INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Susan Tunick

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Susan Tunick conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on June 9, 2020. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is 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.

Raised in the Rockaways, Queens, NY, Susan Tunick is a NYC-based artist with a central interest in clay, spanning from ceramics to terracotta. She received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in visual arts at Bennington College in Vermont, with graduate coursework at University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Tunick turned to historic preservation advocacy work in the 1980s when she became involved with the New York branch of the Friends of Terra Cotta (FOTC) and efforts to preserve the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company's office building in Long Island City. In this interview, Tunick discusses both the landmarking of the Terra-Cotta Company building, as well as her role in adding the company's surviving files to the archival collections at Avery Library at Columbia University. In addition to serving as President of FOTC, she serves as a board member of the Historic Districts Council and has completed site-specific art commissions for New York City public schools, and train stations for the Metropolitan Transit Authority and New Jersey Transit Light Rail. Tunick has long collaborated to expand the knowledge and appreciation of the terracotta industry in New York.

Along with retired Senior Historian of the New York City Landmarks Commission, Jay Shockley, Tunick details both in-situ architectural findings and archival research that attributes the use of terracotta in construction and manufacturing in New York City to a much earlier period in the mid-19th century than previously understood. Among her long list of publications, Tunick discusses her work on *Tile Roofs of Alfred: A Clay Tradition in Alfred, NY* (1994) and *Terra-Cotta Skyline: New York's Architectural Ornament* (1997) and the importance of creating accessible archival collections to continue the further understanding of historic building materials and industries.

Interviewees: Susan Tunick
Session: 1
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic
Location: Remote Video Call
Transcription: Matthew Geesey
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Q: All right, today is June 9, 2020 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Susan Tunick for the New York Preservation Archive Project. And we're doing this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. And today is also the funeral service for George Floyd. So I wanted to note that as well.

Tunick: And my father's birthday. He would be about 108.

Q: Oh, my goodness, wow.

Tunick: Luckily, he passed away. So he's not faced with 108.

Q: Yes, we're really kind of in the middle of an intersection of a lot of really interesting historical moments. So thank you for being willing to talk about the past today. Since we don't have your legal release yet, I just want to ask you verbally, is it okay if we record this interview and deposit it in the NYPAP archive?

Tunick: Yes, it's fine, thanks.

Q: Thank you. So first, can I ask you, since we are doing this interview remotely, if you can just describe where you are?

Tunick: Right now, I’m in our daughter’s room. She abandoned it many years ago and we’re not allowed to call it a study. We call it Anna’s room. So I’m working out of our apartment on 97th and West End Avenue. And that’s been our home for about thirty-plus years.

Q: And can you give a little brief introduction to yourself, to say your name and just a brief overview?

Tunick: Sure. My name is Susan Tunick and I’m an artist but I’ve also been involved in historic preservation for at least forty years. The focus of what I have been doing has to do with architectural ceramics since my own work is in using clay. And I think that all the years that I studied ceramics, I found potters afraid of feeling confident about ceramics. They were always feeling—they had an inferiority complex, which also carried through in other crafts, if you compare art and craft.

When we were living in the oldest extant co-op in New York City at 34 Gramercy Park East, I would notice beautiful heads outside of our window, and it was a red brick building from 1883. And I was surprised that they were there and I was interested in finding out what they were and understanding more about the building. Since it was brick, it looked to me like those ornaments must be clay also. And in the course of time, I learned a lot about architectural ceramics, mostly known as terra cotta, and there was an organization that had formed very recently on the West Coast called the Friends of Terra Cotta [FOTC].

I was in touch with them, and then with New York people who were involved in terra cotta, and the beginning of the Friends of Terra Cotta. So I sort of started, once that organization was up and running, I hooked into them and began to learn as much as I could about my building, which I didn't learn too much about. But then I realized, it was everywhere. And it was very exciting to realize that the city was built of clay. We always thought about it as a "concrete jungle," and indeed, it has lots of concrete, but lots and lots of clay.

So it was wonderful because I thought all of these people who work with clay, all of these potters and craftspeople, don't realize that they have a legacy in buildings as big as the Woolworth Building, as important as the Plaza Hotel. I thought, "Wow, it would be great to let people in ceramics know about this legacy." And from that kind of interest, it began to open up and realize that architects didn't realize either that they were faced with clay buildings. There were many revelations about using clay and how to use it and its history. I thought it would be wonderful if people in clay, and then of course people in architecture, and building people in general, engineers, knew more about the material. How to repair it, its history.

And so those were things that began to develop as the areas of interest within the Friends of Terra Cotta.

Q: Before we go into—more into—the Friends of Terra Cotta, tell me a little bit about where you grew up, the place you grew up and the home you grew up in?

Tunick: I grew up in Rockaway in Queens, which is one of the boroughs of New York, in a really wonderful old, cedar shingle house from about 1915. At the time, when I was a very young kid and we moved in, I thought it was rather ugly and brown and why couldn't we have a spanking new house like some of the people in the neighborhood.

In any case, I grew to really appreciate the house. And it was kind of wonderful to be near the beach in the summers. We were on that block, so we were right at the beach and the water. And then I went, unfortunately, to the public schools in New York and Far Rockaway High School, which has been closed since many years ago, when I was there, but at one point was restored by one of the terra cotta companies because it had a lot of clay ornaments on it, which I had not been aware of as a student.

I went from there to Bennington College in Vermont and I got an undergraduate degree there, and I studied ceramics and painting and liberal arts. And then I went for a master's degree at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in ceramics. I did the first year there and felt it was really not the right place. So I went back to Bennington, mostly to just talk with my teacher, who is still alive and well, and working at ninety-two. And he said, "Well, why don't you come back to Bennington for the second year of graduate work?" And I said, "I don't have the money." Bennington was the most expensive college in the country when I went there. It cost over three thousand dollars a year. And he said, "No, graduate students get paid and you teach drawing and you don't have to pay anything."

So that's what I did. I did a second year of graduate work and I got my MFA from Bennington. It was a very interesting experience because the man I worked with was unique. He remains unique. So that was very exciting. His name was Stan Rosen and he worked mostly in clay structures. He did some pots but he did lots of beautiful clay structures that were in a way like architectural models—they weren't, but they had some of that feeling.

It was an exciting year to be a graduate student, to sit in on faculty meetings. And then I moved to New York and married in 1969. My husband was studying cardiology and became a cardiologist in New York. So we've been here since we were first married, and we both are life-long New Yorkers, and grew up both in Rockaway.

Q: Wow.

Tunick: We can say that we're related because we do have family in common, but we say "vice is nice and incest is best."

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about what Rockaway was like when you were growing up?

Tunick: It was isolated, and that was the thing that was most difficult. To get to Manhattan, it took an hour and a half, on the bus and then the subway. Now, to get there, it takes two hours on the bus and subway, and two hours driving because traffic is so terrible. So it's still as isolated as ever. There is a ferry now in the summer, which is good for people who used to swim at the beach—and now, this year, I guess, we'll not swim but could sunbathe.

We took advantage, through our families and parents, of the cultural things in Manhattan and Brooklyn and so on, but found Rockaway was basically a cultural wasteland. There was nothing. There was one movie theater and there was a park, Jacob Riis Park, which you could play squash at. It was just an open park, which is now part of the National Park system. Because the schools were not good, I don't feel that it was a very good place to grow up. The education was very lacking. By the time I got to Bennington, it was made clear to me that that was the case, and I was able to get my parents to put my younger brother into a private school that he had to be driven to. And that got him a much better education. It didn't make him a good person sadly, but it was a good education.

Q: And what was your relationship to art when you were growing up and how was it that you found Bennington?

Tunick: I was always interested in art. I was not athletic, so I tended towards things that had to do with visual. And I did a lot of mosaics as a child. I took drawing classes. I went to Brooklyn College for some drawing when I was still in high school. And my parents were happy to encourage the arts end of things.

Q: And what about finding Bennington?

Tunick: Well, I'm embarrassed to say that my mother had said to me, "Here's a school that is interesting. It's different than most of the schools." So I said, "No, I don't want different. [Laughs] I don't want that." I had an aunt who was much, much younger than the rest of my relatives, and she had gone to Smith, and I thought, “Oh, I’d like to go to Smith or Vassar or Goucher.” I was interested in a women’s school. I went to a co-ed high school and I could see that it would be nice for the smartest, most outspoken person in the class to be a woman, not a man.

So I was happy to look at women’s schools but eventually after looking at the other schools I mentioned, and interviewing there, I did say, “Well, what makes Bennington different? Why is it different?” And my mother explained to me that there was first of all, no exams and no grades. And second, it closed in the winter for nine weeks and people did jobs. It was called a non-resident term. And I thought, actually, that sounds really interesting, especially the no grades. I had a very hard time with memorizing and repeating—and that’s all that was required of us in high school. Just learn it, spill it back, and take your test. And I found that I couldn’t do as well as I should be able to on tests because it was nerve-wracking for me.

It was a wonderful idea not to be tested and not to get grades but just to learn for the sake of learning, writing papers, things like that, or doing art projects. So when I went up to look at the school, I really was interested in it. I ended up applying early decision and being accepted. And I went and in the first year, I felt the art, which was all very modernist and abstract, was maybe not for me and maybe I should study anthropology, which I was interested in.

So during the work terms, I did different types of things and one year I worked at the Smithsonian with an archaeologist. And that gave me a very clear idea—after sorting ten thousand Iranian animal bones—that I really maybe didn’t want to do archaeology. [Laughs] So

I went back to the sophomore and junior years of Bennington thinking about the arts more and enjoying the chance to explore art. I did different kinds of work periods and had a chance to work at the Brooklyn Museum Art School one work period.

The direction that I moved in was really within the arts of mostly ceramics and also printmaking. I really didn’t do much painting until I went back as a graduate student the second year. But it was a good fit in many, many ways. I think I learned a great deal about myself and about the world through the four years there—actually five, because of the year of graduate work.

Q: Can you explain a little bit more about how your understanding of clay came out of an art space and came into more architectural context?

Tunick: Sure. In addition to wanting to let people who work in clay know about this legacy, I was interested in other people who were working in architecture and in engineering, and I thought it would be really interesting to know what was behind the making of these things that went into buildings. Some of them are very big and some buildings like the Woolworth were completely covered in clay. How did that come about?

I began to talk with people in architecture and people who had studied some things about terra cotta, and read thesis materials, and do a lot of work at [Columbia University] Avery [Architectural & Fine Arts] Library. It was very exciting to see that actually the processes—you had to make something. It had to dry. It had to be fired once, or even in architectural ceramics, it was only fired after it was glazed, mostly. There were a few differences but you’re talking about the same materials: clay, glaze, firing. And the result was a very permanent material.

Terra cotta has gotten a bad rap in the many recent years of New York City's Department of Buildings trying to figure out how to protect pedestrians from falling materials. Of course, the latest death was very recent and ironic because this was the woman that was an architect, and terra cotta fell and killed her. What was not taken into account, and what we have tried to emphasize, is that the building was deemed unsafe. It was supposed to be scaffolded. It was not. And the building owner was responsible for lack of maintenance for this building, which led to this death.

So the clay part was the same in a sense as an artist would do, but then the question of how does it go on the building? Where does it fit? How did anyone know about the sizes you needed? And so on. All of that was sort of an interesting exploration of the entire field of architectural ceramics and how different companies learned how to make things. It turns out that our major influences—in one sense, I can say that our major influences for terra cotta came from England and from English expertise.

However, after many years of working with terra cotta and publishing *Terra-Cotta Skyline* [*New York's Architectural* Ornament] in 1997, several years after that, an architect reached out to me to say, "You're not going to believe this but I'm working on the Cooper Union Building that the Cooper-Hewitt sisters had been involved with—and Peter Cooper—and we're doing a restoration and we found terra cotta on the building." It's noted to be an iron and brownstone building. So he said, "And the building is from 1853." In this country, terra cotta was really developed mostly—and what I was most aware of—was around 1890s approximately, the start. And that's really the start of the second phase. What I didn't realize, even though I had read some things about it, there was very, very little about 1850s architecture and so on, particularly anything to do with clay.

I went to examine the building and I said, "I'm sure that the part that has the clay is the part that has been added to a good bit later than the 1850s." And they say well, come and you tell us. And that was not the case. The case was that there was terra cotta from 1853. That led to the realization that there must be—there certainly was an industry in the 1850s in America. The first American-made materials were from the 1840s and 1850s. And where were they? Did they still exist? Cooper Union still existed. And it led to what's so far is a twenty-year study of the early material.

So it blossomed. It was very exciting to uncover all of the late—there were forty-eight companies in the late 1880s, '90s and through the 1930s. One or two went longer than that. But there was so little about the earlier companies and those were companies that were not influenced per se by English craftsmanship. They may have been influenced by England. They were certainly influenced by Germany and we discovered quite a few extant buildings and now we're still working on the New York ones.

But I've been working on this with Jay Shockley, who was the head of research at the Landmarks Commission for many, many years. He's a brilliant researcher and together—we had different skills. My research skills are minimal compared to his. That's what he does. And I have done a lot of looking, investigating material of different clays. So I could do a lot of the visual work with him. We've had an amazing time. It's been so much fun and we're still working away. We just jointly wrote a letter of support for a project that had 1850s terra cotta. The Landmarks Commission had called it cast iron. But Jay discovered an early article that referred to buildings using terra cotta and it listed some and we went and looked and these buildings all had terra cotta.

So the project has involved restoration of the buildings and a great deal of new construction further down the block by the same institution that owns these buildings. And it's wonderful to see the 1850s material back and looking great and in some cases, new pieces made to match by some of the new companies, the younger companies that are in operation.

We're still planning. Our hopes are to write about the extant terra cotta in New York City of which there's more and more, which is surprising because it is a young city. Now the 1850s was way back [laughs] and hopefully we'll get around to writing something about it. We've been publishing articles in various places for the last twenty years. The entire field is exciting to me.

Now I'm passionate about it and happy to share and teach and try to work with building owners, whoever needs help. The Friends of Terra Cotta tends to be a—we try to help and send you in the right direction, whether it's to a historian or to an architecture firm or to conservation specialists who may be able to provide certain information. Most, we have to try to send building owners to architects. They really would like to go directly to construction management. They'd go to general contractors in construction and say, "This is not a good idea." You're trying to go to have plastic surgery but you haven't found out if you're healthy enough to undergo surgery. So you need to go back and see the proper person which would be a doctor for surgery, a preservationist, architect, sometimes engineer, for restoration. You need to know what priorities you need to address, the most dangerous situations, or the most damaging to the beauty of the building, and prioritize what you do. Make long-term plans, restoration and maintenance.

Maintenance is always. It's permanent. You have to do it all the time. It's like going to the dentist. Preservation, particularly restoration, is as close to dental stuff as anything you can think of. All you need is an owner who calls and says, "Oh, this is my building." So you say, "Okay, I know the building, yes." They say, "Well, we were told that we have to do something because there's some pieces loose." So you say, "Okay." And they say, "Well, we want to know what it would cost." You say, "Okay." However, if you went to your dentist, are you going to ask him how much it will cost before you sit down? And by the way, when he tells you need a root canal, are you going to say, "Well, how much does it cost?" You won't know until you get in there. And that's what preservation is about. You don't really know until you can get in there.

So it's a lot of education for particularly building owners, and much less so now. In fact, my goal has always been—and I think I'm near it—to do enough sharing, enough outreach, to be able to not have an organization called the Friends of Terra Cotta. I once asked a funding source to get a grant to decommission the Friends of Terra Cotta, and they were upset. "Oh, no, you're doing great work. You can't. You have to keep working." But really, there's been a tremendous upswing in the curve of people's learning about buildings. And I think part of this has to do with 9/11. The sudden shock of a building falling. How could that building fall down? How could any building fall down? How could 90 West Street which had six fires and was built in 1906 stand, and the World Trade Center crumbles? Well, one was made mostly out of fireproof materials, which was terra cotta. The 1906 building has been restored and is full of co-op owners now and looks beautiful. It has so much to do with the awareness of our environment, that people are now much more educated.

About thirtysome-odd years ago, I realized that—this was the beginning of Local Law 10—and we lost a lot of ornament and a lot of detail, and buildings were stripped. I remember the famous comments by Paul Goldberger about the Mayflower Hotel, which he called the "Deflower Hotel," because they stripped everything off. We were trying to figure out how are we going to help people learn about their buildings, particularly co-ops, because co-op owners were educated and they had to be somewhat financially stable to own a co-op, but they knew nothing about the building itself. They were very uncomfortable when a professional would come in and say, "Oh, the cornice and the sills and the lintels, the running band course." They felt very uncomfortable because they didn't really know what was being talked about.

So they thought it would be very useful for the co-op buildings, and to protect them, to teach co-op owners about buildings and restoration and about building parts. So we developed a course called—well, let's see, we did a field guide for historic preservation for architecture and buildings. An apartment house field guide [*Field Guide to Apartment Building Architecture: An Illustrated Overview Providing a Simple Way to Identify Building Parts, Styles and Materials*]. With that, we also decided to offer a course and I met some of the most wonderful architecture people by having to reach out and say, "We need to teach a course on buildings. You need to be part of this. Would you come and do a lecture?" The Municipal Arts Society [MAS] was supportive of giving us the space, and we ran a number of these courses, which were three weeks in a row, three evenings with different people speaking: engineers, architects, conservation people. Also giving out the field guide, the little handbook. It also had a glossary. It was a pointy talky glossary. In Japan, you can point to things outside a restaurant—fake food—and point and say, "That's what I want," if you can't speak the language.

So we did a pointy talky glossary of the building parts and that really helped make it easier for non-architecture people to know what the cornice was, and to know where the lot line was, and to understand the terminology so that they didn't feel intimidated and could feel that they could ask educated questions to architects that they were considering using for the building restoration. There has just been no need for this—after a couple of rounds, people got educated. They learned about the buildings. And of course, lots of people didn't; we had fiascos all the time. But many, many owners had been respectful of the buildings, realizing the value financially and aesthetically of taking appropriate maintenance steps permanently, regularly, yearly.

We had a real shock when Local Law 11 came along because that was being introduced by the Buildings Department a number of years after Local Law 10 with this same idea of inspections. But this time, they were calling out that terra cotta had to be inspected hands-on. That was the only material. The rest you could do from the scaffold—from the sidewalk and so on. And we mounted a very strong campaign at the Buildings Department with a lot of very good architects who brought in pieces of other building materials that have fallen off and said, "You can't just try to push the hands-on work on one material. If you're going to do Local Law 11, it has to be hands-on for all of the materials on the building, because they all are subject to failure." We were successful. So instead of having Local Law 11 just target terra cotta, it looks at hands-on inspection and drops down the building with a scaffold, so that there's better understanding of building problems and protecting people on the sidewalk.

Of course, it all falls apart if you have building owners that ignore the fines they're getting from the Buildings Department. The answer of course is make the fines big enough so they can't ignore them. [Laughs] We're hoping to see that in the future because there are many, many buildings that are either scaffolded, and sidewalk bridges stay up for many years, the building owners don't do anything. It does protect the pedestrians but it does nothing for the streetscape or for the building. So there has been a lot of interaction with city agencies to try and press various matters in the direction that would protect buildings and people, not just single out one material. And I have said to a number of reporters, after the most recent death from terra cotta, that in 1911, the *New York Times* ran a big article that one out of every two buildings was using terra cotta—along with brick or stone—but with terra cotta ornament. So that if you look at our building stock, we have many older buildings that used terra cotta and that's why you're seeing more terra cotta falling: because there is more of it and people just haven't been aware.

Q: That's a really good point. You mentioned first discovering the Friends of Terra Cotta out on the West Coast and I wondered if you could share the origin story of the Friends of Terra Cotta.

Tunick: Yes. From what I know—and I like to emphasize this point because people always say I was the founder of Friends of Terra Cotta and I was really just a joiner in the beginning—a group of preservationists went to Gladding, McBean, which is one of the two terra cotta companies still in operation in the U.S., and they had been in operation since 1875, making clay products. Primarily sewer pipe—enormous sewer pipe—because that was a major clay product in the U.S. The group that went there was so impressed and they were all involved in preservation. I believe most were architects. They saw sections of the plant that remained untouched from the day that the particular modeler died and they left the room just the way it was with his smock hung up. The history was phenomenal.

It was right there and they were so excited about it, that they thought it would be really important to try to protect the material the way Margot Gayle had done with the Friends of Cast Iron. In fact, she was an early founder of Friends of Terra Cotta. So she was willing to help form another organization that would work to save building materials.

The group really flourished for a few years in California, and then I got in touch with them when I was—after living at 34 Gramercy Park briefly, I realized how much ornament there was. So I contacted them and I asked for help and guidance. Then it actually made sense to form a New York State branch, which we did. At this point, we're really just one organization: the Friends of Terra Cotta, Inc. and the New York State branch is just part of that. But I got a lot of help and feedback and began to do mailings just from the Friends of Terra Cotta – New York State and then we worked a lot with the national group to send out newsletters about terra cotta all around the country, not just on the West Coast. I included a lot of information there.

At the same time as I was learning about terra cotta, I was told that there was actually a company that had existed in Long Island City and I was very surprised. I was informed that the factory itself was torn down around 1960. But in fact, there remained a tiny and elegant office building, which was the main office for this company. So I looked into it more and I went out and I found the building. It was beautiful and small—seventy feet by twenty feet deep and two stories high—very little. It sat right on the edge of Vernon Boulevard, right at the sidewalk, and behind it was a huge plot of land, which had the factory and various outbuildings, and the kilns, none of which was left. But the building was there and it looked to me like someone might be living there but it was kind of boarded up and you couldn't tell. So I left a note and explained that I was trying to study the building and the material, and eventually, I was able to get into the building with the people who were living there illegally at the time. They were renting from the owner, which was Citibank, and they were supposed to have an audio business in the building which they had—there were stereos and stuff—but they were also living there.

The inside was amazing because it still had the safe. It had a number of fireplaces, and one of the fireplaces was very elegant and elaborate and actually had the signature in the clay of the superintendent of the company who designed the ornament for the fireplace. James Taylor was his name and he signed, "Jas. Taylor" in the clay, in the building.

This was very exciting, and it was clear that the building was sitting on a very empty lot and that it should indeed be protected. That was the first time I needed lots of help because I didn't know much about the landmarking process—I had never been involved. And it was a real eye-opener as to what was involved in protecting and actually taking a building through the steps that were required for hopeful landmarking.

It’s a crazy story in a way. I can make it pretty brief. We call the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company building “the suicide landmark” because as we continued to work on trying to find out more about the building, the previous owners, and when the company closed down, and so on, we began digging into records in Queens and it was clear that Citibank owned the building—they had bought it from someone—but we didn’t really know too much. It became clear that Citibank had been involved with the Queens borough president and it seemed like there was something very odd going on in this entire setting, and the fact that they owned the building and the site, but we didn’t really know what. Because we were more interested not in the politics but in the building’s history. We had a hearing after a zillion letters went in and all kinds of efforts were made to press the Landmarks Commission to hear this small building. And they did hear it. We had dozens of people, lots of potters, lots of people interested in architecture, come and testify.

I met a lot of great people at this first hearing. I had never been to a hearing before, so it was amazing. In any case, the building was designated. However, at that time, each borough president had the yea or nay to determine whether the building would actually stay landmarked or be overturned. And the borough president of Queens was Donald Manes, who was very much a shyster, and was totally against making Citibank suffer with a landmark building.

So we had left town because this was over the summer. In August, the City Council met and we knew that he would say no and they would overturn the building. But a friend who stayed back in New York and followed this called me very excited, saying he didn’t overturn the building and it’s landmarked. And not too long after that, Donald Manes ended up in NYU [New York University Medical Center] from stab wounds. He had tried to kill himself. He didn’t do a very good job of it and so they patched him up and sent him home. But the second time he tried, he was successful and he killed himself. He was involved in a huge scandal that had to do with the parking department [New York City Parking Violations Bureau] and building violations and it was all coming to the surface. He did not overturn the buildings designation because he was afraid that we had learned about some of his criminal activity. Actually he was fifty-six, I think, when he died and he had a twin brother who also tried to kill himself with a knife and failed and died of a heart attack at seventy. It was crazy.

But it is through the fact that this guy was a criminal that the building was actually landmarked and survives. Sadly, it’s empty all these years, and it is now owned by Stuart Match Suna and Silvercup Studios. His wife was a commissioner, an architect, and was on the Landmarks Commission in recent years. And he has not been a good steward of that building. We have had to force the Landmarks Commission lawyers—it took seven years to get them to insist on restoration of the building, repairs. Trees were growing out of it. Water was pouring into it. It had been a completely habitable building at the time it was landmarked and it was becoming a complete wreck. But the commission finally did get Silvercup to restore the building and it’s empty, still, but it is restored. Unfortunately, the site behind it has been rezoned through all kinds of activities by Stuart Match Suna over many years, and he believes that he would be able to build an enormous hotel on the site. And the building would remain but there would be a very large hotel. Each time he’s started up, there’s been a financial crisis: in 2008, and more recently.

So I don’t know when that will come to fruition but we’re hopeful that we’ll watch the building and that it will not be hurt in any way, but could be a showplace for I don’t know what. It depends on what happens with the building and the site behind it.

But that was the first experience with landmarking and it was such an eye-opener in so many ways. I really learned a lot of civics from that, and met great people like Dorothy Miner, who was a lawyer for the Landmarks Commission. I had given her letters from all these potters and she came over to me after the hearing and said, “I know these potters.” And I said, “How could you possibly know somebody named Bennett Bean? How could you?” “Because I love ceramics and I collect it.” And we became very good friends all the way through her death and on her death bed.

So I feel that I gained a lot from that first experience with landmarking.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about some of the people you were working with in the New York chapter of FOTC and some of the other people that you were—in addition to Dorothy Miner—meeting and then being able to connect with?

Tunick: I was involved from very early on with the Municipal Arts Society. We did a large exhibit there on terra cotta called *Firing the Imagination*. We were using contemporary architects to make new designs in terra cotta and also did a history section on the material. It was wonderful. So I worked on the preservation committee. I’m still on it, over thirty years, I guess. I haven’t calculated.

But the preservation committee was wonderful. We worked with Joan Davidson, who was running it. Charles Platt. For years, the whole organization was very helpful. Of course, Kent Barwick went from being the Landmarks Commission chairman who heard the Terra Cotta Building to returning to MAS as its executive director.

So I had a lot of common knowledge and shared experiences with Kent and of course Brendan Gill who came out of the building. I have a beautiful picture of him and Tony Wood and a woman from the Landmarks Conservancy standing in front of the Terra Cotta Building when we were working to landmark it. So Brendan was always a source of inspiration. The organization was very small in New York and I mostly worked with people who just were interested in preservation in general.

I was very early involved with the Historic District Council, which I'm still on the board of. I assume I will soon rotate off because luckily we have term rotations. And I got great feedback and help from everyone. It was very exciting. I was in my early thirties when I began all of this. So people were happy to have somebody younger coming in. Now of course, we're looking for the younger ones to come into preservation and they are, as we age up. [Laughs]

One of the people who helped so much was named Jane Stanicki who I still work with a great deal. She was at the Bowery Savings Bank and I think it was Tony who had met her and said, "She's a banker, maybe she can help us with Citibank." And she was absolutely willing to go out to the bank. I had to ask her if she owned a pair of sneakers because she shouldn't wear high heels out there. It was very dirty. And, of course, she was an athlete and had lots of sneakers [laughs]. So it was quite amusing that I would assume a banker was going to walk around in high heels at a construction site. But she helped us in many, many ways with the Bowery, being supportive, and with meeting rooms and mailing assistance. And she moved on and is doing other incredible work, mostly volunteer now, to do with Rikers Island and women in prison. But her help was invaluable throughout.

Q: You mentioned really getting a civics education from doing this preservation work. I was wondering if you could go into a little more detail about getting familiar with the different New York City agencies and how to navigate that.

Tunick: Well, what was so interesting was that there were channels to follow. I didn't really realize. When we are now ever teaching anyone about preservation, you explain that if you are looking to landmark something, you need to start with a letter and then follow up with a barrage of letters and calls, and everything that you can do to convince the staff and commission that this is a building worth hearing. So all you're doing is going to the very first step, which is a public hearing. And I was never aware of how rigid the three-minute time limit is for speakers. I found the process interesting, a bit arduous, but there was such a need for support and we were able to reach out to so many people that the commission was willing—relatively—it didn't take years and years. It was a relatively short time that they calendared the building. That meant that we would have a public hearing and we would try to get as many people to speak as possible, from different points of view, about the significance of it.

So that process, and then, of course, the City Council process at the time—which is totally different now—was a little hair-raising because you figure five borough presidents, why should one of them from the borough that the building is in really say yes or no to that. That's changed somewhat.

I also was amazed by the Buildings Department and how they could provide a blanket law like Local Law 10 without the recognition that it was going to mar dozens and dozens of buildings. And why not have this law and at the same time begin to teach building owners what they could do to keep us, the pedestrians, safe and the buildings.

So it was kind of a battle to push through things at the Buildings Department. One of the big challenges was the constant change of Landmarks Commission chairmen. You would go from somebody who understood buildings to people who were tokens from the mayor, all across the board. It could be very difficult to encourage someone who was running a department to do the right thing and to support designation.

There was a lot of frustration, and to realize that you just have to stay with it. You're just going to keep going. You're going to come back again. You're going to come back again and again, and unless the building is destroyed in the interim, which does happen, you're going to pressure the commission with tons of support from many people to consider, to give the building a hearing, if nothing else.

So those were the two departments that I dealt with the very most and there was certainly a lot of frustration. But it was also very exciting when you could get to look at records. Queens Building Department is quite difficult because they didn’t follow through with their records in the same way as the Manhattan branch. But even so, I’ve, time and again, gone to the Buildings Department, gotten certain wonderful things, photographed them, and then they’re lost. They never seem to get back to where they’re supposed to go. So that’s disheartening.

But you do learn a huge amount of respect for archival material. There is no way that you could play down importance, even—until recently, in another early article that Jay and I had found about early terra cotta, it listed a few buildings and one of them was on 35th Street. Jay and I walked the whole of 35th Street and we could not find anything that was relevant, and figured it had been torn down. Years later, I was walking to NYU Hospital on 31st Street and discovered a whole row of buildings with terra cotta from the 1850s. That article was a misprint. It should have said 31st instead of 35th.

So you get these clues and then pieces start to fall into place in amazing ways. And the same thing with the buildings that I mentioned earlier that we just helped encourage for the restoration. The article that this was mentioned in, mentioned a company, and we don’t trust a lot of the early articles. Time and time again, we’ve had to go back to research what they were talking about at the time to discover that they were incorrect.

So when we had this early article and it said there were buildings on 16th Street by a certain terra cotta company, we didn’t trust it but we certainly were interested. A piece had to be removed from the building for restoration purposes and when I was on the scaffolding during the work, I was able to see the back of the piece. And it's identical to the crazy pieces I have with the same back and it's all wrong; you just never would do a back like that. But it's the same and it's not the company that was listed in the article. But we know from the back who made it.

But we wouldn't know that if I didn't have a few other pieces with the same back and I only got those pieces because I saw this great building that used to have terra cotta from the 1850s. We knew that all of it was stripped off and it was still standing, right across from Grace Church. I went by one day and it was scaffolded. I went inside to try to find out whether it was in the dumpster and if I could dumpster dive, and maybe find some terra cotta from the building. A very positive building manager was there and he said he'll take me down, and the dumpsters had just been emptied. That was very disappointing and he said to come back to the office. He thinks he might have something I'm interested in. And he had a piece of terra cotta from the building and he says, "Is this like the Holy Grail?" I said, "Oh, yes, yes, it is." It was just amazing. He said, "Why don't you take it? The architect was supposed to take it and he never came."

It was wonderful because we had the actual material and we did have material from Cooper Union. Then this same man contacted me, the building manager, and said, "I have some things that would interest you but you need to bring a car. You can't put the piece in your purse." I said, "Okay, okay, I'll be there." He gave me some pieces that had been removed from the building, that had been chopped away—basically chopped—but not so far destroyed that I couldn't tell where they were from and what the pattern was.

So we ended up with several pieces of semi-destroyed terra cotta and the backs were the backs that we discovered and were so strange. And that was by a company—we knew the company that had made the material for the building across from Grace Church because it was very important. It was the Richard Upjohn Building and significant. It is gone now, totally gone. It was destroyed [laughs] and a new building's going up.

But it was through the outreach and interest of other people such as the building manager. Information just keeps accumulating and it's really fun because you don't know what you're going to learn next. You just don't. And we've been trying—and I'm still trying—to get a series of pieces of clay tested for similarities. We now know that we have pieces from four companies and we would like to compare them. Clay building materials and so on. We actually did this for the Cooper Union but since then, which was twenty years ago, the people who were working are not involved anymore.

So I've reached out to the Landmarks Commission because they have had clay analysis done for their archaeology. But that was just before the quarantine and I know that when things get more back to normal, I'll try to start over again and get more help from them. But there's a lot to be learned, a lot more, and some of it is really not anything I have expertise with. You need microsections of material. You need all kinds of scanning and equipment to learn about different clay values. But it's something that is in the works.

Q: How do you go about taking different pieces of clay from your purse or your car and turning that into an archive for people in the future to continue to learn about these companies?

Tunick: [Laughs] Well, that's a very good question. First of all, I'm not supposed to bring any more clay into my house. [Laughs] They're going to weigh me when I go in with what I have.

Q: [Laughs]

But I have a very good ceramics studio very near the house and it's keeping about half of the materials there. But aside from the pieces, which are—they are definitely of value but the value is something we're making clear through research and writing of the pieces, that the fact that the back is so strange and it's the same as another back. So those two buildings were by the same person, and who this person was, and the company, and all of that. But the question of what do you do with the materials, forty years worth of paper—it's very hard to know.

I would love to have the materials stay in the New York area but my guess is that it probably won't. Possibly the National Building Museum in Washington would be suitable. They have some excellent archives of terra cotta that have been donated. Or there's a Building Arts Foundation in St. Louis that's very active. It actually collects buildings. So the owner has been taking buildings down and apart, recording all the information, and storing them in St. Louis, and hopes to rebuild them as a building museum. He's also doing a lot with archival material. The library is very extensive.

So I would like to see it go somewhere it will fit in and will not just be sidelined. So I'm not sure. We've had a lot of different experiences with archival material. For one thing, when the Terra Cotta Building in Long Island City was being landmarked, we were in there a lot and there were all kinds of things in the attic. Not paper. Unfortunately, very little paper. There were vials of chemicals and things like that. But there was a crawlspace in the attic and it turned out that the crawlspace had four thousand files of buildings the company did not get to work on, jobs that they did not get. And those files were so tucked away that no one bothered to destroy them when they were emptying the building.

So we got those files removed and over the years, got grants to clean all the materials and organize it and we were able to donate it to Avery Library at Columbia. We got a grant to have graduate students work with me on creating a database on the computer for the materials and having it searchable. As a result we did a publication to let people know about the material.

Unfortunately, none of the students in historic preservation have used the archive. Architects have and a number of other people but there are about ten thesis topics sitting there in that material that nobody has ventured near. Each year, I remind the people at the preservation school at Columbia about this but so far, we haven't had any takers.

That archive, I feel good about in the sense that it's protected and organized but I feel bad that it's not really in the right place because if it were in a place where the material value was greater, it might have been used more. So I know that I will need to do a lot more organizing with the material. Much of it, which is really funny at this point now, is reprints and Xeroxes of articles from journals, that were Xeroxed onto archival paper and filed under different companies or under architects. It's all been filed. But the actual articles are pretty much online now. So every now and then, someone from the far reaches of the world will say, "I see in your database that you have such and such article, and I can’t get the microfilm. I can’t get anything. Could you send me a copy of it?” Yay, we send material. We’re happy to help people with that.

But probably a lot of material of that nature is superfluous. I don’t know. That would be for someone else to decide in the future. We also have kept the articles that were newspaper articles. So we have some of the original ones. But I have no problem with not keeping things that are accessible online. We do have a lot of things that are rare, catalogs of companies and early books. I have an 1898 book that’s interesting. We have many different books that we’ve purchased over the years for research purposes. Some of them may be superfluous also because there may be enough other editions out there that it’s not important to have them or keep them.

But with that, and our actual objects, and we’d share a lot. We’d break the back of a piece to share. I’ve worked a lot with students of Frank Matero at the University of Pennsylvania, worked with people up at the clayworking school at Alfred [University] to help them have samples for things that they’re doing. The goals haven’t been the same as my goals for clay investigation. I have really specific goals that I would like to get possible answers to, but I will do that in time through persistence.

Q: When you say that that particular archive isn’t really in the right place for people to be using it, what do you mean? What would an ideal place for those materials be?

Tunick: Well, when I think about it, I think for example, if somebody is interested in terra cotta, they may well go to the Building Museum. I think Northwest Terra Cotta Company donated a lot of archival material and photographs and some physical material. They do have terra cotta from other places, and the archivists there would say, “And by the way, we also have material from the New York company. These are jobs they didn’t get but it’s very rich with correspondence, photographs, sketches. You can understand the process of how things were made or what company lucked out to get the job.” The record will say it “went to Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company” or “job discontinued” or “turned to stone.” So they decided to use stone instead of terra cotta. Sometimes there would be indications that the job went to the closest manufacturer because the shipping was much less. The difference in getting the job or not, it was a couple of dollars practically.

So there was a lot of competition. There was also price fixing in the terra cotta industry. There were legal responses to that, lawsuits. Lots of effort to get a job. I mean, with forty-eight companies in the Midwest, the West and the East, there was plenty of competition, which was good, I think. It wasn’t good that they got together to price fix but it was good to see that everyone worked to do their best. We are doing great work and now we have two companies in the U.S. and a company in England, and a couple companies in Italy and Spain and Germany and China. We wish there would be more of a coming together with these companies, so that they didn’t just compete, that they would sort of work together to make things better. But I’m glad to have this number of companies. At least, there’s competition and it makes everything better. People have to work harder. Satisfy your client more. That’s good.

Q: I can’t help but think of some parallels there with artists, especially artists who are applying for commissions and potentially don’t get those commissions but that’s still part of their work and you only know that if you go to their archive.

Tunick: Yes, the artist situation is far worse because there were forty-eight companies. There's 48,000 artists. I know from bitter experience and also wonderful experience about commissions and the complexity of getting them.

Q: Can you actually talk about some of your work that's public art in the city, in New York?

Tunick: Yes, I had really interesting experiences. I did projects for the subway system, which were on a couple of Brooklyn stations. They were being enlarged and also restored and they needed both new historic material, or restoration material, which I could advise about, people who are making it. And then also, artists commissions for the Percent for Art.

I worked on three stations—three locations—in Brooklyn that I really, really enjoyed. There's ceramic mosaic in the three stations. There's Parkside [Avenue] and Prospect Park stations. That was very, very interesting because I enjoyed working with the architects and actually continued working with them as a consultant on other projects. So that was very, very nice. A lot of work over a long period, especially when you're doing mosaic, but everyone cooperated. The contractors were good. We worked together and it was very positive.

I also worked on the New Jersey Light Rail, which was a very different experience because I was sort of working in isolation. I had the Bayonne station and it needed wayfinders that were on lampposts and also needed medallions that needed to be inserted into the railings that were being built. So it was fun. I went down to Bayonne and I studied all about the industries and the city. They had and still do have Maidenform, it’s one of their companies. The first two-way radios in police cars were introduced in Bayonne. There was the kite that was developed that was used for aerial photographs. Early movie pictures were done there, very, very early, way before Hollywood. So I got a chance to use some of these ideas in medallions and motifs that people would get to pay attention to in their own borough.

I had a very nice pigeon in a Maidenform pigeon vest. Now believe it or not, Maidenform in the war, World War II and I, made pigeon vests for the war effort. They were carrier pigeons and they fit on them to keep their wings from flapping and they would be removed as the pigeon was sent off to fly on its mission. So I had a pigeon who dreamed they went to—God, I don’t even remember—but they dreamed that in their Maidenform vest, they helped with World War II. [Laughs]

There were a lot of fun historical things that you could introduce in the clay medallions that I was making. That went also very well but it didn’t have the interaction with the teams of architects, so it was a little more in isolation. But it went fine and it was fun to do. I think everything went very well.

I also did a big school project in Jackson Heights, Queens for a new school that was being built. It’s a different kind of system now where they had an early learning system. So public schools, which would go through, I think, second grade or third maybe, and then the children would move to a bigger school. But it was a wonderful opportunity in their very large all-purpose room, which was their gym, their lunch room, their assembly room, to make a series of murals that related to the children and to Queens. To the beach, to sea creatures in one case. I used a poem by A.A. Milne called *Now We Are Six*, embedded in a second piece that was part of this. And then one piece that included lots of hexagons and honeycombs and bees and the notion of learning about both bees, and the letter B, and spelling bees, and all kinds of things that related. Then I actually went as an artist to teach in the school with an art teacher about the murals and have the children make things that related to the murals, and it really was fun. At one point, I had laryngitis, so I went in to teach anyway, and I explained to the children that [whispering] we whisper, everybody would whisper. And it worked out great because the teacher would translate what I was saying and then the kids were all whispering. They did great work.

That was another project that I really enjoyed. I worked a lot with the architects because I also helped design the floor pattern for the linoleum and the trim, and I did a large plaque at the front of the building for the firefighters because it was named for one of the firefighters who died in 9/11 and went to that school. So it was a whole plaque and panel about that, that came out of children's books about the little fireman, and so on. What's fun is the context, tying in. The new principal was excited. It was a new school. Parents were excited. It really was wonderful to have the chance to connect with parents and children. I met with parents beforehand to explain what I was interested in doing and sharing the poem with them and things. It was very positive. It was great and interesting, and it was nice to be able to do something for a multi-purpose room, and the kids actually have cushions and stuff that are right next to the mural. They can touch them. They're encouraged to touch. There were some little mirrors—some little, tiny circular mirrors, three-quarters of an inch—that were embedded into the mosaic. So they could put their eyeball up and see their eye. A really nice chance for young children to feel ownership. That was good.

Q: That sounds great. So you have also done some preservation advocacy on the state level. Is that right?

Tunick: Well, yes, I was involved in the [Alfred] Ceramics Museum at Alfred. So I would go up to board meetings. I was, I guess, an advisor or something. Then I got to see really wonderful things around Alfred and in the town. The roof tiles were brilliant. It was an early company, which still operates out of Ohio now called Ludowici-Celadon, which produced vast amounts of roof tile, and beautiful work. It started in Alfred. There were many, many buildings with roof tiles, and I worked with the community and ceramics departments to produce a publication on the roof tiles of Alfred with a walking tour guide, photos.

I've worked with the Preservation League a good amount. It's wonderful because you can try to help, whether it's Corning, which had a terra cotta company and the people of Corning who were trying to save a fabulous building. We worked together on these things and tried to see how we can educate enough to save things. It's the big bucks against the aesthetics and the history. And we've had some terrible losses but we also have been happily successful with some of the landmarking.

Q: You'd mentioned that there's quite a variation in experiences between the buildings, and also differences between administrations and how that affects your ability to move forward. Broadly, how has the field changed during the time that you've been involved? Are there any larger trends that you feel like you can point to?

Tunick: Well, one thing is that Columbia was the first school to have, I believe, a preservation school within the architecture department and now, there are many, many excellent schools. So it means that there are a great many more people trained in preservation. That whole educated base has been very terrific. And it’s not just—some people go right into preservation architecture but many are working with preservation groups in advocacy. Some are working in libraries and doing archival research. I think it’s really exploded the number of people that are interested. I would say, unfortunately, the youngest of the people are less interested in advocacy but advocacy doesn’t pay. You can’t pay rent with advocacy. I do understand that.

But through the professional organizations that work throughout the city, we try to bring in younger people and of course, start educating in schools. We start with young kids. I’ve done a lot of work with the AIA [American Institute of Architects]. It has a program called Learning by Design and they work with teachers on how to teach about buildings, how to share information, how to create projects.

I’m very interested in younger people coming into this, partly so they can pay attention to the environment. When my daughter was in school, the fourth grade is always studying New York, and I just worked with the children, gave every child the terra cotta building near their home to look at, and asked anyone, “Do you have any clay that’s fired in your house?” And the children all go, “No.” And I’d go, “Really? Do you have any cups in your house?” “Oh, yes, I think we have a cup that’s clay.” “Okay, I know this is strange but do you have a bathroom in your house?" [Imitates embarrassed laughter] "Yes." They don't want to talk about it. "Well, guess what? Your toilet is made out of clay." I can't say that for the sinks and tubs anymore but still the toilets. We start really early and we ask children, "What's your building made out of, the building that you live in? Can you please go home and look at it?" Now of course, they take a picture with the iPhone.

But the minute you start introducing things like this, it changes the world view. I introduced my grandchildren, who are now five and eight, when they were two to clay. They live in Paris but I would bring clay over and start working with clay. It was amazing because very quickly the older one who is now eight learned about materials. So we would go to the Louvre [Museum] and the first thing she would say is, "No bottles in the art museum." She got stopped by somebody when she was drinking milk out of a baby bottle—one of the guards. But you could go through parts of the Louvre and say what material is this? And she learned the materials very, very quickly. It was amazing to see. And also learned how to handle the material.

Now the younger one has also learned. It informs them. Now they're in isolation in Switzerland and their teacher tells them they need to make papier-mache. And our daughter says, "I'm not going to waste flour on papier-mache." It's hard to find and newspapers are hard to find. So she said, "I'm going to make pretzel dough with them and then after we make something, we can eat it." They knew how to knead and they knew how to roll out. All of it translates from one to another.

We're really anxious to get children to know about their environment and begin to care about it.

That will give us a chance to have young adults who, if they're interested, want to study architecture or want to study about the history of things. Until you're older, history doesn't really mean anything, and that's a real problem. I'm trying to make history relevant, and that way, we would be getting younger people excited in terms of the work that they do.

I just was at Penn [University of Pennsylvania], they had a two-day conference on tile, and I was a keynote speaker. Then we did a whole day in a plant that was the [International] Masonry Institute's education environment. So they're actually hands-on. And we had goggles and masks and we were handling materials and watching how things can be repaired or damaged or cleaned. There were quite a few younger people there, in their twenties. They were graduate students, or some were out and working. It was terrific to have them involved in the physical. I think that was really exciting for all of us.

Q: Have you found any other people who took a route similar to yours, for example, starting within fine arts and then moving into a more architectural or advocacy space?

Tunick: Yes, definitely. Some of the architects, the good preservation architects, were starting out in the making field and I think that there's such an important relationship. I had worked with different architecture firms to discuss when they have a project with terra cotta, it's new design, trying to discuss the options that are much more extensive, whether it was glaze options, which was an issue that came up with a very sad situation at 2 Columbus Circle where they tore down the [Edward] Durell Building. There they used glaze ceramics for the surface and needed a lot of help with the kind of glaze that might work. So I could either help or advise who could help.

Also, working with architects who were thinking about how to use the material. But it was very difficult—I don't think I succeeded at all in getting anyone to play with clay. I said, "When was the last time you handled a piece of clay?" "Third grade, we had clay." It's hard to get people in there and make a mess, get working. At Columbia—I taught some terra cotta stuff at Columbia––and we did make messes and someone now is working there who's very good and also encourages the making of mess. It's okay. It's okay. So Columbia has been doing [the course] "Brick, Terra Cotta + Stone." I think it was something that was cancelled for awhile but I do think it's coming back or has been back in curriculum.

Q: We're coming to the end of some of the questions that I had and I wanted to ask if there were any other topics that are important chapters that we haven't covered or any particular buildings that you want to describe.

Tunick: Well, I think it's important for people to realize some of the losses and some of the gains. So for example, the worst loss was the Della Robbia—no, that was one we saved. It was the Marine Grill Room which was an absolutely incredible rathskeller in the [Hotel] McAlpin building on 34th Street and Seventh Avenue. It had murals done by [Frederick] Dana Marsh who was the father of Reginald Marsh, a painter. He worked with Atlantic Terra Cotta Company and they designed about seven murals that gave the history of shipping and sailing in New York. So it was just a brilliant setting. There are postcards of it.

I got to have it photographed for the book and in general and then tried to get it landmarked.

Before we could get it landmarked, it was destroyed. The owners did not want to be landmarked and they were going to rent the space to The Gap which has a store above the ground floor, it was a store. So they were using it for storage. You know perfectly well that everything could have remained and they could have had a perfectly fine storage space but they decided instead to destroy it. And I was taking a walking tour in that area on a Saturday and we passed the back of the building on 35th and there were dumpsters filled with terra cotta. It was beyond shocking. The people on the tour took pieces of terra cotta. I couldn't. I was sick to my stomach. There was a guard there and he said, "They don't know what they're doing. They're destroying antiquity." I said, "Yes."

We were able to get it stopped before everything was destroyed and some of the murals were eventually removed and the conservancy took them. They were restored. Sadly, they were restored by a paint conservator, which meant that they couldn't ever be outdoors because that isn't how you restore terra cotta. And then they were installed in the Fulton [Street] subway station and then that closed and they were taken out again. And now they're back in another part of the Fulton station that's very huge, in a place that's okay. But they didn't belong there. They belonged where they were and the room was magnificent.

Following that very, very disheartening experience, we began to realize that there was another rathskeller in the city, the Della Robbia Bar, and it was in the Vanderbilt Hotel on 33rd and Park [Avenue]. But originally there had been the largest Rookwood—and Rookwood was the company that did—not the McAlpin, that was Atlantic Terra Cotta—but Rookwood is a pottery and terra cotta company that's very famous for its pottery. They did all the interiors for the Della

Robbia Bar and Della Robbia Room. The Della Robbia Room was the largest installation they ever did and it was staggeringly beautiful. It is now a parking garage and the marble floors remain but basically nothing else. However, the bar, which was separate and was known as the Men's Crypt [or "The Crypt"], was not destroyed. And it took great effort and persuasion but also cooperation from Laurie Beckelman, who was chair at the time, to see that it got landmarked. And it's now a flourishing restaurant called Wolfgang's. It's a steakhouse. It's just a wonderful space and wonderful detail.

So that was a success story on a minor level compared to the McAlpin. But we've been very fortunate in being able to help landmark a number of buildings in the different boroughs. The most recent in Brooklyn was the Empire [State Dairy Company] building, which was [later] the Borden's Dairy Building. It was originally [Empire]. It has fabulous tile murals, which go up on the whole front of the building, that show cows and all kinds of things to do with the product. So the building is being reused and they are doing things that are unfortunate to it but we know that at least the context and the brick façade and so on will remain. And we are working a great deal with PENY, which is the Preserving East New York group, a lot of younger people who did a great deal toward getting this building landmarked.

It's very hopeful that areas in the city that have been neglected are stepping up with residents and younger people determined to preserve some of what's there. There are a lot of other successful landmarkings, and some are successful but the buildings are still empty, that kind of thing. So it ranges a lot.

We’ve helped a lot of people in different countries to try to work on protecting their buildings as well. We have a very positive network with people in France and Belgium and England and Japan, trying to help each other, if we can, with advocacy or information. I feel like it’s been a really special kind of experience. Of course, I’m really grateful to the people who came before who were working on preservation because they started at a time when it was a complete uphill battle. It was us old ladies in tennis shoes with signs and struggling to keep things. There’s much more appreciation now. We also have much more difficulty with developers and the real estate board in many things, not just saving all the buildings but in affordable housing, which is a complete crisis in the city, which developers have less than no interest in and only do when they’re forced into it. That’s something that has to change, I think.

But our whole government is in such a disaster state right now, that all of our values have been demeaned and we hope to be able to rebuild all the things we’ve lost in a three-year period. A great many laws have been overturned and I’m not really talking about preservation but I’m thinking of the environment and climate change. We can’t have a liveable city if we don’t have an environment that’s climate appropriate.

That is the true beauty of it. It’s all tied together. It’s all of one piece of cloth. I think that our world has specialized people to the extent where most people have blinders. “Oh, no, I don’t do that kind of gynecology. I only do this kind of gynecology.” “Oh, I don’t do this kind of work. I only do that kind.” There’s nothing wrong with specialized, it’s important. But we also need the breadth, so there’s an overview. Those are the things that really concern me.

Otherwise, I am really grateful to a lot of the people who have been working—certainly Tony [Anthony Wood]. He's been there from day one and he's kept his sense of humor and purpose. I greatly admire that. It's wonderful, the Preservation Archives and the whole program that he has set up is extraordinarily important. I tried to do some oral history when I found terra cotta survivors [laughs] and we did some tapes, and we did lots of oral history because when it's gone, it's gone. It's just gone. It's so finite. So I really commend the kind of work that he's doing and also the oral history field. I kind of decided when I had a chance to do oral history, I just made it up as I went along because I had no choice. I mean, I was getting an appointment to meet somebody and I had to figure out how I could get as much good information from them as possible. So I admire what you're doing as well as what Tony and Brad [Vogel] and everyone are doing. That's great.

Q: Well, it always feels great when we get to help add to the record, information and stories that otherwise aren't recorded anywhere. even, like you pointed out, sometimes when the written record is wrong. So we have to use all the tools that we have to try to understand—

Tunick: Well, we have to admit that the oral record can be wrong too.

Q: Yes. [Laughs]

Tunick: I certainly know that I've said wrong dates at times or not quite correct names for the role that somebody's playing. We're all subject to that but I think you can get something more from an oral history than from just reading the text. That's very, very valuable. So good work.

Q: Well, thank you to you. I think the names and dates may be wrong but the way you laid out the interconnectedness and provided so many examples is something that can’t be replicated and you can’t be wrong—it’s your perspective.

Tunick: Thank you, great. When will you send a text? No rush.

Q: Probably within the next two or three weeks. I have to reach out to our transcriptionist—

Tunick: Sure, well, by the time maybe I get the new computer, I’ll be able to look at it.

Q: Yes, it won’t be before that. And I wanted to mention actually that my partner’s grandfather worked for Gladding, McBean in Lincoln, California.

Tunick: What? Really?

Q: And I’ve been there—to Lincoln at least—and have seen terra cotta, the sewer pipes. And then when I lived in Greenpoint, close to the water where they were building out West Street in advance of those highrises that are there now, they had Gladding, McBean sewer pipes. So they’re still using them.

Tunick: Oh, that’s great. I didn’t realize that. Now what did he do?

Q: I’m not sure what he did there actually.

Tunick: Is he alive?

Q: No, not anymore. And they had come from Arkansas, and they came out to California and started doing agricultural work, and eventually they came inland. And I think Gladding, McBean was kind of the first sort of stable year-round work that he did and then from there, I think he went into housebuilding. And that’s what he did.

Tunick: Well, if he ends up having anything from the terra cotta era, that was his father’s, I’d love to know about it.

Q: I’ll ask.

Tunick: The company is busy, active, and they have their archives at the Sacramento State Library that are being really well taken care of, and all the photographs that are documented in recent years by Gladding, McBean are being organized. And the woman that did it will donate them to the library also. They’re in really good hands in terms of that. It’s exciting. I guess I need to start pushing Boston Valley [Terra Cotta] to start creating an archives of their own. They may have been doing but that gives me another mission. That’s great. I’m really excited to hear that. Tell me, do you know the name? His father’s name?

Q: It was his grandfather. The last name was Jenkins, the last name but I can’t remember.

Tunick: If you find out, let me know because I actually know one or two people who are still alive who worked at Gladding, McBean. I don't know if they would go back that far. It would even be kind of neat to look up his work record and what he was working on and stuff.

Q: Now, my partner's father also worked there briefly and I think he describes it as he worked for one day hauling big fifty pounds of clay and that was it.

Tunick: Well, there are a lot of people who spent one day doing that kind of stuff. That's so nice to know, very exciting. Good, well, let me know if he could get the last name, first name, and maybe we can look—and any dates he might have been and we'll follow it along. It's great.

Q: Sounds great.

Tunick: Thank you.

Q: Thank you so much. Take care, Susan.

Tunick: It's good to see you. I hope we'll meet in person at some point.

Q: Me too, me too.

Tunick: Okay, thanks. Bye.

Q: You’re welcome. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]