

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
GEORGE COMINSKIE

By Sarah Dziezic
New York, NY
March 15, 2019

Oral History Interview with George Cominskie, March 5, 2019

Narrator(s)	George Cominskie
Address	Westbeth Artist Housing
Birthyear	-
Birthplace	-
Narrator Age	-
Interviewer	Sarah Dziezic
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Date of Interview	March 5, 2019
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George Cominskie, Photo by Sarah Dziezic

Quotes from Oral History Interview with George Cominskie

Sound-bite

“My name is George Cominskie. I live at Westbeth, and I have been there for thirty-six years, and I love the place.” ... “We had a free evening, so we went to the Westbeth Theater to see a show. And that was the first time I actually had ever seen Westbeth, and eighteen months later, I was living in that building. I met my now husband, then boyfriend, in 1982, at a bar in New York City, and in May of 1983 I moved in with him, into Westbeth.”

“Westbeth has sort of become the—dating ourselves—but we’ve become the grandparent because we’re celebrating our fiftieth year next year, of all of these new artist housing projects that are either just opened, or are in works to happen. We’ve had people come from Germany, from the Netherlands, from Sweden, from Thailand, places that are looking at doing artist housing in their countries. And Westbeth is the largest and the oldest artist community in our country. Maybe in the world, as far as how big we are. We’re an example of how you can survive, if you have the right funding. And how you can’t survive if you don’t.”

Additional Quotes

“Yes, the newsletter was already in existence when I took it over. And it had a very small town—when I say small town, I don’t mean that as a put down—but I mean that sometimes when there were births, that was announced in the newsletter. Special occasions for people, like a big anniversary or birthday or something like that. I think it helped build a little bit more of a community. It was already a community, but you had more contact. You knew more about people through the newsletter because there would be tenants that you might see in the hallway, on the elevator, in the laundry room, that you had no idea what they actually did. And then all of a sudden, you see a picture of them, and they’re appearing in this off-Broadway play. It gave you some point of reference.” (Cominskie p. 4–5)

“I really liked the community, and I thought there was so much more we could do as a community, particularly an artist community. And I just wanted to help promote the artists who lived there, and this seemed like a logical way to help do that. (Cominskie p. 5)

“There is a pride. There’s another event that we’ve done in the last couple of years. We’ve done Open House New York. And it has two parts to it as well: we do guided tours, where a tenant will take you around to different sections in the building, talk about the history, both from Bell Labs, how it became Westbeth, who lived there, some of the interesting architectural features in the building. At the same time, there are like twenty artist apartments or artist studios that are open, and you’re given a postcard that tells you where everybody is, and then you just wander from artist studio to artist studio at your leisure.

The first time we did it, we scheduled six tours. We had no idea how many people were going to come. So we’re like, ‘If we can get six tours, that will be amazing.’ At the end of the weekend, we had twenty-five tours. And we had over two thousand people through the building on that first one. And you could just see the pride of the residents, of like, ‘We all know we live in someplace special.’ But when all of a sudden there is this validation, and there’s that—that happens with the PEN event, and almost every year we have the same people who offer up their apartments. And if they’re not available on that night, they are so disappointed. And they’re like, ‘Who am I gonna get this year? Who am I gonna get?’ And I know that in some instances, the hosts have stayed in touch with their author, even when the author went home. So those type of events actually give the tenants a pride. Not saying that they didn’t have it, but it’s nice, in a sense, to be validated. And those events validate that this is some space, this is a special place.” (Cominskie p. 11)

“Again and again, I hear from tenants, ‘If I didn’t have Westbeth, I couldn’t be an artist here in New York.’ I would say that probably that applies to 85%, maybe 90% percent of the artists who live in Westbeth. They are constantly working; some of them are getting some recognition. But financially, there’s not a lot of them that are getting great wealth. Very few are. And in some instances, the people that might be finally getting some wealth, have been working in their art for 50 years, and now, for some reason, it is paying off. So, without Westbeth, most of these artists would not have survived in New York. At the same time, many of these artists are able to do—and I don’t know, it’s not grunt work—able to do the long-term artistic things that somebody else that can do it, it’s because they have a wealthy family, or they have a wealthy spouse. But these people are out there plugging away.

I'm thinking of one actress who lives in the building who, she works all the time. If I said her name, you'd have no idea who she was. But you have seen her on *Orange Is The New Black*, on, I don't know what the Jennifer Lopez show was, but she was on that show, she was on *Seinfeld*. But she works all the time, and living at Westbeth has allowed her to be that working actress. I just saw her in *Master Class*, playing Maria Callas, which is—it's the largest role I've ever seen her in; she controls the stage the entire time. So, somebody like that, if it wasn't for a Westbeth, they might—I don't know if she could have—she would not have survived in New York without a Westbeth. And that happens for so many of our artists.” (Cominskie p. 12–13)

“Well, I remember the Meatpacking area, because we're right on the edge. And we were all for that designation. Because compared to what it was and what it looked like it was going to be, it was like, wow, this would be great. And we all testified for it, and went to all of those meetings for that, and hearings. And the day that Florent closed was like something died. Like, that is the moment that it was like the nail in the coffin. For me and for many people at Westbeth. And then it became this party area, and these shops that—they were selling things that were worth more than some of our artists make in an entire year. It brought in a crowd that was out of nowhere compared to what the neighborhood used to be. It's not knocking them, I mean, it's fine that people have a place to go and party and whatever, and have a club. But it's not what the neighborhood used to be.

That has come down to the Westbeth area, and even further south, in the—I would say, in 1995, maybe as late as 2000, there were seven Chinese restaurants within two blocks of Westbeth. Now there are none. How many—there were, one, two—there were at least six delis within three blocks. Now we're down to two. There was a stationary store, gone. What has been driven out were what served the residents of the area. And what has been brought in serves the visitors of the area. And something dies when that happens. Something dies. And that's the really sad part of the improvements. A lot of them are for the better, but—and they are not serving the community.” (Cominskie p. 22–23)

Summary of Oral History Interview with George Cominskie

George Cominskie has resided at Westbeth Artist Housing since 1983, when he moved into the small apartment of his now-husband, a photographer. He describes the transition of moving to New York City from Pennsylvania at a time when parts of the West Village and the nearby Meatpacking District were perceived as “seedy,” though also recalls the charm of the neighborhood and its numerous mom and pop stores.

Beginning in 1987, he became involved with the Westbeth Artists Residents Council, serving as publicity chair and taking on the responsibility of the newsletter, which featured news about the residents. He became president of the Residents Council soon after, in 1989, and describes undergoing infrastructure projects that improved communal spaces at Westbeth. As the president of the Residents Council, he was automatically given a seat on the Westbeth Board of Directors as a representative of the tenants. Having served in varied capacities over the years, he describes changes to the make-up and overall operations of the Board of Directors, and its relationship to the residents of Westbeth.

Working together with numerous area tenant organizations as well as GVSHP, he recounts advocating for lower density development along Bethune Street and in the immediate area of Westbeth, as well as some of the activities and debates related to the designation of Westbeth as a New York City Landmark. Despite these protections, he reflects on the loss of many small businesses in the West Village that served area residents, such as delis, restaurants, and stores.

Cominskie has helped produce yearly public arts events at Westbeth, including the Westfest Dance Festival and PEN Literary Fest, both of which began in 2010. Other recent programs, specifically for residents, have focused on serving the needs of aging artists. Citing a few examples, he suggests that an overwhelming majority of artists living at Westbeth would not have been able to stay in New York City and continue to produce art without the stable and affordable housing that Westbeth provides, and notes that Westbeth is often referenced as a model for future artist housing.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU!

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is March 15, 2019 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing George Cominskie for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. And can you start by just introducing yourself, saying your name and a two-sentence introduction?

Cominskie: My name is George Cominskie. I live at Westbeth, and I have been there for thirty-six years, and I love the place.

Dziedzic: And what was your first introduction to Westbeth?

Cominskie: My first introduction was actually when I lived in Pennsylvania, and I was in town—in New York City—with some people that I worked with, and we had a free evening, so we went to the Westbeth Theater to see a show. And that was the first time I actually had ever seen Westbeth, and eighteen months later, I was living in that building.

Dziedzic: And how did that happen?

Cominskie: I met my now husband, then boyfriend, in 1982, at a bar in New York City, and in May of 1983 I moved in with him, into Westbeth.

Dziedzic: Can you describe the theater at the time? What you were seeing?

Cominskie: We saw a rather odd piece that, from the description looked good. It was a “musical with irony,” I think they said, and there was a lot of irony that they called it a musical [laughs]. It was very—it really made no sense. The performers, they were really giving it their all, but it just made no sense. So we just bought more drinks at the bar, and it was more fun than maybe it should have been. [Dziedzic laughs]

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: And so, when you went to the theater, were you aware of it as artist housing?

Cominskie: No, I wasn't. I wasn't at all. It looked like a fascinating place. It also, at that time, was in a neighborhood that was a little seedy, so I was actually taking these friends from work there. We were in New York for a conference, and the further we got away from

Hudson Street, they were like, “Where the hell are you taking us?” But once we got to the theater, I mean, it was great fun, and it looked very Greenwich Village, so to speak, in that Bohemian type of thing that you read about the West Village. Westbeth Theater certainly looked like it.

Dziedzic: And now, as far as moving there, can you tell me about what your first impression was about being a resident there? And just maybe a little bit about the culture of the place at the time, as far as, you know, what made it feel like artist housing?

Cominskie: First of all, I moved into an apartment with John, who is my husband, and we were living in an apartment that was 359 square feet, and he is 6’6”. So that was the first culture shock of moving into the building: I’m living in a house with thirteen rooms in Pennsylvania, and now moving into an apartment that’s 359 square feet. So we survived that—obviously, we’re still together.

It was very eclectic when we first moved in. Some of the artists kept to themselves. We did have a neighbor, a Richard Hundley, who was a composer, and we could hear him composing next door. And the first night that this piano was going on and on, first I was annoyed, and then it was charming. It was like, this is what this building is for, and you eventually just fell asleep to Richard playing the piano. Sometimes badly. But he was composing, and he was trying things out.

As time went on, I became more involved in the community, but my first impression was that they were very friendly, although some people did keep to themselves. We were on a hallway that only had three apartments, so it wasn’t like we were in the mix, and we were on the second floor. So we oftentimes would just take the stairs up and down. It wasn’t until later that we were more involved.

Dziedzic: And I did want to ask at some point about how residents can potentially change where they live within Westbeth; it sounds like you didn’t live in a 359 square-foot apartment for—you don’t still live there.

Cominskie: No, we do not. [00:05:00]

Dziedzic: But I’m curious to hear about how that works, how changes happen within the residential community.

Cominskie: Two ways: one, if your family size changes. At Westbeth, if John and I had a child, then we automatically now qualify for a two bedroom. If you have two kids, a boy and a girl, you then can get a three-bedroom apartment. So family size can change where you can get to live. You can also get onto an in-house waiting list, and you just go up the list, and as you get to the top, you're offered an apartment. Sometimes you take it, because you're just so happy to get out of the 359 square feet, which is what we did. But sometimes you just wait for—you really just want something special. And luckily for us, we're now on our third apartment, and it is special to us.

Dziedzic: And what was it like? You described the neighborhood a little bit. What was the adjustment to living in that neighborhood like for you, coming from Pennsylvania?

Cominskie: Coming from Pennsylvania, it was really a culture shock in that it was perceived as an unsafe neighborhood, and in some ways it was. It had the appearance of being seedy. There were a lot of abandoned factories, or truck parking lots. The elevated was still on West Street, so Westbeth had parking under the elevated, under the elevated highway. When you went into the Meatpacking area, there was a lot of prostitution that would sometimes come all the way down to the Westbeth area. But it was funky, and it was fun, and there were things about it that you didn't like, and the things that we wanted to change have changed so much. I'm not so sure that we're as happy with that.

Dziedzic: We'll get back to that later, I think.

Cominskie: Yeah.

Dziedzic: Where did you go for groceries, and all of that.? How far were you from these basic amenities that are now around every corner there?

Cominskie: Well, actually, it was a neighborhood. It was a neighborhood. The D'Agastino's that is there now was there then. And in some ways, there were a lot of little mom and pop places then. There was a Chinese or a Thai restaurant across the street. On the opposite corner, there was—I cannot remember the woman's name, but it was a woman's name—it was a restaurant, and she was the one who cooked. So it was kind of homey in the area. You certainly weren't going out and buying organic vegetables or anything like that. And there were a large

number of delis. So, it was sort of an up and coming neighborhood, and there were a lot of places that didn't have the best of food, or didn't have the best of clothing that they were selling, or anything like that, but it was a great neighborhood, and I think most people were happy there—except for the crime, people were happy there.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how you first became involved in administrative and leadership role there? On the Board of Directors?

Cominskie: In 1987, I was approached about serving on the Westbeth Artists Residents Council, to be their publicity chair. So, I took that on, with the help of my—I'll just refer to John as my husband—with the help of John. We were doing the newsletters for the building. And within a year, the then-sitting president resigned, and I was elected president in 1989 of the Residents Council. At that point I had lived there for six years. That's how I became involved, first with the Residents Council, and then a year later I was also put on the Board of Directors, the corporate Board of Directors.

Dziedzic: What sort of tasks were involved with putting out the newsletter, and serving as the publicity chair?

Cominskie: Gathering information on what tenants were doing: what shows they were involved in, what plays they were doing, what performances they were doing, either in dance or music, and publicizing those events, both for our artists outside the building—like they were going to be performing at BAM or something—or promoting the activities that were going to be in the community room or in the theater or in the gallery. [00:10:10]

Dziedzic: Was that something that started early in the days of Westbeth?

Cominskie: Yes, the newsletter was already in existence when I took it over. And it had a very small town—when I say small town, I don't mean that as a put down—but I mean that sometimes when there were births, that was announced in the newsletter. Special occasions for people, like a big anniversary or birthday or something like that. I think it helped build a little bit more of a community. It was already a community, but you had more contact. You knew more about people through the newsletter because there would be tenants that you might see in the hallway, on the elevator, in the laundry room, that you had no idea what they actually did.

And then all of a sudden, you see a picture of them, and they're appearing in this off-Broadway play. It gave you some point of reference.

Dziedzic: And what was it that drew you to having this kind of role at Westbeth?

Cominskie: I really liked the community, and I thought there was so much more we could do as a community, particularly an artist community. And I just wanted to help promote the artists who lived there, and this seemed like a logical way to help do that.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about some of the other kind of community building activities that either the Council did, or that happened throughout Westbeth?

Cominskie: Over the years?

Dziedzic: Yes. But maybe, if you can recall what was happening in those early days, '89 and then I think '94 was your first run, if I'm remembering correctly.

Cominskie: Yes, that was my first run as president.

Dziedzic: If you can go back to maybe thinking about some of the activities that were on the agenda, or big shifts that were happening at that time. Things that were drawing the attention of the Council.

Cominskie: One of the big things that was drawing the attention of the Council was that our community room was closed by the city because we did not have a proper ventilation. And that was closed for, I'm going to say, four years. So we didn't have a space that we could meet communally. Luckily the synagogue was very gracious to us, so we would hold our meetings, annual meetings and sometimes performances, in the synagogue. So one of the first things that the Council was working on was getting the funds to do the ventilation so we could re-open the community room. And we did that through a CB2 grant. It was an archives grant. When they re-developed the Archives, they put aside money for community projects, and we applied, and that's what got us our air conditioner ventilation system.

Also going on at the same time, we wanted to renovate our gallery. The gallery had a concrete floor, and, ironically, most floors then had wood as the floor, not concrete, so we were looking to put wood down. And then, fifteen years later, concrete was the popular floor in a

gallery. But finding the funding to put in a gallery floor, new lighting, those were things that the Residents Council was working on to upgrade the spaces so that they would be more artist-friendly.

Dziedzic: Was the issue with the community room something where the requirements changed and it was suddenly out of date? Or was it something that had been, I don't know, finished quickly or something so that Westbeth could open?

Cominskie: I'm not going to indict Richard Meier. [laughter] I don't know. I do know that we had a rather litigious tenant, who actually complained to the city about the community room, and that brought in authorities who then said we did not have the proper ventilation. And that's why we were closed.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about the relationship kind of broadly of the Residents Council and the larger community of residents?

Cominskie: The Residents Council is elected by the residents, so anyone can run for an office. You can't have more than one person from an apartment be on the Residents Council at any one time. [00:15:00] And we do—the Residents Council attempts to represent all of the tenants. But sometimes, even within the community, you have, I like this color, and there's another group that likes this color, and somebody has to at least make a decision. So the Residents Council makes that decision. And the personality of the Residents Council changes as the people who have served on it come and go. You also have some people that are more active than others. But everybody who steps forward is doing some service for the building. I mean, just going to Residents Council meetings and being drafted to do other projects. I have a great respect for anybody that steps forward. In many ways it's no different than the community as a whole; everybody bitches about something but very few people step forward to do something about it. So I have great respect for people who come forward and do something.

I think that as the years have gone on, and more and more people have served on the Residents Council, they have a bigger respect for the people that have been there a long time. And I have heard this over and over again: I had no idea of all the work you do. I had no idea. And you don't—because you don't want to be there bitching and complaining, “Oh, we gotta do this”—you just do it. And then, hopefully you're putting forward a good face, and I think that

more and more tenants respect that, particularly if somebody in their apartment has become involved.

Dziedzic: Now can you talk about the relationship between the Board of Directors and the Residents Council?

Cominskie: Again, that shifts as the personalities on the Board and the Residents Council change as well. I like to describe it that the Board is the bricks and mortar of the building, and the Residents Council is the arts of the building. Because the Residents Council, first of all, is made up of the artists, and also they do the arts programming that's in the building. They run the community room. The Residents Council runs the gallery. The Board has to make sure that the building can function, that it is fiscally solid. The fact that we're a building that's over a hundred years old, there are a lot of things that constantly need to be done, capital improvements, and it's the Board's responsibility to make sure that all of that is running. Does that mean at times there are clashes between the two over priorities? Yes. And that's happened, there have been waves of that off and on, but again I have to give respect to the people who are serving on our Board, as well. They're volunteers. I hope—I like to think they are doing what they think is best for the building. I may disagree very much with what they think is good for the building, but I think that there's respect, for the most part, from most tenants, that they're trying to do something.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how you first became involved with the Board of Directors?

Cominskie: At the time I became president of the Residents Council, it was sort of standing policy that whoever was the President of the Residents Council would automatically be put on the Board. So that the person who was elected by the tenants to be their president was representing them on the Board. And that followed through till about 2004, and then we had a period of about fourteen years where the president of the Residents Council was not put on the Board. That's now changed, the president of the Residents Council is now back on the Board. I just think it makes for much more harmony between the Board and the tenants, that if nothing else, they know that the person that they elect president is going to sit at the table. Maybe they'll be outvoted fourteen-to-one on every issue, but at least they're represented, for sure. Not to say that other tenants can't represent the tenants in the building, and can't do a good job. But I think that it is good policy to have that figurehead on the Board.

Dziedzic: How has the Board changed? You just mentioned one example. But how has the Board changed over the time that you've been involved, in terms of the non-residents that are on the Board? Or in terms of general operations, how the Board strategizes together, or envisions the future? If you can kind of characterize it, and describe how it's changed, I think that would be helpful. [00:20:07]

Cominskie: I would say that the biggest change is like life, it's gotten more complicated. When I was early on the Board, in the late 1980s, early 1990s, it seemed simpler. Maybe it really wasn't, but it didn't seem as though we had as many issues to deal with. Funding was generally good, we were relatively solvent, but the little things that were slowly falling apart, as we got into the later 1990s and into the 2000s, that needed the capital improvements—the Local Law 11, making sure that we were covered under that—those things became more complicated, and the Board has had to take on more issues.

I would say that, in looking at our current Board, they work under a committee system, which sort of assigns things to a committee and has that committee resolve whatever the issue is, and then bring it to the full board. There is also a strategic planning committee on the Board, which I think is wonderful, that they're looking to not only what we need in the next five years, but what is Westbeth going to be in ten or twenty years? What is our vision of that, and how will we get there? I think that other Boards didn't do that, because they had too much of the bricks and mortar stuff to do. And we also had smaller Boards then. I've served on Boards that had seven and eight people, and right now we have seventeen.

Dziedzic: I see. And what's the makeup of residents and non-residents?

Cominskie: Currently, out of the seventeen people, we have five residents on our Board.

Dziedzic: Has that been a ratio that's been consistent, over time?

Cominskie: No. It's changed. I would say, since 2000, it has gotten as low as two, and five is the most we've ever had.

Dziedzic: And you mentioned that the head of the Residents Council has, for the majority of time, had a seat on the Board; how are other residents elected to the Board of Directors?

Cominskie: The only way to be actually elected to the Board of Directors is the Board actually votes to put you on. But the Residents Council bylaws require that every year we recommend three names that the tenants vote for: if you put anybody on, we would recommend these three people. Many years, the Board did not take any of those people that the Residents Council recommended. But in the last few years, the Board has taken most if not all of them.

Dziedzic: I think I noticed that there were some people who had grown up in Westbeth, too, on the Board. Children of residents?

Cominskie: Actually, there are two people who grew up in Westbeth on the Board, but they no longer live there. They have both moved out, and they have not lived there in years. But they have, I mean, obviously, they know what the building is like. It is interesting when we're at a Board meeting, they certainly have a perspective of what it's like on the field, as opposed to non-resident Board members.

Dziedzic: Right. So I want to ask about some of the roles you've had as part of the Residents Council, producing some events at Westbeth. Can you talk about that? I'm thinking of the Westfest Dance Festival and the PEN Literary Quest.

Cominskie: Both of those, we're in our ninth year with those. With the Westfest Dance Festival, that was a project brought forward by Carol Nolte, who was a performing arts chair of the Residents Council, of doing this dance festival. And our first year was dumb luck, in a sense; she had an idea, we worked on it together, there was a third person who didn't live there who had a lot to add to that. And at the end of the first year, we were like, "This is great. How do we make this wonderful?"

The dance festival now has two different sections. One is called Top Floor, where there are four nights of performances at the Martha Graham Studio, and then the same weekend, for two days, there's a thing called All Over Westbeth. It is competitive to get into it—you have to apply, and we have a jury of people who look at the different applications—and we then assign a choreographer to a particular space. [00:25:31] And they choreograph a dance for the space that they're in. Then residents take the tour, take groups of people to each dance. So it starts in the courtyard, and then you might go to a hallway, then you might go to the flea market, or you then

might go to a stairwell, or to an apartment, or to the roof. And then there is a dance that is choreographed for that specific space. It is so charming. It's so delightful because you're seeing dance in a way that you wouldn't normally see it. Another thing that I love about it is each dance is no more than five minutes. So it takes you two minutes to go, "I don't like this!" And then, two minutes later, it's over! So it's not like you're sitting in an auditorium and you're like, "I've got 90 minutes of this? Shoot me now." I mean, this is, it's just charming. And how creative these people are, that sometimes it's just so fascinating. I think even when you don't really like something you still really like, "Well, that was interesting what they did." Now that we're in our ninth year, each year we keep adding more and more tours because we have more and more people come out. So that's the Westfest Dance Festival.

PEN is in conjunction with the PEN World Voices Festival, and they came to us nine years ago, and said, "We want to do something." And after many meetings, and talking about things that we both liked and enjoyed, we came up with these, like, basically salon evenings. And PEN supplies the authors, and there are generally twenty different authors, sometimes from twenty different countries. But usually at least from fifteen different countries. And Westbeth residents open their homes and an author reads in the apartment. So on that particular evening, you can go to four readings. One at 7, 7:30, 8, and 8:30. And you're there for twenty-five minutes. So you can hear a writer from Nigeria in an apartment overlooking the river, and then you run across the hall, and there's a writer from Sweden; it's just fascinating.

It reminds me of—well, two things: it is, again, the old Bohemian Village, but also, like, the Paris salons of the 1920s. And some of the times in the apartments, it is so full—people are on the furniture, they're sitting on the floor, they're sitting on the window seats, and the author is right there. It's not like a Barnes and Noble event where they're up on a stage, and you're sitting in a seat. It's one-on-one with them, and to have the author reading their work right there, as you're sitting in this comfortable chair, again, even if you don't like it, if you don't like the author's work at that point, there's still something really magical about being with all these other people that really want to hear the written word like that. And there's not—I'm sure there are other places to do that—but I don't know of them in New York.

It's one of my favorite nights at Westbeth. When the evening is over, we have a reception in the gallery with all the authors, with all the hosts, and all of the guests at the event.

And the room, there is just a crescendo of chatter because everybody's excited and then there's a bookseller there selling books of the authors that read that night.

Dziedzic: Wow. I'm impressed! [laughter] What is the impact on the community of events like this? Which are so unique.

Cominskie: There is a pride. There's another event that we've done in the last couple of years. We've done Open House New York. [00:29:54] And it has two parts to it as well: we do guided tours, where a tenant will take you around to different sections in the building, talk about the history, both from Bell Labs, how it became Westbeth, who lived there, some of the interesting architectural features in the building. At the same time, there are like twenty artist apartments or artist studios that are open, and you're given a postcard that tells you where everybody is, and then you just wander from artist studio to artist studio at your leisure.

The first time we did it, we scheduled six tours. We had no idea how many people were going to come. So we're like, "If we can get six tours, that will be amazing." At the end of the weekend, we had twenty-five tours. And we had over two thousand people through the building on that first one. And you could just see the pride of the residents, of like, "We all know we live in someplace special." But when all of a sudden there is this validation, and there's that—that happens with the PEN event, and almost every year we have the same people who offer up their apartments. And if they're not available on that night, they are so disappointed. And they're like, "Who am I gonna get this year? Who am I gonna get?" And I know that in some instances, the hosts have stayed in touch with their author, even when the author went home. So those type of events actually give the tenants a pride. Not saying that they didn't have it, but it's nice, in a sense, to be validated. And those events validate that this is some space, this is a special place.

Dziedzic: I'm going to have to get myself in on some of those tours. [laughs]

Cominskie: I'll tell ya, the Dance Festival's the end of April, and the PEN event is the first week in May.

Dziedzic: Back to back! [laughter]

Cominskie: It is a tough producing time, but by the time that's over and we're all exhausted—
—but, you're just thrilled. I mean, I had Colson Whitehead read in my apartment.

Dziedzic: Wow. [laughter]

Well, so I want to talk about, I guess, artist housing, broadly. And based on what you're saying about these events, and this particular way of building community, I guess I want to ask about if you see a distinction between artists working at Westbeth and the arts at Westbeth. So for instance, I know painters can kind of get blinders on with painting, you know, and painting and painting and painting, and are interested in looking at other paintings, but maybe not other kinds of media. So, that's what I'm thinking about, that's the distinction that I have in my head about certain arts practices, and then the arts broadly, which is more interdisciplinary. So I'm wondering, is that a distinction that you encounter at Westbeth? Or that is part of the Westbeth culture? Or is that just me and my own experiences [laughing] not being part of this community?

Cominskie: I know artists can be self-centric, in that our visual artists want to make sure that we keep the gallery running and in a certain condition, and our literary artists, I'm not saying they don't care, but they don't complain about what happens in the gallery. Our performing artists are concerned that they don't have a performing space, so, yes, a lot of the artists are often focused on the discipline at which they're in. At the same time, there's great respect between the different artists. A lot of people will come to an opening in the gallery, even if they're in the performing arts or the literary arts. And vice versa, and if we have a literary arts event, visual artists will come to it. It's hard to mesh different disciplines. We try to do that, but it's not something that comes naturally, and it maybe doesn't need to come naturally. It doesn't even need to come, in a lot of instances. Just do for everybody as best you can, and they'll all be happy.

Dziedzic: Can you give me some examples that you would know from the residents of how having stable studio space and stable housing has enabled people to—how has that effected their profession as artists? [00:35:15]

Cominskie: Again and again, I hear from tenants, "If I didn't have Westbeth, I couldn't be an artist here in New York." I would say that probably that applies to 85%, maybe 90% percent of the artists who live in Westbeth. They are constantly working; some of them are getting some recognition. But financially, there's not a lot of them that are getting great wealth. Very few are. And in some instances, the people that might be finally getting some wealth, have been working in their art for 50 years, and now, for some reason, it is paying off. So, without Westbeth, most

of these artists would not have survived in New York. At the same time, many of these artists are able to do—and I don't know, it's not grunt work—able to do the long-term artistic things that somebody else that can do it, it's because they have a wealthy family, or they have a wealthy spouse. But these people are out there plugging away.

I'm thinking of one actress who lives in the building who, she works all the time. If I said her name, you'd have no idea who she was. But you have seen her on *Orange Is The New Black*, on, I don't know what the Jennifer Lopez show was, but [Dziedzic laughs] she was on that show, she was on *Seinfeld*. But she works all the time, and living at Westbeth has allowed her to be that working actress. I just saw her in *Master Class*, playing Maria Callas, which is—it's the largest role I've ever seen her in; she controls the stage the entire time. So, somebody like that, if it wasn't for a Westbeth, they might—I don't know if she could have—she would not have survived in New York without a Westbeth. And that happens for so many of our artists.

Dziedzic: And what's Westbeth's role in advocating for artist housing generally? From what I've read, at the time that Westbeth opens, there was the thought that it was going to be the wave of the future. And that did pan out with some other housing developments, in other cities. But given that it didn't catch on like wildfire, what is Westbeth's role now, to balance the needs of itself and then also to kind of advocate more generally for more artist housing?

Cominskie: Well, when Westbeth opened, it was thought that this was the seed that was going to keep blooming, and it didn't happen. But also, there was a change of administration, who did not have the same priorities as the Kennedy-Johnson administration. So that was one of the things that kind of stopped it dead. Westbeth has sort of become the—dating ourselves—but we've become the grandparent because we're celebrating our fiftieth year next year, of all of these new artist housing projects that are either just opened, or are in works to happen. We've had people come from—I've led tours from Germany, from the Netherlands, from Sweden, from Thailand, of places that are looking at doing artist housing in their countries. And Westbeth is the largest and the oldest artist community in our country. Maybe in the world, as far as how big we are. We're an example of how you can survive, if you have the right funding. And how you can't survive if you don't.

Dziedzic: What are some unique scenarios that come up at Westbeth? In terms of the needs of the residents, or the needs of the residents as artists.

Cominskie: Number one is studio space. We do not have enough studio space for our artists. You are assigned an apartment based on your family size, not on your discipline. So you can be in a three-bedroom apartment because you have two children, and you're a writer, so you have a desk. You can be a single person who paints on huge canvases, but you're in a 359 square-foot apartment. We have studio spaces in one of the older sections of the building, but at best we have twenty studios there. [00:40:19] We did have studios in the basement, but [Hurricane] Sandy wiped all of them out in 2012. We had 63 studios. Some of them were painting, we had a recording studio down there, we had rehearsal spaces down there, and they were wiped out. It's now been seven years, and we're now working—I know it's a priority of the Board and the Residents Council—to get studio spaces back in the basement. But that's essential.

I mean, to have an affordable apartment is essential; but if you have to travel two hours on the subway to get to a studio that you can afford, and then two hours back, the amount of time that you can spend on your art is very limited. And for those lucky people that do have a studio in the building, they're spending five minutes to get there. And what a difference in the creative process, if you are sitting at home, and you've got an hour, and you go, "I have an idea," and you go over and you start painting in your studio while you have that idea, as opposed to the scenario where you're traveling two hours and when you get there you're exhausted [laughter]. And you're like, "I don't want to be here." But that makes a world of difference for any of the arts. Even if we had more performing spaces, more performing spaces for rehearsal, for our musicians, for our dancers because sometimes you get an idea and it just has to sort of sit there cause you have no place to work out that idea.

Dziedzic: That's a full-page-in-the-*New York Times* level statement that you're making. I just would like everyone to know who's not an artist that that is true.

I also wanted to ask about things like having to massively downsize somebody's inventory. Say, getting rid of a hundred paintings whether somebody is, you know, making artistic decisions or if they pass away, or something like that. Issues around using certain kinds of chemicals, potentially. Do those issues arise?

Cominskie: Those issues arise a lot. Westbeth is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary next year, and probably about fifteen percent of the people who were there on day one are still there. So, obviously, there is an aging population with those people. They're not old. But they're—

somebody moved in when they were forty, they're now ninety. And we're running into issues of services that we need to have for our seniors, and our senior artists. And there tends to be a sense of isolation sometimes, particularly because you have a couple, and somebody passes away; their mobility is limited. Where they used to be able to get out and into the city, and do a lot, and now they can't. We have to be cognizant of that, and we have to come up with programs that are engaging those people both mentally and physically. So that is one thing that we've really had to do as a community, that we recognize that we need that. And we've had at least four programs that we've designed to help with that. But we do have the issue of people passing away, and all of their art is still there, and sometimes the family—there is no family, or the family doesn't care, or, like, "We don't want that." Then we're left to deal with that. So we have been pushing people to deal with your art while you're here. It has been successful to some extent, but at the same time, a person passed away last Saturday, and I know we're going into an apartment filled with stuff and a studio filled with stuff, and sadly, something could end up in the trash.

Dziedzic: Does Westbeth ever work with organizations like either the Joan Mitchell Foundation, who offers assistance with archiving one's artwork? Or an organization like Visual Aids, which can facilitate just exactly what you're describing? [00:45:03]

Cominskie: We do. But all of, most of those programs, actually, are artist-centric, again. Meaning that the artist needs to apply. And based on what the artist application says. But we've had both of those organizations—people in the building have gotten grants, or assistance from there. Pollock-Krasner Foundation has also been extremely generous to our tenants.

Dziedzic: And I was curious to hear more about the flea market. [Laughter] Maybe it's part of this discussion or maybe it's separate—

Cominskie: No, no, it is. The flea market was started by two residents—I think they're in their thirtieth year—where people had stuff that they didn't really want to throw out because it was good, but they had no more of a use for it, so they started the flea market in the basement. And now it has two purposes: one, it raises a fair amount of money, and they use that money—it's the Beautification Committee—they use it to beautify the building. All of the tree planters around the building, they built. All the flowers that go in there every spring, they pay for. There's a new awning on the front of the building, they bought that. There was

a desk that was built for security twenty-five years ago, and they paid for it, and now they're going to build a new one because twenty-five years later, that needs an upgrade. They raise funds for good things. They also donate a lot of money to charity that they raise there.

But it is also a great community thing. People go down, they sort the things that are donated, and it's sort of a sharing time with residents, that you're doing something, but you're not discussing politics. Well, you might be discussing politics, but you're not discussing building politics, or you're not at an event where you can't talk to each other. When I say it's social, I don't mean it's like, you know, they're having drinks or anything. They work really, really hard. But it does build a community as well. And once a year they have a dinner for anyone who volunteers during the last year for the flea market. And again, it's taking items that somebody was ready to throw out, and they've, in a sense, recycled them. So, all the way round, it's a great, great sort of thing. And we now have a number of people who come from great distances to go to that flea market. We get, around October, we get a lot of phone calls or emails: "When is that flea market? When is that flea market?" On day one, get out of the way because [laughter] there are those shoppers that are all over everything.

Dziedzic: Wow. So, the residents are selling materials to benefit Westbeth as a whole, is that right? They're not necessarily selling their own artwork—

Cominskie: No, it is not—no one is selling their own goods for their own income. Everything is donated.

Dziedzic: And so it seems like—you happen to be an agent. I think you wrote that on your release form—

Cominskie: Yes.

Dziedzic: —and you've volunteered your time as a producer of events and publications for Westbeth. To me it seems like such an integral complement to artists, to have somebody who is organizing, advocating, and publicizing. I'm wondering if there is a kind of sub-community of people like you—you know, as I've just described—doing this kind of work alongside artists. How does that work at Westbeth?

Cominskie: There are a lot of people who are willing to do things, or to volunteer, or help. But you've gotta have a producer. You've already said the word. You've got to have somebody that's going to organize it. And take care of, you know, there's a list of fifty things, and that person makes sure that somebody is doing all fifty. Unfortunately, sometimes, the producer's doing forty-five of them, but they're all done. That's how it gets done. There's a fair amount of people who will take on a particular project. [00:50:04] But it's hard for a lot of our residents, and a lot of our artists, that they can't take on that producer role. And that's what I'm happy—I am not the artist in our family, so I am not the person that is worried about doing this painting or finishing this story or this book, but I do know how to produce things. In a wonderful world, all artists are recognized for the great work that they do, but that's not how the world is. And sometimes you've really got to have somebody that gets you out there.

Dziedzic: I think what I'm maybe getting at in my thinking about this is that even when you have the housing and the studio, and the stability of those things, and the proximity to the studio, there's still this element of representation that is the way the art world works, in a sense. And so there still needs to be that piece, as well, for an artist to be functioning on a professional level. The producer, the representation, whether it's the gallerist or the agent, etcetera.

Cominskie: It's true, that is the thing that I know that the Residents Council and the Board both want to change: the fact that Westbeth is here almost fifty years, and there are still a lot of people in Manhattan that don't know that we exist. That should not be. And so many times, when we have these events, and people come, and when they leave, they have this sense of wonder on their face, like, "This is so wonderful, how did I not know that this was here?" And sometimes that's people that live two blocks away. We are a gem, but maybe we're not polished.

Dziedzic: That's a sweet way of putting it. [laughs]

I also wanted to ask about the historic designations and Landmark recognition that Westbeth received in the last few years. And I wanted to know, first of all, if you were part of that, and what kind of role you had in it.

Cominskie: Yes. I mean, I saw a lot of Andrew Berman for a couple of years. [laughs] Particularly when the re-zoning of the Far West Village was happening, and we were smack in the middle of that re-zoning. At that point, we were pushing for landmarking right then to kind

of exempt ourselves from any potential development. Not that there was anything impending, but we felt that that entire square block on the river is very valuable, and it might be even more valuable if it was flat land that you can build up on. So we were really pushing for landmarking, and GVSHP was phenomenal, outstanding in leading that fight to get us landmarked. That meant many hearings, both at the CB2 level, and then down at Landmarks. And we had a good run of five, seven years where it seemed like we had to be at a hearing every other month. Because there were a lot of issues, particularly in that area, because that's when that was all being developed along the river.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit about some of the specifics of the zoning? And the development that you were seeing right around Westbeth? So maybe taking it back to mid-2000s because I think that that is when this was first getting pushed.

Cominskie: Yeah, it was about in there. The irony of it all is that we're on Washington Street, and the other side of Washington Street is landmarked. But our side is not, and that's that whole block from Washington to West Street, all along the river. And there were a lot of properties that were available and there was a big push to put tall buildings all along that area. GVSHP was pushing—originally, it kept popping up in individual units where somebody would buy something along the river, and then they were going to build there, and they would try to get the exemption. Then somebody else would get the exemption. So the push was, let's just re-zone all of this and get this fixed. Of course, the developers were pushing for very high density, and tall buildings, and GVSHP was at the other side of it. And most of the residents of that neighborhood, unless you owned the property, were on the other side of it, of lower density, not going up too high.

Sometimes you do have to make a compromise, and we had that directly across the street from us, in that the Superior Ink Company that was there when Westbeth opened, and was there until the early 2000s, and that was sold to the Related Company. [00:55:32] And their first proposal was a huge glass building directly across the street from us that was an el-shaped glass building that was directly across the street from us. That was pretty horrendous. It was almost a mirrored glass. And in working with the community, GVSHP, we, we sort of struck a compromise that on Bethune Street, in the mid-block, they're all townhouses. So it kept the density equal to what the rest of Bethune Street is. But on West Street, we testified in favor of

them being able to go higher than what the code said right then, so that they could put more units on the river. But we also said they couldn't go higher than Westbeth. Westbeth was, again, the grandfather of the neighborhood. I mean, we're the largest building all along there, and they couldn't go higher, and they didn't. So that's where you sort of compromise. And many of our tenants weren't thrilled that now these wonderful views that they'd had for forty years were gone, but it was better than having a mirrored glass across the street.

Dziedzic: Were there other organizations that were involved in this neighborhood coalition?

Cominskie: Besides GVSHP, there was no real organization. There were more tenant organizations that were involved, like West Village Houses. They were really big on it. Westbeth Artists Residents Council. Some of the—99 Jane Street—all these different tenant organizations were involved with it.

Dziedzic: And how did those—if you can tell me what you recall about actually getting the recognitions, being put on the national register and the state register, and then subsequently getting the designation from the Landmarks Commission. What do you recall about those?

Cominskie: I recall, originally, our then Board actually opposed the building been landmarked. The Residents Council had voted overwhelmingly in favor of being landmarked, but the then Board did not support that at that time. Eventually, after a few changes on the Board, they did come out in favor of it.

Having those designations, in a sense, like the people who are inside, it shows that there are some value to not only who we are, but where we live. And it's really important, like when we're doing those tours, we talk about being on the historic registry for all—I mean, for the city, for the state, and for the federal government, that there is a history here and it's recognized by these different levels of government. And I think it makes people pay more attention. If I say to you, "Oh, that's a historic building," but I have nothing to back it up, as opposed to, you know, "We have been recognized, and you can read about it here, here and here." I think that's very important to have.

Dziedzic: And what sort of reservations did the Board have about being landmarked? I think there's a kind of standard answer, but maybe if it's specific—

Cominskie: No, I think it's the standard answer. That they were concerned about what that cost might be when we do renovations, when do the Local Law 11, when we do capital improvements. And are there additional hoops? Maybe, but I think a lot of it is just bitching. [01:00:06] That, like they say, "Oh, it's gonna take all this," and then when we have to do it, maybe it's two more steps than we normally would have to do. It's not really, I have not found that it is horrific, unless you want to do something horrific. So then, all of a sudden, you have a lot of objections, and it's all because it's a landmarked building.

Dziedzic: Sure. [laughs]

Cominskie: That's at least my experience. And if you look at our building, I mean, architecturally, it is a beautiful building, and I would like to see it kept, because these are things that were in the neighborhood and are gone. There are things that are in the neighborhood that I hope we never lose. And if these designations help that, I'm all for it.

Dziedzic: What sort of funding opportunities or grants has Westbeth been able to apply for given these designations? Have there been changes undertaken, or improvements made, basically, since these designations?

Cominskie: There have been improvements, but to my knowledge, Westbeth has not taken advantage of any historical preservation grants. I have only been on the Board, this round, nine months. And I am not aware of any, even when I was on the Board, and I think they would have announced that they had gotten some. So I don't think that we've actually taken advantage of that.

Dziedzic: When I was reading the application, for, I think it was to be on—

Cominskie: Can I have some water?

Dziedzic: Oh, sure!

Cominskie: Thank you.

Dziedzic: —to be on the National Register—I don't know if you've also read the application, but it's so detailed, down to the color of paint, and—

Cominskie: Yes.

Dziedzic: —[laughs] every shape of every window. So, that got me thinking about what is the condition of those elements now, and what sort of opportunities or limitations does Westbeth have now that it's a historic place, officially, to maintain those aspects of the building? And what freedom does Westbeth have to say, "Well, this paint color may be a little dated, we're gonna change it?" How strictly does Westbeth have to hew to the original stylistic aspects of the building?

Cominskie: For the most part, we really try to stick with the original. The windows will become an issue because they're over a hundred years old, and there are many of those windows that will have to be replaced, probably in the next—some of them should already be replaced—but probably within the next ten to fifteen years, most of the rest of those are going to have to be replaced. It's an issue that we just have to deal with. I don't want to just deal with it as though it's easy, but, sure it might be cheaper if we were to buy some particular window that doesn't match the original windows, but what's the point?

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about kind of the broader impact of being kind of officially recognized as a historically important place. Do you feel like you can speak to that, or has not enough time elapsed?

Cominskie: Like some of the arts programming at Westbeth, we haven't promoted ourselves as much as we could have. So even our historical designation, I don't think we take advantage of it as much as we should. It's not a criticism of any person or any Board or the Residents Council or anything like that. There's only so much that a group of volunteers can do, but that is certainly an avenue that we should take more advantage of, that designation. Both financially and from a PR perspective.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Cominskie: I will say that we did get some bump, so to speak, particularly in relation to Richard Meier, that when we did our first tour, through Open House New York, we had a couple fly in from Florida. Westbeth was the only Richard Meier building that they had never been able to tour. [01:05:01]

Dziedzic: Wow!

Cominskie: So they flew in just to tour it. But in relation to your question, we have not taken—I believe that most of us are thrilled to have it, but we haven’t taken advantage of that designation, as other people may have.

Dziedzic: You had mentioned the Westbeth Archives. Were you involved in setting that up? Can you talk about that?

Cominskie: The Westbeth Archives were unfortunately stored in the basement, and when Sandy hit, everything that was down there was destroyed. So we’re talking a lot of the early publications of the Residents Council, the early documents of the building, a lot of the original plans for the building, all gone. The office still has some of the original drawings. The Residents Council has collected a lot from tenants, particularly tenants that have passed away and their family go, “Here, you might want this, you might want this.” And the Residents Council has collected those. But we have not done a proper archival collection of Westbeth. And it would be something that would be great for someone to do, whether it be the Residents Council or the Board. To put that in order.

Dziedzic: I guess I want to talk about the neighborhood changes, if we could go into that a little bit. Which I guess goes hand in hand with re-zoning [laughs], in a sense. Was there a kind of first sign that the residents of Westbeth, or that you in particular saw, that maybe heralded a major change coming?

Cominskie: Well, I remember the Meatpacking area, because we’re right on the edge. And we were all for that designation. Because compared to what it was and what it looked like it was going to be, it was like, wow, this would be great. And we all testified for it, and went to all of those meetings for that, and hearings. And the day that Florent closed was like something died.

Like, that is the moment that it was like the nail in the coffin. For me and for many people at Westbeth. And then it became this party area, and these shops that—they were selling things that were worth more than some of our artists make in an entire year. It brought in a crowd that was out of nowhere compared to what the neighborhood used to be. It’s not

knocking them, I mean, it's fine that people have a place to go and party and whatever, and have a club. But it's not what the neighborhood used to be.

That has come down to the Westbeth area, and even further south, in the—I would say, in 1995, maybe as late as 2000, there were seven Chinese restaurants within two blocks of Westbeth. Now there are none. How many—there were, one, two—there were at least six delis within three blocks. Now we're down to two. There was a stationary store, gone. What has been driven out were what served the residents of the area. And what has been brought in serves the visitors of the area. And something dies when that happens. Something dies. And that's the really sad part of the improvements. A lot of them are for the better, but—and they are not serving the community.

Dziedzic: Especially when you have such a stable, long-term group of residents all in one place. You said fifty percent of the original people?

Cominskie: No, fifteen. Fifteen.

Dziedzic: But even so.

Cominskie: Yes. But even, I am “middle age,” as far as my residency, and I've been there thirty-six years. [Dziedzic laughs] There are a lot of people that are there forty, forty-five years. When I said fifteen percent of the original tenants, I mean 1970. But how many of the tenants have been there since 1985? Easily sixty percent. [01:10:02] So that they've known the neighborhood for a long time. And they have seen those changes. But it's not as though it's happened just to the West Village. The artists go in first, they make it better, and then the other people come in and take advantage of it.

Dziedzic: Have there been any residents of Westbeth who have needed to leave because of the changes in the neighborhood?

Cominskie: Hm. Not that I'm aware of, but there is a very interesting—there was one tenant, she grew up in the building, and moved out and became a dancer, and applied on her own and got back into the building of her own volition and her artistic credentials. But as the neighborhood was changing, and we went from a lower-rent system to a rent stabilization system, where rents were going up faster than they used to in the building, and she made the

determination that long term, it was better for her to buy something in the Bronx because the cost of living was much lower there, and she at least was buying something so that when she retired in thirty years, she'd have some investment if she sold that. Whereas, the neighborhood was so expensive, and our rents were escalating, and she moved out of Westbeth because long term she's better off going up there. Not a lot of tenants have that ability to move out and buy something; it just so happened that she was married and the circumstances were right for them. They loved living at Westbeth, but looking at their long-term future, they saw what the neighborhood was becoming and they moved out.

I just think that that's kind of reflective of what's happened in the neighborhood, and it's sad. Because we look across at the Superior building—I don't know how many units, between the townhouses and the actual tower, there have to be at least forty units—and if we see lights on in ten of them at any night, that's a lot. There are some nights, you see one light on in the entire tower.

Dziedzic: When did Westbeth change to following the rent stabilization model?

Cominskie: In 2011, our HUD mortgage was paid off, so that required us to go into rent stabilization. It wasn't as though somebody maneuvered something; once our HUD mortgage was paid off, we were no longer under HUD control. And we went into rent—

Dziedzic: —could no longer be affordable housing.

Cominskie: Well, I mean, we certainly were affordable as compared to the rest of the neighborhood. But it used to be that our rent increases had to be justified with real numbers, meaning that we're only taking in \$4 million, and our expenses are \$4.5 million, therefore we're applying for a nine percent increase. Now, with rent stabilization, every year, depending on what the ruling is from the [Rent Guidelines] Board, the rents just are automatically being increased. Now, maybe they need to be based on the needs of the building, but the rents are escalating much higher than they used to be.

Dziedzic: And will they graduate out of stabilization, with the same kind of levels that other buildings—

Cominskie: No, because when we got our tax abatement renewed, back in 2009, that renewal said that we would never go out of stabilization. Even if our rents hit that magic number—I think it's \$2,700 now—

Dziedzic: I think so too.

Cominskie: —if we even hit that number, we're still under rent stabilization, so you can't jump from \$2,700 to \$5,000 market rate. You will still continue at the two, four percent increase that the Board issues.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm. Got it. [00:14:58]

Is there a feeling about the proximity of the new Whitney and the kind of arts tourism that's happening around Westbeth? Maybe including the Highline a little bit in this too. Do the residents have a position, or does the Board of Westbeth have a position on not just the changes in the neighborhood, but some of the specific tourist draws? There are maybe other things beside the Highline and the Whitney but those are the two that come to mind for me.

Cominskie: Well, with the Whitney, I will give them a lot of credit. Before they came in, they didn't just build and like, "Here we are." They were in the neighborhood five years before they actually did anything, talking, at least, to the Residents Council. And I know that they were reaching out to other organizations that were in the neighborhood. They built a community alliance before they even opened, and that alliance still continues now. So that's bonus points for them. And for our visual artists, they're thrilled. Most of our artists are thrilled that the Whitney is there. All of our visual artists want their paintings that are at Westbeth to be at the Whitney. [laughter] Right? It's only a couple blocks, but those couple blocks are huge. So no, we're really thrilled that the Whitney is there—most of the tenants are, and the Board is. We have a good relationship with the Whitney. And at least for the last three years, the Whitney staff show is at Westbeth. So, we love having them exhibiting in our gallery.

The Highline is wonderful, and like every other resident that lives there, we know the hours that you don't go there. And there's a good chance that between June and September, you don't go there at all. It's sad that the residents can't go there, but it is a wonderful thing, and it's a wonderful thing for New York, and there are times that we can take advantage of it. And it's a hell of a lot better than what was there. Now we're going with Pier 55, that that's just starting.

And again, Pier 55 has already reached out to Westbeth, of how we can collaborate. That's how you can be new into the community, and build a relationship to the community. And Pier 55 I think is following the Whitney's leads to get in early and establish those relationships. So I hope that that does the same thing.

So generally, I mean, we're thrilled with that type of improvement, particularly arts-related stuff, because there's arts stuff also on the Highline. And I guess we just wish that there were more of our people on all of those venues. But we'll see what we can do.

[laughter]

Dziedzic: Well, I wanted to end by asking about any other, first of all, if there's anything that has been significant to you, as either a resident or somebody who has served in these leadership roles, that you want to add to the interview. Or just any general reflections that you have with your relationship with Westbeth.

Cominskie: Well, personally, it has been—I don't want to say a thrill of a lifetime—but it really, I can't do enough, and I'll never be able to do enough, because it needs so much. And I'm not the only person that can do that, I'm not saying that. But the idea of what Westbeth is, and the idea of what Westbeth could be, is just phenomenal. It's something that inspires me even when I'm dead tired of doing this stuff. It's great to be a part of something. I know that what I have done—I have left it better than I have found it. So, for that alone, I am thrilled, but I can't stop. [laughter] Which is either a good thing or is a fault on my part, I don't know. But, personally, it's been wonderful. I'll just leave it at that: it's been wonderful. They've driven me nuts—some of them still drive me nuts—but when those things really come forward and our artists have the ability to show in a better gallery, or our writers are featured in something, things like that is just thrilling. [01:20:14]

From a perspective of the neighborhood and the city, I just wish that more people knew that we were there, and took advantage of the great talent that is there, and to actually become a part of our community in that we take volunteers from outside as well, and, like at the PEN festival, we have people from the outside who come and act as docents. They walk around in that same wonder that I first had when I was there. And, I said it earlier, but this is a gem that just isn't polished, and I've helped polish it a little bit. That's it. [laughs]

Dziedzic: All right. Thanks so much, George.

Cominskie: Thank you.

END OF RECORDING