

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Liz Waytkus

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Liz Waytkus conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on March 23, 2023. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

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

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne

Session: 1

Interviewee: Liz Waytkus

Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic

Date: March 23, 2023

Q: Today is March 23, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Liz Waytkus for the New York Preservation Archive Project. Can you start by saying your name, and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Waytkus: Sure. Thanks, Sarah. My name is Liz Waytkus. I am the Executive Director of Docomomo US. I have been with Docomomo since 2010. I received my Masters in Historic Preservation from Pratt Institute. I am from upstate New York, by long way of New Haven, Connecticut. And I have lived in Harlem for just about twenty years doing preservation, yeah, for about thirteen years now, fourteen years.

Q: Can you go into a little more detail about your path to preservation, some of the early things that were sparking your interest, and putting you on that path?

Waytkus: Sure. Yeah, it's funny. When you go to preservation school, the first thing they say at the beginning of every class is, "Why are you here?" So after two years of that question, you have a good sense of how you came to preservation, and mine was a long path. I grew up in upstate New York, in an old mill town, called Cohoes. It's actually where the State Historic Preservation office is located. I grew up in a historic district, and I did not know that until I went to graduate school, and realized the reason why I loved where I lived was because it was old and

it was historic. So when I was a teenager—this is, I think, my first getting my feet wet in preservation—there was a contest with the BID, the Business Improvement District, of downtown Cohoes, to high school seniors. It was to write an essay on how we can bring more traffic and more people to our main street. I lived on it—well, our main street was called Remsen Street. Main Street was one block over and had no retail on it. It was called Remsen. Anyway, I lived next door to a 1946 John Eberson movie theatre that was art deco, and closed, my entire life at that point. I think it might have been open when I was a kid, but I never went in. And so I grew up next to this movie theatre, and as a teenager, all you want to do is go to the movies. Like I didn't want to have to get in my car, or mom's car, all I wanted was that movie theatre to be open. So I wrote an essay saying, "Let's restore and re-open the Cohoes movie theatre," and I won that contest. There's a very funny picture of me, and our mayor, and our state assemblyman shaking hands in the paper, and saying, you know, that Liz had won this contest. So I think that was really—

When I think back, I loved the architecture of our town. It would burn down quite often when we were kids. Like the thing to do was to play in the old mills because they were all abandoned, and to play in the Erie Canal. The ruins of that exist. The Erie and the Champlain meet in Cohoes. Cohoes has a very large waterfall, which produced hydroelectric power, and so there were all these mills, and everything sort of converged. But that industry, as I'm sure you're aware, really just went away at the beginning of the 20th century. So by the time I was a child, it was really just a decaying, industrial city. But I loved the buildings.

Growing up near Albany, I often went to the Mall [Empire State Plaza], by Wallace Harrison and

Nelson Rockefeller. Even though Nelson wasn't an architect, he was really the brains behind it, and that is modern. Nelson called it "Brasilia on the Hudson." And, you know, I thought it was just as cool as the old stuff. I think, as a child, I probably did not necessarily differentiate between cool architecture. It was all just cool architecture. So if I was older, I probably had seen the community that had been demolished to create the mall in Albany, but I didn't know that. I loved the mall. There are Calder sculptures and I would roller skate on it. And I think that was really the formation of why I loved architecture, why I wanted to save architecture, and then just the very beginning of an interest in modernism.

Q: I'm sorry. Did you say you were roller skating on a Calder sculpture?

Waytkus: [laughs] Well, not on it, but next to it. There's a photo of that.

Q: [laughs] Wow, that's like breeding grounds for a love of modern art, and sculpture, and architecture.

Waytkus: The irony is that I went on to play roller derby. So the photo that my mom took of me there just really speaks to my development of, you know, love of roller skating, and architecture, and sculpture, and sort of being a little reckless. There are definitely signs on the mall in Albany that say no roller skating. But I did, and my mom would take pictures. So—

Q: [laughs] So then how did you decide to study this, and, I guess, what were some of the things that you were learning about the field, once you entered into grad school with these interests?

Waytkus: Well, I took a detour, as a lot of people do. I went to school in New Haven, Connecticut, for music. I sort of, I think I just forgot about architecture. There were other things not related to music or architecture that diverted my interest. But I went to New Haven for music. Once I got there, I really enjoyed what I was doing, but I sort of realized that music was not going to be my career.

I started taking classes in architecture, with sort of the assumption that I would get my Masters at Yale in architecture. So I was preparing myself for that. I spent a lot of time, I think, definitely, all of those years hanging out in downtown New Haven, between two Louis Kahns, all of Paul Rudolph, Saarinen, Roche, Kelly, Bunshaft, and SOM, and Marcel Breuer. I was giving myself my own education by studying what I was looking at. Without really knowing what I was doing, I thought, this is what I should be—you know, this is architecture, before I was going to get my graduate degree. And then, I think I realized that I didn't want to go into design. That was really the program at Yale, that was design. So I kept that love alive. I would go on vacation to explore architecture, both modern and of the past, and there was a point at which I knew I needed to make the change. I was up for a job at César Pelli's office—actually his son, Rafael, in New York City—and I didn't get the job. I didn't get the job because I didn't have a degree in architecture. I had the knowledge, I had the enthusiasm, I had the passion, but I didn't have a degree.

And that was the point where I said enough of this. I quit my job. I worked at the State University of New York, SUNY Purchase, also a modern college campus, master plan by

Edward Larrabee Barnes. There were also buildings by Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, and Gwathmey. I didn't know how I was being influenced, really, by all this modernism all around me, although I loved it and I would start to study it. So anyway, I quit my job and went to Pratt.

Being at Pratt, we were a large class. We were the recession class of '09 when the stock market crashed in '08. Yeah, so we were a huge class. We were the largest class ever to go through the Pratt Preservation program. I think we were over twenty-five. The rooms, literally, were not big enough for that many preservation students. They had to split us up. But I say all that because, in our classes, if we would talk about modernism, which honestly was quite rare, I loved it. The 20th century stuff was what got me super excited. And in this big class of people, I was one of the few, if not the only, who saw modernism as just as significant as the older stuff. That was informative to me, that this was unique about me, that not everyone saw. Maybe I'm wrong. But that was my path, essentially, to getting into preservation, and then focusing on 20th century.

Q: What were some of the, I guess, projects or ideas that you might have been bringing to your classmates? Any particular buildings or architects that you were looking at in grad school?

Waytkus: Well, I loved the old Whitney building. That was one of my favorites. And I definitely know I did a paper on the Michael Graves additions to that building that never happened. I felt very passionately that those additions would have been horrible. It was interesting going back and reading in the *New York Times*, Paul Goldberger I think thought they were like wonderful improvements on a horrible Breuer building. I'm fairly certain he does not agree with that thinking anymore.

I mean, what did I bring to the classroom with modernism? I think I was the one, probably, just challenging all of them, in terms of like timeline and style. I was having them think more broadly about what is significant. The timeline. And also, what exactly it is that we're preserving. The idea of preserving colonial architecture, or architecture that is of a style not American. And I think that was one thing that I really focused on in graduate school, was the development of the United States really happened post-World War II. And most if not all of that architecture is modern. So the architecture of the United States is modernism. It's not the old stuff. That is the volume of architecture in the United States. I mean, the old stuff is important too, we need to keep all that. Apologies for dismissing anything [laughs] older than the 20th century and calling it "the old stuff." But honestly, I don't focus on anything, really, earlier than 1920. My apartment building is from 1916. That's about as old as it gets with me [laughs].

Q: So can you talk about how you got connected to Docomomo?

Waytkus: Yeah. Theo Prudon, who's the founding president of Docomomo, he was my professor first semester, and he taught at Pratt and Columbia. A lot of people know he was Jim Fitch's TA at Columbia. He's the longest standing preservation professor at Columbia, and he was really the only person talking about modernism at Pratt. And I think I went up to him, somewhat sheepishly, on the last day of class and said—and I was an older student. I mean, I was in my thirties. I wasn't going straight through, and I said, "This organization, Docomomo, that does modernism, do you ever have interns?" And he said "Yeah, we do have interns. They're usually from Columbia. But if you're interested, let's talk at the beginning of January." So this was the

fall semester. I wrote him, and he was like, “Yeah, if you want to be an intern for Docomomo.”

So I started in January of 2010 at Docomomo as the intern. Docomomo had never really had full-time staff. It had a series of part-time graduate students that would come and go, working out of Theo’s architectural firm. I sometimes like to tell young people who I hire as an intern, that I am, essentially, still in my college internship. I never left. So I went from intern to executive director in about sixteen months. They gave me a title before I was really ready for it. They couldn’t pay me, so this was like the negotiation of having a title without the salary. And then, you know, gave me an opportunity to learn, and to meet everyone. Docomomo was pretty small, and however many years it’s been now, thirteen years, it’s—Docomomo is different, I’m different, I think preserving modernism in the United States is different. It never gets old. I love what I do; I love the people that I do it with; I love the buildings that I’m trying to save. Although I could never, never have predicted to be the spokesperson for postmodernism. But here we are [laughs].

Q: So unpaid staff. How do you build capacity, and have capacity to respond to so many threatened buildings in that sort of situation? How did things progress over the years?

Waytkus: It’s a lot of work. It never ceases to be an incredible amount of work. As the organization gets bigger, more people know about us. More people will send emails or make phone calls, and say, “I have a building, we’re trying to save it. It’s from 1960, 1970, 1950, whatever. Can you help us.” I just do the best that I can. We’re now a staff of two-and-a-half. So we have two full-time staff, a part-time person. We just went through strategic planning, and we’re expecting for—so I run the national office of Docomomo. We’re expecting to get

Docomomo to five full-time staff over the course of the next five years. It's still probably not enough. I could employ a small army of people.

It's challenging, that's the story of preservation, in general. We could always use more help. But in the United States, we are faced with doing the fundraising and relying on people's generosity of contributions, membership. We're a membership-based organization. It's a modest amount of money to be a member, but that's what we survive on. We survive on individuals that believe in the cause. We're no different than any other preservation organization. And that really keeps us going, keeps us having staff being able to answer the phone, email, and responding to issues when they arise.

Q: Let's talk about a few different, specific buildings and structures that you've been part of saving, trying to save. I had given you a little bit of a list but I wonder if maybe there's ones that stand out for you that you'd like to talk about—or maybe they're the same as the ones that I suggested.

Waytkus: I would say the one that really stands out for me is the UN Plaza Hotel and the Ambassador Grill in New York.

Q: Yeah, you said you never thought you'd be the spokesperson for postmodernism [laughs].

Waytkus: Well, that is a mixture of late modern and postmodern. It's little bit more late. It's starting to move into pomo. So how I got involved in that. A friend of mine said to me—Tim

Hayduk from the Center for Architecture, who's a good friend of mine. He's a design educator. The two of us like to go on road trips and go look at crazy architecture. Honestly, the two of us, the crazier the better. Corporate architecture, definitely modernism. And he said to me one night, "I want to take you to a restaurant. It's kitty-corner from the UN, 44th and First Avenue." And he's like, "I think you'll like it." So we meet there, and my jaw just hit the floor. It was like walking into the 1970s in New York City. It was like walking into Studio 54. I mean, I was kid in the '70s. I would have never seen any of that. But between mirror, and all of this green marble, these twinkling lights, it was just incredible. So Tim and I sat at the bar. The bartender's name was Philip. He had been there for like twenty-five years. He made us chocolate martinis. It was just so fun, and I couldn't believe that this interior still existed.

The UN Plaza Hotel was designed by Kevin Roche-John Dinkeloo and Associates. Building One opened in 1979. The second half of the hotel, I believe, opened in '83 or '84. The restaurant is from '79. And then the lobby is primarily '83, '84. But then the two sort of bleed into each other. So what happened was, within weeks of going to the restaurant for the first time, I got an email saying that there was a sign on the restaurant saying it was closed for renovations. It was just like a sucker punch. I had gone, but I hadn't been able to tell anyone else to go, and there was this very unique connection. I had met a gentleman, named Daniel Paul, who is a historian in Southern California. He had given a lecture that I'd seen, and we became Facebook friends. We weren't really friends, but we just connected that way, as you do when you meet someone new in your field. And I didn't know that Daniel was the expert on late modernism, and that he was in the process of writing a book—that I believe will be coming out later this year—and had done all these interviews with Kevin Roche, César Pelli, and Tony Lumsden. He's really the brains

behind mirror glass and what they call butt-glazing so that the glazing of the mullions is on the inside and you get that beautiful, flat, glass, reflective surface.

So anyway, the day that I found out the Grill was closed, Daniel put a post on Facebook that said the article that he had written for *PIN-UP Magazine*—probably like two or three years prior—was finally getting published about the Ambassador Grill. And so these two things happened on the same day. I sent him a DM [direct message] and said, “Hey, do you remember me? I just found out that this thing that you wrote about is closed.” I think we had a two-hour phone call later that day. And between the two of us, we agreed that we were going to write a Request for Evaluation to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and try to save it.

It was a crazy roller coaster of writing the nomination. I wrote the nomination over the course of a Christmas break, submitted it. The *New York Times* picked up the article. The owners of the building at this time were Millennium. They would never take my phone call, but when Landmarks approached them, they were okay with the designation. I have a feeling they didn’t know what that meant. So Landmarks calendared the Grill, so what is designated now is the Ambassador Grill and the UN Plaza Hotel Lobby. They said yes to it, the hotel said yes.

Landmarks calendared it, we had our presentation. And then someone must have told them—the owners, Millennium—what landmarking actually meant. I think Millennium is Chinese-based. They probably, for better or worse, didn’t know our laws, and they tried to retract their support. Or they did. My understanding is they went back to Landmarks and said no.

But meanwhile, the city councilman was on board, all of the preservation organizations, and we

had all this press for it. And to the Landmarks Preservation Commission's credit, they stuck with it. It's rare that they stuck with it. I think it was designated, I want to say, in January of 2018, the interiors. At the time, what also had happened was, when it was closed for renovations, they did actually do some renovation. They switched out fabric and they changed out some of the furniture in the restaurant. So the key element in the Ambassador Grill is, the Ambassador Grill is in the basement of the hotel. So what Kevin Roche did, as a way of expanding the space and making a small, dark, basement restaurant magical, was he created a fake skylight with the use of mylar, these little tiny, twinkling lights, mirror. So when you would walk into the Ambassador Grill, and you would walk through the restaurant and the bar, it's hard to describe just how amazing it is to see. So what Millennium did was they covered up the skylight, they changed out some materials, and when it was designated, it was designated in this state. It wasn't ruined. All you had to do was take off the covering from the skylight.

Then in, I want to say 2021—Hilton now runs the hotel, and they hired—I'm going to be forgetful of who they hired. Anyway, they've gone through the process of renovating the restaurant and the lobby, and I can say, now you can go into the Ambassador Grill, and other than some of the fabric, it looks like it did in 1979, and it is. It opens at five o'clock every night for dinner and drinks. And I always say to people—they know me there [laughs] when I walk in—if anyone wants to get a drink in the Ambassador Grill, I am always available. And I feel very attached to that project. I feel responsible. I feel like every time they have a change of hotel manager, that there must be a post-it note in the office that says, "If you want to understand why this building is landmarked, and what exactly that means, call Liz," and my phone number, too. Because they do that. About every sixteen months or so, someone calls me and says, "I'm the

new manager. Tell me what this means.” [laughs]

Q: Wow, that is amazing. I mean that’s better communication than most nonprofits, [laughs] for transition.

Waytkus: I’ve probably met five, maybe, managers of the hotel, since we designated it.

Q: What’s it like for you to have that kind of like unofficial role and responsibility?

Waytkus: I feel responsible. I tell people, if they’re coming to town, that’s where they should stay. I take people there all of the time. Yeah, it’s meaningful that I’ve landmarked something that will hopefully be there in perpetuity. And I think that if you’re a preservationist, that’s a large part of the motivation for what it is that we—why we do what we do, why we feel so passionately is we want others to be able to experience these places. You know, in New York, so much, especially of interiors, they get ripped out. It’s rare to find them. I mean, this is also—it’s on First Avenue, it’s in the basement. A lot of people probably hadn’t seen it. So yeah. To me, that is—and there are a couple of buildings in New York City that I have designated. Certainly, a couple of dozen across the United States that I’ve participated in, as part of the coalition. But I feel like that’s the one that I did, personally.

Q: Let’s talk about some of the other buildings that you were part of designating.

Waytkus: Sure. The other one in New York City is the AT&T building by Philip Johnson. I think

when I first started at Docomomo in 2010, it was closed. It was initially AT&T, then SONY bought it. I'm not sure if there was anyone in there in 2010. And there were always questions of, is Docomomo going to turn into Docopomo? And there is not total consensus on if that is Docomomo's mission to advocate for postmodernism. But the stance that we've taken in the national office is that modernism is a series of values, and those values go beyond time and style. That it's about social impact, technical achievement, aesthetics, and setting. And that modernism is, you know, could still be with us today. Is modernism over with? I mean postmodernism—the large part of the word postmodernism is modern. And a lot of people will say to me, “if not Docomomo, then who?” And for something as significant as the AT&T building, whether you like the silly Chippendale top or not, it was an intact building. It was a highly significant building. It was made of durable materials by a renowned architect. Whether you like Philip Johnson or not, the significance was undeniable. And so we did that. The exterior of that building is designated, but we did not win the argument on the interior. Interiors are very hard.

We're facing the same issue with 60 Wall Street, also by Kevin Roche-John Dinkeloo and Associates, from 1989. Docomomo, along with all of the preservation organizations in New York—Historic Districts Council [HDC], the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Municipal Art Society, the Preservation League of New York State—all of the elected officials in lower Manhattan, the Community Board, we are a coalition of advocates really trying to designate the inside and the outside of that building. At least one, the exterior will not be radically altered. But Landmarks has yet to move forward on calendaring either inside or the outside of the building. Actually, just yesterday, we received all of the plans that have been submitted to City Planning, to radically alter the interior of the privately-owned public space. So that's ongoing. It's

definitely more postmodern than late modern. Although, you can see elements in the Ambassador Grill from '79, '83 in 60 Wall Street. Kevin Roche also designed some of the structures at the Central Park Zoo, another building across the street from MoMA. And it's interesting when you look at what he was being influenced by, and that development over time of his ideas. Mind you, Kevin Roche is the designer of the Ford Foundation on 42nd Street, which is one of, if not one of the most celebrated modern buildings in all of Manhattan. Just a gorgeous building. Corten steel, fantastic interiors by Dan Kiley. You can see he's trying to do the same thing at 60 Wall Street, just in a postmodern way.

And with like any style, I say to people—we had this before me—but I know enough to say, “People thought art deco was ugly. People thought Victorian architecture was gaudy, and we should get rid of this stuff.” We are having the same argument, even within preservation communities and architectural communities—forget about the general public or, you know, the government. We need to take taste out of the equation. And it's interesting for 60 Wall Street that I had been asking my peers about 60 Wall Street for at least three or four years. “What do you want to do with this? It's a really significant building and interior. It's almost completely fully intact.” The only real change is these fake palm trees, which admittedly are really fun—not original! I love the fake palm trees, because it's '80s, you know. “What should we do? Would you support Docomomo if we sent in a request for an evaluation to be landmarked?” And people are like, “Eh? I don't know, it's a little tacky.”

We had an opportunity in the middle of last year, unbeknownst to most people, that it was actually going to be heard in front of Landmarks, because of the transfer of air rights for 55 Wall

Street, kitty-corner. And there is a portion of the city code that says if you use air rights from a historic building onto a new structure, the new structure must be architecturally harmonious with the other building. Mind you, there is no definition in the city code of what “architecturally harmonious” means. And so all of us in the preservation community that were like, “Oh my God! 60 Wall’s going to be in front of Landmarks!” We’re like, “What does this mean? Have you seen this issue before?” And my understanding is that it has come up a couple of times, but it’s rare. And it gave us a foot in the door, a crack in the door, to push that open and really try to get it landmarked. So right now, we feel pretty comfortable with the outside of the building, that it will not be disfigured, but it is not safe yet. It is not designated, it is not calendared. So, we continue.

Q: In the time that you’ve been working in preservation, have you seen any change in how the different preservation organizations in the city work together?

Waytkus: I would just say, I’ve been in preservation since 2010 at Docomomo. So it’s hard for me to—quite honestly, I don’t think I’ve been in preservation in New York long enough. I like to go to events and stand around people who have, and hear the old stories myself. So I love these oral histories, and I want to hear more of them myself, so I can inform myself of how things have changed.

My perspective on partnerships with preservation organizations in New York City is that everyone has, for the most part, been very supportive of each other. When you think about the crazy buildings that I’ve designated—AT&T, 60 Wall—well, not quite 60 Wall—we were all together. We all stood together on it. I mean, it takes a little while, right? You need to have those

conversations. Is this significant? Does it have the integrity that we look for? So that takes a little while, and we're all overworked and understaffed. But in my experience, everyone has been very supportive of the work that I've been doing, and the work of Docomomo. They do come to us though, "Oh, I've got this modern thing. What do you think of this? Is this significant?" Most of the work I think of the preservation organizations in this city is not 20th century. So they come to me and say, "Do you like this, Liz? Is it weird? Is it significant?" And I can usually give them an answer pretty quickly.

Q: Let me ask about—what was your involvement with the World's Fair structures out in Flushing Meadows?

Waytkus: Yeah. That was very early for me. That was either 2010 or 2011. I think it was 2010. How the New York State Pavilion came to me, how I was alerted to it, was actually not through the preservation community. There was a young man, Matthew Silva, who is a high school—not home ec—a shop teacher, not a preservationist. And he was sending emails to the New York chapter asking us, what were we doing to save the New York State Pavilion, by Philip Johnson. And I don't think he was getting anywhere cause he wasn't in the preservation community. And then he came to me, and he said, "I want to see a better future for the site. I love it, I drive by it. I'm not a preservationist. I think I want to make a movie about it." [laughs] And I was like, "Yeah. If you want to do that, we'll support you. I can't give you any money, but if you want to make a film about the New York State Pavilion as a means as advocacy—" He was serious, he was motivated, and he followed through. So our office just started supporting him and talking about the work that he was doing. And then unbeknownst to him, there were two other people

who were also, in their own ways not in the preservation world, who loved the New York State Pavilion, and wanted to see it preserved. And then they were able to come together. I think it was called *People for The Pavilion*. One of those young men died actually, very suddenly after, really, the kick-off meeting. I think it was just a couple of days later. He was in his twenties, had an asthma attack, and he was just gone. We were all just together. That was very hard to get through. But then, between—I think, at that point, that was when we had that kickoff, they were able to bring in all the preservation organizations—Docomomo, they brought in elected officials. They did this really fantastic ideas competition for the Pavilion. My favorite one was—they asked me to be a judge. So people from all over the world submitted what they thought the New York State Pavilion should turn into. Someone said it should be a UFO landing pad—that big round tent-like—there's no tent on it now, but that was my favorite. So they got everyone thinking about it.

And all of that momentum of an organization, ideas, a film, getting all the preservation organizations involved, encouraged the Queensboro president to assign a certain amount of money to at least have the Pavilion painted. So if you're on your way to the airport—as many of us usually see the Pavilion—you'll see that not only has the Tent of Tomorrow now been painted yellow, and has a much better structural form, and the two towers now have netting over them. And my understanding is that they are working on restoring the towers, so that they can be reused in some capacity—not as a UFO landing pad, although that would be cool. But perhaps there is a restaurant up there, or you can have tours and go up there. But I think that the city and the state continue to be financially supportive of that project.

A lot of the work of Docomomo is just cheering on other people, and lending our name and our voice to work that is being done. I would say that Matthew getting a hold of me at a very early stage in working at Docomomo, and then seeing the results that they were able to achieve, reminds me that anyone is a preservationist. And to not dismiss an individual who comes to you with a building that they want to save, even though they're not a preservationist. They always tell me, "Oh, I'm not a preservationist. I didn't go to school. I don't have a degree in architecture." And they will just say negative things about themselves. But I know enough, especially after that project, that there is value there. And if someone is really motivated, and the building is of quality, that we'll cheer them on and try to save whatever brutalist, modernist—there are a lot of -ists and -isms in modernism, but we pretty much will support all of it.

Q: I think what I'm hearing is that there isn't just one way to go about preserving a building. You can go through it using the official channels that you have, and the credentials that you have, and the LPC works the way that you think it's supposed to [laughs]. And then there's also grassroots campaigns that happen that sometimes are just as effective, or even more so, because of whoever happens to be considering this for protection in some way. Or the ideas that it sparks, and the memories that it sparks. The way that things operate now, it's just that there isn't one way to do it.

Waytkus: Right.

Q: One of the things you mentioned, that it's interesting to hear people talk about how things used to work. Well, it doesn't work that way anymore [laughs]. So, it's like the heydays. But

also, a little bit, I think, can make people feel a little bit stuck now because things used to be easy, and now there's these difficulties that didn't exist in the past.

Maybe you've kind of answered this already, but just thinking about how you're coming on in an era that is post-heyday of things working the way they should and everybody working together. So how do you think about—like when a building comes up—maybe just as an example, with the Midtown East rezoning. So all of a sudden there's a lot of buildings that are threatened, a huge swath of things that you're suddenly having to consider. So how do you go about thinking, you know, for each building. Like how do you think about something that's that large in scale? How do you come up with a different approach for each building? How do you prioritize. When that news broke, I guess, how did you think about it?

Waytkus: Well, that was devastating, Midtown East. I mean, we all knew it was going to be devastating, too. I mean, it's all 20th century there. And then, you know, in addition to the city administration saying that the buildings were underbuilt for the area. Well, they disguised themselves as a nonprofit but it was an architectural firm that did a report, called “Midcentury (un)Modern.” And that still will make me extremely angry, saying that [laughs] the buildings in midtown cannot be re-used. And that's from a sustainability perspective, which is infuriating. From a sustainability perspective, “we are better off to start over again.” And I just read an article about One Vanderbilt that says from a sustainability perspective, that building is already outdated. From the moment it opened, it's not sustainable. So time is always on the side of preservation when you can have something—granted, the buildings in midtown have outdated boilers, they have outdated mechanicals, they have outdated facades, but you can improve on

them. But yeah, that was a one-two punch with Midtown East. We knew we weren't going to win, and all we could really do was—yeah, prioritize a lot of buildings.

What was good was in the environmental [impact statement], the EIS, they listed all of the buildings in the districts that were likely eligible to be city landmarks. So that was helpful that we had their list. I don't remember how their list jived with our list. And when I say "our list," the "our" is really the New York/Tri-State chapter of Docomomo. When people hear Docomomo, they don't necessarily know that Docomomo is a tiered organization. We have an international office. I run the American chapter. I am based in New York, which is why I get involved in New York quite often. And then we have a New York/Tri-State chapter. So the Docomomo list for New York City, especially with Midtown East, was really developed by the New York chapter. New York had gone to the Landmarks Preservation Commission—sorry, I'm just pausing because of New York City sirens outside—they had gone to Landmarks on multiple occasions, with multiple buildings in that area, saying, "This is what we think, as Docomomo, what we think is significant: PepsiCo, Union Carbide, Universal Pictures." What's the other one that I'm being forgetful of?

Q: Maybe the Girl Scouts building and the Pan Am building?

Waytkus: Yeah. MetLife/Pan Am. And Landmarks came back and said—I think there were, of the ten buildings in that list, maybe there were four that Docomomo thought were eligible and should be designated. And Landmarks came back and said, "Of your list,"—it was like four—"our office also thinks that these merit designation and we're going to continue to study them."

And that back and forth was actually before Midtown East was even a thing, before that was announced. So Docomomo went back to Landmarks and said, “Okay, now is the time we need to designate these things.” And as we know, there was no movement.

I think that’s the frustration of the preservation community now, is that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has just turned into an arm of the mayor’s office. Everything is very political. They’re deferring to the mayor’s office, who defers to developers and corporations in New York City. I think Landmarks needs to be separated from mayoral control, in some capacity, to have the autonomy to do what’s written in the charter of that office (identifying, and designating, and protecting sites), rather than it really coming out of the preservation community, before some big corporation wants to tear it down. It was incredibly frustrating.

I think the one for me with Midtown East was Union Carbide, 270 Park Avenue, which was owned by JPMorgan Chase. Everyone knew that it was designed by SOM, attributed to Gordon Bunshaft. But what we discovered over time—Natalie de Blois was the project manager on 270 Park Avenue. When the building was opened, I want to say ’47, ’46? It was very early. She was on the television show, *What’s My Line?* I think it’s called *What’s My Line?* The premise of the game show is you have three people, and they’re all saying they’re the same person, and you have to figure out which one is the real person. So the person was Natalie de Blois, so it was Natalie and then two other women. And the premise was: I am a woman, I am an architect, I built a skyscraper. And the skyscraper that she was there to say she had, you know, was 270 Park Avenue. So it’s hard to know exactly how much of the building is Gordon Bunshaft, how much of it is Natalie de Blois. But it seems like you could attribute, at least, give her half of the credit

for the building. You know, SOM and Gordon Bunshaft is enough gravitas to Landmark, in and of itself, let alone a woman architect designing a skyscraper. If you actually go and just Google “woman architect skyscraper,” the list is very, very short of women who have designed skyscrapers. Jeanne Gang, I think Zaha [Hadid] is in there, Natalie. I don’t know if there’s anyone else. Maybe there’s one more? It’s a very, very short list.

So when New York and our office, collectively, went back to Landmarks, really pushing for 270 Park Avenue to be designated—this is even before JPMorgan Chase even announced that they were going to bring in Norman Foster to design whatever that thing is—Landmarks’ response to us was, “Natalie de Blois already has a building. Natalie has a building designated on Park Avenue, and Gordon Bunshaft also has a building designated on Park Avenue. Gordon designed Lever House, and Natalie designed PepsiCo. They’re both designated. We think those are better examples, and we don’t need another Natalie de Blois-designed building on Park Avenue.” To which I say, “We don’t need any more McKim, Mead & White. We don’t need any more Frank Lloyd Wright. We don’t need any more Mies van der Rohe.” I mean, just an infuriating response. “She has a building.” As if we designate buildings as if it was an architectural petting zoo. One of you, one of you, one of you. I don’t know, it’s extremely frustrating. And then JPMorgan Chase announced that the building that they had just renovated to be the largest lead preservation project in 2012, in I think, the United States, that they were going to tear it down, and build a building that was twice as tall. With amenities. I mean, I get the whole amenities part. I sit on a Community Board where I live, in West Harlem, and we need more public amenities. We need more elevators in the subway systems. They were doing all of that, more connections, and I would never argue against that. But what we don’t need is putting a skyscraper, a significant

skyscraper, into a dumpster, not in the day and age of climate change. There was no reason for that, other than greed and politics.

Q: And I've wondered now, too, now that everyone, or so many people in parts of New York City are working remotely, and there's this rethinking of office space vs. apartments. If their whole theory is that we need more office space, and two years later that's not borne out to be accurate [laughs], everybody has to figure out a better way to reuse these kinds of buildings and adapt them, so that they are actually sustainable, and they are adaptable. So it's flimsy reasoning on all accounts. I agree with you.

Waytkus: And that idea that the corporate offices of Midtown East could not be renovated, this "Mid-century (un)Modern" was thinking that that architecture had to be corporate, that it had to be commercial. And now we know, since the pandemic, that it doesn't, and that there are developers out there who are being smart about buying buildings, and turning them into residential. I mean, for better or for worse. Are they affordable housing? Not necessarily. But we need more housing one way or the other. And absolutely, let's turn all those corporate interiors that people are not going to go to work in anymore, and go into the city. But to be honest, there is a huge push by the business community in New York City to get us all back into offices, because we need to ride the subway, we need to pay money to the MTA, we need to be eating lunch out. I mean, that whole economic engine of New York is, I think, still pretty slow. I'm working from home. We had to close our office during the pandemic. We do have an office now that's in West Harlem. It's challenging, but I think preservation can be an important part of bringing New York City back, and the creation of more affordable housing. I know HDC is having a big conference

on that. I think it's still coming up, maybe it's next weekend. A shout out to my friends at HDC [both laugh].

Q: So let's switch gears a little bit, and the last place that is on my list to talk about is the Marcel Breuer Geller I House. So smaller scale, private. Can you talk about that situation? What unfolded, and what you're thinking about needs to happen in relation to these different kinds of smaller scale buildings?

Waytkus: Yeah. Geller was a heartbreaker, very similar, actually, to the Ambassador Grill. It happened over Christmas break. Houses are really hard. Docomomo has as a national advocacy committee, where we, every month, review advocacy issues going on across the country. And there's another house in the Hamptons—actually, the other George Nelson's office—probably on my notebook here. I don't see it. [note: Spaeth House] Anyway, houses are really hard. So what happened with Geller is, I got an email from Gunny Harboe, who's a preservation architect in Chicago, who is on my board. Gunny got an email from a gentleman named Frank Mateo, who is a teacher of historic preservation at the Penn program. And Frank overheard a young student in the preservation program—

[INTERRUPTION]

—talking about how there was a Marcel Breuer house in his home town of Lawrence, New York, that was recently purchased, that the owners let him do a documentation of with photographs—I think he did SketchUp or something, like he went through and he drew all of it—but that the

building was going to be demolished. So my understanding is that Frank overheard this student talking. The student didn't actually go to his professor and say—cause Frank wasn't his professor—say, "I want to sound the alarm!" Frank heard this, Frank called Gunny, and Gunny told me. Gunny said, "You need to look into this, Liz." So at the time, this is like coming at me, and people can come—I think that's what really separates Docomomo from other organizations is there's not a lot of bureaucracy [laughs]. If we find out that there's something that's significant and we need to act on it, we can do that pretty swiftly.

So I think it was Christmas week that I found out about Geller. Then I just started to do some research. Obviously, it's Marcel Breuer, so we're starting there, 1946, super, super early. So I did what most preservationists do: we hit the books. So I think I had to buy a couple of books. We had a couple of books in the office. I had books in storage because of the pandemic. So I'm like, "Oh, I've got to figure out what's the story with this house." And then talking to friends, I called SPLIA, who are now Preservation Long Island. I called the Preservation League of New York State, and said, "Is this house on your radar?" And the young woman who's the preservation director in Long Island said, "Yes." In fact, I think, in the '90s—in the '80s or the '90s—there was a survey done. And there's actually two Geller houses in Lawrence, New York, and they were both deemed eligible. There was documentation at the State Historic Preservation Office. Not designated. Not on the National Register. Eligible, so that holds some merit. Not designated locally.

Okay, so Lawrence, New York is a small town. It's considered one of the five—sorry, I'm from upstate New York—the Five Towns, I think it was called. Five incorporated towns of

Hempstead. So Lawrence is actually part of the larger city of Hempstead, and Lawrence does not have a historic preservation ordinance, but Hempstead does. So then I did outreach to the municipality, and they had said to me, “If the house is in the original footprint of the town of Lawrence, the original incorporated town of Lawrence, then Lawrence retains jurisdiction. If it’s outside of the original town, then Hempstead could designate it.” It was in the original town. So I just started bringing and putting all of this material together. I reached out to Caroline Zaleski, who wrote *Long Island Modernism*—[turns around] yeah, *Long Island Modernism*, it’s right behind me. Because she had written about this book, I got her involved. I got the Docomomo New York Tri-State involved. We just started having some Zoom calls.

Again, this is Christmas break going into New Year’s, trying to decide is this building—I mean, the building was significant, clearly, but what can we do? What is the state? Who were the homeowners? And I think one real key piece that’s in this research, and in collaboration with other preservation organizations and municipalities, what we realized is that this house, the Geller House, was highly published in 1946. Marcel Breuer had just ended his partnership with Walter Gropius at Harvard. He was moving his office to New York. I don’t know if he was living in New Canaan yet, but he was shifting the office to New York. This was really the first butterfly design, butterfly roof house. It was the first binuclear house. He had sketched other houses of this type that he would go on to design, but this house really put him on the residential map. And two years later he was selected to design *House in the [Museum] Garden* at MoMA. That’s the house that’s up at Pocantico that’s owned by the Rockefeller brothers. Hundreds of thousands of people saw *House in the Garden* at MoMA. And if you think about 1948, you know, the War is over, all of the development that happened in the suburbs with residential

housing. The development of modern homes was, in part, coming out of this show at MoMA. And that show at MoMA and this house at MoMA happened because of this other house, which is actually the root of this story. So we uncovered that. No one had ever—I don't think anyone had really phrased it in such a way. So once we were all, sort of, on board with this idea, that this is the very—I drove out there, actually, with Tim Hayduk, my friend from the Center for Architecture, who I always going on these little road trips with, and I'm like—it was New Year's Eve we drove out, there during the day, and I'm like, "C'mon let's go see what the house looks like." It was modest, to be quite honest. It was not in great condition. I mean, it was still all there. I think there might have been an addition, but it was modest looking. And I could understand where someone who had bought this property—actually they bought two adjacent properties and had already merged them—would see this older house and think, "It's a tiny little one-story house. No one's gonna miss it." I can see that easily.

So I very carefully got the phone number for the owners, left a message, and I spoke with the wife, and I tried to say, "I understand you've bought these properties, you're merging them. I also understand that you intend to build a house, but on the other lot. The town of Lawrence is saying that you don't intend to build a house on this lot and that—" I don't remember who told me, but the plan was to put a teahouse and a tennis court where Geller was standing. And I said to her, "I don't know if you completely understand what you have. We didn't understand the significance of this house until we found out someone had bought it. It's very significant. And I understand that you bought this land, you want to do something. Just give me a little bit of time. Maybe we can move it." I mean, preservations do all sorts of incredible lifting. "Just give me some time." And she reassured me. She said she knew it was a masterpiece, which, you looked at

the building and it didn't look like a masterpiece. We only knew that from the research. She said that she was, at least for a couple of years, going to let her older children live in the house, use it as like a summer cottage. I think it was like ten days later, I got a phone call from the gentleman in Hempstead, who's the historic preservation official. He was going out there to do a site visit, and he called me and said, "Liz, what's that address again?" And he was like, "I'm standing here, and the bulldozer is knocking it down as we speak." [pauses] And we were really trying. You know, as a preservationist, like what are the tools in your toolbox of saving a building? And you've got to know that the whole time, when we're realizing how significant this house is, and the threats to it are very real, of going to the press. And the last thing—I think this is very important for me to say—the last thing I wanted was the *New York Times* to shame this family, in the paper record, that they had demolished an important house. I really went to them trying to say, "You may not know what you have. Let me help you." I think I said that over and over again to her. "Let me help you. I don't want to go to the press. I want to help you do the right thing. That's what we're here for." That's not what happened. And then it was huge, it was huge news.

I think the second article in the *New York Times*, James Russell started the article by saying a quote from me, that "I wasn't really sure if people were going to care about one little house on Long Island. And how surprised I was about how much people really cared." And that was, I think, because of the significance, because of the research that we had done. The research we did during holidays, when we all really need a break. The collaboration of not only preservation organizations and historians, but the student, and professor, and someone in Chicago coming back. That there's an office—my office at Docomomo—where people can just say, "There's a

problem, Liz. Tell us if it's important or not." I try to tell people about why Docomomo matters, and why their membership matters, and it's places like Geller that we didn't really completely understand what we had, and I truly did my best, and we didn't save it.

I think that is the flip side to the Ambassador Grill, of something we saved, and then something that we didn't save. And really trying to just continue to use the Geller House as a conversation starter for how we can work better, how we can get more information out to people, how we can work with realtors, how putting easements on houses can be helpful, or how we can find stewards for these homes. We can't designate them all. I mean, there are so many modern houses in the United States. Too many to designate. But we can certainly get the information out there. Geller should be a wakeup call for people in terms of houses, not just in New York State, but all across the country, of trying to understand what we have. Educating realtors—just giving realtors the tools of being able to include that information in their materials when they're selling a house, that you quite possibly have a historic building. "This isn't a historic site—it could be—and you should be aware of that." And maybe that will attract the right type of homeowners. Geller did not have to be destroyed [laughs]. I haven't gone out there to see what's happened. Maybe in another year from now, that'll be a good way to close that chapter.

Q: So, are there any other, I guess, significant buildings or ideas that you want to share, as we kind of come to the end of our conversation?

Waytkus: I think Docomomo has really been wrestling with two issues in the last few years. One of them is certainly the continuation of modernism as it bleeds into the '70s and the '80s and the

'90s. Sixty Wall Street is from '89. It's, I think, thirty-three years old. Thirty-three, thirty-four years old. Wrapping our brains around that, trying to pull together scholarly information, encouraging people to, when they're in graduate school, to look at architecture that's more recent, more recent past, so we can better understand that. The Landmarks Preservation Commission had said about 60 Wall Street that there wasn't enough scholarly information on postmodernism, [laughs] which is completely untrue.

I think the other piece of modernism, the other negative aspect, is there are a lot of places that modernism destroyed, that came before. You know, whole communities with urban renewal, typically Black and brown communities, under-represented communities, that these projects were created to "make things better," and they didn't. They didn't always make things better. I think about the mall in Albany. My mom got really excited there was a movie about the mall in Albany, the Empire State Plaza. I probably keep calling it the mall, but it's the Empire State Plaza, it's the official name. She got super-excited for Christmas one year. "Oh, I got you a documentary about the creation of the mall." And the documentary is called, *The Neighborhood That Disappeared*. And it is not pro-modernism at all. It is not pro-mall, at all. And so I had to say, "Mom—" [both laughing]. But we need tell those full stories. I think we all know that now. We need to talk about all of it, the good and the bad, and we're really trying to do that now.

Every year, Docomomo picks a theme to focus on. In 2020, that theme was, "The Seventies Turned Fifty," and that's in reference to the National Register fifty-year rule. Last year our theme was on shopping malls, not necessarily saying that all shopping malls are significant, but there are so many malls. For the most part, they're all 20th century. What do we want to do with

them.” They’re being abandoned. Just trying to get that conversation going. For ’23, our theme is urban renewal, a little bit more serious. We’re going to have our national symposium this year in New Haven, Connecticut, in June. Certainly, I think the largest amount of money per square footage of dollars coming from the federal government, in the name of urban renewal, went to New Haven, Connecticut. So we’re going to focus on that. Those two things are what we spend a lot of time on.

I think the piece about homes is really important. It’s very, very hard. All of these are hard. But that’s where I spend my time, trying to look at what people are doing in New York, in the entire country, and then all over the world. So that is one of the luxuries, or burdens, of running an organization this size is, I don’t just focus on New York. A lot of the work is here, but truly trying to see cutting-edge efforts and what’s going on all over the world, and how that can be deployed here. It’s a lot of work.

Q: Yes, it sounds like it [laughs]. And I hope that in another twenty years we can loop back and talk to you about the 2020s to 2040, and hear about how your work has changed and—

Waytkus: And what will be designated? How exciting is that [unclear] [01:24:28]. What have we designated in twenty years from now? That’ll be something I’ll have to think about.

Q: Yeah. Well, that’s all my questions. Thank you so much for your time.

Waytkus: Thank you.

Q: Yeah. Really interesting to think about. The art deco argument is such a good one, and it's come up before in other interviews too. That time scale of when people start to see something as worthy of designation because of taste instead of because of the historical aspect, is really important and hard to get around. But—

Waytkus: We call that the “ugly valley.”

Q: Yeah. [laughs]

Waytkus: It's high, and then thirty years later it's down in the valley and it's ugly, and then it does come back. I mean, parachute pants have come back from the '80s. All that stuff that we all said we would never wear ever again has come back.

Q: [laughs] Yes, it does. Well, on the “ugly valley” [laughs] and hoping to see the other side of that soon, thank you again.

Waytkus: Thank you, and thanks to NYPAP asking me. Happy to make some more suggestions of people to interview for talking about modernism and preservation in New York.

Q: Yeah. Please do.

Waytkus: Great.

Q: Thank you, Liz.

Waytkus: Yeah. Have a great day.

Q: You too.

Waytkus: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]