

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Kate Wood

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Kate Wood conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on August 31, 2021. 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.

Kate Wood was engaged in historic preservation at a young age through her parents, do-it-yourselfers who moved the family into a Tudor Revival house in need of restoration when Wood was ten years old. She learned about the professional of historic preservation as a teenager, eventually attending Columbia University's Historic Preservation program, with a joint program in Urban Planning.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the New York City Landmarks Law, Wood raised the possibility of highlighting interior landmarks. This suggestion would ultimately become an exhibition and book detailing the history of New York City's interior landmarks, which Wood worked on in partnership with Judith Gura. In this interview, Wood describes aspects of the Landmarks Law as it applies to interiors, including advocacy campaigns, controversies, and limitations. She also shares insights into the role of interior design in the history of preservation in New York City, keys to successful advocacy campaigns, and her ideas about preservation as a form of recycling.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey

Session: 1

Interviewee: Kate Wood

Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic

Date: August 31, 2021

Q: All right, today is August 31, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Kate Wood for the New York Preservation Archive Project and we're doing this interview remotely via video call. And because I don't have your signed consent form yet, can I ask you now, do I have your consent to record this interview and to deposit it in NYPAP's archive after you get a chance to review the transcript?

Wood: Yes.

Q: Okay, thanks, Kate. And can you start by sharing your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Wood: My name is Kate Wood and I consider myself an ardent preservationist by training and by passion. I, for many, many years was an advocate in New York City's landmarks community and now I practice real estate in the Hudson River Valley. I also run a full-service preservation and rehabilitation firm called Worth Preserving that helps people plan and execute full house rehabilitation projects, also in the Hudson Valley.

Q: Great, thank you. So I want to ask about your early life and if you can kind of give me a sense of some of the spaces and places that you grew up in.

Wood: So I was born in Dallas, Texas and I spent the first ten years of my life in Texas. So that's where a lot of my family was from. When I was almost ten years old, my family picked up and moved to New Jersey. That was for my father's job. He was the Dean of Students at Rutgers College. So we picked up—my brothers, my parents and I—and we moved to a 1927 Tudor Revival style house in Piscataway, New Jersey and it was a fixer-upper. My parents rolled up their sleeves, gave us paint brushes and taught us how to pull up carpets and do all kinds of things. We were the third family to live in the house.

So that's kind of where I got my early preservation chops. That was normal life to me. You get up in the morning. You paint some windows. You strip some woodwork, do some stuff like that. And that was just how we spent our evenings and weekends and summers for a number of years. Also the fact that my parents were both educators, so we spent our summers crisscrossing the country in our VW Bus and camping and going to national parks and going to battlefields and historic house museums. So again, that was just what we did for entertainment.

So I've been to every state except for Alaska. We did the same thing in Europe, traveling around.

[INTERRUPTION]

When I was seventeen years old, I distinctly remember opening up a magazine. I think it was *Newsweek Magazine* and there was a full-page ad for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. There was a line drawing of Lyndhurst [Mansion], one of the National Trust sites,

and that was the first time that I discovered there was this thing called historic preservation and that you could actually do it professionally.

So from that point on, I decided that I wanted to—I started researching preservation and how you trained in it, discovered the Columbia University [Historic Preservation] program and then basically set my sights on it that I was going to go to college, I was going to study something that related to preservation. I studied anthropology and archaeology but I wanted to go to Columbia and do that program and become a preservationist for life.

Q: Going back to moving from Texas to New Jersey, what were some of the differences that you were aware of when you were ten years old about, the differences between those two places and the buildings in those places?

Wood: Well, we lived in a college town in Texas but our neighborhood was pretty suburban. The houses were built in the [19]60s. It was a ranch house. Looking back, it was kind of a cool ranch house. But we moved from that to this 1920s house that had leaded glass windows and was two stories. I thought that was really amazing to have an upstairs and a downstairs. Our whole neighborhood had been developed in the '20s.

Being in proximity to New York City, my father had a lifelong passion for New York City. So he would instigate family trips. Every weekend we would get on the train or get in the car and go, wander New York City. This is back in the '80s before Central Park was rehabbed and the subways still had graffiti on them. The Lower East Side was Orchard Street and boxes of

wholesale stuff. I remember all that so distinctly and how different it was from Texas, which was kind of suburban but also rural, just the density and the excitement and the energy.

I fed on that also when I was thinking about preservation as a career because I love New York City and I loved the energy and going there. As much as I knew I wanted to be a preservationist, I knew I wanted to live in New York City and that was just where I wanted to be.

Q: Thinking about all the hands-on stuff that you were doing on the weekends and traveling around and seeing things with your own eyes, what was the experience like for you in school, where usually you're really focused on reading and tests and stuff like that?

Wood: [Laughs] Well, I tend to be very bookish, I guess. If I want to know something, I go to a book or, now, online, always trying to soak up information. So I always loved school. I always loved burying myself in the library. Sometimes I had to remind myself that there's this city out there that you always wanted to be in and you need to get out there. I think the Columbia program was good about getting you out into—you would have a study area and you'd go visit. So you were always kind of going around and looking at things.

But my first job in New York City was actually at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and I was an administrative assistant in the American Decorative Arts Department in the American wing. So that was a great introduction to the city and kind of the network of people who were involved in things related to architecture and the history and the culture of the city. So that was helpful because I did that first before I went to Columbia. Then when I was at Columbia, I knew enough

to know—I did a joint program with urban planning. So I was three years there. And I knew enough to know that it wasn't just about what you learned in the classroom. It was really about who you met.

So they would send us out to community boards or to meet with various people. I took that very seriously because some of those people—like I remember Joyce Matz and Jack Taylor and Kent Barwick—people like that who really became mentors to me, who I met as a student and picking their brains about various things. So yes, I think the Columbia program was a good testing ground for becoming an advocate. Even though it was academic, there was enough real-world in there also to give you some preparation.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about the Columbia program when you were there, who some of the teachers were?

Wood: Well, I actually arrived at orientation for Columbia the day that Robert [A. M.] Stern announced that he was leaving and going to Yale. Actually, honestly, I got to be friendly with Bob later, through 2 Columbus Circle, advocacy, that kind of thing, but at the time, I felt like I had dodged a bullet because people told such stories about how hard he was in crits and things like that. So I was like, whew, that was close! And I think Paul Bentel was the interim director of the program at that time, who was great. And then Françoise Bollack and Harry Kendall led the first-year studio and our study area was Midtown South. So it was basically south of the Theater District down into the Garment District, over to Madison Square, parts of which have since become historic districts, somewhat based on the research that my class did. Andrew Dolkart, of

course, was teaching documentation and was a great mentor and still a very good friend.

Yes, Carol Clark. Carol Clark taught preservation planning and I totally geeked out about preservation planning. That's where I first heard about historic rehabilitation tax credits and things that I've used professionally since then. I later taught with her in the Columbia program and that was—she gave me a lot. She's given me a lot, in terms of being a role model and mentor, all of that.

Q: Can you talk about some of the first advocacy campaigns that you were part of in New York City?

Wood: Well, my very first advocacy campaign, which, looking back, I had no idea what I was getting into, was for the Coogan Building which was—Sarah Landau had written about it. She and others believe it was probably New York City's first skyscraper. It was built in the 1870s and it had the long arch—the high arch windows. Even though I think it was only six or seven stories tall, it had that kind of verticality that was a precursor of skyscrapers.

So it was on 26th Street and 6th Avenue, right where all the antique markets used to be on those open lots and the area had just been rezoned for high rise residential development. It was right when our class at Columbia was studying that area for our studio. It was one of the icons of the area. We just thought it was amazing. And suddenly it was threatened because it was right in the crosshairs of that development. Sure enough, there was a very tall building planned for that sight. They were not planning to preserve any part of the Coogan Building. So I tried to mobilize my

class to do an advocacy campaign. And some people were into it and some people were like, “Whoa, I’m so busy. I’m in school.” And I felt the same thing. “Oh, my God, I’m a graduate student and I have so much work to do. I don’t have time to run an advocacy campaign.” And then all the kind of people, the seasoned veterans of preservation, like Joyce Matz and Christabel Gough, people like that that we were meeting with to try to figure out how do we make a dent in this, they said, “No, you’re the perfect people to run this campaign because they hear from us all the time. This is just one more thing. You’re a fresh voice and maybe you can make a difference here.” We tried with our rudimentary advocacy skills and training in progress and I think that it was a last hurrah.

But of course, the building was demolished. That was definitely a life lesson that it’s not about how hard you try, it’s just about whether you’re able to get the stars to align. I thought about that a lot when I was later working in preservation advocacy and trying to frame campaigns around other buildings that were just as threatened. So that was definitely a proving ground for me.

Q: Can you explain a little bit more about how you developed that sight or that sense about how those stars have to align? What are the different features that need to be moving in the same direction for buildings to be preserved?

Wood: Well, I’m trying to remember, I think Andrew Dolkart at one point asked me—or maybe it was Tony Wood, I can’t remember—somebody asked me to put together an advocacy mini course for Columbia that I taught. I had been maybe ten years working in the field at that point, that I put it together. And I tried to break it down into what are the steps and I wish I could

remember because I came up with a ten-point list of the things that you have to do. Everything from you've got to make the case why is this important. Why should anyone care about this site, because it's so easy for people to just say, oh, preservationists, they just want to save everything, or people just don't want change. Just to try to craft the argument in such a way that you say no, this is not about freezing the city in time. This is about making sure that the layers of the city are preserved in such a way that we have a record of something. And not just a record for its own sake. There's so many arguments. I think preservationists and advocates have become more sophisticated about how it's not just the historical or architectural associations but it's also just the principle and the value of embodied energy and sustainability and all of those things.

So I think that's probably the number one thing, just to craft the argument in such a way that you can get people to actually care about it. And sometimes people care just because it's a matter of their view, that the change is somehow negatively going to impact the neighborhood that they live in. So it doesn't really matter whether it's a so-called selfish reason or if it's a larger, more noble reason but you just have to tap into what's going to get people's attention and to turn a silent majority into a vocal movement for a building or a place.

Q: You mentioned the embodied energy. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Wood: Well, it's something that I keep challenging myself to do more of in my own work now because I believe in it strongly, that preservation is a form of recycling. We shouldn't live in a throwaway culture and when we demolish buildings after thirty years of service, that's not the right thing to do for all kinds of reasons. But I'm involved in historic building rehab projects now

and you should see the dumpsters that get filled up with stuff. Some of it is stuff that's beyond its life span, it's time for it to go but does all that stuff get recycled? No, it goes into a landfill.

That's, I think, I've heard, is the number one source of landfill is demolition debris. So yes, that's something I continue to challenge myself, how can we do preservation which is inherently green, I believe, in a greener way? So I think that that's definitely something that we should all be focusing on.

Q: That's a really nice term for that. So how did you start to key in on interior landmarks?

Wood: It's funny because it was this moment in my life where I had been at Landmark West! as the executive director for over a decade and I had left—it turned out, temporarily—but I had left because I had a baby and I was focusing on him. He was still an infant. And I started going to meetings that Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel had organized for the fiftieth anniversary of the New York City Landmarks Law. So this was a couple of years in advance of the actual anniversary but she was trying to get institutions from around the city to talk about and plan ahead for things they were going to do to celebrate the anniversary.

So at that moment, I was still on the board of Landmark West! but I was sort of more in my husband's world at that moment, which was the New York School of Interior Design. And he had been president of the school for a little while. He had been at the school for many years. And I was at one of these meetings with Barbaralee and it occurred to me, well, what about interior landmarks? I could work with the New York School of Interior Design to come up with what ultimately became an exhibition [*Rescued, Restored, Reimagined: New York's Interior*

Landmarks] and a book [*Interior Landmarks: Treasures of New York*] to celebrate the interior landmarks of New York City, which was not otherwise an area which was really going to be highlighted or at least so far. And who better than the New York School of Interior Design to lead that charge?

And it was also something that I really didn't know that much about. I just knew interior landmarks by definition. In my work on the Upper West Side, we had a couple of interior landmarks designated in the area. But I had never been involved in an advocacy campaign for one. To me, it was kind of more of a research thing, to learn more about interior landmarks. So I kind of dove in and partnered with Judith Gura who, at the time, was a professor at the New York School of Interior Design and an independent scholar on interiors and design. She just plunged head-long into it with me. She brought the design history background and I brought the preservation advocacy aspect of it and landmarks wasn't something that she knew a lot about. So it was a great partnership and we created this committee that included Hugh Hardy, who was great to work with, and Kitty Hawks, who then brought her husband, Larry Lederman, into the project as a photographer who documented—beautifully—many of the interiors that were included in both the show and the book.

So it was a great team and we worked together for a couple years. We did the exhibition that opened literally on the fiftieth anniversary of the Landmarks Law and ran at the school for a few weeks that spring. And then the following year the book came out and then the book had a second edition because it was actually something that other people were interested in as well. Just the material was so ravishingly beautiful. It was a really nice project to be involved in.

Q: Can you explain some of the history of the Landmarks Law as it pertains to interiors? How it differs from some of the other kinds of landmarks that are covered by the law?

Wood: Yes, so this is interesting because I had to go back and read my own book [laughs] because I had forgotten some of the history. Because, again, it wasn't something that I lived and breathed except through this project. I thought it was so fascinating. I went back and looked at clippings and files at the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission [LPC], at the Municipal Art Society, really kind of piecing together the cultural history of how interiors came to be landmarked. So I did not realize that when the law was passed in 1965, it did not include interiors. There was talk about including interiors because, certainly, people recognized that there were some amazing interiors in New York City. But there was the distinct feeling that we can't bite off more than we can chew right now. That would just be overreaching. The law, it was important to preserve buildings at that moment and just couldn't quite wrap their arms around the interiors.

So the history of it was that it took another eight years to get the amendment to the law that authorized the Landmarks Commission to designate interiors. So that was 1973. And in the meantime—I have to look at my notes because I had to go back and write some of these down. So there was the old Met Opera, the Metropolitan Opera [House], prior to Lincoln Center. It was on 7th Avenue and 39th Street, I believe. I realized in researching that, which was this milestone in thinking about interiors as potential landmarks, that that was sort of like the [New York] Penn Station of interiors. That was the moment where people realized that if something like this could

be lost, we don't have the tools to protect something like this. The Met Opera was apparently, from what people's public opinion was at the time, it was not an amazing building on the outside. It was lovely but nothing spectacular but the inside was amazing.

So it was not only architecturally spectacular but also just the cultural history. When Edith Wharton wrote about going to the opera in *The Age of Innocence*, this was the interior where all of that took place.¹ So I think that realization, that we've got to do something. But of course, at the same time, other interiors were threatened. Grand Central [Terminal], of course, had the whole redevelopment of that site looming over it. The Met Museum, there were plans to totally change the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum. The Plaza [Hotel] was threatened. So I think all of these things together, they said we've got to do something to fix the law so that we can protect these things.

So the law changed in 1973 and the earliest designated interiors were things like the Merchant's House Museum and the New York Public Library, although not the Rose Reading Room, not the Main Reading Room. That was sort of an a-ha! moment, when we realized that the Main Reading Room is not a landmark [at the time of the exhibition and book—though it was later designated]. Other interiors of the New York Public Library are. But they were some of the earliest interiors to be designated. City Hall, places that no one could argue, these are public. They are part of the history of the city. Nobody could argue that these shouldn't be designated.

Just to go back to the definition of something that is eligible for interior designation, so it's all of

¹ I was wrong about this. *Age of Innocence* was set in the 1870s, before the Met Opera was founded.

the criteria that any landmark would have to meet. It has to be thirty years old at least. It has to represent some special aspect of the city's history or cultural life or architecture. But it also has to be customarily open or accessible to the public. So you can walk down the street and appreciate a beautiful façade and that makes it part of the public interest to designate it as a landmark, but you can't designate a private interior that has arguably no public benefit to being landmarked or regulated.

So it has to be something like a train station or a theater, or a lobby of an office building. So it can't be a lobby of a residential building because the public is not customarily invited to be in that space. It can't be religious space, if it's still in active use as a sacred site. It can't be somebody's apartment or a private club or that kind of thing. But they were fairly conservative in the first designations, not to rock the boat too much.

But then, I think it was '78, that there was the threat to Radio City Music Hall and that I think of as the Grand Central of interior landmarks. So that was a moment where they had the law. They had the power to preserve that space. The question is, would they? And I believe it was Kent Barwick who was chair of the Commission at the time and the Commission, as they did with Grand Central, they chose to go to the mat and said if we can't preserve Radio City of all places—just like they said if we can't preserve Grand Central Station of all places—then what is the point of having this law?

So they really went to the mat for Radio City. There was a big public advocacy campaign. The Commission did what it needed to do. Rockefeller Center was not happy about it at all. There

was a lot of pushback, threats of lawsuits and things like that. But then the *Penn Central* [v. *City of New York*] decision came down at the Supreme Court almost exactly at the same time that upheld the Landmarks Law for Grand Central. It was kind of part of that whole suit that was going on right now, like whoa, the Landmarks Law is serious. If it says that we can preserve Grand Central, we can preserve Radio City. And then Rockefeller Center backed off and Radio City was preserved, which was kind of interesting because at that point, Radio City—it was the ‘70s. It was only forty years old. So it was basically part of the recent past. There wasn’t universal consensus that it was a great work of art because Art Deco was kind of meh [indicating some distaste]—it was not really in fashion anymore. But still, it was such a cultural icon as well and people had so many associations with it, during the Depression and war and tough times. It was kind of a happy place for the city. So that was a major milestone.

After that, the Landmarks Commission became a little bit more intrepid when it came to designating interiors. There were a slew that came after that and lots of controversies. But still, at the time we wrote the book and did the exhibition, there were only 117 designated interiors. So that compared to many, many thousands of buildings that are protected as individual landmarks and historic districts. So it’s not like the flood gates opened and all of these places were designated. They were still fairly selective but a lot of important places got saved after that.

Q: You mentioned that there were some controversial aspects of how the LPC went about designating some of the landmarks. So can you just elaborate on that, what kinds of controversies come up with interiors in particular?

Wood: Well, I think with interiors, it's hard to avoid the issue of use and use is explicitly off limits for the Landmarks Commission. They cannot designate or protect a particular use. So if an interior is used as a theater, that use cannot be protected by the law. If the owner wants to change the theater into a restaurant or vice versa, a restaurant into a theater or something else, the Landmarks Commission has no control over that. And I think when you're talking about interiors, it gets so entangled with issues of use that there's inherent controversy there. And I think also, this came up again and again, and especially in talking with interior designers about what do they think about interior landmarks. There was this sense that maybe, unlike architects, they didn't expect their work to survive for many generations. It was like interiors were very specific to a particular use, a particular style, a particular whatever the purpose at the time, the program of the interior. It was interesting to me, sort of eye-opening, that interior designers themselves sort of thought interiors as ephemeral, that they were meant to change. So kind of coming to terms with that and okay, well, at what point is an interior so important because of its design, because of its cultural associations, its history, that it shouldn't change, even if the particular use of that interior changes.

I mean one of the big controversies that came soon after Radio City were the Broadway theaters. So that was the early '80s and Gene Norman was the chair. I think Kent Barwick and Gene were sort of—there was a transition from one to the other. But the whole issue landed in Gene Norman's lap. The Helen Hayes [Theater] and several other Broadway theaters were threatened because of the Times Square development with the Marriot Marquis that was planned. People came out in droves to protest the demolition. They weren't able to stop that particular project and those theaters were lost. But it was very clear that something had to be done about the Broadway

theaters because there were dozens of them. Some of them were just beautiful, again, lots of historical and cultural connections. So Gene instituted a survey to study the interiors and the theaters themselves because the feeling was, well, we can't preserve the outside and not the inside of some of these. They go hand in hand.

And of course, there was huge pushback from the theater organizations. The big argument was, you're going to put the nail in the coffin of the theater industry and the Broadway industry in New York City because it's already so difficult to put on these productions in these old buildings. And coming into vogue at the time was the idea of total theatrical production, like think of *Cats* where they just take over the whole theater and the whole theater, not just the stage, is part of the actual experience. So how can we do that if we have to preserve every final and all of that?

But the Landmarks Commission came up with—they hammered out a middle ground with the theater owners, that they had guidelines, that the theaters would have to be preserved in certain aspects. If they had to be changed for a particular production, then they had to be put back exactly the way that they were before. That created an industry in and of itself because theaters are constantly having to be restored, because they're constantly being destroyed and then rebuilt.

So that was an interesting solution to that particular problem, that it also paved the way for the Landmarks Commission to come up with other guidelines for other types of spaces, like banks was a big type where the banking industry was like, well, how can we be expected to preserve teller stations because people don't work in banks anymore. People just walk up to the ATM.

This isn't the way that banking works anymore and you can't hamstring us to these old buildings, these interior types. So they came up with guidelines to regulate and help facilitate the regulation of bank interiors. So that's been a tool that the Landmarks Commission has created to deal with some of that inherent conflict with different owners of interior types.

Q: This maybe goes back to the earlier question I asked about advocacy but I'm curious to hear what coalition of people who are invested in preserving an interior might look like as compared to those who are invested in preserving a building or preventing a building's demolition. What sort of differences have you seen?

Wood: Well, here I'm speaking purely in academic terms because I've actually never been part—I should take that back—I was part of a coalition to preserve the interior of the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Building on 43rd Street and 5th Avenue. That was an interesting example because the exterior had been landmarked. It's a Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Gordon Bunshaft building. The exterior had been designated back in the '90s but the irony was that it's a transparent building. So the interior wasn't preserved, wasn't landmarked. So there was always that, how does that even make sense? How can you preserve the exterior and not the interior?

So there was a campaign in the late 2000s to landmark that interior and while I wasn't involved directly in the landmarking process, I was involved in a lawsuit that took place after it was designated and the Landmarks Commission had approved certain changes to the interior, that we argued were totally out-of-bounds when it came to—how could you say that by reorienting the escalators, which are one of the main features of the interior, that that is preserving it? How can

that be allowed for a designated interior? Would you let them demolish the Grand Staircase at the Metropolitan Museum?

So I was involved in the lawsuit side of that. I don't know that there's a fundamental difference between them except that with advocacy for a historic district or an individual landmark, you can always do things, stage things out front. You can do protests. You can do walking tours. You can do educational programs to raise awareness. Interiors is maybe a little trickier because you can't actually get access to it freely. So that may change some of the traditional advocacy mechanisms. Again, back to the question about why should people care about this? Maybe not everybody has been in that interior. Maybe not everybody has had the experience to know why that interior is important. How do you build the case for it? And the arguments that come up—I talked about where the owner pushed back is, how do you expect me to use this space profitably if the Landmarks Commission is in here telling me what I can and can't do? So some people in the public, I think, may be more sensitive to that as opposed to a façade or something like that. So it gets into that owner consent property rights area that you just have to craft the argument carefully when it comes to that.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the example of the Four Seasons, the decorative aspect versus the physical space?

Wood: Yes, that was another controversial one. The Seagram Building had been designated for a number of—actually no, I think that the issue of the Four Seasons interiors came up at the same time the Seagram Building itself was being discussed for landmark designation. But including

the interiors. So of course it's commercial use. So it's not like City Hall or something like that. It's something that actually has to function for profit. And of course there was pushback already from that. And then it was this very minimalist modernist—the Pool Room and the Grill Room and the sort of ancillary spaces. The question that the owners had was, well, what's there to preserve? The design is not necessarily even the fixtures. It's the furniture. It's the use, all of these things that are, according to the law, treated as ephemeral. You can't really preserve those things.

So the preservationists had to be like no, there's the book-matched paneling on the walls. There's the pool. There's the chandelier, the [Jacques] Lipchitz chandelier in the Grill Room. There's all of these things, the curtains, the swags that kind of move with the air currents. So to make that argument about what there is even in this very minimalist space, what there is to preserve. But it did raise some interesting questions about fixtures versus furnishings and when a space is stripped of its furnishings, which can't be protected under the law, does it still retain enough of its character to be worthy of preserving. In that case, obviously, it did.

Q: Maybe this is a good place to ask about ceilings because there's obviously a lot of ceilings that are preserved, as part of interior landmarks. So can you talk about that? Why are there so many ceilings? [Laughs]

Wood: I guess ceilings don't have to change. [Laughs] I mean, ceilings just kind of float above it all. Nobody ever has to touch the ceiling. I remember the Empire State Building, it was designated and then—I think the sequence of events was that it was designated but then there

was a whole restoration process where they removed the drop ceiling that was covering the space. Ceilings, I guess, do change because of people's different ideas of energy efficiency or they need to run electrical or ductwork or that kind of thing.

So yes, some of these amazing spaces over time, I guess, had been broken up with drop ceilings and that kind of thing. But ceilings, I guess, have a better chance of surviving because nobody touches them as much. Of course, there's always the great story of Grand Central's ceiling. It was so sooted that nobody could see the constellation patterns anymore. So that's one of the great restoration stories of New York City.

Q: Yes, I know that was kind of an obvious question. [Laughter] But yes, you don't have to talk specifically about Grand Central but I am interested in the technical restoration that sometimes goes along with the interior landmarking. So is there an example that you can use to reference, to explain what that process is like, the research and then also doing the restoration, the goals involved with that?

Wood: Well, actually one of my internships that I did when I was at Columbia was for the Empire State Development Corporation. One of the projects—they basically were very involved at the time with 42nd Street and some of the theaters. I remember going—that was such a great internship. I have no idea what value I brought to the table. I think I would just come to the meetings and I would sit there and I would just soak up stuff. And it was the time when they were discussing the development of the new *New York Times* building. So I got to meet Norman Foster and César Pelli and all of the architects, Renzo Piano, all the architects that were being

interviewed for the project.

But that aside, one of the things that the Empire State Development Corporation did was—I guess this was specifically the 42nd Street project of the corporation—was I got to do zoning calculations when people wanted to do new signage on 42nd Street. So I would make sure that they had enough sparkling lights, enough moving parts, that they were big enough. It was so much fun just to sit there and do the math, to make sure that they were meeting the zoning. But the other thing that we would do is there were theater restorations that were going on at the time—and I wish I could remember the names, the Empire Theater, and there were other theaters that the restoration was going on—and getting into sort of the design weeds, like there's this scrap of fresco that's still intact in this one spot but the plan was not to try to recreate the fresco throughout, across the entire wall, but to create a window where you could look in and understand that this was a fragment of the history of the building but not part of the current design. It was just an interesting—how do you design it in such a way that you don't just slap a frame on it? You create like a little reveal and a little curve around it and all of this. I remember those kinds of conversations.

I mean, that was where I was first introduced to the whole—EverGreene [Architectural Arts] restorations, one of the companies, Jeff Greene, who is involved in theater restorations as well as the Empire State Building lobby, the kind of conservation of the terra cotta, of the paint, doing paint analysis, and all of that. That was when my eyes were opened to that as a huge part of preservation in New York City is that level of conservation of these spaces.

Q: It almost sounds like there was a public history component as well.

Wood: Yes, I think they took that seriously. There are so many smart people who bring different philosophies to it. We don't all agree about what the right treatment is. I think there's lots of arguments and there's lots of valid positions to take about how purist you want to be versus how much you do want to recognize that distance. These interiors are still in active use and still part of the ongoing history of the city but they are history. Sometimes it's okay to maintain that separation. We don't have to turn them into museums but we can create space for people to understand that this is part of the city's history and cues to help people not to take it for granted.

I know another controversy that I really only read about—I wasn't directly involved—with the 67th Street Armory and the restoration of all of those interiors. I mean, it's a massive, massive project and when I say restoration, there are people who I can feel cringing. They're thinking, that wasn't a restoration. That was a total bastardization of those interiors because the approach they chose to use—they being the group that runs the armory—I think they called it delayering the interiors. So it wasn't like a straight restoration to a particular period of time but they would reveal different layers and have them all showing at the same time but it was very selective. So there were a lot of different opinions about—instead of creating something, they created this sort of Frankenstein, that was nothing. It was basically that it would be looked back on as they destroyed more than they preserved.

So yes, I think there are people that are so intimate with the history and the technology of these spaces, the different materials, and they are much more knowledgeable than I am about what

should or would be appropriate for these spaces. It was always very interesting to hear those conversations where, again, people have to recognize that there's philosophy and theory about how to approach these interiors and then there's recognizing that it's like an archaeological site. Once you've scraped back one layer, it's gone forever. So you have to be very careful about how you treat these spaces. With the theaters, it's great that the design keeps being recreated and put back but every time, there's an authenticity and an integrity that just isn't there anymore. It's not the original. It's something that's been rebuilt again and again and again. I think that's something to be aware of but at the same time, it's like, okay, but we're keeping that practice alive, the skill set that goes into casting terra cotta cartouches or things like that. That technology, that skill set, is being sustained. I think there's something to be said for that as well.

Q: Yes, I agree, and not only that but there is the potential for these different kinds of spaces to carry a sense of place and put people back into a different time. Why can't I think of the right word?

Wood: Transport.

Q: Transport! Transport people to a different point in time. So when you have this potpourri, as I kind of thought of when you were describing the 67th Street Armory, it's very confusing.

There's too many messages going at the same time. But I wanted to ask you if there are particular interior landmarks for you that have that ability to transport.

Wood: Gosh, that's almost asking like what my favorite is. It's like an impossible question to

answer. I would say, a place like Radio City or Grand Central, those are transportive spaces, I think. It's a total experience. I think Radio City because you get to spend a significant amount of time there when you go because you're there for the Christmas Spectacular or you're there for a concert. So you're very immersed in that environment. You have no sense of what the outside world is. And that's what it was meant for. It was really an escapist kind of thing, like a fantasy world where people could escape the daily life. And Grand Central because it's so elevating. It doesn't matter that you're getting on a Metro North train on one side or a subway on the other side. It's while you're in that space, there's just this sense of nobility and civic gravitas that you can't help but appreciate.

Then I would say that there are places that have special sentimental value to me or meaning to me. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was the first place that I worked in New York City. So I spent many, many hours in the Great Hall and getting to know that building just intimately from the basement to the attic. And then the Four Seasons, actually the Grill Room, my husband and I got engaged at the Grill Room. So that is a place that's very special to us. Even though it's changed, I still feel like there's elements there that—I love to sit on a banquette next to the beaded curtains and just watch them move. There's a glamour there that is very—it's nice to know that my son will be able to experience that in the future. It has more meaning than the other very nice bar or restaurant that's down the block [laughs] but that probably won't be there in five years. So places like that.

Q: What do you think it's meant for all of us to have less access to interior spaces over the course of the [COVID-19] pandemic?

Wood: I think when people start going back to Broadway shows, I think there's going to be a joy in that. I think that any space where people congregate. Hopefully people will recognize the vessel as much as they recognize just the sheer privilege of being able to be with other people in a public gathering. I think there's no substitute for physically experiencing something yourself, not seeing it on a screen or in a book. So I hope that people will take the opportunity to become tourists in their own town and go see these places that they haven't seen in many, many, many months. Hopefully, there will be a greater appreciation of that. After spending so much time just seeing things through a screen, that there is—again, it really is a privilege to be able to have access to things and to have celebrations, that the place is as important as the thing itself, the event itself. Being able to experience that event in person in a place, I think that hopefully will have renewed meaning for people.

Q: Yes. As you were talking, I realized that the first place I went out to, first public place was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So I wanted to ask about, I know that this has been, like you said, an academic project that was sort of spurred by the fiftieth anniversary of the Landmarks Law, but between looking back on it and also having an awareness of it since then, are there any interesting trends that you can identify, any thrusts towards the future that you think may happen?

Wood: It's hard to tell. There have been a handful of designations. I think three new interiors have been designated since we did that project. And then of course there have been changes to the Ford Foundation, places that have had kind of rejuvenation projects. So I think there's always

going to be dialog and debate and controversy about landmarks, period, but interior landmarks maybe especially because of the things we're talking about. Although there's so few, it's like, can't we just have these and not fight over them all the time? But I think it will continue to be slow-going to get interiors designated. I was very active in the advocacy community when we were all coming to terms with mid-century modernism. Being on the younger side of the advocacy community, I was looking back forty or fifty years at things and saying of course, we should preserve this. This is so cool. Modernism is amazing. Even the 1960s stuff that's more kind of glam and not as purist.

But I think that now that I'm getting to be middle-aged and looking back at what's eligible for landmark designation now and it's things from the '80s and the '90s and realizing, okay, yes, it is hard to get perspective on what's significant from those periods. I think interiors, like landmarks in general, will lag behind the thirty-year threshold. I know the Ambassador Grill was designated and that's a space from the 1980s. But there's still places from the 1970s and of course earlier that still haven't been really identified and protected. So I think trying to maintain perspective and trying to get ahead of the curve because it's always frustrating. You think that advocates must just revel in the conflict of the last minute save and the drama of it but it's like no, we don't. It's heartbreaking to have to be in a position to preserve something when it's already threatened and the die has already been cast. Too often that's the case.

The interior landmarks movement, I should say, because it's so important to the story, it was really started by R. Michael Brown who was a landmarks commissioner back in the '70s and, as far as I know, he is the only interior designer to ever serve on the Landmarks Commission. So he

took it upon himself in the mid-'70s to start—I think it was the ASID, I think that stands for the American Society of Interior Designers—to do a survey. They surveyed hundreds of buildings of interiors throughout New York City, all five boroughs. So of those hundreds of interiors, only 120 of them are now designated. So there's still lots of stuff out there. I mean some of it wouldn't be eligible because it's a religious interior, that kind of thing, but there's so much out there and there's so much that becomes eligible every single day, that they wouldn't have even looked at back then because it might not have even been built yet or it was too recent, that they didn't take it seriously as an interior design that ought to be preserved.

So we always say how do we get out in front of these things and try to preserve things before they're threatened, and create a culture in the city where preservation isn't seen as this knee-jerk reaction, this reactive thing that's all about the past, to reinforce the fact that it is very future-oriented. And to try to engrain that in the public culture, which is a pipe dream, I know. But so much of the controversy has to do with how owners respond to landmark regulation and that dance that the Landmarks Commission does with owners to try to get their consent before they'll designate something. And then if it is designated, is it regulated effectively because there's always that push and pull with how do the owners feel about it. Let's make sure this isn't going to create too much conflict that is going to stir the pot too much. So I think things like that, which is not just specific to interiors but has to do with preservation in general in New York City, I think those are going to be things that we deal with.

One of the other things that we did as part of the exhibition at the school was we had online and actual physical pieces of paper at the exhibition where people could write down their

nominations for landmarks. And it was very interesting to see what people—it was everything from their public school to the church they grew up going to, the synagogue, things like that. So it was sort of like dream big, whatever, it doesn't have to meet the criteria. Let's just go beyond that and see what's important to people. And I think keeping up that dialog with the public about what's important because there's always going to be pressures for change and New York City's never going to stop changing. That's part of its identity. But to keep that dialog with the public exciting and energizing, so when the inevitable controversy comes up, that we're just in a place where we can have an intelligent conversation about it. That's the dream.

Q: Thanks. I had another question but I think that might be a lovely place to end actually. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you'd like to share?

Wood: I'm going to read my notes really quickly just to make sure that we covered everything that I thought was important. Yes, we talked about a lot of these things. I really think that we covered everything.

Something that was really important to me in working with Judith on the book and the exhibition was to make sure that it wasn't just pretty pictures of places that had an important architect, dates, events, something like that, but that we really told the advocacy story as well. And I think we succeeded in doing that. With all of the interiors that we were able to include, there was a really interesting and telling advocacy story that really brought in the people—the cast of characters, the moment in time—so that you could understand why these places were important to begin with but also why it was so important to protect them and why people felt so strongly

about it. So I'm proud of that, that we were able to get that story in because I know that's central to the mission of the Preservation Archive Project, that it's not just about the landmarks themselves but it's about the people and the movements and the campaigns and everything else that went into making sure that they're there for future generations to enjoy.

Q: Absolutely. Well, thank you, Kate.

Wood: All right, well, thank you.

Q: Yes, it's so nice to learn so much more about this process.

Wood: Well, it's fun to kind of get back into mindset. I've been out of it for awhile. So it was nice to revisit it with you.

Q: Great. Well, I'll be in touch sometime in September and in the meantime, take care.

Wood: Take care. Thank you so much, Sarah.

Q: Thanks, bye-bye.

Wood: Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]