to stop it was not to say that we didn't want anything to happen in the neighborhood. It was simply to say there has to be a better way to do this that is more cognizant of the hydrological realities of the place, the environmental justice issues of the place, and that still adds housing but doesn't add it in a way

that feels like someone is taking a riding crop to the face of the neighborhood, and saying, "You will take this whether you like it or not." [01:15:05] And you know, that's what happens though.

And despite our efforts, and lawsuits, too—I mean, the amount of time I spent behind the scenes on a lawsuit early in the pandemic because they were ramming through the rezoning process during the pandemic using Zoom when people didn't know how to use it. People were trying to find a way to keep their jobs and keep themselves alive during the early months of the pandemic. All the other rezonings that ever happened had happened in person. So all the processes that had played out were done a certain way, and those were now no longer being done that same way. So there's disparate treatment of our neighborhood. I mean, the list goes on and on and on, about why that should not have happened during that time, and how illegitimate, in many ways, that process was. But anyway, I will not go on and on.

Q: Brad, I think that's such an important note. We'll save your Penn Station advocacy for when that fight is over, and it will end at one point. But we're nearing our own little sip-in here, to have mentioned Julius', and I think it's so excellent that you mentioned the pandemic a couple of times because when Sarah [Dziedzic] and I were talking about doing this interview, Sarah mentioned your pandemic leadership. And I think for a lot of us in the field, and in the trenches, if you will, when we think of Brad, we think of the way that his leadership crystallized during the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Vogel: Well, thank you.

Q: And all of the different threads of your life came together, to really hold our preservation community as one during a really difficult time. So I hope that in closing, maybe you can tell us a little bit about that leadership style, how it evolved during COVID, and what your message is to the preservationists of tomorrow.

Vogel: Sure. Yeah, I mean, that's the thing. Preservation, sometimes advocacy can be very lighthearted, like writing the lyrics to carols that we sang on the street in front of the Demarest Building—rest in peace. But it can also be very profound, and I think in some ways, the COVID pandemic wiped everything else off the field in a way that was profoundly clarifying. And I guess that's the way I often see moments of crisis, is that everything else falls away and there is a clear task: how can you make things better? How can you get things back to stable? How can you achieve some semblance of normalcy, so that things don't fall any further apart during this moment? And I guess, yeah, that did play out in a lot of ways. And it, perhaps, was not for my own personal mental health the best thing to do, or even physical health, but it is certainly what I did, from March all the way through—man, really through, like almost all of 2020, once the pandemic had actually started was, on the NYPAP front, it was leaping—catapulting—myself onto Zoom, and bringing the organization with, and saying, "I don't know how to do this, but we cannot sit here stopped dead in the water. We are going to do something." And the broader thing is, we put together, program, after program, after program, we had—

Q: Oh yes. You roped me into a few of those [both laugh].

Vogel: We had afternoon coffee chats on Zoom. And we had NYPAPPY hour, happy hours, on Fridays.

Q: That was a clunky one. Yeah, I remember.

Vogel: Yes. We had educational programming that Sarah did, about how to conduct oral histories. I mean, we threw all kinds of content up. There was almost no planning, there was no rehearsal. People didn't even know what they were doing. It was just, let's make this happen. And I realized very quickly that the biggest thing at that moment was not so much about keeping programmatic inertia going, or even operations. It was, people are unbelievably unmoored right now from everything that is normal for them. Everything. And they are alone, and they are suffering, and they don't know what to do. And they have all the pillars of community that they have in their life, no matter how small or big that might be, as a percentage of how they live their lives. Almost all of them are gone right now. Almost everything. We're talking April, and May, and June of 2020. And so my thing was, "You know what? We are gonna get on Zoom, and we are going to do *something*. We are going to do anything, and it is going to be fun." We are gonna hoist our coffee cups for a "cheers," and I am gonna wear a crazy hat, so that my face doesn't get garbled by the Zoom background. [01:20:00] Because we didn't even know how to do *that* at that point. [both laugh] It was like, "I will be your crazy cowboy host here, so that we are having something human happening in our lives."

And I will say, the number of people who have come up to me in subsequent years, sometimes almost in tears—even people that I hardly know—and they were on some of those programs. And they're like, "I cannot tell you how grateful I am for the fact that you were providing that. Cause there was just nothing else right then." And I was like, "Wow!" We went *way* beyond preservation. It was way beyond business or nonprofits. It was like, we are

providing a service for human beings to continue to be human beings. And like, wow, that is deeper than I guess I thought I'd have to get as executive director.

But also, you know, it was wild! [phone rings] I brought home an external hard drive that I bought, like the day before we were all supposed to—right before everything shut down. And I thought, "Okay. I've got our system on here, and within three, four weeks we'll be back, so this should be fine." Like two-plus years later, I was still operating off of that extra hard drive! And from my kitchen table in Gowanus. Man! And like, I literally wore tracks into my kitchen floor from being at that table for Zoom programs, and just living my life there. And thank goodness I had a little back deck. I lived across from an oil truck garage [phone rings], which makes it just affordable enough that I could have this little outdoor space. And it had a garden. So I'm forever grateful for that across the pandemic, because wow, in terms of things that kept my sanity. But all this to say, there were other fronts too. I mean, the canoe club that I mentioned earlier [phone rings] became, instantaneously, a rapid-fire mutual aid society essentially, when one did not exist. I mean, I hardly even knew what mutual aid was. We just started doing stuff. We put together a list of businesses. I mean, I got out on the canal, in a canoe. I went over to Linda's house, cause I knew she would have paint, and I took a piece of cardboard, and I said, "Linda, can you just put a bucket of paint out on the stoop with a paintbrush?" And I took it and I painted "Support Gowanus Businesses: Buy Gift Certificates." Cause how are these businesses going to stay alive if they're shut down just out of the blue, and there's no certainty about when they will reopen? So we made online lists, as a canoe club, where people could buy gift certificates and how they could support businesses. Where they could pick things up remotely. We created a fund for health workers. We put up a sign for the emergency workers

saying “We Support You” across from the entrance to the EMS station, as they’re going out and taking people to the hospital, and collecting dead bodies.

I mean, it’s really hard, and I think it will be increasingly difficult to actually put ourselves back in that head space. I can understand why we don’t get much of an inheritance with respect to the Spanish Influenza of 1918–19. It’s that people, once it was over, were, “I don’t want to ever think about that ever again. I want to go on and live.” And I understand the impetus, and I can feel it so strongly. But I still have all this stuff in my closet from that time—the fliers we made about collecting cans to bring to CHiPS [Community Help in Park Slope] for people who were coming to get food because they lost their job. [phone rings] So many things unraveled so rapidly. And even after things started to stabilize, like a lot of those impacts have not been dealt with. And it was really crazy to be in there. But as a canoe club, I’m forever proud of that crew because we just started doing stuff. Again, we did not know *how* to do it. We did not even know what to do, we just started doing things. “Does this seem to make things better? Then let’s do it.” And people had enough free time because their jobs, in some instances, had kind of gone to a low power mode. And it was unclear what to do in many cases because the things we would be doing weren’t happening. So, anyway—and I apologize for being longwinded on multiple fronts. [laughs]

Q: No apology required.

Vogel: But all this to say, I have deeply appreciated my time with NYPAP and with the archive projects. [01:25:00] I haven’t even told you about trying to run a film festival two years in a row, singlehandedly.

Q: That's for the next oral history.

Vogel: With, thankfully, some great Jeffe Fellows, and great Reisinger scholars, and a board too. I mean, that's the thing I have to say, is the board has been so helpful in so many ways. Because when people say that NYPAP is just one person, yes, maybe there's one full-time employee, technically, but there are so many people who work to make it happen behind the scenes. I've learned so much from Lisa Ackerman and from Tony Wood. And from Stephen Facey, I have profound amounts of thanks to him to give. But all that to say, [voices in background] NYPAP has been a great experience, and I think its mission is more important now than ever, and I'm excited that, across my time as executive director, I think more groups have gotten this preservation history ethos into their bloodstream.

Q: Brad Vogel, thank you for sharing your love of business interruption insurance with us. Now, off to the party. Thank you again.

Vogel: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]