INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Peter Pennoyer

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Pennoyer conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on October 25, 2023. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Peter Pennoyer's interest in old buildings and architecture developed at a very young age, as he saw changes on the block of 65th Street where he grew up. In high school, he interned at the Landmarks Preservation Commission where he worked on a project to restore the greenhouses of the New York Botanical Garden; he credits the research that he did on cast iron facades on this project for deepening his interest in historic preservation. While he was an undergraduate at Columbia College, he talked his way into a summer program in the graduate historic preservation program, and took an entry-level job at the office of Robert A.M. Stern. He went on to establish Peter Pennoyer Architects, a preservation architecture firm with an in-house conservation division.

In this interview, Pennoyer talks about developing his design style from modern and traditional influences, incorporating a conservation-minded approach to new practice and historic preservation, the process of proposing designs for landmarks and buildings in historic districts to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and Robert A.M. Stern's influence on his approach to architecture in context. He also describes proposing the winning clock design for Moynihan Train Hall, as well as his prior advocacy to restore the train hall in the 1990s through his role on the Municipal Art Society's board of directors.

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Interviewee: Peter Pennoyer	Location: New York, NY
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic	Date: October 25, 2023

Q: Today is October 25th, 2023 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Peter Pennoyer for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Pennoyer: Yes. I am Peter Pennoyer and I am the principal and founder of Peter Pennoyer Architects, located in midtown Manhattan, with a small office in Miami, Florida.

Q: I'll just ask you this broad question, and you can take it wherever you like. What was the path that got you involved in historic preservation architecture?

Pennoyer: I was interested in historic preservation—well, old buildings—from a young age. I grew up in New York on 65th Street in a block of wonderfully varied town houses, and always loved the city and the streets and the buildings. And in seventh grade, a developer bought the end of my block and tore down all but the tenements that were on Third Avenue. This is a block that had David Rockefeller in a house in the middle, tenements on one end, and a grocery store and modest buildings on the other end, so it was a great slice of life of New York, architecturally speaking.

So yes, I'd say that my first preservation statement was my essay in my school bulletin in eighth

grade [both laugh]. It was comparing the new building that went up next to me, which is called The Phoenix, which is a concrete, humdrum, not very wonderful apartment tower, to the Plaza Hotel. So I was comparing Henry Hardenbergh to Mr. Birnbaum, who I think was the architect of the one at the end of the block. So I cared about old buildings.

Our next-door neighbor and dear friend of my family's was a modernist architect, French-born partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. I found his work very exciting, but I was more interested in older buildings, and was lucky enough to grow up around people who were concerned about architecture in the city. My father, for a while, was president of the [New York City] Art Commission, which was the agency that looked after and reviewed any new construction on city property, whatever it could be, a bus shelter or a public school. So he would bring home drawings of various projects, and talked to me about the architecture and how it was fitting in with the city. He was also on the building committee at the Metropolitan Museum as a trustee, so I'd walk around that when it was under construction, that is, the Temple of Dendur, for example. So I did have a window into wonderful architecture from a young age, and I had opinions about it. And I definitely thought that the Plaza Hotel was more interesting to look at than The Phoenix.

Q: Did you have a dialogue with anybody else that was your age about, if not architecture, just the streetscapes and neighborhoods?

Pennoyer: I don't know that I had those dialogues with people my age, but I knew a lot of people who loved New York, and we knew people who were, you know, sort of the founding of the

Landmarks [Preservation] Commission, like the Platt family. So this is something that we thought about.

Q: So how did you go about formalizing this interest into more of a career?

Pennoyer: So I really was always taking pictures and sketching old buildings. And when I was a senior in high school—it was actually sixth form of the prep school, St. Paul's in Concord, New Hampshire—I finished my credits early in my last year, and so I only had to spend a third of that year up in cold New Hampshire, and the school allowed me to pursue an independent project, so I was an intern at the Landmarks Commission when I was in high school. [00:05:04]

Q: I knew that you'd be an intern there, but I didn't know it was when you were in high school!

Pennoyer: For six months.

Q: Go on. [laughs]

Pennoyer: And Beverly Moss Spatt and other people there decided that what I should do is to do something helpful, so they asked me to see if I could find someone who could fix the greenhouses at the [New York] Botanical Garden. So I went through the Yellow Pages, and I didn't get too far [laughs]. Then I began working on a project that was more of a research project, which they thought would keep me out of their hair and give me something useful to do. So I was looking at cast iron architecture, photographing it, and digging in and writing up a

paper just as a kind of general audience introduction to what do we mean when we say cast iron? What do we mean when we say wrought iron? How do these things work? And how did they come to be in the city? It was a fantastic opportunity because it allowed me to spend time walking around New York taking photographs and then researching. Among other things that were terrific, I discovered the library at the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesman, which had fantastic trade catalogues that were in pristine shape, which is unusual for trade catalogues. There was one that had cast iron facades, so that's how I really got interested in preservation.

Q: Did you get to work directly with Beverly Moss Spatt?

Pennoyer: Well, I was mainly working with the staff, who were processing applications and debating whether certain streets or buildings should be designated. It was a very small staff. But I spent some time with her. I was intimidated by the whole thing, obviously. It seemed like I was definitely the low person on the totem pole. But it's interesting that some of those people are still in the world of preservation. I mean, Adele Chatfield-Taylor must have been in her twenties then, and there she was. [laughs]

Q: You had said they kind of figured out a project to keep you busy, but it was also a time when the field of preservation was growing quite a lot. Were they interested in kind of getting you into the professional track?

Pennoyer: No. It's interesting that there wasn't really considered, at least then, too much of a professional track. And it seemed to be more about people who cared about the city, and

buildings, and with the political aspect of preservation. So no, it wasn't a training program, so to speak, and that was very common then. My parents' dear friend, Jack Baur, was then director of the Whitney, and I remember thinking, "Well, that's good, because he majored in English, and he's the director of the museum." [laughs] I think the world was more like that then. You know, bright people who cared could work in preservation. They didn't have to necessarily have a degree.

Q: Yes. So how did you decide what you were going to study as your education continued?

Pennoyer: I always knew, or knew from a young age, that I wanted to be an architect, and I was fascinated by modernism. In New York, when I was very young, the only glass and steel buildings anywhere near my neighborhood, within walking distance, were the Seagram Building and the Lever House, and the Pepsi-Cola Building on Park Avenue. They were really exciting, to have those beautiful, modernist buildings in the context of old Park Avenue in these old blocks. And they were also open to the public. The lobby of the Pepsi Building was a playscape for children, there were great bins of beads that you could jump into, and weird things like that. [laughs]

Q: Wow, I didn't know that. [00:09:56]

Pennoyer: And the lobby of the IBM Building, which was—not the one that's there now but the one that preceded it—which a very elegant, international style building, was occupied by a massive supercomputer with whirring wheels, and cards, and all sorts of stuff. And so those

buildings were more public, and it was wonderful. So I was fascinated by modernism, and so I wasn't initially thinking that I would be drawn, as much as I have been, to history. Although in some sense, all that is history too, now.

So when I got to Columbia College, I was interested in the courses that were on offer from the preservation program and also the architectural history courses. I had professors like David DeLong, who had a wonderful, foundational, architectural history survey course, but also had broad interests. So I thought maybe I would be an architectural historian, but I wanted to make buildings, ultimately. So I begged the preservation program—because it was a graduate program—to let me go on their trip to France as guest of the [unclear] in France. And of course, Fitch said, "Well, you know, you're in college, you're not in our program." But then he called me up and he said, "I think I know how to do this." And so in exchange for coming, or letting me enroll in the program that summer, I had to prepare the report back to the grant-making organization that sent him the check in the first place. So I had to write this boring paper on "What I Did on My Summer Vacation," basically. [both laugh]. So I went with Fitch, and that was really fascinating to see how the French handled it. So I was very interested in historic preservation, but ultimately, I wanted to be in the architecture school.

I met [Robert A.M.] Bob Stern when I was a freshman, socially, through a friend, through my parents. And I told him that I didn't want to be an architecture major. He had an architecture studio as an undergraduate program, and it was rated the most difficult class in the entire university. There was a book that had a page on each class, and he had the highest rating for difficulty and stress.

Q: I went to Columbia College as well actually, so I think I've seen that similar book.

Pennoyer: I'm amazed that it's still in print.

Q: Yeah. [laughs]

Pennoyer: So I told Bob that I did not want to do this—I wanted to be a French literature major because I didn't want to be a boring pre-professional. And then Bob talked to me a few times about it and told me what a good idea it would be for me to buckle down and do this. Then I prepared to go into the Sorbonne for a year, in the Sorbonne's own graduate program in literature. And to do that, I had to hang out in the city for my miserable summer, getting to that level of French where I could actually be a student with French students, and not a student with Americans, in their sort of, you know, summer vacation for American kids.

But my professor at Columbia became a friend—the head of the French department—and he and I conspired to change my plan. I received a refund on my deposit on my French program, and instead enrolled in drawing classes. I had private French classes and did an independent study project on the Romanesque architecture of Saintonge. So this professor, he gave me great advice. He said, "You'll be very lonely. Pretend you're not American, don't even speak to Americans. But you will learn much more about architecture, which is really your passion. You'll absorb a lot of French. And since you're not interested in teaching or doing any of that after, you may as well delve into architecture instead."

So I took, among other things, drafting lessons, which were offered as vocational instruction, for free, by the city of Paris. [00:15:04] You would draft with metal nib pens with ink reservoirs on paper, which is very good discipline, sitting in a gymnasium surrounded by mainly—only maybe a third of them were French, a lot of them were like Somali refugees or [unclear] that were trying to find something they could learn that would lead to a job. It was really an interesting experience. And then free-hand drawing, and I never was wonderful at it, but I went to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, so that was good.

And then when I got back, I talked to Bob and Bob said, "You just have to buckle down. You have to take my class." So I did. And he always had us focus on the buildings around, in the context of what we were designing. So one of his first projects was a branch library in Brooklyn at the scale of the Carnegie libraries. And he, unlike most of the faculty, said you must understand the block and the street that this is on, and you have to draw these buildings. And when you show me your façade, it has to have your neighbors left and right. And so that really fit in. That really captured my imagination, that here was an architect who loved the city as much as I did, was interested in the neighbors as much as I was. And yet would say, "And now you can design, and you can design something that has a relationship to those things." And in his case, he encouraged us to think about that relationship in a sensitive way, and not assume that if we did something that was foreign and a non sequitur that it would get us any glory at all [laughs].

Q: So how did you start to develop your own design style?

Pennoyer: Well, when I started with—in those classes, I found that I had looked at the city so much that the natural default starting point for me, in design, was to take a tack that was more traditional and contextual. So if I drew a house, it would have identifiable punched windows and a door, perhaps a pediment, perhaps a cornice, and all these elements that seemed just to be part of what architecture should be in the city. So it was, I'd say, part of my DNA, or the way I felt about architecture. But I eventually finished my credits somewhat early in my last year, so I went to work for Bob Stern. And I was his [unclear] person for a while, standing at a—when he hired me, he said, "Okay. I'll give you a job, but there's no chair, and there's no desk." And I thought he was kidding. I showed up, and there wasn't a chair [laughs]. Well, there was a stool. It was a slide table and I organized slides. He had an incredibly encyclopedic collection of slides of architecture everywhere he'd ever been, all of which were labeled, categorized, architect identified. And a red dot sure as hell had to be in the correct, upper right hand corner reverse, so when it went into the slide tray, it didn't come out backwards.

So when I went to him, we were in the depths of the most kind of cartoonish, postmodern, architecture moment. And so it was a tough job. And then he discovered that I was sneaking out for "dental appointments," which were actually interviews at investment banks. And he said, "You can't do that, you won't be good at it. Here, I'll let you do an architecture job." So my first design project, I indulged in all the, let's say, less graceful motifs of postmodernism. I had one curved—it was an apartment on 81st Street—I had one curved wall, one diagonal wall, one column, one of everything. And mouldings made of rectangles, cubes, squares, half rounds. So it was like a child's block level of detail [00:20:03].

But what I admired about that office—and it was an intense place to work, and I was lucky to be there when there were only eight or ten of us—was that Bob was interested in what talented young architects would bring to his office. So he was interested in seeing what people would design. It was not an office where you went to imitate the master. So there were people there who knew more about classicism, more about history.

One of those is a man named Gregory Gilmartin, who at the time was both designing and writing with Bob. The office had occupied two sides of a corridor in a building on 72nd and Broadway, and one side was the studio and then the other side was the authors room. And Greg was in the authors room, and he co-authored *New York 1900* and *New York 1930* with Bob. He was a brilliant designer. And he was an example of someone who had absorbed the lessons of architecture—the history of buildings he'd seen, drawings he'd seen, books he'd read—so deeply that he could simply sit down and draw, and draw upon that as a kind of inspiration to his imagination. He was not an architect who was then opening the pattern book to check to make sure that he'd gotten something right. He simply never did that. So he was a great inspiration. And then there were other people who were very talented there.

Q: And how did you come to open up your own architecture firm?

Pennoyer: So I was working for Bob before graduate school because, for one reason, we were told we could have a year off of the graduate program if we'd taken his program. So that was already going to turn three years into two. And I thought I would stay with him for a year and see how terrible architecture was—because everyone told me you'll starve, and you'll be miserable.

And even architects would tell me, people like Hugh Hardy, when I was a child, said "Don't do it!" which is terrible." [laughs] So I was there to see what it was like, and it became a wonderful thing. But I didn't stop. So when the classes started, I'd go to Columbia and then I'd go back to the office. And then when vacation came, I'd go back to the office, and I was running a project up at International House while I was in school. And then summer vacation—that was my summer vacation.

And I went on a trip to Italy, and Bob said, "Well, you're there, so take pictures of the Biennale," which he was in charge of the La Strada Novissima, so it was all of that. And then there were people on the faculty who had a problem with Bob because he was into, you know, well, scholarship and rigor, and he had us all writing an essay every week about a lecture we attended, and we did all sorts of other things that they thought were too structured or something. And then, I think there was a little bit of professional jealousy, perhaps. So there was an intervention—I've never told Bob this—where they called me in, three faculty members, and they said, "You have to stop working outside the office." I mean, I was doing fine with my work, so it was like an intervention. So I thought, "Well, I'd better listen to them and do this."

And then three weeks later, a friend who had always worked independently came to me and said—he'd always had architecture jobs on the outside, going back when he was a senior in high school and in college—so he said, "I'm gonna be doing Isabella Rossellini's duplex loft in Tribeca. Would you want to be my partner in a new design firm, and we'll do this?" And I said, "When?" And he said, "I don't know. At night." [both laugh] So a friend named Peter Moore, had a father who was a designer, who was set up in an office at 437 Fifth Avenue, so we actually

had this office in the attic of 434 Riverside, and we were doing little loft renovations, and nothing too substantial. So that's how I started.

And then we were working on a lot of old buildings. And by the time we graduated, we found ourselves installed in a suite of rooms at The Mark Hotel, charged with renovating the whole building, three floors at a time. So that was our second office. Our first real office was in the offices of a firm called Cain, Farrell and Bell. Walker Cain had been the last partner at the successor firm at McKim, Mead & White. He'd been at McKim, Mead & White. So we had McKim, Mead & White's six-foot-wide flat files. We had one wall of their paneling in our conference room, and we had a ledger of their project costs in a linen bound book.

Q: Wow, that's amazing.

Pennoyer: Yeah.

Q: Let me ask you about working within historic districts and landmarked buildings. When, aside from your internship [laughs], did your work bring you into conversation with the Landmark Commission?

Pennoyer: As soon as we had to work on any property in a district, or any individual landmark, we found ourselves before the Commission. And we learned from the staff, I'd say, at the beginning, and we were learning what's allowed and what's not allowed. And some of it's very small things, like how do you replace a double-hung window with a window that performs well,

but also fits the profiles, and has the right brickmould? So at some level, it's just kind of a terrible thing for architects to have to have to get through that layer of bureaucracy. On the other hand, I've never done that. You never learned any of that. If no one ever said, "You have to look at this, have to look at this, this, this," you would never actually have to think about those things as hard as you do, when someone says, "Wait. You can't do that." Because if you hadn't been forced to do it, they would do these things in buildings that weren't landmarked, where they would cap over all the old wood frame for a double-hung window, including the weight chambers. And then you'd end up with these horrible aluminum clad boxes, that would then result in the replacement window being even narrower. So you could not be forced to do that if it was a landmark building. So there was an upside to it.

Q: A lot of the interviews that we have with people in our archive are people that are kind of seeing things happen on the street and saying, "You can't do that!" So for the sake of you having your unique perspective, can you spell out in a little bit more detail what that process is like when you are actually required to—and enjoy—interfacing with the commission staff about what actually is required.

Pennoyer: So the process is that you propose a design. You start by documenting what was there, carefully, because a) you enjoy doing that, and b) it's interesting because you're being paid to document something old, which is kind of cool.

Q: Yeah.

Pennoyer: And then you propose another window to replace that. And when I first started, there weren't as many window companies that could do that well, so they would point out—someone on the staff might say, "Well, you actually can't have that pre-made frame jamb because that isn't a brickmould and that won't work well, and here's why." So they would give you advice, and usually it was good advice. And the job became easier for us because there were more and more companies that made really good windows, and there was a demand for that product. Even in new houses, there was demand for it. And then we knew how to answer the question the right way, instead of being told how to do it.

Q: So you would come to the commission already knowing what you were going to do.

Pennoyer: Yes, yes.

Q: A little but further along in the process.

Pennoyer: I think what happens over time is that people learn. [00:30:00] People naturally want to make their lives easy, and be efficient. And clients don't like paying money just to have people talk, so if you can get in there and present something that you know is correct, it's a good thing. But I think landmarks—without those designations, that never would have happened. Everyone would have aluminum-capped, not brick-to-brick installations. Or they would have, cornices that were shoddily reconstructed out of flat pieces of AZEK or something. You see what happens. You see it in neighborhoods that aren't landmarked.

On the other hand, there's a frustration in how long things could take. That was always hard. And I mean, Landmarks, I don't think rubber stamps anything. But I do think if you're responsible over the years, they feel more comfortable about working with you and moving things along. And also, at hearings, I used to see people come in who were already annoyed that they were even having to get permission for anything. And I remember some woman who wanted to open a fancy boutique on Madison holding up the drawing at the table, showing it to the commissioners. She was yelling at them, and she had it upside down and she didn't realize it [laughs]. So yeah, you don't want to be the person holding a shoddy drawing upside down. And also internally, you build up a library of details, and so you know more to get you to the next stage.

Q: Has there ever been any—I don't even know what to call it exactly, but push back, or a requirement to redo designs in some way that didn't really jive with the research that you had done?

Pennoyer: I can't think of any major one. I mean, there was a case, a maisonette on Fifth Avenue, where the staff required that we put the doorbells—essentially, a little panel—on a bronze pylon that was four feet high and eight inches wide, and plant it in the sidewalk within the areaway, in front of the door on Fifth Avenue. And I was very disappointed. But I felt vindicated because, years later, someone from Landmarks—for some reason we were walking on that block—I forget who it was that looked at it, and said, "We made you do <u>that</u>?" [both laugh]

Q: And you said you were interfacing with the staff, but then you would be presenting in front of

the Commission? Is that correct?

Pennoyer: Yes. For a time, we would present in front of the commission, but then the staff would take a more active role in managing presentations, and we would answer questions. And that's not the only part of it. Part of it is presenting to the community board architecture committee. And even like Friends of the Upper East Side, for example—I don't know if they still do this—would have us come in to their little office on Madison Avenue and 67th Street, and present the project so that they could have a chance to formulate their opinion. I think now they do that by going to the community board and watching—

Q: What kind of changes have you seen in—you did mention one, in terms of the staff and the procedures—but what sort of changes have you seen with regard to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, over the era that they've been part of your work process?

Pennoyer: I mean, I think there have been—listen, I've been doing this for decades—I think there have been times when the staff there simply had too many applications in a stack on their desk to get their jobs done. And I think they were being harassed, probably, by more aggressive applicants, like developers. Sorry, I love my developer clients. But yeah, I think there were times when things seemed—you know, we were frustrated. And those had to do, I think partially, just with the finances of the city and the various mayors' level of support of Landmarks. [00:35:00] And their interests in the economic benefits of landmarking, which I think some mayors don't realize.

Actually, just to go back, when I was in Columbia, I had a part time job working on a study through Rutgers, their urban institute. It was a through a firm called Abel Schwartz, and it was fantastic. I was paid twenty-one dollars for each interview, and they would set up the interviews for me. I got to go to people's houses and talk to them about how landmarks worked for them, how it affected their property, how it affected their ability to paint their façade, how they perceived it effecting the value of their property. That was amazing because I was going into neighborhoods that I never would have—I'm sorry, some fairly sketchy places. I reported every two weeks, and once I came back and said, "Well, this man took my money outside of one of the places on 142nd Street because he said he wanted to buy Pampers for his baby." And they offered to refund me the mugger money. Anyway, so I went into houses that I never would have been able to see, in all sorts of neighborhoods. That was really interesting.

So sometimes the staff was over-stretched. I don't think we ever got—we never really had fundamental disagreements about what we were trying to do. They were generally open-minded about our approach to additions. And by additions, I mean a new front door, where you can't establish what was there at all, either in photographic evidence, or any other way. And we had an approach that is not typical. And they never seemed to object to it, although our approach certainly is not consistent with the Secretary of Interior guidelines. We don't believe that you should make new elements or additions look like they're—what's that terrible phrase, "architecture of its own time." We think it's perfectly acceptable to sensitively continue the language that exists in the building. And we think that everyone should have the right to do that, and to be creative, within limits. But it's better if it's based on scholarship and careful study, and sensitivity about the context. But then, we actually draw things that were not there—that no one

can prove were there—and Landmarks has been good about doing that.

Recently, there was a presentation of, I think it's the Goethe House—was the Goethe House on Fifth Avenue—that's now going to be a German cultural center. David Chipperfield's the architect, and he had a clever way of providing accessibility, which is really important if it's going to be a public facility. So he removed the steps and made the lobby an outdoor space with some great modernistic grid of a door that was pivot-hinged. If you were in a chair, you could roll right in easily, and the elevator's there. But he was putting something gargantuan [laughs] and very abstract on a building that had these lovely wrought iron and bronze balconies, and railings, and all that. And it was the community board architecture committee said, "Did it occur to you to be inspired by that wonderful railing on the second floor balcony?" And the poor architect responding in London—it must have been two in the morning—said, "Oh no, that would be morally wrong." And so he did exactly what is, I think, the accepted orthodox way of approaching renovation, which is, he created something quite beautiful that no one's going to ever think was there before 2023. And then, we went up, and I showed pictures of an element on a building in a neighborhood. We did a deep dive—had a lot of old photography—and I said, "And here's our balustrade." [00:39:59] And I said, "And I have no moral compunction against indulging in this fiction that we're part of the past. We have no problem with it." So Landmarks has been really good about that. And it's difficult because I think it's not what one's supposed to do, right?

Q: The danger would be to make something look like it had persisted across time, when really, it was newly constructed?

Pennoyer: Yeah. And I actually believe that as long as it's a beautiful design, if you continue the language—the Council on Foreign Relations on Park Avenue, the Harold Pratt House, was added onto, or that organization expanded in three parts. The first part, the architect took Delano's frieze band that has dolphins and shells on it and replicated it exactly. It continued the language of that building. There's a little break in plane, so you can tell when you look at it, that this is not—and also it's not symmetrical now they've added a bit more. But it's really lovely. And no one knows—I don't know the name of the architect who did that, because why would you? It's a very modest attitude. And then the next one is like a 1990s postmodern sort of take on the same thing, but it looks really klutzy. So I'd actually be happier with just an international style addition. But yes, I don't have a problem with—and I think there are great craftsmen who can do beautiful things. And I admire what Viollet-le-Duc did. Notre Dame didn't have that spire. And they were in danger of not rebuilding it, and now they are. I know the company that's doing it.

Q: Oh, wow.

Pennoyer: Yes.

Q: Let's talk about the Moynihan Train Hall Clock. So what was your interest in submitting a design to that competition?

Pennoyer: It was an invited competition. So we were lucky to be put on a list of some very impressive bigger firms, firms which do museums all over the world. So I think we were snuck

on because they thought they should have one firm that was interested in history. And I suspect they thought I'd come up with a clock that had little columns, or pilasters on it or something [laughs]. So that's why we did it, and it was wonderful to get invited. There was a problem with––the invitation never came. So when they had the jury, my design wasn't there. I hadn't been sent the brief.

Q: Wow.

Pennoyer: And Paul Goldberger said, "Where's Peter Pennoyer's clock?" They said, "What? Who?" So they said, "Okay." This isn't going on another twelve weeks. "We'll give them three weeks. We'll extend the deadline." [laughs] So it was really fun. It was intense.

Q: And the design was developed and submitted within three weeks?

Pennoyer: Yes, and we had to find—I knew the company. It was like a design-build. So we had to propose who was gonna build it and a schedule. We had wonderful craftsmen, Hyde Park Mouldings. They know exactly what they're doing, and they can build the most complicated vaults and geometry truss in our projects. I knew they could do it. And they work in a material that is fiberglass reinforced gypsum [GFRC], which is perfect for that. And also stayed under the weight. The weight limit was, I think, 4,000 pounds. And also I realized that it was done relatively quickly during the full lockdown. And it's a huge thing—it's twelve feet. So I figured, when you move things, they can get dented, and if it were metal, it would be a nightmare. So GFRC, they can actually fix and touch-up. So it was really fun. It was so much fun. And it was

odd not being able to meet and all that because we got a call saying, "Well, how do you know—they're really worried in Albany that you won't be able to read the numbers, the numerals on the clock." And then I called—because you're not together—I called the designer, a young man in the office, and he sort of chuckled. And I said, "What's so funny?" And he said, "Well, actually, last weekend, I snuck into the office, and I printed out half the dial. [00:45:00] And then on Sunday morning, before anyone got up, I hung it out my window on Eighth Avenue, and I measured exactly how far I would be if I was the furthest place when you entered Moynihan Train Hall, and I looked up, and I could read the numbers!" So he'd already thought of that.

Q: I just saw the clock yesterday as I was coming back from Pennsylvania, actually. So yeah, very timely—ha! So what was the research process like for that? I guess, also, given that everyone is in separate places?

Pennoyer: So we looked at examples of train hall clocks, and we realized, a) if we're up against these brilliant geniuses, they're probably likely to do things that are very avant garde, if not inscrutable. They may be making clocks where it's unclear how to decipher what time it is [laughs], if they're really imaginative. And there's a clock project that failed—I won't name the architect—but they actually had removed it the year before. It didn't work. Anyway. So I thought, maybe they'll do wild things. So we'll just make it four faces, that's number one. Legible, a typeface that seems like it belongs in a train station. And we will hang it from the trusses, so that we're not creating anything that looks like it would have been attached originally. Let's let the trusses be the trusses, and make this a distinct object that's clearly not touching the trusses. And then the scale of it seems obvious. SOM provided us with great 3D of the space, so

that really helped. And then we had a wonderful graphic designer, Diad, in Philadelphia. They recommended this font. And the font was really legible and clean and crisp.

So when we showed it, it was fun, because we were the only ones—and someone told me, in your interview, it's best to be the last, right? If you're trying to get—and so they said, "Did you know about our font? This is the project font. This is like all our graphics." I said, "No, we didn't know that." It was really fun. So it took a while for them to decide because I think the governors had the final word, but someone called me from Albany to tell me the good news, and I said, "Well, I'd love to see the others. It would be interesting." And he said, "No, we're not gonna do that. But I can tell you that some of the others were so wild. We thought they were intriguing, but we thought we might have had to require drug testing." [both laugh].

Q: Wow. I would love to see the others too, but I guess that answers the question, that it's—

Pennoyer: I don't know why they—anyway. So there you go.

Q: Yeah, wow.

Pennoyer: And I've been in that room in the '90s. Because that was the mail sorting room. And I was in the board of the Municipal Art Society [MAS] when we were trying to campaign for the White House to actually put pressure on the state and Amtrak, to actually push it through. And HOK presented a scheme that was not very sensitive to the buildings. Just chop the corners out. And so we had a committee, and we hired Richard Nash Gould to come up with a really lovely

design for the project. We had a tour of the building, and Philip Howard went down to Washington, and actually had a half an hour with Clinton, explaining the project. Clinton loved the project, and he came up and gave a talk to like fifty of us—there were like a hundred reporters—in the building, in one of these warehouse-like rooms. And he'd been preceded by all the local pols, you know, Al D'Amato got up and did his whole schtick. And then Clinton got up and gave this absolutely brilliant speech about the importance of civic architecture and historic preservation. I mean, I hope someone recorded it!

Q: Was it arranged through MAS?

Pennoyer: Yeah. It was really cool. It never took traction. And I remember exactly when it was because someone said, "Philip, you can't go down today! Didn't you see the TV news?" "What? Lewinsky?" And we explained it to him and he said, "Well, he'll definitely, definitely want to spend time looking at a train station!" [both laugh] So I've been in that room. [00:50:00] And honestly, those trusses were never intended to be seen by the architects. I mean, they're utilitarian things. They hung hallways from them that were enclosed like tubes for the postal inspectors to look down, you see, and make sure that the postal workers weren't stealing checks or cash. They were supposed to support a labyrinth of surveillance halls with little windows.

Q: Surveillance! Well, what was it like to come back to this project in this way?

Pennoyer: It was wonderful. It was so exciting. And it's so beautiful to see what SOM did with those—their skylights are amazing. And it's just such a glorious way to get off your Acela train

now.

Q: It is absolutely such a game changer to travel through that space. What do you know about the inner workings of the clock?

Pennoyer: That was all handled and manufactured by the company with the great age old name, Americlock. They do big clocks all over the country, in malls and public settings. I think that it was actually the head of Americlock who drove it himself. I think they're in Minneapolis. It was COVID. I mean, no one was—so yes, it's all digital. It's all controlled from one point. But you know, when they hadn't paid the bill for—apparently this is—I know nothing that had to do with the state—I was a subcontractor, so—but I said, "Yeah, there is a closet. I can just unplug it." It was all fine in the end.

Q: But they didn't decide to do a mechanical—

Pennoyer: No. It's absolutely what you would do if you were—I don't think it's necessarily a thing of beauty itself. But I guess it is because it keeps four clocks in sync. And I admire that it's totally robust, obviously. And no one has to get up there on a ladder to do daylight savings.

Q: Yeah, right.

Pennoyer: So that's impressive.

Q: Yeah, reliability is very important. There certainly have been other issues with other clocks not being maintained, and what that means for a space as well. Okay, I'm gonna announce that it's two o'clock. And in our last eight minutes, I want to ask you about the way that you've integrated conservation into your firm.

Pennoyer: So Lou Gleason, who runs our conservation division, has great technical knowledge, and we worked with him for years in his prior firm. And one of the favorite things about my job is working with people who have different knowledge and learning on every project. You know, you're lucky, right? Because you get to—I didn't know that about brick. And really, there's all these things that you learn. It's like having a seminar in your own firm. So Lou runs that, and Lou brings real wisdom to it.

He did notice that we, having taken apart many old buildings, already do things in our new construction that address the problems that we see, when we take apart an old frame house. So we do even more of that now because Lou knows how things should be detailed because he's a forensic mind, right? It's really good if you hire him to do a new house—I don't tell people this––but you're gonna get someone who's actually seen what happens to your house after a hundred years. So every window in the house has a copper pan that's hidden under all the wood. And it sits there, and the window sits in the copper pan, and you never see the copper pan. But whatever happens, it will never—it's like literally impervious to water. Whatever might happen—a hurricane, or the wind, or the window getting old and the seals—there is a copper pan there. There are all these little things, and we're learning more of that from Lou. And he helps with maintenance with older projects, issues—if there's some staining on the stone he can quickly

figure out maybe the weep holes got clogged, or they're not maintaining their gutters. It's just been absolutely fantastic.

So the Racquet Club, which is a great McKim, Mead & White building on Park Avenue, well, they want to replace their sidewalk. And our team figured, well, it's not that easy because there's actually a sealed tunnel under there. And they researched—we have a lot of researchers here—so they come up with the McKim Mead & White site photos taken by the architects when they were building it. And the ladder that's down in the McKim, Mead & White tunnel there is still there today, in its same position. So it's an adventure, having Lou, and we integrate it by making sure that architects working on new things are taking advantage of that resource.

Q: What led you to bring that in-house?

Pennoyer: Because it seemed that we didn't have to draw a line between new practice and historic preservation as much as we were.

Q: That is really lovely. And I also want to ask about how taking this conservation-minded approach is also connected to building green, and things like that?

Pennoyer: So the most important way we as a firm can contribute, we think, to building green, as architects, is by building things that people will not ever want to tear down. We think that that's our highest principle. There are all sorts of other things that are great, like the way we insulate our walls, and all these technical things, but those are really just best practices and engineering.

And all architects, honestly, do that. I mean, we all do it, we all keep up with it. No one's sitting there doing 1976-level insulation. And we think that the engineers, those folks should really get credit for that stuff. Even though architects are dependent—but what we can do is build something that people will think, "Well, we're not gonna take this down. We'll just move a wall." That's the best thing we can do: nothing ends up in the trash bin. We have a project now where we're using wood that's cut in the house. We're using stone to make gravel. We're just recycling everything that was there. And there's a building there that we've taken down, and we're using all the beams and the paneling for a room. So that's a preservation-minded aspect, too, I think.

Q: Wow.

Pennoyer: Avoid having trucks leave your site, if you can.

Q: We might have to end there, I think.

Pennoyer: I mean, if you have another question.

Q: I mean, my last question is if there's anything that I haven't asked you about that you want to add.

Pennoyer: I just hope that people realize, today, you can design buildings and elements of buildings that are completely consistent with the way people were designing in any period you

care about. And there's no moral peril in that, at all, as long as you take it seriously. And then, one thing that I've been thinking about lately is about the paradox that it's the modernist buildings that are the most susceptible to bad architect decisions during a preservation project. I think that modernist buildings depend so much on the windows being done exactly right, and the window treatments being done exactly right. Well, you can see at Seagram's, they control the ceilings within the rooms as part of their thing. So I think those buildings are not as easy to preserve.

And then an unrelated subject that I'm puzzled by, and disturbed by a little bit, is that we always try to preserve fabric of any building. If it has pockmarks in it or streaks, we still keep it. We don't pull stones out and put new stones in, if we can avoid it. But I've been seeing entire curtain wall replacement—like Lever House, where the whole thing was replaced. Good for them, and they spent fifty million dollars on it, and you have to admire that, but it's not the same. It doesn't look the same to me. And their spandrel glass has failed twice. So I'm kind of annoyed by that, but I don't know what they could do other than replace it. It's worth noting that that building, the entire skin of that building, is new, which I find very odd. And also odd from a sustainability perspective. [01:00:00] Because we wouldn't do that with an older building. And Landmarks wouldn't let us, nor should they. But it's kind of obscene to just put the whole thing in a dumpster.

Q: I agree. I think my actual last question is how do you think about your work in relation to the larger preservation movement in New York City?

Pennoyer: So, as I said, we have an unorthodox approach, which is we believe that additions should be contextual. And it's a good thing sometimes to push your design ego to the side, and make something that's quieter and more consistent with a neighborhood. You won't get credit, you won't be in the architect magazines, but I think we need more of that, and less, "look-at-me" architecture. That's not all about preservation—that's also just about new buildings. And I also think that people don't understand when they see a building that was designed in a sensitive manner to evoke the sense of place, like Robert Stern did in New Colleges at Yale, they're extraordinary that a) they're not pastiche, and b) there's an incredible amount of technology and digital tools that were necessary to make that happen. And the way things like the vaults there are constructed is entirely novel. Those methods and means and processes didn't exist fifteen years ago. So people look at it and say, "Oh, well they just did that whole thing." Well, actually they didn't, right? And those buildings feel completely like they belong. But their performance, energy-wise, is, I'm sure, just off the charts, right? So don't judge a book by its cover.

Q: All right. I think we'll end there.

Pennoyer: Thank you.

Q: Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]