INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Michael Devonshire

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Devonshire conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on October 11, 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.

Michael Devonshire was an explorer of old buildings as a kid growing up in southern New Jersey, and recalls being fascinated by the architectural styles and designs of these structures. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design, where he first studied studio art, then transitioned to architecture. After graduating, he traveled, and describes a series of jobs ranging from photography, sculpture, restoration, and design work in a variety of locales, including the Cycladic Islands of Greece, Mill Valley, CA, and Philadelphia, PA. He was eventually encouraged by a mentor to attend a graduate program in the new field of historic preservation, which he did at Roger Williams University, a school that was focused on hands-on experience.

After a period of working with the Center for Building Conservation, where he participated in projects at the Jasper Ward House, Tweed Courthouse, and Weeksville, among others, he signed on to work for Jan Hird Pokorny Associates. In this capacity, he ran conservation projects at various sites, including the Morris-Jumel Mansion, Sailors' Snug Harbor, and the Merchant's House Museum.

In this interview, Devonshire traces his career path from arts and design to architectural conservation and historic preservation. He discusses the origins of the Center for Building Conservation, and outlines a meaningful youth carpentry training program at Weeksville restoring the Hunterfly Road Houses. He also describes the challenges and rewards of directing projects on New York City-owned historic buildings and offers a detailed account of work at the Morris-Jumel Mansion and the Merchant's House Museum. He also provides an analysis of the Landmarks Preservation Commission's work over the last few decades based on both his own service as a commissioner, and the service of former Commissioner Jan Hird Pokorny, who he worked with closely for many years.

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Interviewee: Michael Devonshire
Location: New York, NY
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic
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Q: Today is October 11th, as we established, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Michael Devonshire for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Devonshire: I'm Michael Devonshire. I'm the Principal at Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, architects in New York City.

Q: Can you tell me about where you grew up and what that place was like?

Devonshire: I grew up in Southern New Jersey. Way Southern New Jersey, which was predominantly farm country, with the exception of a DuPont ammunitions factory on the Delaware River. But our area was surrounded by fields. It was mostly tomatoes. There were a lot of Sicilian immigrants. It's Salem County, New Jersey. And one of my first introductions to old buildings took place down there. My grandfather had built a cabin on a lake called Alloway Lake. The Alloway Indians were part of the Lenni Lenape tribe. And at the end of the lake was a Victorian house, that we would on occasion paddle the canoe over to, and go through the house. It was abandoned. And I remember distinctly, today, seeing piles of newspapers from the turn of the twentieth century, and being total fascinated by it.

Later on, when I could drive—I had an old MG TD, an old English car, that I used to drive around the countryside—and I would come across early and mid-eighteenth century brick houses that had been built by early settlers that were also abandoned. The farmers were using them to store wheat or store feed, and it was just really fascinating for me. And, of course, I got interested in those houses, and it turns out that they were all constructed by settlers from Kent, in England. And they had diaper pattern headers up the gable ends of the buildings. It was really just totally fascinating for me, and that sort of sparked that interest in old buildings—how people have lived. It was really pretty amazing. I had a really fortunate childhood. We would ride our bikes everywhere, and it was just living out in the country. It was really pretty amazing.

Q: How do people talk about history in your family?

Devonshire: In my family, they only talked about history with regard to the eccentricities of family members. There were always wild stories about some uncle or some aunt. My family, when they came over, they settled around an area in Maryland, called Conowingo, which is on the Susquehanna River. And my grandfather had started at the age of twelve. He shoveled coal. I can't remember what railroad it was, but it was one of those railroads that ran along the river—when he was twelve! But he didn't move up into the area where I grew up, which was Penns Grove, until he was an adult. So there were all these stories about all these eccentric relatives down in the Conowingo area, which is really kind of a back woods.

Q: I know the area.

Devonshire: Oh, you do?

Q: I’m from a little further up the Susquehanna.

Devonshire: Rising Sun? Or—

Q: Across the Pennsylvania border.

Devonshire: Oh okay. Yeah.

Q: Oxford.

Devonshire: Oh sure.

Q: Interesting. And what kind of work did your parents do?

Devonshire: My father was the physical education director and the football coach at the local high school, and my mother was a secretary for the Dupont Company. My father was kind of a local hero. He was a football star when he was in high school. [00:04:57] And just before the Second World War, he went to Duke University and played football for two years. After the War, he always had great, bizarre stories about the War. Because he was an athlete, they made him a lifeguard at the Officer’s Club at Fort Bragg. And when they took off and landed in North Africa, he was in the 9th Infantry Division. He hadn’t really had any basic training, [laughs] so it was really kind of bizarre. But again, because he was an athlete, they put him in the Rangers, and he was one of the people who climbed the Pointe du Hoc during the Normandy Invasion. My mother was a secretary. What ended up happening is, after the War, my father went back to the University of West Virginia. He was a runner-up for an All-American halfback. He was offered a job with the Cleveland Browns, playing professional football, but he chose to return to his hometown because the athletic directorship was open.

And he went home, and he was just—he was a local hero, forever. I mean, I can remember going back home when I was fifty years old, and people would recognize me, and say, “Oh your Jim’s boy.” [laughs] And so, my poor mother, was Big Jim’s wife. She was smarter than him. She was really a charming woman. She was really sharp. She ran the family. There were three of us: my father, my brother who was older, and who was a football star as well, and me, I was an artist. And I remember when we were in high school, I would come home first. She worked all day, but she would make dinner for me, then my brother, when he got home, and then my father. She worked her butt off. She handled all the family finances. She handled everything and got zero credit. It was her situation that made and instilled in me, a respect for what women have to deal with in this world, still. It was really pretty amazing. I have a lot of admiration for her.

Q: So when you’re finishing school, and you have the local hero as your father, and your mom working at the company, what did you think was your future? What kind of choices did you have?

Devonshire: I was artistically talented, somewhat because my dad, every once in a while, would sit me down and we would do drawings. I could do drawings in three-dimensional perspective when I was in kindergarten. And I took up painting, and I realized that I wanted to be an artist, which for a WWII vet, athletic director, was possibility the last thing on earth that he wanted his son to be. And I took up painting. I started painting when I was twelve. I painted into high school, and in high school, if I dropped a half letter grade in any course, I would have to relinquish my paints for a marking period. So that set my father and I, at the beginning, head-to-head.

When it came time to apply to colleges, I wanted to go to art school. I was offered a football scholarship at Vanderbilt University, and I went down there for a weekend. It was like me and these monsters, and I realized I probably wouldn't survive four years there. I applied to several art schools, and was told by my guidance counselor that I wouldn't get into any of them. I got into all of them. I got into Cooper Union, I got into Pratt, I got into the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD], I got into Carnegie Mellon, and I got into Tyler, which is outside of Philadelphia. It's part of Temple University. [00:09:58] My father refused to pay for me to go to art school, [laughs] so that was the second roadblock in our relationship.

And so—as long as I'm allowed to gasbag—my father would not participate in the college application process. My mother ended up taking me on the tours of all the schools, and we drove to New York City. We drove into New York City—this is in 1966. We drove to Astor Place to look at Cooper Union. There was some sort of a festival going on. Southern New Jersey was not New York City at that point. She was so taken aback by the hippie scene that was going on there, that she sat in the car and cried, and said, "Please don't go here." [laughing] And I said, "But

Mom, it's a free ride!" She said, "I don't care! Go anywhere but here. Go anywhere but here." Anyway, I ended up going to RISD, which was—you know, Providence is beautiful, College Hill is beautiful. I entered RISD and I was going to be a painter. And about a year into it, I started feeling like being a painter was really kind of a self-absorbed thing to do. So I started looking around for something more interesting, and socially helpful, and architecture seemed to be that thing. So I toyed with that for a while.

I ended up actually in the sculpture department, because I thought, "Well, this kind of deals with everything." And my senior year, I finished up, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to go back to New Jersey, because at that point, I had burned my draft card, my father's attitude about school was too much for me to handle, and he and I weren't speaking to one another. And—oh, another one. My sophomore year, I returned home from RISD, I had hitchhiked home to Southern New Jersey. He met me at the door with a tray with a pair of scissors and a razor because I had grown a moustache, and he had heard about it. And he said, "Shave, or you can't come home." This was Thanksgiving. And so I hitchhiked back to RISD, and a friend of mine took me to her house for Thanksgiving. But he and I pretty much stopped speaking to one another for about ten years. So school finishes up—

Q: Can I ask you a question, actually? You said you were thinking that you should do something more socially helpful. What about architecture to you at that time, or what was going on in architecture that seemed like it could be socially helpful?

Devonshire: At RISD, the architecture department was embedded in the systems, in the study of systems. Buckminster Fuller was everyone’s god. Paolo Soleri was building Arcosanti out West, and it just seemed like, here’s something where you’re making things, and it’s not just for you, it’s actually for the good of society. It was essentially that. You know, you’re twenty something. All the things that are going through your head are really just: do I do this, do I do that, what’s better, what’s more helpful, what kind of person am I gonna be. Am I hip enough? [laughs] You know, it was strange.

Anyway, I had this really great group of people I hung around with. One of my professors at RISD was a guy named Dale Chihuly, who was a glass blower, and there was a mansion. It was summertime, I didn’t know what I was going to do. There was a building called the Woods-Gerry Mansion on the edge of RISD that had been donated to RISD, and they were restoring it. [00:15:00] And this was something that I’d never really even heard of, or thought of. They were doing finishes analysis. I mean, this is in the early 1970s. I’d never even heard of that. Anyway, we were all sitting around one night smoking marijuana—yeah, okay—and I was telling Dale that I was probably gonna go home and look for some kind of work. And he said, “Don’t go home. Stay here. You can help me restore the”—there was a big glass light fixture out in front of the building—“We’ll smoke dope and you can help me restore the light fixture at Woods-Gerry Mansion.” [laughs] So I stayed there that summer and worked on that, and I saw people doing the restoration work on the Mansion, and it was really fascinating.

Then a friend of mine, Georgia Marsh, had just returned from Greece toward the end of the summer, and she said to me one evening, “You should go and see the Cycladic Islands.” She said, “I read something by Corbusier about the Cycladic Islands,” and she said, “I spent four weeks there this summer." And right then and there, I decided I was going to go. I got the book she was talking about by Corbu, and I read it and he talks about how planning in the Cycladic Islands is very vernacular. And they were really beautiful islands. And I decided I was going to the island of Paros, where they had beautiful, beautiful marble. It's even more pure than Carrara. I would go and maybe do some sculpture. So I took off, I went to Greece. I was gonna stay there for six or eight weeks. I ended up staying there for over four years. I was doing photography, and I was doing marble carving, and it was just a phenomenal place. The island was not completely electrified. Only the little towns had electrification. I had a farmhouse out in the country that I paid $10 dollars a month for. There was no running water, no electricity. But I had a well and a fig tree, and there was a cow less than a quarter of a mile down the road, so I could get milk all the time. And I ended up staying there for almost five years. It was just wonderful. To make money, I white-washed houses, and I carved—do you know what kouros figures are?

Q: I don't.

Devonshire: There's a cycladic fertility figure, starting in the Periclean era, that are very simple carved marble figures. You know, usually with sexual organs of some kind or another. For my landlord—who owned the ferryboat franchise, and a bookstore, and a souvenir shop—I would carve kouros figures for him out of Parian marble. The quarries we still open. They weren't being worked, but you could go and get marble. And he would bury these things, dirty them up, [laughs] and sell them to tourists. I made $5 dollars apiece in drachma—the equivalent of $5 dollars apiece—for each one. My rent was $10 dollars a month. I came back home with more money than I left with. I white-washed houses for people, I worked for a fisherman, just did all kinds of stuff. And I did photography and carved marble. It was halcyon days for me. I realized how little I needed to live and be happy. No electricity? It was not a problem. You had oil lanterns. You go to sleep when it gets dark, you got up when the sun comes up. [laughs] It was fantastic, it was really fantastic. And I've been back to Paros several times since then actually. It's still beautiful. It's overrun with tourists now, but it's still a beautiful place. I love the Cycladic Islands. We've been going there every year for probably the past nine years now. We go sailing on the islands. So I ran out my time there. What made me come back was my grandfather died, and I couldn't get back here in time for his funeral. And I just thought, "Oh man, this is gonna be weird." So I came back home.

A woman who I'd met there invited me to come to a little town called Mill Valley, where she lived, which is north of San Francisco. Beautiful little town. I went out there to spend a week, and I ended up staying there. [laughs] It was just a beautiful, beautiful place. And I ended up, eventually, going to work for a company called Design Research, DR. It was a company that was started in Cambridge by Ben Thompson. They had a store at The Embarcadero, and at Ghirardelli Square, and I built display stuff for them. I worked there for a couple of years, and then my then-girlfriend—who I was living with at that point—we decided to go back to Paros. I had heard the whole place was going to be electrified, and I wanted to go back and photograph all those things that were gonna change. The baker was gonna have an electric oven now. He wouldn't have the oven that started at three o'clock in the morning, things like that. So she went ahead of me. I was building a pool house for the father of a friend of mine. By the time I got there, she had fallen in love with a Greek butcher and [laughs] was living with him! So my time there was short. I only stayed there for about five months that time, and on my way back home I stayed in Paris for about three months.

When I got home, the people at Design Research got in touch with me and said, “We’re starting a store in Philadelphia. Will you come help set it up?” So I did that. I stayed there working for them for a while. Then a photographer, who was shooting the store for *Architectural Digest* magazine, asked me if I would help him out on the weekend that he was shooting. I helped him out, and he liked my attitude about work. He said, “Why don’t you come and work for me?” His name was Tom Crane. He recently passed away. He was a magnificent photographer. He had cut his licks with Ezra Stoller in New York City. He’s got a couple of books actually of his photographs of Philadelphia architecture and churches.

Anyway, I worked for Tom for a couple of years, and one of the projects that we worked on was Andalusia, which was the Biddle family mansion north of Philadelphia. James Biddle was, at that point, the head of the National Trust [for Historic Preservation], and he and I just kind of hit it off. He invited me back a few times for drinks, and while we were talking, I told him about my interest in old buildings, and blah blah blah. And he said, “Well, you should go and study historic preservation!” [laughs] I didn’t know that you could! And at that point, I think the Columbia program was going, but I didn’t want to do a master’s degree. There were two other programs in the country with undergraduate degrees. One was Goucher in Maryland, which was an all-girls school, and the other was this little college in Bristol, Rhode Island, called Roger Williams, which I knew of from my days at RISD. So I applied. I applied in August—they had this strange rolling admission thing. The program was only two years old there, and I got in. So it was probably five weeks between applying and actually going back to Rhode Island.

And the program was magnificent. It was all hands-on. One of the first things we did was dismantle a barn, and move it to the campus to make a performing arts center out of it. It was magnificent. And so I was there for a year and a half. I applied for a National Trust summer internship at three places: [00:25:00] Newburyport, Massachusetts; Camden, Maine; and the South Street Seaport Museum, [laughs] which wasn't really there yet. It was an organization called the New York State Maritime Museum, which had been formed by State Parks to sort of oversee that area while it was getting developed. And so I won a National Trust internship to work down there—working essentially for Jan's office, really—doing documentation of the Schermerhorn Row. And one of my other tasks was documentation of all the Federal Period buildings in New York City. And so I would spend my days in the attic of the Bartow-Pell Mansion, or in the attic and cellar of the Merchant's House Museum. It was ideal [both laugh]. It was absolutely ideal.

So at the end of the summer, it was really kind of strange. Jan said, "Michael, why don't you stay and work on—" There was a publication that they were gonna do of the Schermerhorn Row, and they needed someone to do the drawings. So I stayed there and I did all the drawings for the Schermerhorn Row book. While I was there, there was another group of ex-Columbia students who had this organization called the Center for Building Conservation [CBC]. It had been a thesis project for these three students, who did this group project. They asked me to come and work for them. I went, and I started work for them. I've never had a job interview! I've never been in a job interview. So I worked for CBC. We restored the Jasper Ward House on Peck's Slip.

And then—I can’t remember how it happened—but there was a guy who was connected to the National Trust up at Lyndhurst, and he asked me to do some stuff for them. So I was sort of doing work for both of these organizations. And then the Centre for Building Conservancy got a project working at Weeksville, which is in Bed-Stuyvesant. It’s an early African American settlement. And there was a gentlemen by the name of Bill Cary, who was the restoration director there. They needed someone to do restoration carpentry, and train three young men from the local high school, three men at risk. And so there were two of us from CBC, and these three kids, really, from the local high school, and we restored the houses at Weeksville. And that was just amazing. It was really amazing.

When that was done, I went and did a little bit more work for the National Trust. And then Jan called me again, and said, “Will you come and work for us?” And at that point—I’ll never forget this—at that point I was making, I think, $19 thousand dollars a year, and I misunderstood what Jan was talking about in terms of what my salary would be. I ended up taking a $3 thousand dollar pay cut to work for him, which was fine with me. I loved the man. I really loved the man. There was an interesting thing that happened, and while we were talking about it, I said, “Jan, I’m really happy to come to work for you, but I’m planning on going to India with my girlfriend for two weeks, just when you want me to start.” And his faced scrunched up and he said “Ugh.” And I thought, “Well, this is it. I’m gonna lose this job before I even start working.” And he leans over and he says, “Two weeks? That’s not enough to go to India. You’ll have to go for at least six.” [laughs] And so I went with my girlfriend to India for six weeks, came back and started working for Jan.

This is one of the buildings I worked on, and the other first big one was the Morris-Jumel Mansion. We did a $3 million dollar restoration of the exterior. And I've been in that office ever since. Jan Pokorny was an amazing, amazing man. [00:30:00] He was an incredible gentleman. He was a horrible businessman, but he was dedicated to his work. He was really wonderful, and a humanist. Loved him, and I miss him every day. Sorry. [laughs]

Q: Not at all. I have a couple more questions about some of the info that you just shared. One is, I wanted to ask if you could you tell me a little bit more about the Center for Building Conservation. Because when I saw that in your bio, I tried to figure out what it was, and I couldn't. And I thought, "This is interesting."

Devonshire: Well, it was started by three guys. Ray Pepi, who now owns BCA, Building Conservation Associates; another gentleman by the name of Ted Kinnari, who seems to have disappeared; and another student, Mark Ten Eyck, who's now an environmental attorney in Minnesota. They started this thing as essentially an organization that would disseminate information about how to restore buildings and give technical information to people who were restoring buildings. Jim Fitch, James Marston Fitch, was on the board. He and I became really good buddies. Yeah, I mean Jim Fitch was also amazing. He and Jan were very similar, and they were buddies, but Fitch was a communist, and Jan was a staunch anti-communist. When they got into political discussions, it was really pretty amazing, but they were definitely allies in the historic preservation field.

In any case, these three kids, you know, in their twenties, started this organization, and we did a lot of really cool stuff. One of the things that we did was a time and materials study for a window upgrade at the Tweed Courthouse. Those windows are wood and cast iron. They wanted to restore them, and they wanted to know if it was going to be better to just get rid of the windows or restore them. We actually took a window all apart, stripped it down, restored it, and put it back in, and tracked our time so they would know exactly what it would cost. That was the kind of stuff that we were doing. Really, really interesting work. And as time went on, we had a magnificent restoration library that—really, we got donations from everyone. We got donations from Fitch. We got donations from Adele Chatfield-Taylor. We got donations from Columbia. It really was a good organization. And then we went into the restoration contracting business. That was one arm of it, and that's how I ended up out at Weeksville. We did a couple of other buildings around the city, but Weeksville was the big one. And then it got to a point where Mark wanted to go to law school, and Ray wanted to do something else, and so the business sort of disbanded.

Q: I'm interested in the field of historic preservation at this time, which is the early '80s, right. So I think when I spoke to Alex Herrera, he was talking about putting together information about windows, or answering phone calls that people had about their own buildings, and how to restore them. But there really weren't existing resources—at least in the U.S.—about how to do this.

Devonshire: Not really. Probably the most popular publication at that point was *The Old-House Journal* [laughs], which is kind of a—it was everything on it sort of pedestrian level. There wasn't a lot of really good technical stuff coming out of the United States. It was all coming from England. There was a magazine called *Technology & Conservation*. All of the good stuff was coming from Europe. In Europe, they were using epoxies. People didn't even know about epoxies for wood repair in America. There was a gentleman named Morgan Phillips, who was experimenting with the stuff down in Philadelphia. But no, Alex is right, there really wasn't a lot of good technical information. I remember, we actually subscribed to a NASA publication because NASA was dealing with different materials, and glues, and things like that. But everything that we were doing was more traditional. That's what we were doing, we were doing restoration. We were not doing a lot of really high-end architecture, or anything like that.

I think that the Timber Framers Guild, at that point, had just started. For me, *Fine Woodworking* magazine was one of the things that I went to all the time. It was even before *Fine Homebuilding*. *Fine Woodworking* was the thing that I used as a bible for dealing with wood and things like that. And I have to jump back for a second. One of the other great things about going to RISD, was that in the freshman foundation course, which took a year, every week you did about sixteen hours of life drawing, which was magnificent. But you also did work with wood. At RISD we worked with glass, you worked with metal casting. All of those things then served me very well as a conservator in the restoration field later on, things that I learned at RISD. Blacksmithing, you had to do some blacksmithing. That was the foundation that I was able to build all this other stuff on. So that when I was in Jan's office and a contractor would say, "Well, I can't do that," sometimes I would show them how to do it. I remember having to show a guy at the Morris-Jumel Mansion how to shave a shingle. [laughs] But this was somebody who was working on a very important house in New York City, and they didn't have those skills—in 1989, 1990. It was really bizarre.

Q: What were the other organizations that you might have been in conversation with at this time?

Devonshire: Well, there was the National Trust. I know a lot of people at the National Trust. There were lots of folks at the State Historic Preservation Office. Actually, when we were working at the New York State Maritime Museum, the representative from the State Historic Preservation Office was Bill Higgins, of Higgins & Quasebarth, now. And, of course, the State had their own group of restoration people, and so they had a lot of good technical information.

Q: What did you do on this building [174 East 80th Street] when you were working on it?

Devonshire: Drawings. [laughs] In the pre-CAD era, I remember doing drawings for the front desk area. There was a conference room downstairs as well, that I recall, and putting together technical specifications. That’s essentially what I did for the Jan’s office first off, and then I would go out into the field. I was in the field a lot at the Morris-Jumel Mansion project.

Q: And I wanted to ask you about the Hunterfly Road Houses. For that restoration, I know there’s been so many different times over the years, where people have gone there and done archaeology or—

Devonshire: It’s been restored now again, twice I think.

Q: So what kind of work were you doing with it? Historic carpentry? Keep it standing up? Or—

Devonshire: We were doing everything. At that point, this is before any restoration had taken place. People couldn't believe that these buildings were actually going to be restored. One of them had been—to mothball it, they had wrapped it in sheet metal. Someone had gotten in and set the place on fire, and so it smoldered inside this sheet metal thing. And that was 1706-08 [00:40:02]. 1702-04, which is the long house, between 1700 and 1706-08—I did a little research on it. The gentleman who built it was from Virginia. And it looks very much like a Virginia dogtrot house, with a chimney where the dogtrot would be, which makes sense because they didn't need a dogtrot here. They didn't need a breeze, they needed a chimney. Both of those houses, both 1700 and 1702-04, we had to raise up to replace the sill plates, the sill beams. We had to do scarf joints on the floor joist—fundamental framing stuff on these buildings. They had been abandoned, and they had been really vandalized, heavily. And so we did framing work. We taught the—I'll call them men; they were high school kids. We taught them how to make windows from scratch, from lumber. We taught them how to make doors, how to make windows. We taught them roofing work. I taught them how to do three-coat plaster work. They ended up doing everything. We really did everything.

Q: Wow.

Devonshire: And the unfortunate part, of course, was that at that point, the Weeksville Society had almost no money. They were unable to maintain these buildings, and so a lot of the things that we had done actually just deteriorated, and had to be done over again. Of course, the second time they did it, they didn't have a training program, they just bought the stuff. [laughs] But the three men who we trained, all ended up going into business on their own, separately, afterwards. So it was successful in that way.

Q: I also wanted to ask about what your sense of the field's growth was, at this time.

Devonshire: At that time? You know, quite honestly, I wasn't so concerned with the field, in general, at that point, but my own selfish needs. Where do I find white oak? Where do I find cedar for shingles? Where can I get the kind of stone that I need? If I want to replace a brick in kind, where can I get the new stuff? And that was very much an issue at that period, and even up till now—I mean, up until recent times. Procuring decent original materials has always been a problem. When we were looking for replacement stone to replace the Portland, Connecticut brownstone at Schermerhorn Row, for example, the Portland, Connecticut Quarry was closed. So you couldn't get it. You couldn't get it salvaged. We had people coming and suggesting that we use limestone soaked in brown crankcase oil. Use crankcase oil [laughs] to replace brownstone! It was like that. We couldn't get replication brick here, it all came from England. There just wasn't a market for that kind of stuff then. It's better now, but it's still not great. We still get a lot of the bricks that we need from England, or from Germany. It's always been an issue. So it wasn't so much that I was involved philosophically in the historic preservation field, I was worried about where I was gonna get good bricks for a restoration. I had one of the guys on the crew, who was clinically depressed, and I would have to go and essentially drag him out of bed and bring him to work. It was a closer-knit thing that I was worried about.

Q: There was an article that I found from the *New York Times* in 1985. It was kind of saying, you know, "Used to be, nobody wanted to restore anything, but now there's suddenly more of an interest." And it was trying to actually share some resources, or give people a phone number to call. And what you were saying, the Center for Building Conservation was one of those organizations that was listed. [00:45:00] It must have been a very fleeting time. But the Director of Preservation at the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC] at the time was Donald Plotts. He was saying, they were getting—I can't remember the numbers—like three hundred calls a week or something like that, "more than we can handle," for people who were asking, "Where do I get the materials? Who do I talk to about what I need?" and so forth.

Devonshire: And at that point, Alex was at the Commission, I believe. Yeah, he was run ragged. He would call us at CBC, occasionally, for stuff. Yeah.

Q: So that's where my question comes from. Was there any kind of awareness about this growing interest in exactly the kind of field that you were in?

Devonshire: Well, in the '70s, leading up to the bicentennial, there was a huge sort of movement toward restoration, and some of it was done well, and some it—we lost a lot of really great stuff because people wanted to take an 1840s building and make it look like a 1776 building. There was a lot of really ridiculous stuff done then. This is sort of off-topic. I have an article that the *Times* did about Weeksville that I'll send you. It was an interesting one, and I remember saying to the guy, "You know, Weeksville, it wasn't a high-end—it wasn't designed. It was built by a couple of carpenters." And I remember saying, "This is really vernacular architecture here in New York City."

But yeah, there weren't a lot of places that you could go. There was an organization called The Association for Preservation Technology that had started in the early '70s, and that was a real resource for people, APT. But the other thing that was really strange was that if someone had a recipe for a good epoxy consolidant for wood, they didn't let everybody know about it. They really kept those things really kind of close. I remember it being really sort of a stingy era in historic preservation. [laughs]

Q: Yeah. And to think that maybe ten years prior, there is more of a social interest, and there is more of a connection to "let's train some people so they can go off and build." [laughs] There's a skill.

Devonshire: And that was the thing, the National Trust, they had a training workshop [National Trust Restoration workshop]. The training workshop did work on Drayton Hall, down in South Carolina. We did work on all sorts of buildings. Sherwood House up in Yonkers. We did work on the William Ward Mansion in Rye, which was a cast-in-place concrete. It was like one of the first concrete buildings in the U.S. built for this guy. Anyway, we went off the track there. I'm sorry, I tend to do that.

Q: No. I mean, I really was wondering how the field was going, and I think you were saying that it was becoming a little proprietary. Everybody was being a little proprietary.

Devonshire: The scientists were being proprietary. The people who were building stuff were all trying to help each other out, because this was kind of a new thing.

Q: And then the organizations that were set to provide information to the public were also in conversation about “what do we share?” and “who do we connect people to?” So let’s talk about the Morris-Jumel Mansion and the work that you did there.

Devonshire: It was an interesting thing for our office, because when Jan came over here during the War, he came under a student visa. The Germans had come into Prague. His father got him essentially a fake student visa to go to Sweden, and there were people in Sweden, who then ended up getting him here. And he went to Columbia, and the first building—I can’t remember the professor he had [00:50:02], but he had him going out and doing drawings of buildings, and the first one that he did was the Morris-Jumel Mansion. And so when he got the job to restore it, it was just fantastic.

But the Mansion had been purchased by the city, I believe in 1903, and everything that was done to it, from that point on, was a disaster. [laughs] They ripped out all the original windows and put in these monsters. Everything they did was bad. They ripped out the original stone steps leading up to the portico, and put wood steps in, which of course were terrible. In any case, we did a complete restoration of the exterior: a new roof, new monitor, new widow’s walk. We took off the bottom three feet of cladding and redid all of the timber framing. We consolidated that; we did epoxy consolidation with that. And we were so scrupulous about it, that we actually had the contractor take off the shingles. On the side that faced Broadway, which was the King’s Road, it was flush board, so it looked like stone. On the side facing the river, on the other side, it was shingle, because that was the "bad side." We had them remove the shingles, save the nails, straighten the nails, and put all the shingles back in the same place that they had been.

And again, one of the interesting things about that project, was that Parks really didn't know how to do a proper restoration project. And we fought with them over the low bidder for this project—which is, that's what they did. They took the low bidder. We insisted that they provide similar projects that they had worked on. This was not something that the city had ever done for a restoration project, and it held the project up, because these guys couldn't provide us—the firm that eventually got it was an excavation contractor. They didn't even do carpentry. They had a sub-consultant, who was a carpenter from Romania. He couldn't provide any similar projects that he had worked on. It was a nightmare. It was really a nightmare.

In any case, the entire project was a fight because of that. I mean, they were really terrible. I remember—well, and again, I'm sorry. I'm sort of going all over the place. I just keep thinking of different things that happened on that project. The original stone steps had been, again, Portland, Connecticut sandstone. We couldn't get it, so we had to import some stone, called St Bees, from England. And it took almost a year to get those steps for the building. We had to redo three of the columns on the front of the building. And all of this was done—that was the job where I had to show the guy how to shave a shingle. Really, every time I would go up there, I would come back pissed off because the city had insisted that they take the low bid on that project. But ultimately, we got it done and it was good. The city unfortunately, again, has not maintained that building, and it's undergoing, soon, almost as much work as we did. All of the balustrade on the roof rotted away because no one ever went up and painted it. They didn't paint the outside of the building. It's very sad. It has taken a beating.

Q: Yeah. So how does it work, administratively, with the architecture firm, and then the contractors that the city hires? [00:54:59]

Devonshire: At that point—I believe the gentleman's name was Donald Mannis—there was a scandal that had occurred in New York City with regard to contractors and supervision by city people. And it was really pretty easy for city supervisors to get paid off and turn their back on certain things. And so what happened on this particular project, we had the design contract. The site supervision contract was given to another architectural firm. Unfortunately, they had no experience in historic preservation, so the city gave us an additional contract to assist them with their supervision of the project. And eventually—my closest partner at Jan's office was Richard Pieper, he was great. We did a lot of work together. And we realized that the representative from the construction administration firm was being subject to what we called the hostage syndrome. He shared an office in a trailer with the contractor. The contractor was always taking him out to lunch. And so I would go up there to do my review of stuff, and I would see that it was not complying with the technical specs or the drawings. I'd have to get into a fight, not only with the contractor, but with the guy who was supposed to be on our side. So that was a rough one. That was a rough one.

Same thing happened at Sailors' Snug Harbor. We were doing eleven buildings out there, and the site supervisor was subject to the hostage syndrome with the contractor. I don't know how much that has improved since then, but I know more firms have historic preservation experience now than they did at that time. This was in 1990, ‘91. This was a long time ago. It’s a much better situation now. And of course, people at Parks know more about historic preservation. I mean, they’ve got great people working for them now. Really great people.

Q: And according to my notes, when the Morris-Jumel Mansion was actually completed, it won an award.

Devonshire: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. So can you talk about that experience?

Devonshire: No. [both laugh] We won an award. We were happy! [laughs]

Q: After all this stuff, all the visits where you get pissed off and come back, at the end of it, well, it was a good job!

Devonshire: What you remember are the horror stories. Okay. So, this absolute troglodyte carpenter, we’re in a meeting one day, and we’re fighting because they didn’t want to restore—there’s beaded board. Do you know what beaded board is? There’s a piece of board, and there’s a little bead on one edge of it. Okay, there was beaded board in the porches of the octagon, on the hyphen between the octagon and that house. And we were having a discussion about it, and he was just being intransigent about being able to replace some of the pieces. He didn’t want to do it because he clearly didn’t know how to do it. And so, as I was walking away, I just said, “Just put in the damn 3/16” beaded board.” And a week later, I go back for another site meeting. He grabs me at the gate, and takes me back, and he says, “We’re doing the beaded board.” And I hear this whacking going on behind the trailer. What he interpreted the 3/16” beaded board as being—he had one of his guys go out and buy 3/16” diameter chain. He had a bunch of flat boards laid out, and the guy was beating the board. [01:00:00] And I said, “What the hell is this?” And he said, “You said you wanted beated board.” [makes a sound of shock]

Q: Wow.

Devonshire: Another time, I got a call from the construction administration person in the trailer, and he said—it was right after a rainstorm—and he said, “They’re here to install the handrails at the front steps.” And I said, “It rained yesterday. Don’t allow them to pour hot lead.” You put the thing in, you pour hot lead around it. I said, “Don’t allow them to do that today. They can’t do it today. That stone is so wet, it will explode. It will expand and explode.” I said, “I’m coming out.” I got on the subway, got off at 163rd Street. As I’m walking down Sylvan Terrace toward the Morris-Jumel Mansion, I see these guys running—running away from the job site. They’re running, and as I got closer, I saw that they were running toward their truck. They had poured hot lead into these holes and blown the ends off of two of the steps that it took us a year to get from St Bees, in England. He had told them not to do it, and they went ahead and did it anyway.

Q: And they knew they had messed up.

Devonshire: So every time I go up there, and I see where we had to pin those ends back on, I get angry. So winning an award was not [laughing] the most memorable part of that project.

Q: Well, let's move on to stories about the Merchant's House Museum. I watched a video that you had done, kind of explaining, I guess recently—maybe it was last year—about what it needs now, and what it has needed in the past. It was very interesting. And I was struck by how a lot of people might end up describing it as "here's all the things wrong with the building." But for me, it seemed like you had a lot of interest and patience as you described all the different changes in materials.

Devonshire: Yeah. It's my favorite building in New York City, without a doubt. It's just wonderful.

Q: I mean, I think anyone else would be really overwhelmed. So how do you kind of go and assess a whole building, that you have now a decades-long relationship with, and still think about it in a way that's orderly and long-term—in public. [laughs]

Devonshire: Fortunately, they have a director, Pi Gardner, who's as much in love with it, if not more, than I am. She has an unnatural relationship with that building. And she listens to me. She listens to others. I know Richard Sammons is an architect she talks to from time to time. She listens to us. And she was able to get an endowment from Brooke Astor, of almost $2 million dollars, so that she could do things right. She could do things right. And so it's never been a situation where she's been in a hurry to do anything. It's always been a situation where she says, "What do we need to do?" The first thing that we did there was an historic structure report. Do you know what that is? Thank God you know what that is. Do you know how few people know what that is? And typically, people will take that and stick it on the shelf and say thank you, and that's it. She said, "Okay, what do we do first?" And we went through. We have pretty much, until the recent plague, done a project of some kind every year. And it's been the kind of thing where we haven't done work that we had to undo to do something else. [01:05:00] It's been methodical, and it's been steady.

Now, that said, the Historic House Trust [HHT]—it's part of the Historic House Trust—which I admire greatly, but because it becomes part of the Parks system, they have to go through that procurement process. And anyone at Parks will tell you, from the time of conception of a project, to the time that the first hammer swings, it's at least four years. Sometimes you don't have that grace period. If something's deteriorating, you don't have four years to deal with it, you have to do it now.

[REDACTION]

Q: There's also people who work in the building. I don't know how much income they get from––or is it free?

Devonshire: I think it costs $3 dollars and something.

Q: It costs something, and then there's tours. And things like that. And it's an interior landmark.

Devonshire: Yes, yes, which is very important. She's been wonderful about allowing us to do what we do, and do it right, not rushing things along. She wanted to redo some floorboards. I wanted to look at the nail holes in the floorboards to see where the original carpeting was. Some nails are square, some nails are round. You can tell pretty much when those nails were put in by their shape. She allowed me the luxury of spending some time to figure it out, so she that she would always know how it was originally, and what changes took place. She is dead-on involved in telling the whole story of that place, not just what's going on there today.

Q: And speaking of which, and maybe in terms of threats, where is that process at with the potential building next door?

Devonshire: You know, the city has actually offered that clown another site. And I don't know if it's an ego thing at this point, or what, but apparently it's still on. But I haven't heard any rumblings, and usually I hear from Pi immediately if something's starting to move. I like to refer to myself as her court eunuch. [laughs] When she needs a sounding board, I'm the person she listens to. And I'm happy to do it because she's just great. She's really great.

Q: Well, let's talk about being appointed to the—

Devonshire: I'll tell you something else. The City Parks is about to embark upon another restoration of the Merchant's House Museum. And because of Pi, I was heavily involved in determining the scope of work, and I will also be involved in the selection of the contractor. I'm doing that pro bono for the Historic House Trust because they now seem to know what's going on, too. There's a new director, she's great. They've got a person there named Amy Woodin, who used to be with the Landmarks Commission, who's in charge of projects like that. She's on the ball. She always has been. At the Commission, she was great, and she's really doing things right. They had some of the people on the board go out to the Lott House several weeks ago, and work up a scope of work of things that we saw, that we thought needed doing. HHT is really doing things right now. It's really good to see.

Q: And I just interviewed Alyssa Loorya a few weeks ago.

Devonshire: Great.

Q: Well, if you think of anything else, feel free to—you can go back and bring it back up. But I just want to ask about becoming involved with the Landmarks Preservation Commission. How did that happen?

Devonshire: Well, quite honestly, I feel that part of it was almost a quid pro quo. There was a time when Jan was a commissioner, [01:10:00] and he was approaching ninety years of age. Bob Tierney was the chair, and I'd met him a few times. Jan would occasionally fall asleep in the hearings, and Chair Tierney contacted me one day, and asked if we could sit down and have a coffee. And he expressed to me his misgivings about Jan being at the table and falling asleep. Even though—I attended hearings—he could wake up and say something [laughs] perfectly cogent, and right on. But we both agreed, there could be a situation where an applicant would be denied, and they could sue the Landmarks Commission and say, "Well, Commissioner Pokorny was sleeping through the hearing," and it would become embarrassing for both. So I took it upon myself to coax Jan to eventually leave the commission. And I think within a year, I was asked to become a commissioner. And I don't want to give myself any credit that I don't deserve. I think probably the only reason they asked me is because I helped them out to have Jan leave. Nevertheless, I used to go on site visits with Jan, on weekends, to look at buildings that were coming up in the presentations. I don't know if many other commissioners do that. But he used to do it all the time, and I would go with him. So I knew the ins and outs of how the stuff worked before I sat down at that table. It was sort of okay.

Q: Can you spell out some of those ins and outs? I guess I'm interested in how it all worked, but then also what you're looking at when you go on site visits.

Devonshire: The way a hearing works is that on a Thursday before a hearing, all the applicants who will be giving a presentation during that next hearing, all of those applications are adjudicated by the staff. The staff sits down with the chair, they all go through these things, and they come up with a list of recommendations for the commissioners. And it could be a recommendation—something innocuous. It could be a recommendation for a denial. It could be a recommendation for no action, but do this, this and this. And so when we, the commissioners, sit down at that table, we have before us these sheets. Each one of the applications is a sheet, and they're the staff recommendations. And I had always thought that because Jan was going out on weekends looking at these things, that that was the only exposure that they had to these things. But in fact, they got these recommendations in advance. So what he was doing was going out and seeing if his recommendations jived with the ones of the staff. Okay? And so I learned that.

And he would tell me, occasionally, that the chair will suggest that something be approved because the mayor's office has gotten contact with them, and said, "This one's a favorite of the mayor," blah blah blah. And what I will tell you, is that I never felt any pressure from Chair Tierney in that direction. He occasionally would make an offhand remark like, "Oh, the mayor would really like this one." But it wasn't, "You better approve of this one, or else." And the way he would run the hearings, is that he would go around the room, and each commissioner got to state their opinion, and then he would state his. That changed when Meenakshi Srinivasan took over. [01:15:00] She would state her opinion and then go around the table. And if you disagreed with her, she would start to get into a debate with you about it. That was a big change. That was a really big change.

[BREAK]

Devonshire: The other thing that I learned from him, from those trips with him, was how a sense of place is established. Because we would go around to districts that were going to be designated, and we would sort of judge buildings that fit into the district, or didn't fit into the district, and things like that. So I had a nice background in it, before I actually sat at the table.

Q: You were talking about Tierney and Srinivasan, and just running the meetings differently. Tierney was a lawyer, right, also?

Devonshire: Yes.

Q: So how did the way that Meenakshi ran the meetings change the feel—how you felt, or the general feeling of the commissioners, and what your roles were?

Devonshire: [sighs] This is an emotional one for me, because it went beyond just sitting at that table. There were many people on the staff, who were former Columbia students of mine, and I stayed in touch with. And they indicated to me that it was very much a hierarchy within the staff once she arrived. She made them realize that they were just workers, and that she was the boss, unlike Chair Tierney. And there were a lot of demoralized people because of that. I mean, these were people—she was an appointee—these were people whose careers were involved in historic preservation. And I had staff people tell me that one of the things that occurred was that they would have those Thursday meetings, and the staff would have particular recommendations, and she would make them change those recommendations. I can't imagine anything more demoralizing to someone who is dedicated to historic preservation.

And so it became very clear that she was taking her cues from the mayor's office. And I don't think it's too much to say that that was camouflage for a lot of developers getting things that they wanted to get through the Landmarks Commission, by having the mayor's office put the word down to LPC. And it became very clear. And again, at the table, there was a person who used to sit next to me, Adi Shamir-Baron, and we would actually discuss these things while they were happening at the hearings. She eventually separated us, like kindergarten, so that we couldn't have these conversations. And I, very early on in her administration, disagreed with her, openly, at the table. And about three months into her administration, she asked me for coffee. I met her in the Village for coffee, and we had our perfunctory greeting, and as we were sitting down, she said, “I’d like to know why you can’t be a team player.” I remember this distinctly. And I said to her, “Well, the decisions that I make, and the opinions that I have, are based on my thirty-two years in the field of historic preservation, and my philosophy about what things are good, and what things are not good.” And I said, “That’s how I make my decisions at that table.” [01:20:00] And we went on, and she started going off about disagreeing. And I said, “You know, the thing about the LPC, if you look at any of the neighborhood publications, they all say that the LPC is a rubber stamp organization for developers in this city.” And I said, “Having someone disagree with you at that table actually gives you a little more legitimacy, doesn’t it?” She didn’t really get it. And as I was leaving, she said, “Just one more thing. Why are you such a fanatic about restoring original windows?” And I realized that this knucklehead didn’t understand a thing that I was saying.

So about three more months went by, she asked me for coffee again, and when we sat down, she said, “I’m sorry, but the mayor would like for you to leave the commission. And we’ve decided that we can say anything that you would like us to say about leaving, for whatever reason. We’ll publish something that’s nice.” And I said, “I don’t really want to leave the commission.” And I said, “And I’ll do it when I get a letter from the mayor, telling me that he wants me to leave the commission.” And of course that never materialized. We had another meeting, just like that, and she went through the whole thing again. And I repeated that I would leave when I got a letter from the mayor. And she was about to go on vacation—I remember this. I related that story to Simeon Bankoff, and apparently, he related that story to several other people. And apparently—I was told by a staff member—that when she came back from vacation, there were over a hundred and twenty letters on her desk, saying she’d better not get rid of Commissioner Devonshire.

Okay, so time went on. Bill de Blasio lived a block and a half from me, in Park Slope. And apparently, at some point, my wife ran into him on the street and said, “I understand that the chair wants to get rid of my husband from the Landmarks Commission”—which he didn’t know anything about the Landmarks Commission! He said, “I don’t think that’s true. I certainly haven’t said anything to anyone about it,” he said, “but I’ll find out.” And apparently, within two hours, someone had sent her an email and said that the whole thing was bogus—that Meenakshi was making it up. So one more coffee, and I just told her, “When I get the letter from the mayor, I’ll leave.”

And then this whole thing blew up. I can’t remember what it was about, but at one of the hearings, several people got up and insisted that she retire. And I think within six weeks, she had been replaced. And during the hearing, when she announced that she was leaving, the hearing went on, and at the end of the hearing—I was two seats away from her—I just turned to her and said, “Isn’t life ironic?” She was not a preservationist. She was probably the furthest thing from a preservationist that you could be. I don’t know why she was ever appointed, and I don’t know why she lasted as long as she did. She thoroughly demoralized that staff.

Anyway, so I lasted until this mayor, and I found out that I was being replaced. We used to have these—for five minutes or so before the hearings, we would all be on Zoom, and we would be having a discussion. And at one of the pre-hearing discussions, Sarah [Carroll] announced that it would be Adi’s, John Gustafsson’s, and my last hearing. That’s how I found out. Yeah. So as one of my colleagues said, “Well, they got rid of the three troublemaker preservationists.” [laughs]

[01:25:00]

Q: From the Preservation Commission.

Devonshire: Yeah. And if you will notice, the hearings take place now, and Sarah does the same thing that Meenakshi used to do. She states her opinion first, and then they go around the table.

Q: But she is a staff preservationist.

Devonshire: She was, yeah. But it changes. When you become that appointee, you take your direction from the mayor's office. And the mayor's office takes its direction from the people who donate to the mayor's campaigns. It's not separated enough. One of the chief [sighs] battles that I wish had been fought, would have been the LPC to save the Hotel Pennsylvania, once the largest hotel in the world. McKim, Mead & White. Songs written about it. Everybody knows the Hotel Pennsylvania. They sent for a request for evaluation [RFE], and Sarah's office responded that it didn't rise to the level of an individual landmark. Well, what does, if not the Hotel Pennsylvania? Until the Bloomberg administration, when there was an RFE, request for evaluation, that came in, there was a committee of commissioners who would review that, and they would decide whether it deserved further action. Now the RFE comes in, it doesn't get beyond Sarah or Kate Lemos McHale. They decide. And I don't have to tell you.

Q: With the influence of the mayor?

Devonshire: There you go. I'm sure the first thing they do on something like that, that's owned by a developer, they call the mayor's office and ask them if they have a problem with it.

Q: How did this happen? [both laugh] How did this happen, and how does it change?

Devonshire: We reinstitute the committee of commissioners to review RFEs. I don't know any commissioner who would feel that that's a hardship. Everybody sitting at that table, as far as I know, are dedicated. They are knowledgeable and dedicated to being on the Landmarks Commission. It's not some fantastic honor. You've got a target on your back. You get a free sandwich every Tuesday. It's the only commission that doesn't get paid. People do it because they want to do it, and because they really feel that preservation has a place in this city. That's why you do it. So reinstitute that one.

Educate the staff in technical information. There are some people on the staff who have a background in materials, who have a background in the technology involved in historic preservation. So many times, I would be sitting at that table, and I would see someone come up with a presentation that said, "Our windows are in horrible condition, and we have to replace them." And the staff recommendation would say, "Yes. Approve." And they would show a slide that showed a little bit of rot at the bottom of a piece of sash, which so easily could be restored. But because the staff didn't necessarily have the technological wherewithal to know what the levels of treatment can be for a deteriorated piece of wood, they didn't have any choice but to say, yeah, replace them.

Same thing with the Park West Church. Okay? [01:30:00] The initial recommendations were mixed, but all the commissioners were invited to a site meeting with the applicant, and the applicant's consultants. And the applicant's consultants went through the forensics that they had done, to decide that that church needed to be demolished. And in fact, the forensics that they had done, was so incredibly fundamental. I think they tested something like two dozen stones, and determined that the building had to be demolished, because two dozen stones spalled when they hit them with a hammer. Well, if you know about stone, and you know about stone conservation, you know that there are different levels of intervention with stone. You can consolidate it, you can retool it, you can do all sorts of things before you have to knock the building down. But Mark Silberman was right on the side of those guys pushing their agenda. He invited me twice to come and speak with the applicant alone, and I said, "I'm not gonna do that. That's a conflict." He said, "No no no, it won't be a conflict. I'll be there." Come on. So I refused to do it. But I think that may also be part of the reason, because John, and Adi, and I, were adamantly against demolition of that building.

Q: Yeah, I wanted to ask why you and the two other people were dis-invited from the commission at the same time.

Devonshire: Because we tended to be the people who said, "No, you don't have to destroy all those windows. No, you don't have to do this, you can do this, this and this." We were the preservation troublemakers. [laughs]

Q: Well, let's talk about some of the things that did become landmarks while you were on the commission. What do you kind of remember feeling like, "I'm glad I was there. I contributed. The building is saved."

Devonshire: Not necessarily a particular building, but the designation of some neighborhoods that were clearly overlooked. A couple out in Bed-Stuy. A couple up in the Bronx. There were some—

Q: Addisleigh Park?

Devonshire: Yeah. And so that's the kind of stuff that means a lot to me, just in terms of the diversification of the city. This is a diverse city, and they're only now sort of reaching out to these areas. And I think that's where the LPC needs to do a lot more work in letting these people know what is required once you're in a designated area. Because we would have these people that would come to the LPC, and they had done $20 thousand dollars' worth of work on their building, and it would have been completely wrong, but they didn't know that they had to apply for a permit. And it's really sad to see that. I think the LPC has to do much more outreach to let people in—I don't want to say disadvantaged—but disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Q: Outside of the previous focus of the Preservation Commission—

Devonshire: Mainstream.

Q: —and the focus of professional preservationist as well. What was the Backlog 95 situation like for you as a commissioner?

Devonshire: A little frustrating. Because I saw a lot of things that—because of the then chair, I saw a lot of things taken way. Adjudication taken away from commissioners and put on the staff—that worried me because I knew that the staff were under the influence of that chair. That was the biggest problem for me. [01:34:57] Giving the staff permission to approve things that I thought they were not uncapable of dealing with, but in terms of keeping their job, they might be incapable of dealing with, because there would be so much pressure from the chair.

Q: They weren't able to freely recommend as preservationists.

Devonshire: No. Yeah, that was really the biggest issue for me. The entire story of, we're trying to make things easier for the commissioners, blah blah blah. Well, if you want to make things easier for the commissioners, you allow testimony. You allow people that are giving testimony three minutes, but someone can come in from a developer's office, and take an hour and forty-five minutes, or two hours, to give a presentation. No! Limit that. Limit the amount of time they can have to present your case. Higgins and Quasebarth, I love 'em, but whenever I saw Bill Higgins walk into the room, I would say, "Okay, time to put on the hip boots, cause this is gonna be a long one." No, seriously. I love the guy. He's articulate, he's erudite, he's knowledgeable. But I had this feeling that he knew that eventually they could just wear everyone down. [laughs] So if you want to make things easier for the commissioners, limit the amount of time that people have to make a presentation. Not two hours. Are you kidding me?

Q: Testimony pitch clock.

Devonshire: But the interesting thing is, that could also backfire. I mean, there were some times when you could sense that everyone at the table was ready to just say “yes” at the end of the day, so we could get the hell out of there. Or, we would get so cranky, that we would deny something [laughs] because we’re angry that they had just gone on and on, and on, and on. I don’t need to learn the history of New York City because you want to change the windows on your building. Okay?

Q: Right. No, this isn’t being graded. Were there any things that you were really sad to see not make it through that approval process—flawed approval process? I’m sure there are lots.

Devonshire: Hotel Pennsylvania. Didn’t even get to that. Didn’t even get to that part. There were a couple of Dutch houses on Staten Island that ended up getting offed.

Q: Irreplaceable.

Devonshire: Yeah.

Q: Let’s talk about some of the hinky things. So, what I have written is 250 Water Street and the Clocktower. And I’m sure there are others, too, where things felt wrong in some way. Would you like to talk about either of those?

Devonshire: The Clocktower was really—I never really came to terms with my own opinion about the Clocktower. [laughs] I really kind of wanted it to—that became a legal thing that we really didn't have a choice in. I wanted it to be an interpreted space, and Mark Silberman, of course said, "No, it can't be an interpreted space. We don't have the mechanism to make it that way." So I was a little disappointed in that. 250 Water Street. Our office had actually done a proposal, a plan for a building there years ago, while Jan was still alive, that was reasonable. But the developer didn't get enough money out of it. [laughs] And so, I had a little bit of a background with that one. I, personally, would like to see something a little more contextual on that site than what's being proposed. So there. [both laugh]

Q: That's a very fair opinion. What opinion do you have about the, I guess, the developer's proposal to support the Seaport Museum in some way financially, or the accusation of that happening? [01:40:06]

Devonshire: That's one of those situations where you don't really know. You don't know what's going to happen until you actually see it. And I've seen so many. Howard Hughes has done a great deal of work down there. They've done a great deal of good for the Seaport Museum. In my history in New York City, I've seen a lot of those kind of promises not come through. And so I was skeptical, and I remain skeptical.

Q: And there is sort of a—I mean, I say this as a citizen of New York City—it does seem that there's a lot of, suddenly we're in a position of having to ask developers to repair the infrastructure, or fund the museum, or restore the buildings. So on and so forth.

Devonshire: Yeah.

Q: And that feels very different than the decades that I've lived in the city. And then I guess, reading about this particular issue, it felt like, "Where does it end?"

Devonshire: Right.

Q: Do you think that there needs to be changes to the Landmarks Law itself?

Devonshire: Yes.

Q: What sort of changes.

Devonshire: I would like to see the Landmarks Law somehow establish a separation between the political administration and the administration of the LPC. I think that that's first and foremost the most important thing. I would also like to see a stronger—I'm not sure how to put this. Based on some recent information that I have gotten about the selection of commissioners who replaced the three troublemakers, I would like to see, perhaps, a little more transparency in the selection of commissioners. Those would be the two.

And again, I think the establishment within—you know, the Landmarks Law is very general, and my focus was sort of at the table level. Like I said before, I would like to see there, by requirement, be technically knowledgeable people on the staff. But of course, that’s meaningless, unless you’ve got that separation between the administration and the mayor’s office. But you know, in a perfect world, that’s how this would happen.

Q: Then people could be, maybe, transparent with their interests. But it’s the Landmarks Preservation Commission, so why exist, if it’s gonna have a different agenda?

Devonshire: Right.

Q: Again, I just say this as a New Yorker.

Devonshire: Absolutely. No, that’s the thing. I can’t count how many times I turned to Meenakshi Srinivasan, and said, “I’m sorry, this is the Landmarks Preservation Commission.” Sarcastically.

Q: Yeah, needs to be underscored. So, I mean, we could certainly talk all day, but within the context of the things that we’ve discussed here, is there anything particular that you want to add into this conversation?

Devonshire: I am thrilled, I am satisfied, I am gratified, that the field of historic preservation is where it is right now. Having started, having had my diapers on when there were no great sources of information, that it really was sort of hands on, seat-of-the-pants kind of stuff. [01:45:02] So that now—and again, the Internet has done amazing things for historic preservation—I'm distressed in living in the city in which I live, that historic preservation can be shoved aside so easily, in a city that has so much history. That someone can say, "Well, we have enough Federal Period buildings," or, "We have enough of those Dutch frame buildings." That there can be such a cavalier attitude among certain levels of business and society that the information that can be gleaned from historic buildings, and that the sustainability that evolves around saving historic buildings, can be so cavalierly thrown aside, is distressing to me.

Q: Yeah, there is. I feel like that opinion about there's enough of this kind of building or whatever, is sort of historic preservation jumping the shark, or whatever that terminology is. [both laugh] It's only about this piece, and that piece, and this piece, and that piece. And check, check, check, check, and here's our database. It's overlooking the things that you're pointing out about the fabric of the city.

Devonshire: It reminded me of something else that I thought should be part of the Landmarks Law. If a building is approved to be demolished, if there's any sort of historic significance about that building, it should be a requirement that it be fully documented, that measured drawings be done of the building, that every possible piece of knowledge that is contained within that building can be extracted before it's allowed to be demolished.

Q: Maybe conduct some interviews with some long-term residents? Which I have done that in advance of hearings. But yeah, absolutely. That seems very valuable.

Devonshire: If you can't save the building, at least save the information that the building contained.

Q: Maybe I'll end with a question, with a quote that you shared from Jan Pikorny, that "the act of preservation is a humanistic endeavor." So I wondered if you could talk, in conclusion, about why that's meaningful to you.

Devonshire: It's meaningful to me—there is much that's emotional about historic buildings, of course, because we all have our histories in these buildings. To me, buildings have always been—they're the stage on which people live their lives. And that environment that forms their—it gives them their safe place to establish their political ideas, their social ideas, their spiritual ideas. The buildings, all of that, is contained within our historic buildings, and that is essentially humanistic. They're the platforms on which all of the civilizations have been built. You know, was it Julius Caesar? I'm not sure. It might have been Adolf Hitler, who said, "If you want to destroy a civilization, you destroy their buildings." And so, that's what's important about buildings. Not even necessarily historic buildings. Buildings of Levittown. How many lives, how many wonderful things have come from a kid who grew up in Levittown? They're just these wonderful little containers in which humans form this thing, which is our civilization. [laughs]

Q: I like it. All right. Well, I guess we can end there.

Devonshire: End there. Turn that off.

Q: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]