GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

MICHAEL E. LEVINE

By Sarah Dziedzic

New York, NY

August 25, 2020

Oral History Interview with Michael E. Levine, August 25, 2020

Narrator(s)	Michael E. Levine
Address	[redacted]
Birthyear	1943
Birthplace	Brooklyn, NY
Narrator Age	77
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	August 25, 2020
Duration of Interview	112 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Levine_MichaelGVSHPOralHistory_zoomaudio.mp3 [67.1 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	44 [#2 2020]

Michael E. Levine, 2019

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Michael E. Levine

Sound-bite

"My name is Michael Levine. I am now seventy-seven years old. I never thought I would live this long and experience as much as I did. I live in Greenwich Village where I have lived since 1971 and I currently live with my husband of the past thirty years, and our cute little dog, in a cooperative apartment on 10th Street in the heart of the Greenwich Village Historic District…"

"...At that time, it [the area south of Houston Street] was called the South Houston Industrial Area. It was the artists who came up with the name SoHo, which was their idea, which of course became what is known today. But at that time, it was South Houston Industrial Area because it was industrial. It had the quality and the flavor that I found fascinating, although other people would look at me and say, when I talked about it at the City Planning Commission, why would anyone want to live there?

Of course, the sun didn't reach very many of the streets during the day because the cast iron buildings could be pretty tall. So it was in some ways dark and gloomy, but I found a fascination as I looked at these buildings, and said, despite what I'm seeing on the streets right now, there are original authentic cobblestones there. There are sidewalks that go back a hundred years. There are buildings that go back a hundred years. It's dirty and it's gritty, and we have to save it. That's what SoHo is."

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Additional Quotes

"I left Brooklyn in 1967 for my last year of college. I saved enough money to have my own apartment on 9th Street in Greenwich Village. Wow, that was fantastic. But as a kid, until I was twenty-five, whenever I had any money in my pocket and the ability to travel, the one place I always came to was Greenwich Village. I loved the Village as a teenager, in my teens and my early twenties. The Village was where I came alone or with friends. I always loved going to 8th Street and MacDougal Street and going up and down Sixth Avenue and going to Washington Square Park. I always said to myself when I lived in Brooklyn, someday when I grow up, I will live in Greenwich Village and that happened when I was twenty-five years old in my last year of graduate urban planning school at Hunter College.

So now I hold a masters degree of urban planning and have fulfilled my greatest desire to live in Greenwich Village." (Levine p. 2)

"The kids going to the Stonewall were very much out in their behavior, and hugging and kissing on the street, something you never saw anyplace else. Immediately I knew, this is where,

and then of course I realized—at that time, it was called the Stonewall Inn. The sign still had the original restaurant Stonewall Inn sign and I said, 'Okay, Stonewall, this is it,' and of course, I was right. When I followed a group of kids in on that Saturday, I said, 'Okay, I'm home now.'" (Levine p. 3)

"When I completed my work at the end of 1969 and presented it to the City Planning Commission, I also explained to them that these buildings are of great historic quality, and the members of the landmark committee—at that time, the landmark committee had already been formed for Community Board 2 and Ruth Wittenberg was the chair and Verna Small was the co-chair, and there were many, many other people on the Community Board's landmark committee, who were very much concerned about the buildings. And they told me to talk to Margot Gayle, who at that time was forming her Friends of Cast Iron organization, and Margot gave me many, many contacts who I should talk to, to gain support for changing the zoning to make it legal for residential use, and who could help me in what agencies. I went to the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC]. I spoke to the chair at that time, Harmon Goldstone, and I said, 'We need to designate this area as an historic district because of the quality of the cast iron buildings.' And he said to me, 'That's a great idea but <u>you</u> have to change the zoning first, so that there is a viable alternative use for the buildings. Only under those circumstances can the Landmarks Preservation Commission designate this as a historic district.'

So I went back to the City Planning Commission again. I was back and forth to the commission every month presenting the next step and I explained to them, 'The Landmarks Preservation Commission is ready to preserve this area,' and at that time, we're only talking twelve blocks. The Landmark Commission and the City Planning Commission outdid me, and we extended it to the full forty-three block area from Houston Street to Canal Street, from West Broadway, beyond West Broadway almost to Sixth Avenue, and it began to grow and grow and grow. And finally, we negotiated the zoning change in 1971 to the M1-5A, which meant the entire building of every single loft in it could be converted. And the M15-B, we could only convert buildings with a street frontage of less than thirty-seven feet. It was magic to be able to work with such fascinating people, to have worked with the likes of Ruth Wittenberg and Verna Small and Margot Gayle on this designation." (Levine p. 11–12)

"Following the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District, it was probably one of the most productive times I can ever think for a young man fresh out of college, and I was there at that time. And the reason it happened was because of my great love for Greenwich Village, and my familiarity with Greenwich Village before I came to the job. When I look back at it, I say yes, I know I've done a lot of things since then, but that was probably one of the most fun parts of my creative career. Some of the things I did in Greenwich Village, like on 8th Street, and of course working on the Greenwich Village Historic District designation, and the

designation of SoHo as a joint living/work ordinance district for artists, and the ability to have it designated as the Cast Iron Historic District. Those are really great highlights to look back on fifty years ago." (Levine p. 12)

"As I was walking down the streets with my clipboard, it was so obvious. Clipboard, I wore my City Planning Commission ID, I'm walking down the street, recording. I knew I was being followed. It was like a spy story in a way. I was being followed. And finally, several people would approach me and say, 'We heard that you're here. We heard that the commission is here.' I said, 'Yes, I'm doing a survey and I would appreciate your help.' And they would look at me and they would say, 'Why?' And I would say, 'Because my job is to figure out a way to help you, to make your occupancy of these buildings legal.' And they would look at me because that was the first time they ever heard anyone say that. They couldn't believe someone was here to help them. They knew the Department of Buildings and the fire department were staying as far away from them as possible. And of course the police department was so glad they were there, but they didn't expect to hear anyone say, I'm here to help you.

And then I learned from some of the artists, as I went through the neighborhood, that they started calling each other and saying, there's a young man walking down the block. Help him. Tell him where the residents are. I built up a reputation that this is someone who is here to help us. [00:50:04] And it was really funny because at first they were following behind, and now as I walk down the street, they're greeting me and saying, 'Let me show you our building.' And that's when I started to go into the loft buildings and to see how they were living.

At one point in time, when the SoHo Artists Association was formed, and it was formed around the same time that they made the original request for a zoning change, several public town hall meetings were held, and I was the guest speaker, explaining what it was that I was trying to do. And a lot of the artists got up, and like any typical town hall meeting, if everyone agrees with the main speaker, you're doing something wrong. A lot of them got up and said, 'Why? It's perfectly okay the way we are now. I can't afford it if you change the neighborhood. You're going to price me out.' And I had to look them straight in the eye and say, 'That could happen,' which of course happened. But a lot of them said, 'It's a risk we're willing to take.' And then another would get up and say, 'How do we know we can trust you? How do we know you're not sending these lists to the Department of Buildings to evict us right now?' And I stood there and I said, 'Guess what? They know you're here. There's no secret, I'm here to help you make it legal.'

It was a slow process in which I gained the confidence of many, many of the artists because they began to know this young man is walking the streets and he's trying to help us." (Levine p. 19–20)

"Someone said to me recently, a younger man, 'Well, did you have to dress in drag to go there?' I said no. You have to picture me. I'm coming from work in my three-piece suit, my favorite tie, coming home, changing, having dinner, and I'm getting into my jeans and my T-shirt and I'm going to dance at the Stonewall. Where did you ever get the idea that you needed to dress in drag? And he said, 'Because the drag queens were the most famous patrons.' I said, yes, but they were only five percent of the patrons. But they did give us the ability to be who we were. If they could go to that bar and dress the way they wanted to, we could go to that bar too. We could hold hands, which was something we couldn't do in another bar. We could touch dance. We could kiss. No other bars in the city allowed that at that time. Remember it was Mafia-owned and they were paying the police department off to <u>not</u> raid them because there were drag queens in that bar who were wearing more than three items of clothing from the opposite sex, and that was what was illegal at that time." (Levine p. 26–27)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Michael E. Levine

Michael Levine grew up in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY, and lived there until 1967, when he moved to Greenwich Village in his last year of graduate school at Hunter College. He was drawn to Greenwich Village because of its exciting bohemian qualities and the prevalence of its gay scene, in particular the Stonewall Inn. Levine was present at the Stonewall the night of the raid in 1969 that led to the days-long rebellion, and recounts the scene in the streets each night, as well as the event's immediate impact on gay rights and visibility.

With a graduate degree in urban planning, he was hired at the Department of City Planning, where he was assigned to work with Manhattan Community Board 2. In this role, he approved and recommended to the City Planning Commission the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District, which was established by the Landmarks Commission in 1969.

Working closely with Doris Diether, Ruth Wittenberg, and Verna Small, Levine also reviewed plans related to other community issues within Community Board 2, including the rezoning of SoHo to accommodate residential use of industrial buildings. Known at the time as a depressed commercial area, many artists were living illegally in industrial buildings in SoHo because of the cheap rent and opportunity for large studio spaces. Levine recounts mounting a neighborhood-wide survey of SoHo, with the support of the SoHo Artists Association, that led to the rezoning that enabled artists to remain in the neighborhood. Levine also explains how the adjustment to the zoning was additionally a critical step on the path to the creation of the Cast Iron Historic District, also in SoHo, as well as to the later establishment of the city-wide Loft Law.

After working for the Department of City Planning on various issues throughout Manhattan, as well as working for the New York chapter of the American Planning Association and teaching at Pace University, Levine retired and returned to Manhattan Community Board 2, where he contributes as a long-time resident of Greenwich Village. He recounts the new issues Community Board 2 faces in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as evergreen preservation and quality of life concerns that he was introduced to during his first involvement with the Board in the late 1960s and 1970s.

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 Village Preservation 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 August 25, 2020 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Michael Levine for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. We're conducting this interview remotely during the global COVID-19 pandemic and connecting via video conference. And before we begin, I'd like to start with a living land acknowledgment. Today, we are on the traditional land of the Lenape people and we acknowledge in this archival recording the Lenape community, and especially their elders, past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography, and for the use of their language as place names.

So Michael, before we begin some of more in-depth questions, can you start by saying your name and then giving just a brief two-sentence introduction?

Levine: My name is Michael Levine. I am now seventy-seven years old. I never thought I would live this long and experience as much as I did. I live in Greenwich Village where I have lived since 1971 and I currently live with my husband of the past thirty years, and our cute little dog, in a cooperative apartment on 10th Street in the heart of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

Dziedzic: Thank you. And I want to start by asking you about your early life. So where you grew up and how you describe your lineage, and connection to, and history with this place.

Levine: I was born in Brooklyn. I'm very much a typical New Yorker. And when I tell people that I came from Brooklyn, they say, "You don't have a Brooklyn accent." That's because I spent most of my life living here in Manhattan. But I was born in Crown Heights in Brooklyn in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, and I went through all of my schooling—elementary school, junior high school, high school and even college—while I lived in Crown Heights in Brooklyn. And I lived there until, I guess that would be—well, 1967, when I was in my last year of graduate school.

At that time, I was attending Hunter College for my master's degree in urban planning. I received my undergraduate degree, a bachelor of political science and sociology, at Hunter College and I went on because I met so many fascinating people in the sociology/political

science department at Hunter, I went on to get a degree in urban planning, master of urban planning.

I left Brooklyn in 1967 for my last year of college. I saved enough money to have my own apartment on 9th Street in Greenwich Village. Wow, that was fantastic. But as a kid, until I was twenty-five, whenever I had any money in my pocket and the ability to travel, the one place I always came to was Greenwich Village. I loved the Village as a teenager, in my teens and my early twenties. The Village was where I came alone or with friends. I always loved going to 8th Street and MacDougal Street and going up and down Sixth Avenue and going to Washington Square Park. I always said to myself when I lived in Brooklyn, someday when I grow up, I will live in Greenwich Village and that happened when I was twenty-five years old in my last year of graduate urban planning school at Hunter College.

So now I hold a masters degree of urban planning and have fulfilled my greatest desire to live in Greenwich Village.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit more about why you wanted to live in Greenwich Village?

Levine: So we can get right to the point of what my life has been like in this journey from Crown Heights and Brooklyn. Here, number one, the street life was exciting. All of the cafes on MacDougal Street, all the shops on 8th Street, all of the fascinating people, the background, the bohemian quality, which was still visible on the street even though we know it's mostly gone now, but the bohemian reputation that Greenwich Village had, sitting at all the cafes on MacDougal Street with friends made me feel as though I'm part of this scene, which is so full of energy, and so full of what the city is all about. And this is the most exciting place to be because you sit here in these cafes and you see fascinating people going by and you say, "I'm sure this one is going to a poetry reading, and this one just finished reading a book, and this one is going off to play somewhere in an orchestra." And it was fun to try to figure out who was what.

But there was a second reason. As I grew up in Brooklyn, it became very clear to me at a time when gay people were not out, that I was in fact a gay person. [00:04:59] When you're a gay living in Brooklyn in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, it's very difficult to come out. So when I would come to Greenwich Village alone on a Saturday night, I would discover that this is also the location of the most obvious, to me, gay bars in Greenwich Village. Of course, there

were bars uptown and Upper Manhattan but they were in and around 8th Street and of course, on Christopher Street, at the Stonewall [Inn].

So even before I moved here, I knew that the Stonewall was the place I needed to be. The Stonewall was the bar I wanted to patronize. The Stonewall is in the heart of Greenwich Village and this is where I belong. The weekend that I moved from Brooklyn to Greenwich Village, on a very limited budget, and tried to figure out how far could I stretch whatever money I had for one year before I graduated from school, the first place I went to on Saturday night was the Stonewall. I fulfilled a major dream I had. I was now living in Greenwich Village and patronizing the Stonewall Inn, the most famous gay bar, I think, in the history of modern times.

Dziedzic: So I know there weren't gay newspapers at that time yet. So how did you learn about Stonewall as the bar to go to?

Levine: Okay, Greenwich Village had a reputation of being a bohemian location and a place that had all, you know, those kinds of people: the queer people, the sissies, the things they were called years ago. So it already had that reputation when I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn. But as I walked the streets of Greenwich Village, I didn't know that the Stonewall was the place where everybody went to. I just knew I saw lots of gay people walking into and out of the Stonewall. Eighth Street had a few gay bars but they were never as crowded outside. They were never as obvious as the Stonewall. The kids going to the Stonewall were very much out in their behavior, and hugging and kissing on the street, something you never saw <u>anyplace</u> else. Immediately I knew, this is where, and then of course I realized—at that time, it was called the Stonewall Inn. The sign still had the original restaurant Stonewall Inn sign and I said, "Okay, Stonewall, this is it," and of course, I was right. When I followed a group of kids in on that Saturday, I said, "Okay, I'm home now."

Now by the way, the Stonewall at that time was two establishments next door to each other. Right now, the Stonewall is only the one building. But at that time, it was the two buildings, and I just walked around all night long, fascinated by the people I had seen on the street and followed in, this is where I belong.

Dziedzic: Do you want to talk about some of the risks that went along with that? So, for example, you're just out of grad school. You're looking for work. So can you kind of piece that together for me and help me understand—

Levine: So this is the problem. I still was in my last year of graduate school because I graduated in June of 1968. I started going there in—well, the summertime of 1967. And the risks were I did not want my family to know anything about what I was doing because I was very much closeted, naturally at that time. Later on, all of my relatives said, "We knew all along. We were just waiting for you to tell us." But at that time, I was very much closeted. So the biggest risk I was taking was I would be outed and that my family and friends would know, "Gee, he is a homosexual."

They all knew. It was so obvious to them but not to me, and they were waiting for me to tell them. The following year, in 1968, I was able to live that kind of double life, being with family when I was with family and then going to the—even dating girls at that time occasionally to make my family happy—and going to the Stonewall to make me happy. It was in the first year in 1968, when I went to work for the City Planning Commission in, I think, it was June or July—I don't remember but it was over the summer, right after I received my urban planning degree. And I suddenly realized, okay, now I'm working for the City of New York. I was still a provisional employee. I knew the whole system very quickly, that I would have to take a civil servant exam to become a permanent employee, and I was really afraid here I would be outed, that everyone would know at work that I am in fact gay and it would in some ways influence whether or not I would be able to be appointed to a permanent position and how would it affect my career later on.

So I was very cautious that first year in 1968 to keep it as big a secret as possible from everyone in my place of employment that in fact this is my lifestyle and these are the kinds of places I go to. Of course, later on after the Stonewall Rebellion, a lot of the folks I worked with at the Department of City Planning said to me, "Gee, Michael, were you there at the time? [00:10:06] It must have been terribly exciting." They knew too. I used to joke with my friends and say, "Do I wear a sign that everybody knows before I'm even ready to come out, that this is my lifestyle?"

But I did live that whole first year from 1968 to 1969 in fear of anyone at work finding out that in fact I am gay and that it would impact my ability to become a permanent employee, to be appointed to a permanent position, and for salary raises, adjustments, and other advances in my career. Within a year or two after Stonewall, those fears were all gone, and as I always say to people, that's what Stonewall did for me. That's what Stonewall did for the gay population. It really, really liberated us from the fear we lived under.

Dziedzic: It sounds like it also liberated some of the people who were not gay from the fear that they might have had about—

Levine: That's right. Suddenly, we were able to talk about it, which we couldn't do before.

Dziedzic: And can you describe the process of looking for work as you're coming up on the end of your degree and where you were looking for work and what that process was like?

Levine: Well, that was relatively easy. In my last year of urban planning school at Hunter College, I worked for the student—I'm forgetting the name of it now—but it was a non-profit urban planning organization that Hunter College had set up and I went to work for them for I don't know what it was, the minimum wage at that time, $1.50 an hour. I did it intentionally. I didn't even need the money then but I wanted to make sure that I was able to get into the planning profession before I graduated. So I went to work for the Urban Planning Institute at Hunter College, at that time, 1967 to 1968, and we were assigned to do research and it was interesting. We did research for local community organizations—easy stuff for us as planners—population, income, education, background information that the communities really did not know how to access. And it was fascinating and a fabulous experience for me because it gave me the opportunity to reach out into the planning community.

So even in my last year of graduate school when I was doing the research, I was going to the Department of City Planning, and I was going to the different offices and doing research and introducing myself, "I'm an urban planning student and I'm doing research for a project that our school is working on and I need access to data and information." Although I knew that it was there, I really didn't know how to access it, and the folks at the Department of City Planning

were very pleased that I came and I spoke to them. “You mean there’s a degree in planning?” They were mostly old-line engineers who were not used to the idea of planning as a profession and they were fascinated to meet me.

So when I graduated and showed up with my degree, I went back to the very same people and I said, “Here’s my degree. When can I have a job?” And I interviewed with two or three people. I was hired instantly, and I was told it takes like two weeks, which it takes a lot longer now, to have all the paperwork processed. So here, fill out all the papers, come back in two weeks. And I started working. I don’t remember the exact time but—oh, I remember—they said it would take a month because it’s summertime and not everyone is around. So they said, “Why don’t you go on vacation?” So I went off to Puerto Rico with some friends and I came back and the day after Labor Day, I went to work for the Department of City Planning, whatever that would have been September 1, 1968, having already made connections in the department. So people knew me when I came. They said, “Oh, the kid is back.” And I said, “The kid is now an urban planner.”

Dziedzic: I’m going to keep that story in mind every time I apply for a job: just remember this can be great and easy! [laughs]

Levine: That’s true.

Dziedzic: So can you talk about some of the projects that you were assigned when you started.

Levine: So this is where we come now into Greenwich Village. So now I’m living in Greenwich Village fulfilling my greatest desire. I am now patronizing the Stonewall Inn when I can, which is another great desire, and because I am a Greenwich Village resident, I’m assigned to work with the Greenwich Village Community Board. Now at that time in 1968, the City of New York received a lot of federal grants for planning purposes, and as part of a federal grant program, every city has to demonstrate that it has the planning capacity to research projects, to determine the need in the community, and to make sure that money is allocated appropriately. So ten percent of all federal funding usually will be for planning purposes.

The Department of City Planning received large amounts of grant money for this purpose and what the department did was set up five borough offices, which it didn't have before, because the Department of City Planning was created only between the wars. [00:15:07] It was not an old-line agency. And now suddenly all these young kids are coming and we're all being assigned to work in these brand new borough offices, one in each of the five boroughs. And the natural thing was, well, Michael lives in Greenwich Village. Let's assign him to Manhattan Community Board 2.

And I already knew about the community board because I had attended meetings of the Village Independent Democrats all through the summer when I moved here and I learned from the Village Independent Democrats about the community board. So I was attending community board meetings out of curiosity without ever thinking that I would be working with the Greenwich Village Community Board.

Within my first week of being at the Department of City Planning, my job was to call up whoever I could on the Greenwich Village Community Board—that's Manhattan Community Board 2—introduce myself, and start to work on projects for this neighborhood. Now there were a few projects already in the pipeline, applications for zoning changes and other things that would normally have been managed by the old-line engineers in the agency, but were now going to the borough offices because we had borough planners.

So I called the chair of the community board at that time, introduced myself, and he said, "Oh, this is fantastic. We're so great to have you. I would like for you to contact the chair of our zoning committee and start to work on some of the projects that they have in the pipeline." So I called the chair of the zoning committee at that time, who was Doris Diether, and she gave me—and she's still a member of Manhattan Community Board 2, the longest serving community board member in the history of New York City. She just passed her ninetieth birthday and she's still a member, unbelievable. And she said, "I'm so glad that you're aboard. I have a shopping list of projects for you to work on." And I said, "Okay. What am I getting myself into now?"

The first thing she mentioned to me was something that the Department of City Planning and the City Planning Commission—and I need to make that distinction. The department is the civil servants who work for a city agency, and the commission are appointed by, at that time, the mayor and each of the five borough presidents, and the controller of the City of New York, and the city council president. That was the composition of the City Planning Commission and we,

the staff, were the people who worked for the chair of the City Planning Commission, who was also the director of City Planning. So it's a double title. So at that time, I was told, "Okay, these are the projects that you have to work on with the City Planning Commission." One of them was something that this community board had been working on for a very long time, which was the designation of the historic district. And I remember having read about it in the paper and having walked the streets of Greenwich Village before I moved here, trying to figure out what it was that, on the one hand, the city wanted, and then on the other hand, what the community wanted.

The city wanted a series of small historic districts, excluding major thoroughfares like Sixth Avenue and Seventh Avenue, which do not have major contributing buildings, and only doing a designation of I don't know how many it was, eighteen individual small districts, mostly mid-block, that would contain the greatest wealth of contributing buildings to the Greenwich Village Historic District. So that was number one. And I said, "The City Planning Commission does not have jurisdiction to designate, but the City Planning Commission must in fact approve, or in fact give a recommendation for or against."

So that was my first assignment. I worked very, very closely with the chair of the City Planning Commission and wrote a report in which the City Planning Commission, or the director of City Planning, the City Planning Commission chair, supports the idea of one contiguous historic district. I would like to be able to say, gee, that was the turning point and we convinced everyone, but it wasn't. There were many, many people involved in that decision, and the fact that the City Planning Commission supported one contiguous district, I'd like to feel was important in the final decision to designate one contiguous district.

That was my very first assignment. It was relatively easy. I knew the area. It was not complicated for me to work on something I understood very, very well. But there were other projects that were assigned to me by the chair of the zoning committee and the woman who ultimately became the chair of the landmarks committee, Ruth Wittenberg, and Verna Small, who was her co-chair—fabulous people who poured their heart into the creation of the historic district and worked so hard once it had been created.

So Doris said to me, "Well, we have other things to work on right now." Now that we know that the landmark district will in fact probably be approved as it was, which happened in 1969. [00:20:02] Being assigned to Greenwich Village Community Board 2, I attended every single landmark committee meeting with Ruth Wittenberg and Verna Small and Doris Diether

and many others in the district. And they treated me not just as a city employee who was responsible to report back to the City Planning Commission but as a neighbor and a friend and an advocate. And it was a wonderful experience to go around the table, to go around the room. We met in Ruth Wittenberg's wonderful townhouse at 35 West 10th Street. We would review plans for—this was after the designation—for new construction, for alterations to buildings, and Ruth would always turn to me at the final analysis and say, "Michael, what's your opinion, as a representative of city government?" I said, "I'm not speaking for city government. I'm an advocate here for my neighbors," and I'd agree or disagree, whatever it was. It was wonderful to play that role even though the City Planning Commission had no formal role in approving what happens within the historic district.

But there were some things that were related to the historic district. One of the issues was 8th Street and how we can prevent 8th Street from becoming a location for pizza parlors and other open window establishments because everyone was afraid that the nature of the city was changing and Greenwich Village was changing. And so I was told you have to come up with some way through the zoning and I said, a-ha, that's what the City Planning Commission does, zoning. We had to come up with a way to prevent the deterioration of the retail uses on 8th Street. And so I worked very closely with the engineers and the zoning experts in our agency, and we came up with a special district called a limited commercial district, which runs the full boundary of 8th Street and Sixth Avenue, and the intent was to keep all uses within fully enclosed buildings. And I think it worked very well for many, many years because we really did keep away the kind of uses that we were so afraid would change the character of 8th Street.

The character of 8th Street has evolved over the years from high-end retail to—well, I don't know if everyone is familiar with the period of time when it was the greatest location for shoes in the city. And today, it is—I don't know, everyone loved to shop at—even our councilwoman, Margaret Chin said to me at one point, "Michael, the district has changed. I can't buy shoes there anymore." I said, "Margaret, but you can find a hundred different eating establishments on this block and they are all in fully enclosed buildings because of the work we did at the City Planning Commission way back in 1969." That was something I really, really felt very proud of, that I was able to work so quickly on a project that had an immediate feedback in the district.

Of course, the big project that came to me and the one that was given to me by Doris Diether was what's happening in the area south of Houston Street. Now, I know that's not within the Greenwich Village Historic District, at that time it had not been designated. And the phenomenon that was occurring—and it's, again, part of Manhattan Community Board 2—the phenomenon that was occurring, and people were aware of it, was that vacant industrial buildings were being occupied by artists. The Department of Buildings insisted that they can have two artists living per building on the upper floors, not on the ground floor because you cannot live under an industrial use, and they must put a sign on the door of the building that says AIR, Artist in Residence, and the floors they're on. And it went on for many, many years that way. The buildings became more and more vacant, and one thing I noticed later on when I went into the field was that it's the smaller buildings that are being occupied, not the larger buildings. The artists are taking over small spaces that are no longer valuable to manufacturers.

So this assignment was given to me way back in 1969, the year after I came to the department, when one of the buildings was occupied fully by artists illegally, even though we knew the AIR restriction was to two floors. And they applied to the City Planning Commission for a zoning change that would make it legal to have residential use in the entire building. It was a co-op, and their problem was because it was not a legal residential area, they could not obtain bank financing—they couldn't get a mortgage and they couldn't obtain bank financing to improve the property.

It was a fascinating project and when I brought it to the City Planning Commission, the immediate answer at that time was of course, we can't do it. We can't spot-zone for one building. We need to understand the phenomenon happening in SoHo. We need to know what's happening to make a decision because we cannot rezone for one building. It has to be an area-wide rezoning. It has to be a phenomenon, which you, Michael, say is happening all over this area, but you have to prove it. [00:24:58]

So that's how I spent the next two years of my life, surveying SoHo, walking block to block, building to building. One member of Manhattan Community Board 2 today has described me as the "senior project manager for the SoHo project." I was the only person [laughs] working on it at that time and I had volunteers and students during the summer assisting me in field surveys, but it was just me supervising kids, which I had been a year earlier, in surveying the buildings to figure out what's going on. And sure enough, we discovered the smaller buildings

are fully occupied, almost all illegal. The larger buildings still have industrial uses, and we have to be concerned about the future of the smaller buildings. I spoke to the buildings department. I spoke to the fire department. I spoke to all the relevant city agencies, and they said these buildings are becoming vacant. The area was known as Hell's Hundred Acres, and they were very concerned that we do not draw the artists out; that we, the City Planning Commission, should find a way to make them legal because they're keeping the neighborhood safe. If there is a fire anywhere, they call us immediately. If there's a disruption in the street, if there's any kind of an emergency, the people who are living in these buildings are our eyes on the street.

It was kind of a Jane Jacobs concept at that time, in SoHo. The artists who are hiding behind their AIR signs are the eyes on the street. I learned very quickly how to determine which of the buildings were occupied. Look up at the windows. See where are the flower pots, where are the air conditioners, where are the telephone lines. Look at the mailboxes. Does it say ABC Paper Box Company or does it say Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz? That tells you immediately who is in what loft.

When I completed my work at the end of 1969 and presented it to the City Planning Commission, I also explained to them that these buildings are of great historic quality, and the members of the landmark committee—at that time, the landmark committee had already been formed for Community Board 2 and Ruth Wittenberg was the chair and Verna Small was the co-chair, and there were many, many other people on the Community Board's landmark committee, who were very much concerned about the buildings. And they told me to talk to Margot Gayle, who at that time was forming her Friends of Cast Iron organization, and Margot gave me many, many contacts who I should talk to, to gain support for changing the zoning to make it legal for residential use, and who could help me in what agencies. I went to the Landmarks Preservation Commission [LPC]. I spoke to the chair at that time, Harmon Goldstone, and I said, "We need to designate this area as an historic district because of the quality of the cast iron buildings." And he said to me, "That's a great idea but <u>you</u> have to change the zoning first, so that there is a viable alternative use for the buildings. Only under those circumstances can the Landmarks Preservation Commission designate this as a historic district."

So I went back to the City Planning Commission again. I was back and forth to the commission every month presenting the next step and I explained to them, "The Landmarks

Preservation Commission is ready to preserve this area," and at that time, we're only talking twelve blocks. The Landmark Commission and the City Planning Commission outdid me, and we extended it to the full forty-three block area from Houston Street to Canal Street, from West Broadway, beyond West Broadway almost to Sixth Avenue, and it began to grow and grow and grow. And finally, we negotiated the zoning change in 1971 to the M1-5A, which meant the entire building of every single loft in it could be converted. And the M15-B, we could only convert buildings with a street frontage of less than thirty-seven feet. It was magic to be able to work with such fascinating people, to have worked with the likes of Ruth Wittenberg and Verna Small and Margot Gayle on this designation.

Following the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District, it was probably one of the most productive times I can ever think for a young man fresh out of college, and I was there at that time. And the reason it happened was because of my great love for Greenwich Village, and my familiarity with Greenwich Village before I came to the job. When I look back at it, I say yes, I know I've done a lot of things since then, but that was probably one of the most fun parts of my creative career. Some of the things I did in Greenwich Village, like on 8th Street, and of course working on the Greenwich Village Historic District designation, and the designation of SoHo as a joint living/work ordinance district for artists, and the ability to have it designated as the Cast Iron Historic District.

Those are really great highlights to look back on fifty years ago.

Dziedzic: You've certainly impacted the way that so many people have come to know the city too, after those. [00:30:02] So I have a few follow-up questions about those two major projects. I just wonder if you could kind of answer this general question about, just to define more specifically what the role of a planner is in these community projects.

Levine: The role of the planner evolved. In the early 1960s, before I came to work for the City Planning Commission, when the community wanted something, they went right to the Department of City Planning or the City Planning Commission, and there was very little interaction between the community and the staff at the Department of City Planning and the City Planning Commission because the old-line engineers—and I respected them all for their knowledge and their ability and their hard work—they didn't know how to work with

communities and negotiate. They didn't understand that the communities are always going to ask for more, knowing they're going to get less and you have to argue back and forth.

Somehow when we as planners came in and we became advocates for the community as well as representatives of city government. We were playing two roles. And it was easy for me to come to the City Planning Commission and say at that time, "I have met with the community and this is what the community would like to see, and I think we can work something out and this is my idea."

One of the first things I was able to do when I worked on SoHo was to attend a large community meeting that the SoHo Artists Association put together only because they had me, an urban planner, willing to meet with them to hear what their case was. This was the role of "advocate city planner" to bring back to the City Planning Commission what the community feels they want, and to try and explain to them what is possible. But what the Department of City Planning and the City Planning Commission insisted on is that we do our research. We cannot bring a project to the City Planning Commission without the backup information. How many artists are there? Where are they living? What is the nature of the use of the buildings? What kind of a legality are we looking for here. The same thing was true on 8th Street. Do your research. Tell us before we can change the zoning to a limited commercial district, what are the uses on the street? Tell us store by storefront what's there. You are telling us what the community wants. They want protection from uses, large-scale uses, uses that will turn it into open front pizza parlors. Do the research. Tell us what's there. Talk to the community. Ask them what they think they want and then bring it back to us.

So we had a dual role as planners. We were number one, advocates for the community. We had to listen carefully to what they wanted. But we were representatives of the department as well. We were the City of New York. And I learned one thing, you can't just say, "Well, I'm the commission." You have to say, "I represent a group of people who will make a decision in city government, and I need to have a solid idea from you, the community, as to what you think can work." And I enjoyed that role enormously and to this day, the Department of City Planning still has that organization of central offices that deal with zoning and mapping and other issues, and borough offices that have planners who are trained, number one, in doing the research required to recommend zoning changes and other actions, and also skilled in negotiating with community

organizations. They can't always get what they want, but you have to be able to work with the community to figure out what you can give to your community.

I always felt that I was a little bit prejudiced towards my community because I'm a resident of Greenwich Village but as I explained to the department, this is a fantastic community that has so much to offer and has so much accomplishment already. And we're going to continue working this way, and we did.

Dziedzic: Now, with regard to Greenwich Village, you mentioned that there was a debate around many individual designations versus one contiguous designation. So can you explain why the community wanted the contiguous designation?

Levine: Well, the community felt that we are one community. I forgot the number but we're not like eighteen different districts. We would end up bifurcating, trifurcating, multi-poly-furcating this district, and the people on one side of the street wouldn't be talking to the people on the other side of the street. And it's not a good idea to separate out this district. We're one district. There are different qualities and different characteristics in different parts of Greenwich Village, but we're one district and we all work together.

There was a second reason also. [00:34:50] If we left out streets like Seventh Avenue, which had been modified enormously when Seventh Avenue was cut south of 14th Street, all the way down to the tunnel where it meets Varick Street, and an entire row of buildings were demolished to widen the street, it left many pock marks in the cityscape, holes on the cityscape. And this community board felt as though it should have a role of determining what the nature of the buildings would be that would be infilling those locations.

So that's what the community felt. You can't separate us out into these small districts and turn us into eighteen different districts that would all be opposing each other. We're one district. We work together, and we want to make sure that whatever happens in this area is appropriate for everything else that's there. And the argument was persuasive. The Landmarks Preservation Commission abandoned that approach. We know it was the real estate industry that was opposed to the idea of one contiguous district because there would be such tight controls over anything they could build in the district and they were right. To be perfectly honest, in Greenwich Village, we haven't had very much new construction. But on the other hand, because the argument was

sound that it should be one contiguous district, we had had high quality renovation of existing buildings, expansion of buildings, and the limited amount of new construction we've had have all been very much in keeping with the nature, and the quality, and the context of the existing historic district.

So I think LPC realized immediately that it did not make sense to do these different districts. One contiguous district was the only answer.

Dziedzic: And you mentioned, also, the limited commercial district and the pizza parlors. Of course, I just think of Joe's [Pizza]. So can you help me understand: what was it about this—people eating pizza on the sidewalk—that the community wanted to limit?

Levine: Again, we were afraid that the quality of the commercial uses would be deteriorating and it was happening already. Nathan's Famous of Coney Island, which may not be known to the younger generation, but Nathan's Famous of Coney Island had another location in Long Island somewhere, and they were seeking to open a location, which they did, on Sixth Avenue and 8th Street on the corner, which later became Brentano's Bookstore, and is now a vacant site but it is a corner location on the southeast side. And it's a relatively large building, one hundred by one hundred [feet], occupying a lot of street frontage. And they had the reputation of, during the summer and during the months that they can, in Coney Island and elsewhere, of having all of their windows wide open. So that people come right up, buy their food on the street, never enter the establishment, and walk down the streets, eating and throwing garbage everywhere.

This is what the neighborhood was terrified of. So we created this special purpose district, the limited commercial district, and Nathan's was the biggest example, but we did have three other locations on the block, one of which was a pizza parlor in that we were afraid they were going to do the same thing—to put in open windows if Nathan's did it, in competition. It worked. The limited commercial district worked. Nathan's was only there for a few years. They were not allowed to do open windows. What they did was they kept their doors open, which was less obnoxious than having open windows. So we felt that we did succeed in toning down the commercial uses of the street, and preventing it from becoming an open air eatery.

Interesting enough, now in the days of the pandemic in 2020, almost all of the restaurants on 8th Street are now serving in the evening on the sidewalk and the roadway—open air

restaurants. But that's designed by city government to help keep our businesses alive, which is so important. The restaurants are doing so well. But it's not that ugly image that we had of people walking down the street, eating pizza and throwing their garbage everywhere. We did prevent that from happening. We were very successful in that regard.

Dziedzic: Thanks for bringing up the comparison to today because I was thinking about that too. I guess the biggest difference would be that you're being waited on at these restaurants when you're eating outside as opposed to—

Levine: You're being waited on and you're not eating fast food.

Dziedzic: I also wanted to ask you about the advocacy role. So how did you balance—I mean, you were talking about another kind of aspect of balancing yourself as a planner representing the city, but also kind of representing the discipline of planning too in a way, and then also as an advocate. I'm wondering if there were any times where that was a challenge for you to balance those two roles. [00:40:06]

Levine: Yes, there were many challenges along the way and [laughs] I have not highlighted them but there were challenges and there were times in which I did not succeed. There were times where the community board wanted certain things that I thought were too much to ask for. There was one case, which stands out, as you mentioned, as you're talking, of a variance that was requested for a grocery store on the ground floor of an apartment building in Sheridan Square. And I felt that was a totally appropriate request because it is a new apartment building being built, and there were apartment buildings in the area, and I'm not entirely sure I can recall what the nature of the variance was but it was something to do with delivery entrances and exits and driveways and so on. And so the community board asked in exchange for the variance that the building requested for the grocery store use on the ground floor that there be small windows, not big windows, because they didn't want it to change the nature of the area, which is Sheridan Square. Well, Christopher Park. It's right around the corner from Christopher Park, which is almost entirely residential.

And I got up and said, that's not really appropriate. A grocery store—it's a supermarket now, it's there, it's a supermarket—really needs to have large windows to make it clear to the neighborhood that they are a supermarket. And I lost. I lost. The community said no, we want small windows, and we don't want any signs in the windows. They are very ugly and they would reflect poorly on our newly designated historic district. And the Board of Standards and Appeals approved the variance they requested with a stipulation that they have small windows on both frontages of the building. Interesting enough, if you go by the building now, today, you will see they do have signs in the windows. So they found a way around that.

But this is one case in which my advocacy didn't work. I tried to convince them that it's inappropriate. A grocery store needs larger windows. They requested small windows and they got what they wanted, and I had to say okay, this is how my role works. I advocate where I can for the planning point of view, and I advocate for my community point of view, and I advocate for the city point of view, and I can't always do all three and win on all three levels.

Dziedzic: Thanks for that example. I think advertising is one of the first impetuses of trying to get some kind of regulations around preserving the "quality" of a neighborhood or something like that, at least in New York.

Levine: Exactly.

Dziedzic: So I want to transition to SoHo, and I wonder if you can take me back to SoHo at the time before the rezoning when there were artists living there. What was it like to walk on the streets? What were the sights, the smells?

Levine: It was fascinating. The streets were dirty, and they were filthy, and there was garbage, and you never knew when it would be collected. And you would walk down the street, and remember, it was mostly not manufacturing buildings but warehouses, and it was rags, remnants from the garment center uptown, which were repackaged and recycled, and it was cardboard boxes. And you would walk down the street and you would be walking through a trail of cardboard box remnants and fabric remnants, and of course the cobblestone roadway, and the cracked sidewalks. They fascinated me. I loved it. I loved every <u>minute</u> of it.

Of course, the sun didn't reach very many of the streets during the day because the cast iron buildings could be pretty tall. So it was in some ways dark and gloomy, but I found a fascination as I looked at these buildings, and said, despite what I'm seeing on the streets right now, there are original authentic cobblestones there. There are sidewalks that go back a hundred years. There are buildings that go back a hundred years. It's dirty and it's gritty, and we have to save it. That's what SoHo is.

At that time, it was called the South Houston Industrial Area. It was the artists who came up with the name SoHo, which was their idea, which of course became what is known today. But at that time, it was South Houston Industrial Area because it was industrial. It had the quality and the flavor that I found fascinating, although other people would look at me and say, when I talked about it at the City Planning Commission, why would anyone want to live there? [00:44:57]

I do have to describe a few fascinating experiences I had when I met artists and they took me up to their buildings. That was the convincing point for me that I need to advocate for those that are living here. And they were artists, they were craftsmen, they were sculptors. They were people who worked in the industry of art formation. When I saw what they had done with their lofts, that they had taken a twenty-five by one hundred [foot] space, and there's always a ten foot rear yard for safety purposes, and that they had converted a small portion of it into living areas, with bathrooms and kitchens, and they knew they had to meet the minimum buildings department requirement or the buildings department would not have allowed them to remain living there illegally under the zoning. So they had a legal residential use on a portion of the floor and the majority of the floor was for their artwork.

And as I went building through building through building, some were expensive, some were very, very modern renovations. The co-op building that I mentioned before, that had applied for the variance for their building, which later ended up being a zoning change, they had soundproofed each of the floors because they knew they were wooden and the residents under them heard them when they were moving their big pieces of art around. I saw large pieces of artwork that couldn't possibly have been produced in the studios that we have here in Greenwich Village proper, and that's why they occupied the area.

And I remember the art galleries starting to move into the area in some of the locations and I said, oh my god, look at that wonderful art gallery here on the corner. And to get up into

the art gallery, you have to walk through a pile of cardboard boxes and garbage to see the wonderful spaces, and the wonderful artwork on display. It was a total contradiction. There are—and there still are—very few places that you can shop for groceries. There are a few bars that have been there for fifty years that predate me, but there's no grocery shopping. This is not that kind of neighborhood. It never was and it never will be. The folk who live here, the folk who have the expensive shops that are there today, know that this is a different kind of neighborhood. This is not Greenwich Village proper. This is not Nolita. This is not Little Italy. This is not Bedford-Stuyvesant. This is not Crown Heights. This is a very different neighborhood. It was absolutely fascinating to walk around.

When I did my surveys to figure out which buildings were occupied, I would go during the day with a tally sheet and take one or two students with me, and we would try to figure out from the outside who's living in there, and then I would go back at night. I would go up and down the streets at night and double check. Now, I see a light on at night. Someone is living here. And you would never know from the outside of the building that anyone is living in these buildings. It was a total contradiction. It was an atypical residential neighborhood but this was and still is an atypical part of the city.

Dziedzic: Let me ask, what was the relationship like that you had with the artists' organizations? What was the balance of—why weren't you able to ask these organizations to tell you who lived where, for example?

Levine: That's a very good point. A very, very good question. It was difficult going at first, and this may sound a little bit paranoid but I loved every bit of it. As I was walking down the streets with my clipboard, it was so obvious. Clipboard, I wore my City Planning Commission ID, I'm walking down the street, recording. I knew I was being followed. It was like a spy story in a way. I was being followed. And finally, several people would approach me and say, "We heard that you're here. We heard that the commission is here." I said, "Yes, I'm doing a survey and I would appreciate your help." And they would look at me and they would say, "Why?" And I would say, "Because my job is to figure out a way to help you, to make your occupancy of these buildings legal." And they would look at me because that was the first time they ever heard anyone say that. They couldn't believe someone was here to help them. They knew the Department of

Buildings and the fire department were staying as far away from them as possible. And of course the police department was so glad they were there, but they didn't expect to hear anyone say, I'm here to help you.

And then I learned from some of the artists, as I went through the neighborhood, that they started calling each other and saying, there's a young man walking down the block. Help him. Tell him where the residents are. I built up a reputation that this is someone who is here to help us. [00:50:04] And it was really funny because at first they were following behind, and now as I walk down the street, they're greeting me and saying, "Let me show you our building." And that's when I started to go into the loft buildings and to see how they were living.

At one point in time, when the SoHo Artists Association was formed, and it was formed around the same time that they made the original request for a zoning change, several public town hall meetings were held, and I was the guest speaker, explaining what it was that I was trying to do. And a lot of the artists got up, and like any typical town hall meeting, if everyone agrees with the main speaker, you're doing something wrong. A lot of them got up and said, "Why? It's perfectly okay the way we are now. I can't afford it if you change the neighborhood. You're going to price me out." And I had to look them straight in the eye and say, "That could happen," which of course happened. But a lot of them said, "It's a risk we're willing to take." And then another would get up and say, "How do we know we can trust you? How do we know you're not sending these lists to the Department of Buildings to evict us right now?" And I stood there and I said, "Guess what? They know you're here. There's no secret, I'm here to help you make it legal."

It was a slow process in which I gained the confidence of many, many of the artists because they began to know this young man is walking the streets and he's trying to help us.

Dziedzic: And can you explain the relationship between this rezoning, the—I can't remember what it's called, the rezoning that permitted the joint work and light industrial of—

Levine: Joint Living-Work Quarters.

Dziedzic: —Joint Living-Work Quarters. The relationship between establishing that in your survey and report, and then the designation of the SoHo Cast Iron Historic District?

Levine: That's a very good sequence of events. So when I came to the City Planning Commission and said, "We need to change the zoning to make this legal," they said again, "We can't spot-zone. We need to do a whole area to make this legal, so it will hold up in court because we need to show that there is a reason, a rationale—a planning rationale—for what we're doing. Go back out there, survey the area and tell us where the artists are." I did extensive maps of how many blocks had buildings occupied by artists, and I came up with a number of how many, and I don't remember the numbers today. It was a lot, like 1,200 artists living in a twelve-block area. It was unbelievable. No one thought it was that great.

So first, I came with a problem statement: we have to change the zoning. I had to go back and as a planner, do the surveys and come up with the numbers. I prepared extensive maps. Everything at that time was done by hand, it was wonderful. We did not have computer mapping at that time. We had to prepare the maps by hand. I remember bending over a great big drawing board and drawing up the map myself of where all the artists were located, using different colors. This is a planner's technique. The darker the color, the denser the occupancy by artist. So yellow would mean one artist, orange would mean two artists, brown would mean the whole building is all artists. And when I would display this to the City Planning Commission, they would say wow, this guy is right. This area is in fact almost entirely occupied by artists.

There were issues though. They wanted me to do a similar survey of the businesses, and I was able to do that using a variety of state and federal business reporting techniques, for tax purposes, to identify how many manufacturing uses there were in each building, and I showed the corollary uses, and I showed the comparison. I said, "Just look at the two. The areas that have artists living in them, the buildings are less likely to have industrial uses. The areas that have industrial uses are less likely to have artists." This was a very convincing argument, and that's how I came up with the M1-5A and the M1-5B. They're both Joint Living-Work Quarters but again, the distinction is the size of the building. M1-5A, all buildings which are small buildings in the heart of the SoHo district, just south of Houston Street and north of Canal. In the area where the buildings are smaller, you can have every building occupied. But in the areas around Broadway, and as you get closer to Sixth Avenue, and you get closer to Canal Street where the buildings are larger, it's M1-5B, which means only if the building has a frontage less than thirty-seven feet.

It was the kind of work that I love doing because I had a problem statement. I had a documentary evidence of what I was trying to prove, and I had a solution: let's come up with a new zoning district. [00:55:00] I wanted to create a special purpose district as I had done on 8th Street, a limited commercial district. I wanted to create an artist housing district, and they advised me not to. They said, "Don't limit it that way to artist housing. If you make it M1-5A and 5B, you're allowing manufacturing uses but you're allowing residential uses by artists." I also had to go to the Department of Cultural Affairs and I convinced them, although they were sitting targets for me—they knew I was working on it already—they would certify who was an artist and who was not, and they became the greatest supporter, the city's Department of Cultural Affairs.

And as I mentioned before, I went to Harmon Goldstone, who was the chair of the City Planning Commission, and I said to him, "Guess what? We have a public hearing coming up in August," which had to be continued until September because so many people are out of town in August of 1971, "and we're going to be hearing the proposal that I have prepared to rezone the area to M1-5A and M1-5B, and if it is adopted, are you ready to designate the SoHo as a historic district?" And he said to me, "You come back with a report that shows that you have rezoned SoHo, and I will place it immediately on the calendar of the Landmarks Preservation Commission for designation as the Cast Iron Historic District."

The pieces fell into place very, very easily over a three-year period. I guarantee to you today, because of the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, and other kinds of city regulations, I don't think this could happen as quickly in today's world. But it was magic. It all came together, and I was able to do it because it had become my primary assignment at the Department of City Planning. Again, they were calling me the senior project manager; I was the only one. I was doing it on my own, and I was able to walk it through from the original research to designation of the M1-5A and M1-5B and designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Dziedzic: You mentioned that the AIR signs, the Artist in Residence—

Levine: AIR.

Dziedzic: I thought that those happened after the rezoning.

Levine: No.

Dziedzic: You said before—okay.

Levine: No, before. That was the only way that the buildings department could justify allowing them to live there legally because it told the fire department, they're obviously living here. They didn't care how many were in the building. They just wanted to know there were artists there. So that was before.

Dziedzic: Got it, thank you. And what was the impact of the rezoning on the ground? How did it change walking through the neighborhood?

Levine: Oh, it changed it slowly. It's still a gritty area, let's face it. The streets are narrow and there are a lot of vendors on the streets right now, but it changed immediately. Suddenly, you began to see more people on the streets. It enlivened it. It never became like 8th Street in Greenwich Village, but you found more and more people on the streets, especially as the art galleries, as the other—well, now we have very high-end retail uses there, and of course the street activity is enormous. You go there on the weekend and there are many complaints that you have to walk in the roadway and not the sidewalk. And I hope after this pandemic is over that we will see those kinds of uses coming back again. A lot of them have been boarded up. But it changed the nature and the quality of the street life immediately. It's not like they were dancing in the street, but people now knew—but it wasn't an easy road. They had to hire architects. They had to hire engineers to file all of the paperwork, to make their uses legal. They had a long road ahead of them but it worked, and it changed the character and the quality of the district.

I still have fond memories of the grittiness of the district before, and when I go there now, I say, okay, things have changed. That's what life was like. It's now a high-end retail district and unfortunately, the pandemic has put a temporary stop on it, but I'm sure it will come back.

Dziedzic: Is there a relationship between the M1-5A and M1-5B designation, zoning designation and the Loft Law that came ten years—

Levine: Oh, definitely, definitely, definitely because we're talking about buildings in which the units were not legally built for residential purposes, and in a variety of ways had to be found to make it legal for people to live in these "lofts." A state multiple joint law had a new provision written into it, Article 7B, to allow for certain provisions to happen in these buildings. And then the Loft Law was created to implement the state laws to make sure that they're following the new state laws for the renovation of these units into legal lofts. [01:00:05] Loft Board still plays an important role, and not just in SoHo. We discovered all over the city there were people living in loft buildings and the Loft Board has jurisdiction. They can also designate a building as an interim multiple dwelling if it doesn't have the money right now to meet with the requirements of the state multiple dwelling law and the building code. They can designate it as an interim multiple dwelling, meaning it's legal to live there as it seeks ways to meet all of the requirements of the law.

So it's a very important role today, the Loft Board, and their regulations are extensive and I make no claim to understand all the regulations. They do a very good job in safeguarding the people who live in those buildings, and the people who want to live in those buildings, to make sure that they are safe.

Dziedzic: I know people that even, maybe three or four years ago, were protected by the Loft Law and were able to continue living where they had been living for ten, fifteen years or so. A generation after, I think, some of the folks that you were working.

It's interesting from my perspective—Greenwich Village has really been able to preserve so many aspects of its character since it was designated as a historic district, whereas to me, SoHo, from how I understand it, at the time, feels very different today than it was. And I'm wondering—first, if you think I'm wrong, please correct me. But second of all, I was mostly interested in your vision of what the future of SoHo would be like? I think you even have said it: it's similar but it's also very different.

So what's your vision for how SoHo would be in the future when you were working on these regulations at that time?

Levine: At the time that I was working on the regulations, my vision was a little bit different. I really did envision supermarkets and shoe repair shops moving into the ground floor locations. That was the one thing that I didn't call right. The supermarkets don't want to be there. There isn't enough backup space. It's far too expensive. The only thing that can afford some of these major, major store fronts on Broadway, for example, is the high-end retail. Supermarkets can't function that way. Other shopkeepers can't—shoe repair, dry cleaners—they can't. That was the only vision I had that didn't work because I really didn't understand that I can't call that. But I think my vision of what SoHo is today is pretty much what it was then, an area that is a throwback to a different point in time for which we have a viable alternative use.

People walk down those streets and they know that this is in fact a gritty industrial area but they are seeing excitement. Everywhere they turn, there's something fascinating to look at. We may not all approve of all of the high-end shops that are going in because we can't all afford to shop there, but it is a visual spectacle and a visual treat for us to walk the streets of SoHo, when it is under normal circumstances, and see the variety of uses that occupy our ground floor locations, to see the original cobblestones still there, and to see the wonderful, wonderful cast iron buildings whose facades have been so well-preserved and maintained. And I think that the Greenwich Village—Community Board 2—the landmark committee has played a large role because SoHo is within the Community Board 2 area, has played a large role in making sure that those cast iron buildings remain intact.

Even to the point of what kind of signage can go there. Should the fire escapes remain or be removed? The fire escapes are a remnant after the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire when fire escapes were put in to make manufacturing buildings safe. Well, now we have other safety precautions in these buildings—should we remove the fire escapes or keep the fire escapes? A consideration that is part of what that district is all about. And I think it's an absolutely wonderful discussion: how do we keep the quality and the character of the neighborhood so that we still see the old gritty district but can enjoy the kind of uses that are there today?

Dziedzic: You've talked a little bit about Stonewall already but I'm wondering if we can switch back to Greenwich Village and you can tell me about being there that night that the riot started?

Levine: Okay, I will talk about it. [01:05:00] I'm going to correct you, which I know you will take as a friendly amendment—

Dziedzic: Yes.

Levine: —rebellion, not riot. I do not like the word riot. To me, it's a rebellion. Remember, I've been so much attached to this community. I worked for the community board at that time when I worked for the City Planning Commission, and now I'm a member of the community board in my retirement, and all that time it has all held together as one great big experience. Stonewall was very important to me way back in 1967, and as I mentioned earlier, it was one of the reasons I moved to Greenwich Village. I knew this is where the gay population is located. This is where I need to be. This is where I want to be. And this is where I will be.

I started going to Stonewall, as I said, the first weekend that I moved here, and I met wonderful people I never would have met in Brooklyn. But I should correct that. Occasionally, I would meet someone I knew from way back in school in Brooklyn and it was really quite an experience. "[Gasps] You're here too?" It was unbelievable to see some people I knew way back in my years in Brooklyn. So I started going in 1967 and met a lot of people, and Stonewall was an unbelievable phenomenon. There were gay men. There were lesbians. There were cross-dressers. Everyone knows about the famous Puerto Rican drag queens that made the place fun. There were straight people. They came to have fun with the gays and the lesbians. It was a fun place. People of all colors and all races were welcome because color didn't matter at Stonewall. That was unbelievable for that time in the history of the world. Color didn't matter. Everyone was welcome.

Someone said to me recently, a younger man, "Well, did you have to dress in drag to go there?" I said no. You have to picture me. I'm coming from work in my three-piece suit, my favorite tie, coming home, changing, having dinner, and I'm getting into my jeans and my T-shirt and I'm going to dance at the Stonewall. Where did you ever get the idea that you needed to dress in drag? And he said, "Because the drag queens were the most famous patrons." I said, yes, but they were only five percent of the patrons. But they did give us the ability to be who we were. If they could go to that bar and dress the way they wanted to, we could go to that bar too. We could hold hands, which was something we couldn't do in another bar. We could touch

dance. We could kiss. No other bars in the city allowed that at that time. Remember it was Mafia-owned and they were paying the police department off to not raid them because there were drag queens in that bar who were wearing more than three items of clothing from the opposite sex, and that was what was illegal at that time.

To me, it was a club. I had bars uptown that I could go to while I was still wearing my three-piece suit and my tie, and I had my club here in Greenwich Village, just three blocks from where I lived. I live at 45 West 10th Street, which is a few doors down from the building that Ruth Wittenberg, the late chair of the landmark committee lived in, and I moved here because this was her block. I lived within three and a half blocks from the Stonewall. I could walk there in two minutes and be there and be part of the fun scene every Friday and every Saturday and every Sunday night, and even sometimes during the week. I met a lot of people there. I met a lot of boyfriends there. It was, to me, the center of my life in Greenwich Village at that time, while I was still a part of my family and a part of straight friends and a part of colleagues from work.

The night of the rebellion was an unbelievable experience and when I've described it to people, they kind of hold their breath as I explain what's happening. I was dancing with a date and I said, "Let me go to the bar and get some drinks." I walked up to the bar, ordered two drinks, and suddenly, the blaring music from the jukebox went off. The lights went up and someone shouted, "Raid!" That is scary to a twenty-five year old—well, how old was I then—a twenty-seven year old kid from Brooklyn who had never been in a raid, and was working for the City Planning Commission, and it is terrified that he will be outed and might lose his job. So I turned to my date and he said, "First of all, put the beers away. You paid for it. It doesn't matter. We're leaving. They don't want us. They want the owners who have not made their payoff." I looked at him and said, "Really?" I was so unsophisticated in this, and obviously my date had been in raids at other gay bars in Greenwich Village, but to me, this was the only one I ever went to! And of course, I went to some piano bars uptown, and I didn't know what a raid meant.

So okay, I put the beers back on the bar and we slowly walked out because there was a big crowd there. It's Friday night. [01:10:00] The place smelled of beer and cologne and cigarettes. Do you remember people smoking in public places, including me? It reeked, again, of beer, cigarettes, cologne. As we walked out, it became more and more obvious, and as we got to the street, I was ready to take a big breath and say, okay, we made it out of here, and suddenly I realized there was an entire line of police cars facing the entrance to the Stonewall, which is the

current entrance, with their lights shining on us. And I said oh, my God. Now they're going to know that I'm gay.

So I grabbed my boyfriend's hand and said, "Let's get the hell out of here." And we started to run down Christopher Street towards Sixth Avenue and he turned to me and he said, "Let's go back." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because the kids are not leaving." We turned around, we went back, and we stood there on the street and we danced all night. And this is where the drag queens became so important because they're the ones who led the rebellion. We were just standing there and they would start dancing on the street. They formed a chorus line as the police came to break them up and say, "Go home. Go on. It's over." They would form a chorus line and dance their way towards the police. It was one of the funny experiences of my life.

We stayed there and we danced all night and we said—what we were saying was, if you won't let us dance inside, we're dancing out here on the street, like it or not. I know that there was some violence. I understand that there was some garbage pails turned over, and I even heard one store had its windows broken. I didn't see any of that. Maybe I wasn't looking for that. I was looking for the same kids that were inside who were dancing and having fun, dancing on the street and saying, "We're going to stay here all night and dance, even if you don't want us to."

We came back Saturday night and there were signs on the Stonewall that said we're closed. Thank you for your patronage, kids. There are many other bars to go to—meaning Mafia-owned bars. And we stayed there on the street! We didn't want to leave! Some people were dancing. Some people were just milling about. And we were saying at that point, we're coming back every night until you accept us for who we are and what we are.

By Sunday night—because it started Friday night and it went into Saturday night—by Sunday night, it became more potentially dangerous. As we went to Stonewall like we had done for the prior two nights, we suddenly realized that the tactical police force was there. The mayor—and this is something that the police commissioner has now apologized to the gay community for—the mayor had sent the tactical police force to Greenwich Village. The press was there, everyone was there. People were coming from all over the city and the metropolitan area. Everyone knew: something is happening downtown. Something important is happening in Greenwich Village. Something significant is happening at the Stonewall. The kids were all gathering again, and the tactical police force—that's the riot squad—with their motorcycles and their white helmets were trying to break up the crowds. And that's what everyone saw on

television that Sunday night and that Monday, and that's what appeared in newspapers on Monday, which is why people call it a riot. That may have been when some violence occurred but that really was the peak of the weekend.

So again, it starts with rebellion that we refused to leave and we're going to stay here, and it continues Saturday night, we'll be here every night, and it continues Sunday night because everyone knows that something significant is happening here at the Stonewall in Greenwich Village. And what is it that happened? At that point in time, for our modern society, gay rights was born. And that's why Stonewall is so important to the gay population around the world. You go to any city in the world and they will always be a Gay Pride celebration in June. And this past year or two years ago, we celebrated Stonewall 50, the fiftieth anniversary, and every major city across the world did the same thing, because this was the birth of gay rights, fifty-some years ago. And I was there!

By the way, I testified at the public hearings to designate the Stonewall as an individual landmark, and the federal hearings to designate Christopher Park as a National Park. And I was able to stand there and say everything I just said now, I was there. And you have to do this because something important happened at this location.

Dziedzic: You mentioned the effect that this had in the workplace for you immediately afterwards and I'm wondering how did that carry through? [01:15:11] When did you start to say, wow; this was the beginning of this movement?

Levine: When I came to work on Monday, one of my co-workers—at that time, we were all young planners, young kids—was sitting there with a copy of one of the newspapers and said, "Here's an article about Stonewall. Were you there when this happened, Michael?" And I said, "Yes, I was there all three nights." And for the first time, I was able to say something like, "with my date." That's something I couldn't have done three nights earlier. And at that point in time, I had never had to hide the fact that I'm gay. Everyone knew it, accepted it. It's not that it became the talk of the agency. Everyone knew and the words started to come out, "Gee, Michael was there the night that all of this happened." Then someone said to me, "Are you in any of the pictures?" I said, "No, I don't think I'm in any of the pictures." And I looked at some of the

photographs. I don't see myself there. But I never had to hide it after that. That was truly the birth of gay rights.

Dziedzic: Are there other impacts that witnessing this rebellion had on your life?

Levine: Yes, because as my life has progressed and I continued to come out further and further from the closet, I became active in gay organizations. There was the Gay Activist Alliance, the GAA, and they had purchased a city fire house, and I used to go there on Friday nights instead of the Stonewall, but of course it was always so overcrowded that one could never get in. And gay bars started to open up all over the city. It became easier to lead a gay life in the city. And one thing that I'm very proud of is that in 1974, I became a member of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah which is New York City's GLBTQ synagogue, and by 1978, I was the president of the congregation. I've been an active member of that congregation ever since. And I trace all of this back to Stonewall. And I say all of this has been possible to happen because of Stonewall. If we hadn't had that—would this have happened someplace else? I don't know. But it seems as though the ingredients were correct at that time.

Again, some people argue that it was because Judy Garland had passed away that week, that the gay people were angry and upset and would rebel over anything. I don't remember that. I don't remember anyone saying, "Gee, I'm so upset that Judy Garland is gone, that I'm going to rebel in the streets." I think there was just magic in the air, and it was a warm night—people wanted to be out, people wanted to stay out when we could no longer stay in. I think the magic of the moment was there and it has continued to impact the rest of my life since then.

When I told people the story on Stonewall 50, the Friday before the last Gay Pride march we had, I believe, because of the pandemic, I addressed our congregation—1,400 members including our state senator, speaker of the city council—to describe what it was like to be at Stonewall fifty years ago. It has impacted the rest of my life.

Dziedzic: Thank you for sharing that. Is that the congregation that's based out of Westbeth—?

Levine: You're going to say the Westbeth Artists House and Complex, which Andrew Berman had placed a plaque designating its fiftieth anniversary of the creation of Westbeth. We

rented—the whole congregation had originally met in the 1970s in a church. In 1980, we moved to Westbeth, and we took over a space that had been occupied by a defunct art gallery and we remained there for many, many years. We remained there until—I'm trying to remember, 2016. In 2017, we moved to our own premises on West 30th Street in what is still known as the Fur District. Again, this is the conversion of the loft building phenomenon, a building that had been a furrier district building where all the furriers were located. The furriers moved out. The building was purchased and converted into a residential condominium, and we bought the three ground floors and now our synagogue is located there. So we were at Westbeth all of the years, almost since its formation. I guess that would be thirty-five, close to forty years. And we finally moved to our own location on 30th Street which unfortunately is closed right now due to the 2020 pandemic, but we hope to be able to go back to our premises someday very soon. [01:20:07]

But we did have a long history with Westbeth and Westbeth was very pleased that we were there and I'll tell you a little joke. Westbeth was so happy that our synagogue was there because we always paid our rent on time. Not all of the residents had that record.

Dziedzic: [Laughs] And were you able to maintain any religious relationship with your family in Brooklyn?

Levine: Oh, definitely, oh, yes. One of the first ways after it became obvious to my family members, in addition to my colleagues at the Department of City Planning, relatives were calling and saying, Michael, are you okay? Michael, are you sick? I know you go to bars like that. Were you in that raid? Were you in that riot? I said, "It wasn't a riot. It was a rebellion. Yes, I was there. No problem whatsoever." And I had in subsequent years invited my brother and sister-in-law, my nephews and nieces, all to come to services with me. They'd come to High Holy Day services. And I had a single aunt who raised me from childhood when my parents passed away, I made her a member of the congregation. And when she passed away, our rabbi buried her.

So there has been a long history. Although all of my family has their own synagogues in Long Island where they live, I still always had my family members come to our synagogue for a variety of purposes, and they always felt perfectly comfortable there. Whenever we'd have concerts of any kind, when we can do things live and in person, I always bring cousins and other

relatives with me. And of course, my husband, who I've been with for thirty years. It's a great big family affair and my family loves the congregation that I'm part of. And one of the reasons I think is that they feel it's part of the tradition that I brought with me from Brooklyn, that I have maintained faithful to my religion. I had problems with it at first when I moved to Greenwich Village in the late '60s, early '70s because I didn't feel comfortable in those synagogues, but as soon as I found out there was a gay synagogue, my affinity was there immediately, and my family has appreciated that all these years.

Dziedzic: Do you still have a relationship to Brooklyn? Any family that still lives there?

Levine: No. There is no one left in Brooklyn. I'm a third-generation American Jew. Most of the family members from the first generation lived in Manhattan, Lower East Side, and moved to Brooklyn or Queens in the second generation. That generation is gone now and it's difficult to think of the fact that, as of now, the third generation, we're the elders. The third generation is now the elders from the original grandparents that came to this country in the early 1900s. But everyone has moved out of Brooklyn.

The nature of the Crown Heights neighborhood is extremely diverse now. It's changed a lot and what happened is all of the—except of course for the ultra Orthodox Jews, who still live on Eastern Parkway and Borough Park and Williamsburg, that part of Crown Heights has changed completely. It's mostly Caribbean. The neighborhood hasn't changed much at all physically but almost all of the relatives have left Brooklyn.

The first stop was—well, for me, it was Manhattan, and one or two other cousins. And most of the family members went to Queens, some of them ultimately to Long Island, or as I like to say with my Brooklyn accent, [phonetically] "lonn guylund." And some of them went to Yonkers or further, or Hudson, Hastings on Hudson. The family doesn't have its ties to Brooklyn anymore. Those are gone. We're now more spread out over the metropolitan area.

But our origins were not on the Lower East Side. We, of my generation, were all born in Brooklyn, and now the families, they're raising the fourth generations in all different parts of the metropolitan area, including one of my nephews, who has his family in San Francisco.

Dziedzic: Okay. Well, I want to ask you about Community Board 2 but if there anything else that you want to mention about Stonewall, please feel free.

Levine: No. So let me move on to Community Board 2, which as you know, I've had a very long history with. So when I first went to work with the City Planning Commission, that first assignment, which was the perfect assignment for me, was Community Board 2. In 1971, and this is where the story becomes a little bit strange, I became well-known in the staff of the Department of City Planning that I was reassigned in 1971 to the mayor's Midtown planning office to work on, of all things, a Garment Center project, to determine what would the appropriate use be for the Garment Center buildings that were in some ways being vacated. [01:25:05] And everyone thought that I would come up with a zoning district that would allow for residential uses and after I did my research there, I decided that that's not right. There was still far too many garment manufacturers in the 1970s in this part of town, and what we need to do is promotional activities. We created Fashion Capital of the World, which was the first business improvement district.

So I did a lot of fun things, again, always enjoyed what I was doing, in the Midtown planning office with the Garment Center. But because I no longer worked on the Greenwich Village assignment, I'm still an employee of the City of New York as a planner. I still have all of my ties. I was able to join Manhattan Community Board 2 from 1971 to 1977. And I was a member of the executive committee at that time. I was the vice chair of the community board and everyone thought I would go on to become the chair of the community board, but at that point, I was promoted into the management service. I came back to the main office of the Department of City Planning, working on capital budget projects, and it was deemed, at that time, to be inappropriate for a manager to be a member of a community board. I could have appealed it and had a decision to make, but I said okay, I don't think that's necessary. And I had a lot of work to do as a manager in the department, now supervising a staff in charge of capital budget projects all over the city: new schools, new highways, new sewer systems. So I said okay, I'll give up this position with the community board.

So in 1977 I left the community board, and I was so delighted to have been vice chair of the community board. So first, I worked with the board, and then was on the board, and I've been away from the board all of these years, as I continued my career for thirty years with the

Department of City Planning. And then I retired from there. I went to work for the American Planning Association for ten years, the New York chapter, and then I went to work for the Lower Manhattan Community Board 1 for the next ten years. And while I was working for Manhattan Community Board 1 in Lower Manhattan, across the street from Pace University, I came in contact with the very same kind of people I first went to school with when I was pursuing my master's degree, the political science and sociology folk, and they invited me to come and teach urban planning to undergraduate students at Pace University, which I did for ten years.

So I have now retired from all those positions. I think it's time. There's a certain point in your life where you feel you are entitled to retire. Just before the pandemic occurred, I ended up doing all of this retirement and that gave me the opportunity to once again join Manhattan Community Board 2. So now I'm a member of Manhattan Community Board 2 and I'm very pleased to be back. And none of the people—except for Doris Diether, who was the original chair of the landmark committee at the time that I worked for the community board—none of the other people are still there.

Now that I'm back, I can remember a lot of the voices I heard way back in the 1960s and '70s from Manhattan Community Board 2, and the issues are the same. How do we maintain the character and the quality of our neighborhood in the face, prior to the pandemic, of a changing city economy? Changing commercial uses? High rents? And the nature of the population changing? It's no longer a bohemian neighborhood. It is a middle to upper middle-class neighborhood. It is a neighborhood with many, many children. It's a neighborhood that needs schools, parks, playgrounds. The needs of the community are a little bit different than they were back in the 1960s and '70s when we were so concerned about preserving the historic nature of the bohemian neighborhood into which we lived.

Now we're concerned about how we maintain this as a more stable middle and upper middle-class neighborhood. Is it becoming less affordable? Yes, it is. I always joke with my friends, I own a co-op now that I bought in 1977, and I surely couldn't afford to live here now if I hadn't bought that co-op in 1977. Values have gone up enormously. And it's part of our job to make Greenwich Village and all of Community Board 2, which is Greenwich Village, NoHo, SoHo, Little Italy, Nolita, the Far West Village, and even portions of Chinatown, to make them as livable as possible. And I think this is a wonderful cap to my career. I started with Community Board 2 and that's where I am now, back at Community Board 2.

Dziedzic: What sort of discussions have the community boards been having—or Community Board 2 specifically—about responding to the pandemic, and the different strains and needs on the community because of it? [01:30:05]

Levine: We've been impacted in many ways, more so than other communities, although everyone is suffering. The demonstrations that occurred because of Black Lives Matter, which were almost simultaneous with the pandemic—so we had a pandemic happening. We're now all shut down. We're all working from home, or in my case, retiring from home, and now suddenly we have demonstrators out in the street. They're going down Fifth Avenue and up Sixth Avenue, from Union Square Park to City Hall Park, to Washington Square Park, and we have those awful riots in the neighborhood, where we in the center of the Village, the Village Alliance, the Greenwich Village Business Improvement District, had forty-seven stores destroyed.

We suffered a lot in this period of time over the pandemic and the demonstrations, and the riots that followed, and now we're starting to slowly settle into the fact that the pandemic, the riots are over, thank goodness. We still have demonstrators. There was another loss of a life just the other day and there were more demonstrators in the street. We're expecting the fact that the demonstrations will continue. They always have. It's the nature of Greenwich Village. We're right near City Hall. We're right near Union Square. That's what our life is like, and we will always have demonstrators here, and fortunately the riots are over. But we're trying as hard as possible to live with what we have now.

Let's go to SoHo. SoHo, so many of the high-end shops are closed. Before the pandemic, we were concerned that there were too many high-end shops and nothing left in SoHo for residents or neighbors to shop. Now we're not sure what the future will be for SoHo. And we had a project that we were working on with the City of New York—the mayor's office, the Department of City Planning, the city council members—of what we could possibly do to save portions of SoHo for moderate income uses as well as moderate income residential units. That project has been placed on hold.

What we're focusing on now in the community board is how we live through the pandemic, and one of the ways we mentioned earlier was to be encouraging the City of New York, which it did, to allow open air dining. The latest estimate is that there could be as many as

10,000 restaurants citywide that are now serving in the streets, and my husband and I go there all the time. We can't stay home. We know the science says stay home. We can't. So we go to safe restaurants that we know here in the Village and in Little Italy, where we know that social distance is being maintained. And it's wonderful to walk down 8th Street, Greenwich Avenue, 10th Street and to see all of the wonderful outdoor restaurants. It's how we respond to the pandemic. It's how we try to keep our small businesses intact.

There is an estimate that after the pandemic is over; twenty-five percent of our small businesses will never come back. We need to keep them alive. That's one of the primary things we're doing. Our transportation committee has been working very, very hard with the City of New York to open streets—the Open Streets project—to be closing those streets to traffic at certain times to allow people to social distance if they want to come out on a Sunday to walk. They don't have to worry about crowded sidewalks. They can walk up and down University Place and MacDougal Street and other locations right here in the heart of the historic district and feel comfortable. That's a major concern, open streets, safe streets, places where people can eat and wherever there is to us, where people can shop.

And our education committee has been working very, very hard on resolutions to try and figure out how to deal with the prospect of whether or not the schools will be opening or not opening. It's a major issue. I know there are arguments on both sides. The kids need to have social interaction. Remote learning is not the best situation. We want kids to be back in school but will they be safe, and will their teachers be safe? So we've been tackling this issue at every one of our community board meetings. How do we deal with, how do we reopen education right after Labor Day? We don't have an answer yet. We're still trying to figure out what direction the city will go and trying to figure out what position we will take.

These are kind of the major issues that we're focusing on right now. There are other issues too. There are issues related to the cuts in the city budget. The city budget, the state budget, everything is being cut. Social service programs are being cut because they cannot be supported because the tax dollars are not being collected. Tax dollars that are collected by the city and the state then get recycled back into our communities. [01:34:56] Less taxes are being collected because there are less businesses. [Digital distortion]—cleaned less frequently because there is less money available for this service. We can expect to see a lot of this occurring throughout the pandemic and we don't know how long it will take to recover from it.

On another note, we are being very successful in using Zoom, which is the way this interview is being conducted now. All of our community board meetings are on Zoom, and the good news about this is they are very frequently attended by very many people. Because you can't be in a lot of places at one time, and yet rushing from home, to dinner, to someplace else, you put your computer on and you're home all night on Zoom. It can drive you crazy at times but at least we can all be together in Zoom and other forms of meeting online.

So we're functioning. We're trying to figure out what our role will be in the pandemic. We're trying to figure out how we can make life here in Greenwich Village and in the city more livable for us all.

Dziedzic: And are their conversations on the community board level that are reflective of some of the issues that have been brought forth through Black Lives Matter about equity or about policing? Are those being discussed at the community board level?

Levine: Definitely. As a result of Black Lives Matter, the chair of our community board has created an equity working group, and it doesn't call it a committee because it may not be around forever, but it's an equity working group that is trying to figure out how we can approach certain issues, such as the language that we use at meetings, such as the members of our board who are appointed by the city council, the president and the—I'm sorry, a city council member who happens to be the city council president. Corey Johnson is now in that position of being the city council member for our board and the city council president. Our members are appointed by the city council member and by the borough president. Does the composition of our board represent a truly equitable representation of our community? And what about volunteers and people who serve not as members of the board but serve as volunteers on other committees, how can we open this up more widely to get a better representation of all of the different groups in our community?

And they have just started their work and I think we can look forward to some pretty good results from them as to how we make this a more equitable—but Greenwich Village has always been an equitable society. How can we make it more equitable? How can we recognize the issues of today, which aren't necessarily the issues of the past? And I'm very, very pleased, and very proud that our community board has taken on that issue right now.

We also have a reopening task force, again trying to work on what are the facilities in our neighborhood that will be reopening, and will it be accessible to all? Don't forget, will they be accessible to people with handicaps? Will they be accessible to the elderly? Will they be accessible to people who are in higher risk categories such as myself? How do we deal with all of these things? So I think our board is taking a lot of very positive steps as a result of the pandemic, as a result of Black Lives Matter. I think the Greenwich Village board is one that we can be very proud of, which is why I'm so happy to be back on the community board, because I think we're always on the forefront of what needs to be done.

Dziedzic: Now the last thing I wanted to ask you is to reflect on living in the Village for so long. To start, if you can explain—you said you moved into your co-op in 1977—what was the block like then and how has it changed?

Levine: All right, so let me do the history a little bit. I moved to the Village in 1967 to a studio apartment on 9th Street and University Place. And I lived there from 1967 to 1971. And then I moved to the building I'm in right now on 10th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in the heart of the historic district. Again, just down the block from the person most responsible for the creation of the district, Ruth Wittenberg, for whom the triangle outside of the Jefferson Market Garden has been named, Ruth Wittenberg Triangle. And the reason I'm on this block is because she lived here. So I lived here in 1971 and in 1977, the building turned co-operative and I purchased this apartment.

So people say to me, "Michael, you move around so much." I don't. I'm kind of used to being at one place at one time. I lived in Brooklyn for twenty-five years in one location before I ever moved. And since I've moved to Greenwich Village, I literally lived only two or three blocks perimeter around each other from 9th to 10th Streets to University between Fifth and Sixth. [01:40:06]

How has the neighborhood changed? Not much. This may sound revolutionary. It hasn't changed much! The historic district is very much a part of that because you really can't demolish anything without approval. The zoning is a very big part of that. This district is zoned for low rise buildings. Yes, Fifth Avenue does allow tall buildings. Fourteenth Street does allow tall buildings. Fourth Avenue allows tall buildings. There are certain locations, which do allow tall

buildings because that's what the zoning is like. You need to have a city in which you have small-scale buildings and large-scale buildings, and you want to have your large-scale buildings where there is public transportation. And the preservation society [Village Preservation] has been very much opposed to changing those boundaries at all to allow high-rise buildings in locations that would be in conflict with the historic district.

So I haven't seen very much change, although there has been some new construction around the 14th Street and Fourth Avenue corridor, and there's been some new construction on Seventh Avenue and Sixth Avenue, most of it low-scale, and a lot of the fact that it is low-scale is to the credit of the preservation society and its wonderful work here in Greenwich Village.

And in SoHo, because of the fact that it's a historic district, and that everything needs to be approved—and again, the zoning is low-rise. You cannot build large buildings in SoHo other than the ones that are currently on Broadway.

So physically, it hasn't changed much. And I've heard some criticism from others that maybe it's a disadvantage that we haven't seen any very distinguished architecture here in Greenwich Village. We have some distinguished architecture in some of the new buildings built on 14th Street and our periphery, but that's not what we're all about. We're not about new, and of course, we don't know what the future will bring in terms of rentability of space, but we're not about new buildings that will pierce the sky and bring us unbelievable international acclaim. We're about maintaining and preserving a quality of life that is visible in the physical experience of walking our streets. That has not changed since the days since I was a kid walking Greenwich Village in the 1960s. The same blocks with the same low-rise buildings, and the same wonderful townhouses, and the same small parks that we have, they're all still here. In some occasions, one-story tax-payer buildings that were built when Seventh Avenue was cut through, have been replaced by six, seven, eight story buildings which are very much in character and in quality with the buildings that are there already.

So physically we haven't changed very much. What has changed, of course, is the nature of those who live here now. It's less bohemian. It's less gay. The joke is that the gays left Greenwich Village and went up to Chelsea, and Chelsea became too popular because the gays were there. So they had to move up to Hell's Kitchen. Wherever they go, it becomes too expensive. And now they're all out in Brooklyn. It's the phenomenon of New York City. It is a higher-rent area, a higher-cost area.

I don't know how the pandemic will impact what's going to happen in the future but this is clearly an upper middle-class area. It's not a working-class area anymore. There's going to be changes happening after the pandemic is over. I cannot predict them. But right now, when I walk my streets, especially when I walk my dog and see my same neighbors who I've seen for years and years and years, some who are not in town right now, most who are still in town, I see a Greenwich Village that hasn't changed all that much.

So new uses in places. The character of 8th Street has changed, that's natural to happen. We have more physical cultural establishments than we've ever had before. We have more large chain drug stores. We know that that's going to happen. But mostly, Greenwich Village is still the same wonderful home community that I fell in love with back in the 1960s and I'm so pleased to still be here right now even though we're going through very difficult times.

Dziedzic: That is so amazing to hear. I wonder if I can ask you to speculate for a minute. I'm just thinking about how, for folks that live in Brooklyn, that experience—the conversation everywhere is about how the neighborhoods have changed, how fast the neighborhoods are changing, almost quite the opposite from what you just said. And I'm wondering if you have a sense of what you think the role of planners are in how Brooklyn, and potentially Queens, I guess, navigate through this era of the last twenty, twenty-five years of such tremendous change? [01:45:04]

Levine: Planners have a dual role. Planners have to be leaders and followers and that goes back to some of my earlier statements with my early projects. And I know from planners that I worked with for many, many years, who are assigned to different areas of Brooklyn and Queens, that they have to understand how the neighborhood is changing. You can't reverse that. You have to work with it. So if the developers want to be rebuilding portions of Brooklyn or Queens in areas that were low-rise, or that were not residential districts, non-manufacturing districts—and that's been happening for the past forty years. So many parts of Queens and Brooklyn are being rebuilt, not just gentrified where there are existing townhouses and other buildings, but whole neighborhoods being rebuilt. Even something such as Hudson Yards in Manhattan, which was a concept for many years until it started to become a reality, the planners have to number one, follow. This is the trend that's occurring. Work with the community and figure out what the

community wants, and then become the leader, and say okay, in order for us to allow this to happen, in order for the zoning changes to occur, the community needs to receive something back for it.

Right here in Greenwich Village, in Community Board 2, the zoning was changed in Hudson Square just north of Canal Street and west of Avenue of the Americas to allow for high-rise buildings, and one of the conditions was that schools and parks be built in the neighborhood to accommodate what is anticipated as an increased residential population. So we're following the trend, which is appropriate, but then we have to lead it, and say, in order to make this trend valid and continue the city to be a livable place, we need to make sure that the community and the city receive something in exchange. And in this case, it was new schools, highways, roads, schools, communities, facilities.

When we approve the construction of a new building in the Meatpacking District, which is a very tightly built up area, it doesn't have very much vacant space, and a new building was proposed. A new residential condo was proposed there. This community board negotiated very, very carefully for the developers to provide community space, a portion of which will be in that building, and a portion of which will be off-site, for theatrical purposes. We felt that Greenwich Village is losing some of its theatrical character, and the developer has agreed to provide offsite and onsite facilities for either community purposes or for theatrical purposes.

So on the one hand, the planners and the community board, which is a planner, must follow what's happening, and then must lead what's happening. Change will occur. Understand the change. Understand what's good for the community. Understand what's good for the city, and lead the way for as much of that as possible to occur. That's our job. That's what we were trained to do. It's what I was trained to do more than fifty years ago, and I'm pleased to say that I think I've been able to accomplish most of that in my lifetime. And it's what I taught my undergraduate students for ten years at Pace University. Whether or not you become city planners, your job is to advocate for what's appropriate for your community.

Dziedzic: Thank you, Michael. That's pretty much the end of my questions. So is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Levine: No, I just want to say that I'm pleased to be interviewed and I really appreciate this. I had described the Stonewall story before for National Public Radio on *StoryCorps*, which is in the Library of Congress, but I've never had the opportunity—and of course, I have on many occasions talked about my experience at Stonewall—but I haven't had the opportunity to talk, to bring it all together in one location. And I'm a joiner. I join organizations. One of the most pleasing and satisfying organizations to which I have been a member since its formation twenty-five years ago is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, which is now known as the preservation society [Village Preservation], and I've had an absolutely wonderful experience being a part of this organization, attending all the annual meetings, and attending the lectures and programs in person while they were done in person, and now that they're being done online. And I'm so pleased that I will be part of the oral history that the preservation society is collecting.

So I thank you for the time you have taken to lead me down memory lane, and lead me through all the steps I have taken as a planner related to Greenwich Village and SoHo. And Stonewall. [01:50:00]

Dziedzic: Well, thank you! And we'll have to figure out another place for you to share some more of your stories that are outside those boundaries. [laughs] Okay, great.

Levine: It has been my pleasure. Whenever you need me, you know that I am available.

Dziedzic: Great. Well, you'll hear from me probably in a couple weeks with your transcript and we can talk about the best way for you to review that. Maybe I'll send you a copy of the audio.

Levine: That would be very useful, thank you.

Dziedzic: Yes, yes, whatever is the best for you in terms of accessibility. We'll work that out. Maybe I'll give you a call when I get to that place, of being ready to share that with you.

Levine: And do you have a time frame? Do you have to edit it down or how does that work?

Dziedzic: I'm going to keep the transcript pretty much verbatim, a full transcript. I'll create just about a one-minute audio snippet of the interview but otherwise the audio will be available, I think, by request is how they do it on their website. So yes, we'll keep it in full as much as we can.

Levine: Great. I appreciate this so much and I thank you for the time you have spent to be an excellent host for my memories.

Dziedzic: [laughs] Absolutely. I hope the rest of your evening goes smoothly, no floods, no more disasters.

Levine: So as long as that sink doesn't flood again, I hope to get some rest because Ray and I are tired from bailing water. But it seems to be okay now. So thank you for your good wishes.

Dziedzic: Good, good. All right, take care, Michael. Bye-bye.

Levine: Same here and remember, it's warm out there today.

Dziedzic: Yes. I'm going to turn on the AC as soon as I hang up.

Levine: Good, okay.

Dziedzic: Bye-bye.

Levine: Good-bye.

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