

COLUMBUS AVENUE AND THE UPPER WEST SIDE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Huntley Gill

Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District

PREFACE

The following is a transcript of an oral history interview with Huntley Gill conducted by Leyla Vural on February 4, 2019. This interview is part of the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project, sponsored by the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Huntley Gill (born in 1952) has worked in architectural preservation, construction, and real estate management and development on the Upper West Side and elsewhere for many years.

In this interview, Gill describes New York as he experienced it from the regular visits to the city he made as a child and teenager with his family, to his days as a graduate student in Columbia University's Historic Preservation M.S. program, and his eventual move to the Upper West Side. Gill tells stories about the adventure – shaped by a certain lawlessness and creativity – that was life, to him, in New York City in the 1970s. He talks about what he learned about real estate development in his first job out of graduate school, working for Harley Baldwin, who was trying to open a food market under the Fifty-ninth Street bridge. And Gill talks about the role Robert Quinlan (also interviewed for this oral history project) played in changing the avenue and about his own work for Quinlan during the reconstruction of The Endicott. Gill tells the story of the founding of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District and talks about the resistance to change that he sees as part of the culture of the Upper West Side.

The interviewee has reviewed, edited, and approved this transcript. Readers should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of an interview and, therefore, does not read like a polished piece of written work. Time codes have been included to make it easier for readers to match the transcript with the audio recording of the interview. Time codes may, however, no longer be completely accurate because of edits to the transcript. Where there are differences between the transcript and the audio recording, the transcript is the final document of record.

The views expressed in this oral history interview are the interviewee's alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Interviewee: Huntley Gill
Interviewer: Leyla Vural
Interview date: February 4, 2019
Session: 1 of 1
Location: New York, N.Y.

Vural: [00:00:00] Today is Monday, February 4th, 2019. This is Leyla Vural interviewing Huntley Gill in his apartment on the Upper West Side for the Upper West Side Oral History Project sponsored by the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District—a mouthful. So, thank you. I'm really glad that we're getting to do this. Usually oral histories start with the same question: Can you tell me something about where and when you were born and how you grew up?

Gill: [00:00:24] I was born by accident in Cincinnati, which is where my father was for a couple of years right out of school, and then basically grew up in Chicago, in the suburbs of Chicago, in the winters, and in the South, which is where my family are from, in Virginia and North Carolina, in the summers.

Vural: [00:00:45] And can you tell me about your family?

Gill: [00:00:48] The family—you know, sort of I guess a standard, kind of upper middle-class family. The Gills have been around for a long time, arriving in Maryland in the seventeenth century, and we've always been land rapists on both sides. And they were planters and kind of moved with—as the soil got exhausted, you'd keep moving to the outer edges of wherever there was soil left and then they finally ended up completely exhausting—this is all cotton—exhausting the soil. And the last place they were before they gave up on planting was in Paris, Texas, where my great-grandfather became a lawyer, and everybody else has been sort of more bourgeoisie since then.

[00:01:41] And the Huntley's have been here since a little before that, in fact, and my mother's family, the Turnbolls, were also land rapists. They clear-cut timber, first in Minnesota and Wisconsin and then in North Carolina.

Vural: [00:01:59] And by "land rapists" you mean what?

Gill: [00:00:48] It means that these—both sides of my family pursued things that we would never find acceptable today. You would do clear-cutting for timber, where you would basically buy land, cut down everything on it—with the exception of in our case hardwoods, because it was a softwood mill—and just leave it, walk away.

[00:02:20] And in the case of cotton, of course, cotton is a really destructive crop. It just drains the soil, uses lots and lots of water, lots—very, very high labor costs. And so the easiest way to do things is plant and then after the soil is exhausted, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the nineteenth century was when the money was being made—you just move on and sell it for not very much money and get some new land and then exhaust that land, until you ran out of land. And that happened right after this—you know, we basically ran out of land after the Civil War at The Red River in Texas.

[00:03:01] And on the timber side they cut down all the trees in Minnesota and Wisconsin, finishing them off in about 1905; thought about moving to San Francisco and indeed bought a lot of land north of San Francisco, or went contract for it, when my great-grandmother called the deal off because she woke up one morning and read about the San Francisco earthquake and said, "I'm not moving there," cancelled the contracts and instead went down to North Carolina and clear-cut North Carolina until they ran out of timber there in the fifties.

Vural: [00:03:34] So, Huntley, your first name, was your mother's family name?

Gill: [00:03:39] Which is the Southern thing. You name your kids after the last guy who made a lot of bucks [chuckles], which was Benjamin Huntley on that side.

Vural: [00:03:47] And did you grow up with siblings?

Gill: [00:03:49] I did. I have two sisters, younger sisters, and cousins, and we would spend those at my grandparents' cottage on the ocean in Virginia, and then we would go—it was great. Now that I think about it, you know, my parents were really very good at getting rid of us. We would be sent off to the mountains and to ride for part of the summer and the rest of the summer we'd spend on the beach, which is not a bad thing.

Vural: [00:04:13] What year were you born?

Gill: [00:04:14] '52.

Vural: [00:04:16] And how do you remember yourself as a kid? What were you like?

Gill: [00:04:19] I was blond. I had hair. I don't have hair now. I don't—you know, just a kid, I think. Nothing—suburban life, you know, which has its—I guess it's all the clichés of the fifties and sixties and seventies. My parents did what you were supposed to do. You had kids when you were relatively young. You moved to the suburbs. You lived in the suburbs. You wanted to make sure that your kids had the best possible school.

[00:04:47] Part and parcel of both sides of my family's concerns were always education and always schools, and they were very concerned—that kind of old-fashioned American ethic that education is all was important to both my mother's family and my father's family. So, went to suburban schools, very good schools—north of Chicago they're famously good—and then off to secondary school. Not at Exeter [Phillips Exeter Academy], where my father went—I didn't get

in. I did get into Andover [Phillips Academy Andover] but he wouldn't let me go to Andover. And I went to Lawrenceville [School], which is the traditional prep school for Princeton. And then on to Vassar [College], which was my mother's alma mater, and my grandmother's and great-aunt's and my sister's. And then Columbia University School of Architecture and Planning [School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation].

Vural: [00:05:37] So I'm going to ask you some more about growing up first. Did you conform to your parents' expectations of—

Gill: [00:05:45] Well, I think all parents want their children to be investment bankers or doctors, right? [Chuckles] But no, they were perfectly happy with what we all—we each did. And I think my mother always would have liked us to all be a good deal richer than we in point of fact are, but that never really concerned us very much. Yes.

Vural: [00:06:12] I remember when we met you mentioned that you used to come to New York as a kid. Can you tell me about that?

Gill: [00:06:18] We did all the time. I think my parents really always wanted to live in New York, our mother especially. She was an interesting character. She grew up in a tiny mill town—New Bern, North Carolina—and I don't think that was a very happy experience. I think that she really wanted to be living in, say, Paris [chuckles]. But she married my father quite young, right out of Vassar, and she got out of Vassar when she was young, and they moved, ended up living in Chicago. And I don't think she ever really liked Chicago, but somehow they could never engineer moving to New York.

[00:06:55] And my mother became, after the youngest of my sisters hit about, you know, fifth grade, fourth grade, something like that, decided that being an actress and singer—she had

studied music at Vassar—was what she wanted to do. So she did. And she was an actress not blessed with a great deal of talent but a huge amount of energy and chutzpah. And she worked from then all of her—much of her life as an actress doing voiceover TV, doing dinner theater, which is kind of disgusting stuff. I don't know if you're a New Yorker if you even know what dinner theater is. It's a Midwestern thing. Doing that kind of stuff, TV commercials, and had a great time. And one of the things that was true then, I don't know if it still is, but basically even if you're living and working in the Midwest, most of the auditions were in New York. So, this was a great excuse for her.

[00:07:47] So, she would trundle in and stay at The Waldorf and go do auditions for three weeks or a month and then if I were East that would be a great—when I was at school, of course, it was great to come in. And there was a whole different set of non-suburban friends, right? These are actresses and actors living in cold-water flats on the Upper West Side. This is not Winnetka, Illinois. This was really fun.

[00:08:14] And then, you know, she'd have all these really interesting stars that would become friends and end up coming to dinner and you'd have dinner with them in New York, which was great fun. And my friends did—and she was embarrassed, I shouldn't say embarrassed, she was protective, like most actresses who had to work hard to get jobs, about her age and her private life, because if you're doing an audition against an actress that is living in a cold-water flat and [chuckles] the people who are auditioning know that you live in a twenty-room house in Winnetka [chuckles], who's going to get the job? So that was kept kind of secret.

[00:08:55] And also the fact that, you know, her age was—she would be squishy about. So, we were always told that we weren't her children—that we were her nephews and nieces—because

then she could pretend to be a bit younger than she was. And we all just finally—that was at—I remember—what was the guy’s name? He was casting director for CBS, so it was a big deal.

And we were at dinner at the Lamb Club and we had a few drinks. I was in prep school. And we had a few drinks and at some point at dinner I slipped and said, “Oh, mother, don’t be ridiculous.” And under the table came this pointy toe flying at very high velocity into my [chuckles] shin to remind me that I was not—I was indeed her nephew. And so we just decided for the rest of her life to call her “Aunt Gill” because it was safer.

[00:09:40] So, it was fun. And that was how for all of us, I think the three of us, New York was imbued with a sense of really this great place to go, because you’d come and she was having a great time. You were always going out to dinner. You were always going to the theater. My father loved the city, too. And, you know, for me New York was The Waldorf and that kind of neighborhood, which was not New York—we know it’s not New York—but it was kind of then for us.

[00:10:09] And one of the things I think that was also interesting is that my mother, being kind of a snob, really didn’t think that you were allowed to go anyplace except, say, The Waldorf, north and east. And obviously you had to venture into that horrible district to the west because that’s where the theater was. The idea that—you know, when I lived in the Village [Greenwich Village] or when I lived on the Upper West Side or wherever, that was not a good idea. This was not—this is not where one should be. My sisters were never allowed to live anyplace except the Upper East Side [chuckles]. I was a boy. I could get away with it.

Vural: [00:10:44] So, when was it that you started coming to New York?

Gill: [00:10:47] I don't know. I don't remember the first time I was in New York. I was probably five. We came to New York all the time. And my grandparents—remember, in the South, if you lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, or the like, you couldn't shop. There was no culture. So, my grandparents would—and my great—my grandparents' children would come with my great-grandfather and stay at what my grandmother called The Old Waldorf, Thirty-fourth Street, and just come here and settle in three times a year, say, for two or three weeks and just shop and go to the theater and go to see museums and stuff, because that's what you had to do, right. What are you going to do in Winston-Salem, North Carolina? [Chuckles]

[00:11:32] So, I think that New York has been in the mix forever and ever and ever, mostly, yes, on mother's side. My father's side, they were in Texas at that point, so that was a bit far to go.

Vural: [00:11:44] So, do you have memories, specific memories, of something that happened in the city or what you thought of the city or something you saw from when you were a child?

Gill: [00:11:59] You know, I don't think so. I loved the city. I loved the energy of it. I loved the vitality of it. Again, I think that was part and parcel of what led to—what made Columbus Avenue work for my generation. Because our parents were all so concerned about what was happening with cities in the fifties, what was affordable, because they were young. In other words, if you're having kids when you're in your twenties, you can't afford to—most people can't afford to live a rather grand life. So, I think we—most of my contemporaries—grew up in suburbia. And suburbia is no fun. Suburbia is no fun. I mean, suburbia is not an interesting place. During that era, of course, is when exactly the topic of Columbus Avenue on the Upper West Side, this is when things really started heading south.

[00:12:46] I think for my generation, and with people of exactly my background, that we didn't really care about the fact that the neighborhoods were pretty rough and that you had to kind of worry about getting mugged and that sort of stuff, because it was exciting, it was the city, and it wasn't *the suburbs*.

[00:13:10] So, I think to that extent, yes, I mean, for me as a kid being in the city was really an exciting thing and when I—it's a really stupid exercise—when I graduated from undergraduate school I thought, okay, I'm going to do this kind of in a systematic way. I could live any number of places. At that point living in the U.K. or France wasn't very practical. Their economies weren't very good, and so it had to be the U.S.

[00:13:38] And I went kind of around the country, visited different cities, and thinking I'm going to choose a city. Well, how am I going to choose a city? So, I went to Washington, went to San Francisco, went around L.A., and here. I was here staying with an ex-girlfriend, lover from college, and it was winter. I went to see Giorgio Cavaglieri, an architect, and it was very cold and I hate the cold. And I came out and I thought, okay, well, I'll walk over—she lived on Thirty-second Street off Park [Avenue]—go down, catch a bus back to the apartment. And then I suddenly found myself at Thirty-second and Park, having just walked down Fifth Avenue in the freezing cold, which again I hate, because it was Fifth Avenue and walking was so wonderful. And I kind of turned to go into her apartment and said, "Huntley, what an idiot. You know where you're going to live [chuckles]. You know there's no—you're not going to live in Washington D.C., San Francisco. It's going to be New York—duh!" So, I think, yes, to that extent, it was imbued in childhood.

Vural: [00:14:50] And when you were a kid, were you interested in architecture and buildings. Do you remember?

Gill: [00:14:55] Three dimensions always, yes, and old buildings always, yes, and history always, yes.

Vural: [00:15:00] Can you tell me what you mean by that? How do you remember being interested in three dimensions, for instance?

Gill: [00:15:06] I think, you know if people sit back and think about their childhood and what they gravitate to, there are those that automatically love the abstract. There are those that love two dimensions—pictures. Like there are those that love music. Not that any interest in any of these things is exclusionary but, you know, there are those, too. And I think it's probably a way our brains function to some degree. There are those that really love three-dimensional things, whether it's working in a factory or designing a building or fiddling with a car or that kind of aspect of things. And those aspects of things have always interested me from forever.

Vural: [00:16:00] So, do you remember looking at buildings and really paying attention to the aesthetic of them?

Gill: [00:16:07] Always. And then especially once you start studying architectural history, which was basically in undergraduate school, and a little bit in prep school, but mostly there, and then kind of a whole different world opens up. And I've always been interested in old buildings, the history that interweaves with them, too, because buildings don't stand alone. Buildings are a product of their time. And, you know, the fascinating thing once you start getting into this academically is that it's very easy—I mean, I love travelling in cities especially, because if you've got enough education, whether it's just quick homework before you go to a specific city,

it's easy to date things. And, you know, in New York, it's *very* easy to date things. New Yorkers have been slaves to style since Day 1. So, we can wander around, I can look at a brownstone, and we can probably date it within about five years, because everybody was marching in lockstep. And that makes these things really fun and really fascinating.

Vural: [00:17:14] So, tell me about your time at prep school. You were in Lawrenceville. Do you remember—obviously you took history, because every high school kid does—history and were you starting to think about architecture in a sort of organized way?

Gill: [00:17:30] No, no, that was really in undergraduate school more than anything else. History was my favorite topic in school, always, through to—that and architectural history. Those are the two things.

Vural: [00:17:45] And were you interested particularly in American history given that your own family has such a long history here?

Gill: [00:17:50] I don't even think that I knew my family had a long history here. Nobody ever—it's only when you get in your sixties you ask these questions, you know. And my father particularly just kind of went, "Oh, family history is a bore." He was actually against using family names. His family are all completely boring names—John, James, William—except Absalom Barney. There was one guy called Absalom Barney Gill. I don't know how he got an interesting name, but he did. But all the others didn't.

[00:18:19] So I don't think I even knew that we'd been around for long. And again it's not like my families are important families. These are not Custises or the like, first families of Virginia, that did a lot. They just went around raping land and they got here early and then did what they did and that was that. So, I'm not sure that played a particular role in my interest in history. I

don't know why it's interesting. I think it's always just interesting to look around, figure out why we are where we are and how we got there and why things look the way they are and why people had the mindsets, prejudices, ways of living that they do. And that's all intertwined with history and very much with architecture.

Vural: [00:19:04] So, tell me about going to Vassar and studying architectural history. How did that come to pass?

Gill: [00:19:08] That was great. I went to look at Vassar because my mother kept really bitching at me to do it. I kept saying, "Mom, I'm not going to go to Vassar. I'm not going to go to Vassar. Give me a break." It was the first class of men going to Vassar. And I went to Vassar because she just wouldn't leave me alone, and went with a couple of friends and we loved it, it was great. The mood was great, the campus was great, the curriculum was great, and decided that was my first choice. So, I ended up going there.

[00:19:38] And then I was *very* lucky. There was a guy called Richard Palmer, who was an architectural historian teaching there. The art history department at Vassar is probably—it's arguably the best undergraduate art history program in the country, then if not, certainly at the top. And he was a really great teacher. Died young, unfortunately. And he and I had a mindset that just kind of locked on right away and I loved working with him and loved studying with him. I probably should have gone to Columbia College undergraduate if I think about it retroactively, and I probably would have done save for Dick Palmer. He was so—he was such a good inspiration and he had such a wonderful way of kind of approaching things and thinking about things.

[00:20:30] Obviously, Columbia would have been better for architectural history because there's a lot—there are a lot more architectural historians. Vassar had two.

Vural: [00:20:40] So, what year did you start at Vassar?

Gill: [00:20:43] Let's see. It would have been, yes, 1970, graduating in '74, then taking a year off. In the meantime working to save some money to come to New York, which I did, and then going to Columbia.

Vural: [00:21:00] So, what did you do for that year?

Gill: [00:21:01] Construction. I'd done construction for a long time. Construction is great. It's a great way to learn about buildings. And every architect I ever talked to said, "Work in construction, work in construction." And I liked working in construction. And it had the other benefit that when you're a teenager or in your twenties, it paid relatively well. And then during that one little period I also worked in a unionized job for UPS [United Parcel Service], sorting, I think, Minnesota or something like that, because you could work for an extra three hours a day and make—I've forgotten—a *huge* sum, like \$25 an hour or \$30 an hour. So much. It was like manna from heaven. So, then I crammed about four or five months into just saving money, living at home, and then moved here.

Vural: [00:21:50] So, a little bit of a random question, what kind of work did your dad do?

Gill: [00:21:53] He was in advertising for most of his life, but like many people, advertising as a career fades because it's a young man's—or woman's—career. And then he operated a small business importing wines. My parents loved to travel. They loved Europe. They spent as much

time there as they could afford, which wasn't a huge amount, and this was an excuse kind of to spend a lot of time in the Loire Valley or wherever.

Vural: [00:22:25] Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember learning about architectural history at Vassar? What were the ways that you were thinking about buildings and cities?

Gill: [00:22:36] Well, this was the seventies and then more than now even, and now the two are very much intertwined, but architecture and planning and social concerns were always very symbiotic. And architects can get, unfortunately, very full of themselves and decide that they have the answer for mankind and how we should live our lives and how you should not only occupy a house, but how you should actually then operate your life. That was part and parcel of the philosophy. Urban planning was a major central concern. We were very busy completely screwing up our cities in the sixties and seventies with very bad urban planning. And a lot of it was done by architects, because architects, then especially, tend to be—what architects are supposed to be—visual, and urban planning and urban life aren't necessarily tied into the visual. The way a city looks bird's-eye view can be absolutely elegant. Le Corbusier [Charles-Édouard Jeanneret], probably one of the greatest eyes in the history of mankind, did beautiful-looking cities that of course were a total *disaster*.

[00:24:06] And so that era was one where we were increasingly fascinated by it. And I think when I was in undergraduate school, people were just beginning to realize how badly the sixties were turning out for cities, how urban renewal, where you'd go and—Poughkeepsie, for instance, where Vassar is—and tear down almost everything to try and make parking lots so that

downtown Poughkeepsie is more like the suburbs. Of course it didn't work and these cities have never, never recovered, never will probably.

[00:24:36] So, that all was intertwined—the interest in architecture, the interest in planning, the interest in architectural history, and, you know, a love of cities. And I think again this is not unique to me. I think it was our generation really loved the idea of having cities come back. Because at the very worst, I think we thought we would move into these cities and then have kids and not be able to afford them anymore and move to the suburbs, but it would be holding our nose. And I think universally all of my friends who could afford to not move to the suburbs holding their noses didn't. Most, you know, many of them had no choice, but that I think, as a gross overgeneralization, was kind of our mindset.

[00:25:28] So, it's hard to say. I mean, all this stuff is so symbiotic, all so intertwined. And I think it was the key to these people who were brave enough to invest in—and the banks that were brave enough to lend to them—to invest in neighborhoods like the Upper West Side, because I think they had the sense that there was a generation that was willing to put up with a lot of stuff to live in these neighborhoods—which you had to do.

Vural: [00:25:54] So, tell me. Do you remember, did you read Jane Jacobs? Were you paying attention to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and what did you think of her?

Gill: [00:26:03] Of course. Yes, I mean, she was the great—she was the great catalyst for everyone taking a look around and seeing what was going on. And her story still resonates. It's so wonderful. I mean, if you read—which I reread recently some histories of her—that's her theory. Her theory is what it is and it's—you know, you look back and say, this is a no-brainer, right? Well, it's not a no-brainer if nobody's thinking it. But, also, just her tactics and her

interactions with the likes of Robert Moses and the city planning establishment of those days. There's so much to be learned there. I mean, she was unbelievable. She was intractable. She—I mean, you go back and you read these things where she would be urged by her fellow campaigners to sit down with Moses and compromise and she'd go, "No. *No*. Once you let the beast's nose in the door, you're finished. The answer is *no*. It's a bad idea. It's never going to be a good idea, even half a bad idea. *No!*"

[00:27:09] I mean, that kind of stuff is really fascinating. And that, of course, is very much an Upper West Sider's—and a Greenwich Village—attitude. It gets stale sometimes now these days, but in the sixties, you really needed that, in the seventies, you needed that, because you were fighting against really malevolent, well-meaning but malevolent, forces.

Vural: [00:27:31] So, tell me, you came to New York I guess in 1975?

Gill: [00:27:35] Yes, I moved here right after undergraduate school. Well, I worked for a few months in Chicago, then moved here. Lived in an apartment that my mother—a friend of my mother's had on Fifty-fifth Street between Fifth and Sixth [Avenues]. Big one-bedroom apartment. I've forgotten what we paid. It was nothing—my mother made the poor guy sublet it to me for nothing. He was off for six months somewhere on a ship, which was really great. Can you imagine that's your first place living in New York? Governor [Nelson] Rockefeller had his mistress in an apartment on one side and his office on the other. I was sitting in the middle, feeling very poor. And then went to—worked for a really completely crazy furniture designer and showroom called Karl Springer, and part-time when I was in graduate school did that too, and then went to Columbia for two years starting in it would have been '70— I guess it must have been '75 to '77.

Vural: [00:28:31] So, tell me about graduate school. What brought you there? What did you hope to learn? What did you learn?

Gill: [00:28:36] Well, I'm not a designer. I'm not a good designer. I never have been. And so going to professional school—I certainly could have gone to an architecture school, but it wouldn't have been, I believe, it wouldn't have been New York. It might have been, you know, University of Ohio or Ohio Institute of Technology or something like that and that didn't interest me at all, because I knew I would never be a good designer anyway. So, preservation was appealing. And luckily the best program, the pioneer program, was James Marston Fitch's program at Columbia, which invented the whole idea of preservation and preservation planning.

[00:29:16] So, that was good. And I applied and enrolled and it was an interesting experience. I probably didn't work as hard as I should have and probably didn't do as much as I should have, but I was *really, really* having a good time living in New York! [Chuckles] You know, when you're in your twenties, it's great. And a lot of—it was also interesting. I think a lot of people who were at Columbia at that time living up, you know, 106th Street, 107th Street and focusing on university, those of us who'd known New York for a long time and had lived in New York without being at university had a different view. I mean, I lived in the Village and commuted up.

[00:30:01] And so part and parcel of the education was just the really wonderful excitement of being and living in the city, and graduate school was fine. Graduate school was fine, but it was part of that whole bigger picture really.

Vural: [00:30:14] So, you got here just as the city was on the brink of bankruptcy, right?

Gill: [00:30:19] Yes, I mean, it was a mess. It was a mess and my parents' generation were very pessimistic about it. And I kept saying, "Mom, dad, you should really—you should buy some stuff in New York." "Oh, no. We don't want to do that."

[00:30:36] My parents were offered—they had friends who had—I've forgotten now—a three-bedroom, one of the big, old-fashioned three- or four-bedroom co-ops on Park Avenue in the seventies [referring to side streets] somewhere and they said, "Look, we will just give it to you if you'll take it over. Just take the maintenance payments over. It's just—we don't want it." And that's what these things were worth.

[00:30:59] The first guy I worked for in New York, Harley Baldwin, bought his apartment at The Dakota in '70—I would say '3 [1973]—for I think it was seventy-two thousand five for a two-bedroom, three-bedroom apartment with an office and other stuff at The Dakota. I mean, that was the state of things. There were little islands of course—Park Avenue, Central Park West to some degree—but, you know, things didn't cost anything. The city was a mess. It was a mess. It wasn't functioning. The subways were a disaster, fiscally. Our current mayor is working very hard to restore our fiscal irresponsibility, and he's doing a very good job of it, but we were wildly fiscally irresponsible then and we didn't have the finance industry that we do now to back up that fiscal irresponsibility. Everybody was moving their corporate headquarters to big over-designed campuses in Connecticut and Purchase, New York, and places like that that are now vacant. And he'd invested, which was good [chuckles].

Vural: [00:32:02] So, tell me, can you describe sort of details that you remember? Like what did it mean to be a mess? Like when you were on the streets near Columbia, for instance, what did it look like, what did it smell like, what were in the stores?

Gill: [00:32:14] Well, Columbia was worse than downtown, obviously, in many ways. I had a bunch of friends, three or four friends all in professional school, that were sharing an apartment on [West] 107th Street. I remember going over there one day and there were sheets on the windows, which was new, and I said, “Guys, what’s with the sheets?” And they said, “You know, we just went out and bought a color TV. It’s really expensive. If we don’t put up the sheets, it’ll be gone in a week.” [Chuckles]

[00:32:44] You know, the streets were of course messy and there was always—the crime rate was high and you could indeed get hurt. You knew exactly where to go and where not to go. The top of Morningside Park had signs that I don’t know who, I think it was probably the university, put up saying, “Caution. Do not enter. High crime rate below” on either side because people would get off the train, they’d take the Number 2 train or 3 train, get off at 116th Street, not realize, and walk up through crack central. It was really *bad* there.

[00:33:12] I know one guy who bought a house just at the bottom of Riverside Park, too early. You would go to dinner at his house, he’d send instructions. So, take the subway, and that’s fine. But take *this* subway and walk straight into the street and here’s the house on the south side. If you’re going to drive, don’t park anyplace except my block, because your car won’t be there when you get back. And then you’d go to dinner and you’d say, “By the way, why your block?” He said, “Oh, because there are three drug dealers that operate here on this block and the last thing they want is police, so, they won’t allow anyone to touch a car because that means the police will be interrupting their business. So, my block is safe to park on.”

[00:33:57] And then you always had that in the back of your mind. You, you know—it’s I think automatic. You knew to walk next to the curb at night. You always had that sense of who’s

behind you. You always were kind of just keeping a very casual eye on doorways and things to see if anyone's lurking around. And if there were clumps of young men hanging around, then you'd kind of just very casually cross to the other side of the street, because they could be, they may not be, but they could be a threat. And that was just part and parcel of life. If you were going out at 3 and 4 in the morning, 4 in the morning, 5 in the morning, 6 in the morning, you know, there was a lot of—and that was part of the fun of it, you know. But you *did* have to know what was going on.

[00:34:41] I had one wonderful friend, took her ten years to recover really, who had three kids. She moved here from Paris, speaking no English at all, with two of her kids. The third she left behind with her husband in Versailles, because he was kind of a tough kid. She lived here for about a year and got a little settled and then brought him over. And he thought he was a tough kid. He thought he was a French tough guy: "I live in Versailles," which is kind of a working-class town. Yes, Louis XVI and all that, but it's a working-class town. And within a week, he was dead. He was in a bar and some guy who'd just gotten out of jail that day, and over a pool table, he got in a fight and he got knifed and killed because he didn't know when to be careful. He hadn't developed that radar that we took for granted. You know, this was all so imbued in us.

[00:35:40] You know, there was not a lot of violence. I was never mugged. I did know one kid, very cute. He was from Salt Lake City. Mormon, of course, blond, looked like a Mormon. And he was mugged every month. Once a month, on average, he'd get mugged. And you'd kind of say, "You're getting mugged a lot." He said, "Oh, isn't that just part of being in New York?" He just thought it was normal. Of course, you looked at the kid and you'd say, "I want to mug the kid!" [Chuckles] He looked so out of town.

[00:36:09] But that was part and parcel of being in the city. And I don't think it bothered you. It was just there. It was the mindset. It was part of the deal. It was part of not being in the boring suburbs. Just, you know, being careful and knowing what was going on. The flipside was that you could do lots of fun things because law enforcement wasn't around. You know, there were gay clubs that would operate for about three months out of some loft with no licensing, no liquor license or anything else, all word of mouth, you'd just have to kind of know who to talk to. Then finally somebody would get around to closing them up and they'd open somewhere else. All kinds of [coughs] really wild stuff going on. And that was the flipside of the lawlessness was that there was a creativity to nightlife I think long, long gone and an experimentation with drugs and sex that was built into the period.

[00:37:09] There were also unspoken rules—it was interesting—between here and France or the U.K., say, but especially France, where there were certain drugs that you could use in the U.S. if you were educated, middle-class and others that you wouldn't go near. I mean, there were no—it's just you—heroin, opiate derivatives, things like that, just were out of the question here. In France that was just part of drug life. Strange.

[00:37:34] So all of that was tied into the way the city worked and the way we lived in the city and the way we thought about the city. Part of the adventure was being a little on the edge. And the interesting thing for me at sixty—how old am I? sixty-five, sixty-six—is that as I've gotten older, and my contemporaries get older, my patience with lawlessness diminishes, and luckily law enforcement has kept pace. You know, but if I were a twenty-year-old, the *last* place I'd want to be is on the Upper West Side. How boring. It's much too much like Paris was, you know. It was *quelle bourgeois* [chuckles]. What's the point if you're a kid? So, you live in

Brooklyn. But even there now, they clean the streets, they pick up the garbage. This is stuff that wasn't going on here. Picking up garbage? What's—I mean, the streets were a mess.

[00:38:31] Graffiti were every place, as I'm sure you know. For me to commute on the IND—A, B and C and D trains—you really had to know what kind of equipment it was—is it an R-10?—you didn't have to know the number, but you had to recognize the type of car to know whether it was a C train or a B train, because it will have been covered top to bottom and toe to end in graffiti and they were covered over the signs. “Is this a C train?” “No, dummy, look at the equipment. Only the B uses this.” New Yorkers knew that. Can you imagine how tough it was for tourists?

[00:39:09] All of that kind of urban coping was part and parcel of what we were up to. And, again, that I think ties very much into what was going on up here because you in the early days had a mix of sort of adult diaper and walker stores for kind of older people that were living on the Upper West Side and then these little islands of renovated apartment buildings. Just little studios. But once you walked into that studio—wasn't a lot of rent, we thought it was a lot of rent, I thought \$275 a month, say, was a lot of rent—but then the disorder outside the window was abated. And I think the whole J-51 program that made all of this happen was great because what happened is that you'd have very clean, simple, white gypsum board boxes and you'd open the door and—bingo!—there you were and protected from the disorder outside, which was very appealing, I think.

[00:40:10] I mean, the flipside of it was that I lived for years at a loft at Twenty-sixth [Street] and Sixth [Avenue], where disorder was—well, I wouldn't call it disorder, but that was 4,600 square feet for two of us. I think we paid \$600 a month, \$650 a month. That was pretty cool. But,

again, that was, you know—there was a sense of refuge from the disorder because it was so big that people could come over and learn to roller skate or whatever they wanted, or you could have—every February we’d have 1,300 of our closest friends over for a party.

[00:40:44] Part and parcel of all of this was, yes, the streets were tough, but we had places to go—whether they were clubs or apartments or everything else—where you could close the door. I think that’s important to that whole urban renewal—that contrast of public squalor and private safety I would call it. And in some circles obviously the wealth—you know, I wouldn’t call it private luxury.

[00:41:08] On the Upper East Side, where we stayed, you know, Park Avenue always had its doormen and its enforcers. Fifth Avenue always had its enforcers. So, that was really public squalor and private luxury, wasn’t it?

Vural: [00:41:19] Well, and the place that you’re describing at Twenty-sixth and Sixth is a little bit of public and private both. Sometimes people call that a “third space.”

Gill: [00:41:28] Well, it was great. I mean, it was pretty—we have friends, lots of friends with lofts. That was an amazing spot because it was sixteen-foot ceilings and big arch windows. It was a magnificent space. It was overheated. Can you imagine? There was nothing in the neighborhood. A McDonald’s opened while we were there and we thought, well, at least there’s someplace to go in an absolute emergency. But it was so big that you’d kind of get up hungover on a Sunday morning and get on the phone and say, “Hi, want to come for brunch? You want to *bring* brunch?” [Chuckles] And people would, because it was such a cool, big space. The fact that there was no supermarket within walking distance was terrible. And at that point I was

working in The Dakota anyway, so it was good for me. I could shop on the Upper West Side and then go back to Twenty-sixth Street where there was no shopping at all.

Vural: [00:42:23] So, tell me about the Upper West Side. Tell me about when you sort of started to both—to live here, to work here. How did that happen?

Gill: [00:42:32] I was resistant to live here. My first job, literally a week after I got out of graduate school, was working for a guy called Harley Baldwin. He was a young man and very full of himself—dead now. He was a military brat, but he'd had one building that he'd done in Aspen just as Aspen was beginning to—he was a ski bum and married a woman with some inheritance, young, also very beautiful, insecure, I've forgotten her name now, and decided that Aspen was fine but that New York was New York.

[00:43:12] So, he moved her, with her inheritance and her financial statement, bought an apartment at The Dakota, and started working on this project called Bridgemarket under the Fifty-ninth Street bridge, which was a very then odd idea to have a food market, mixed stalls in those wonderful Guastavino arches that are underneath the bridge, which I put on the National Register of Historic Places. So I know that it was designed by Henry Hornbostel and Gustav Lindenthal. Not a lot of people know that. Not a lot of people *care*, with good reason.

[00:43:45] So, that was a very interesting—that was a great job for me. I was living in the Village then and then shortly thereafter moved to a loft at Twenty-sixth Street and worked up here in—because his office and my office were adjacent in his apartment in The Dakota. And that was a nice mix for me, because then literally I was living in a neighborhood where there were no services. So, it was easy. You just take a backpack, come up here, buy your stuff, and go down there. But the Upper West Side is not nearly as interesting as the Village—or Chelsea was

beginning to get a little interesting but wasn't very interesting to me. It was mostly kind of occupied by older gay men than I was and older gay men aren't interesting, are they?

[00:44:23] And so the Upper West Side was not that interesting as a place for me to live. It was a little too settled, even then, and rough around the edges in a way that wasn't particularly attractive. I mean, the Village also, if you're interested in urban fabric, what could be more interesting than the Village? Because it's much more European in the way it's laid out. It's much more—the street scale is different. It had a much more complex set of social interactions. I mean, there would be old people, young people, an Italian neighborhood, kind of working-class waterfront neighborhoods all kind of intermingled in this wonderful rich architectural history going back to really the late eighteenth century. And that's got to be a lot more interesting than the Upper West Side, which architecturally is really 1880 on and it's also the grid.

[00:45:25] Things like parks are great now at our age, but when you're in your twenties who gives a damn about a park, right? I mean, a park. You know, I don't have a dog, I don't need a park. So, the Upper West Side wasn't that interesting for me as a place to live, but I was spending a lot of time up here because I was working up here.

Vural: [00:45:48] And what were you doing for Harley?

Gill: [00:45:50] Everything. He was a developer and he hired [Samuel H.] Sandy Lindenbaum and all the right people for politics and—but it was a great first job for me because it was literally a one-man shop. So, I would do whatever had to be done. Write a traffic study? Right, give me a traffic study. We'll figure out how to write a traffic study. Deal with Community Boards 6 and 8, as they were fighting over this very political project. There were people in

Sutton Place, really horrible, stuck up, nasty people, who thought the idea of having fresh food in their neighborhood was a nightmare. So, it was a very contentious project that way.

[00:46:34] And after several years of that—and then I'd have to go out to Aspen every once in a while to help him out there, which I didn't like, because I don't—I hate winter. It's all about skiing. And eventually that project got bogged down and he walked away from it and that was the end of my involvement with Harley.

Vural: [00:46:57] So, tell me about how you remember the Upper West Side from those years. So, that would have been sort of the latter part of the seventies.

Gill: [00:47:05] Right. Well, you know, still the park at Seventy-second [Street] and Broadway [Verdi Square] was a pretty dicey place, pretty shady characters. Central Park was a wonder but you had to be a historian to know it was a wonder. I mean, it was a disaster in its condition and the social uses to which it was put were certainly nothing as organized as they are now. But of course it's arguably the greatest single most influential piece of architecture in American history and if you knew that and you could see it, it was a fascinating place. But it was like much of the city. You saw it, you saw the quality of its bones, but that unfortunately you were seeing the bones and it was pretty awful.

[00:48:11] And then also the park had a huge influence on the character of the Upper West Side even then because Amsterdam was really kind of a pit. Columbus Avenue was *just* beginning to kind of have a *little* bit of stuff going on. But Central Park West had always survived because it had these big, great, old, large apartments and it had the park. And, you know, you can't beat the park, the view of the park. So, very much the parks were tied into one's vision of the Upper West Side even then. Living in the Village there were no parks. The only place you'd kind of get away

on a hot summer's day if you couldn't get out of town was to kind of clamber out illegally onto piers that were falling apart just to get a little bit of sun or something. And so that was an appealing bit of the Upper West Side, but not much else was.

[00:49:05] I mean, Columbus Avenue's architecturally not very interesting, is it? Remember, it was there because it was—the el was built, and I've forgotten the exact year, 1870, late seventies [the first run was in 1878]—and all the buildings along Columbus Avenue were tenements, by and large, with retail ground floor, so that it was adjacent to the el, and that was the only mass transit up here before the IRT and before the IND.

[00:49:40] And side streets, of course, were nice, built as houses, good houses, in almost every block. The avenues were not. Amsterdam was horses, a lot of horses and a lot of—you know, the stables are still there, the garages are still there, aren't they? And we of course never had the other, the traditional mews kind of arrangement that other cities have. Our real estate pressures have always been so great that you keep your horses down the street, not in your backyard.

[00:50:09] So, it's not a very interesting architectural set of circumstances when compared to something as rich as, say, Brooklyn Heights or the Village, if you're an historian or an architectural historian. It is, ironically, now, I might be wrong about this, but I'm pretty sure the Upper West Side is by far the largest set of historic districts in the city because it does—part of I think the benefit of its relative economic stagnation was that a lot of it survived until preservation became a valued part of our lives and you could stamp it with the protection that preservation gives.

[00:50:57] The Upper East Side, on the other hand, kind of went through all kinds of bad development periods and the like. A lot of white brick, a lot of lousy redevelopment of side

streets, and in consequence it's ironically not as important as far as number of preserved buildings, weirdly enough.

Vural: [00:51:27] I know we talked about this when we met—there's that piece from *New York Magazine* from 1977, Gael Greene's piece where she writes about all the—often describing the food as being bad, but all the kind of fun restaurants and little shops on the stretch of Columbus Avenue between Sixty-seventh Street and into the low eighties. And there was a similar piece in *The New York Times* written right around then as well. Do you remember? Did you ever go to those places? Were they interesting to you?

Gill: [00:52:01] Sure. Yes, I mean, you would, obviously, even downtown, if you lived downtown, you'd spend more time—even downtown there were a lot more choices in the Village than there were up here, but it was definitely coming back. And Gael—when you talk to Gael, one thing to keep in mind about Gael. I have a very close friend—he's been a friend of mine since I knew him in Paris, moved here—called Florent Morellet, and Florent opened a restaurant on Gansevoort Street that was kind of the pioneer down in that whole meat market. He was the first guy down there. It was nothing but transvestite whores and Florent. That was it.

[00:52:39] And I remember taking—it was just opened and we all kind of rolled our eyes and said, “Aye, God, you know, we're going to have to eat at Florent's six nights a week to keep him from starving to death.” Well, of course it was jammed all the time. He's a very clever guy and built up constituencies over ten years of working at other restaurants, so people followed him. We took Gael there and we had dinner, and she turned to me and said, “Well, I can't write a review of a restaurant because the food just really isn't up to it. But the place is so wonderful that

I'm going to send someone else from *New York* [magazine] and we'll write a style piece about it."

[00:53:16] And I think Gael's writing about Columbus Avenue and all of that was very much of that spirit. She understood that this was important—that food is great, and that's one of the things that she's always cared about in life—but that part and parcel of a restaurant and being in the restaurant world is the scene and its contribution to its community and its neighborhood.

[00:53:48] I just read in *The New York Times* an article saying this is how you can travel and save a lot of money. You don't have to do this. You can stay in a hostel and go to groceries. Don't go to restaurants, just go to groceries and buy groceries. You know, how dumb is that? Why would you want to go to Istanbul and go to a grocery store and buy some tuna fish? I mean, part and parcel of being in the city, an important part—I mean, obviously rituals of our daily lives usually surround—are built around meals. How could you not do that when you're travelling? How could you not do that when you're living on the Upper West Side? Even if the food isn't great, go to Ruelle's, you know. Go have pork burgers at one of these places. It's the scene it is and it's getting out and it's having sidewalk cafés and enlivening your own neighborhood. That's crucial.

[00:54:40] And Gael was important in that she recognized that, you know, and therefore she wasn't there with her knife out to say, "By the way, the food here is going to disappoint you." It was go, you know, and—read her reviews. They're really fascinating. She's very good at that. And she really—if she thought a place had good energy and was contributing, she wouldn't write a bad review. She just wouldn't talk about the food [chuckles].

Vural: [00:55:06] Can you tell me how you got involved in preservation and the work that you've done on the Upper West Side?

Gill: [00:55:14] Gael Greene. Gael was a good friend of Harley's. Harley was building a food market. So, Harley, mercenary man that he was, decided he would go out and meet everybody in the food mafia, which he did. And he sent me to cooking school because I was so ignorant, which was kind of fun. I mean, just for a quick couple of weeks course so that I could sit at table with the food mafia and not make a fool of myself. And when the Bridgemarket thing was winding down, Gael said, "Oh, I know a guy called [Robert] Bob Quinlan. He's doing these buildings on Columbus Avenue. Maybe you'd like to meet him and work for him." And I did.

Vural: [00:55:58] So, what year was that?

Gill: [00:55:59] It must have been 1980, I would guess. Bob had done this building in '78. He started in '70—I'm going to say his first building was '72 or '73, a building I think he's a little—well, he should be ashamed of now because it's—it was three tenements between Seventy-fourth and Seventy-fifth [Streets], Seventy-fifth, Seventy-sixth—326 Columbus—and the only way he could make it work financially was to fit six stories in what had been a five-story building. So, to do that he had to rip the façade off. So, it's just this really awful façade. But that was the economics of those days. To make these buildings work was not easy.

[00:56:40] And the last building that he did on Columbus Avenue was The Endicott, which was the biggest one, and I was basically hired to help deal with the sales, coordinate the sales, and kind of help with construction. Bob is many things but he's not a construction guy. I don't think he can—you know, he's not good at reading plans. He's not really good at reading sections,

unlike his son, who is. And so I think it was helpful to Bob to have somebody like me that could do the transition from construction through sales into management.

[00:57:14] One of the ways when you sell these buildings you always manage them yourselves because it's very easy to get sued by your purchasers that some stupid little thing isn't right and you don't hold their hands, so it's important to manage it and do all of that. I worked for Bob kind of dealing with the end of the construction of that building, which was pretty wild. Lou Nargi—ask Bob about Lou Nargi and other stuff going on—and that was really fun. That was a really interesting process.

Vural: [00:57:47] Did you remember The Endicott from when it was still an SRO [single-room occupancy]? Were you aware of it?

Gill: [00:57:55] I was aware of it but not in the same way that so many other people in the neighborhood were, because up there it was a real problem. You know, it was, again, you'd have in that weird kind of radar you have in your mind's eye—de-de-de-de-de [makes high pitched alarm sound]—avoid that corner because there's this really gruesome building there. But I didn't have much cause to be up there very much anyway. So, no, I wasn't aware of it specifically as a building except by reputation.

Vural: [00:58:23] And when you came on it was well under construction, right? I think the construction started in '79.

Gill: [00:58:29] It was well under construction. It was basically, yes, they were getting two mechanical systems and finishes then at that point.

Vural: [00:58:37] So, can you tell me did he become a friend of yours?

Gill: [00:58:42] Who, Bob?

Vural: [00:58:43] Bob Quinlan.

Gill: [00:58:44] Oh, yes, yes, we have—we go out. He’s still a client, you know, so there’s that, there’s always that. But, no, we have dinner every once in a while. He’s married to a really interesting woman, Encarnita Valdes Quinlan, who’s from a family that was pretty influential—is pretty influential—in Puerto Rico and she’s a very well-educated—I think she was educated by French nuns. You know, she’s multilingual, and she played a good part in that, because she opened Endicott Booksellers in The Endicott as part and parcel of the deal and this became her project for years. I don’t know if you know the store, but it was *just* a marvel. It was really one of those wonderful, wonderful bookstores. I’ve forgotten—I’m going to say it was not very big—4,000 feet, something like that, of the worst space in the retail space, because the building was designed—it was a very early apartment building, so architects didn’t really know what to do about apartment buildings. You know, poor people live in tenements, rich people live in houses. The Upper West Side has, of course, this whole type.

[01:00:00] Hotels were an exception. Americans always had the best hotels. Central heating, plumbing, all of that stuff was all pioneered in hotels. So, living in a residential hotel was a different thing. So, the Upper West Side had this enormous stock, more than most parts of the city, of these residential hotels. They were all over but, I mean, it was very much a building type here. And The Endicott was a residential hotel.

[01:00:30] But the architect who built it, whose name I’ve forgotten and it’s probably better, didn’t know how to build an apartment hotel, so he just built basically a bunch of kind of masonry walls and a lot of stuff and built a maze of little horrible courtyards and stuff. That

means that during the renovation, it was pretty tricky because you had to work around a lot of bizarre masonry that shouldn't really have been there, and horrible little courtyards that shouldn't really have been there. And it also means that when you hit the retail space you have a lot of big masonry piers in places where they really ought not to be. And retail doesn't like big masonry piers.

[01:01:16] The place where the maze was worst in that block-long bit of retail running from Eighty-first to Eighty-second [Street] and back 125 feet was the center, because that's where a whole bunch of the elements of the building—which was built in two parts. The first half was built—I'm going to forget the year now but I'm going to say 1879—I'm going to guess—and then the second half was in 1881. They sort of did the first half and when it worked did the north half. It was right next to the el station, so that was a good location.

[01:01:49] So Bob then rented the worst bit—the hardest to rent was the center bit with all this masonry—to Encarnita. Also because a bookstore, if anybody used big masonry piers, it's a bookstore. Because what do you do? You put a bookshelf on it. So it was a very complex space, which was nice, and there's a lot of brick and it was pretty funky and she hired a lot of people with Ph.Ds. who were working for twelve bucks an hour—whatever minimum wage was. And I've forgotten now—Encarnita told me her item count once, because towards the end of the store's life, Barnes & Noble were opening up and I—Bob will know this, ask him, or Encarnita can remind me—but I think your average Barnes & Noble store has maybe a 40,000 item count and that includes a lot of remainder books on World War I airplanes and, you know, things that aren't really books. And I've forgotten now, but I think Encarnita had an item count of like 110,000 books. It was a real bookstore and it was *great*.

[01:02:53] This, of course, was the Upper West Side. People read. Like Argentines, they just gobble books. And this place was a wonderful beacon. There were lots of other bookstores, but this was a great bookstore, and you could run in. We would go down to our house in Virginia every weekend and I would inevitably run out of books. And you could go *zooming* in and say to whoever was there, “Quick! Two paperbacks, one fiction, one nonfiction. Put it on my account.” They’d hand it to you, you’d run out the door, and get on the plane, you know, and they would—and you just kind of then look at what book you had, because they were all—they knew what you wanted. They knew what books they loved. And it was the sort of place that was really great. And that tied into other stores that were going into that building, never mind that this was retail held back blocks away from The Endicott because it was so bad. Not only that, death to retail was having one side of an avenue. You want to have—retail is about intensity of experience. Shopping centers can make a lot of money out of a cornfield by concentrating your experience where you have a lot of retail on your side.

[01:04:07] Columbus Avenue has a museum from Seventy-seventh to Eighty-first [Streets]. It’s bad for retail. One of the Zabars did a building where they put residential on the ground floor of one of the buildings. That was not good for retail. There’s one of the buildings just renovated that had retail that was half up and half down. That’s not good for retail. So the stretch between Seventy-seventh, Seventy-eighth [coughs] and The Endicott wasn’t very good for retail. So, The Endicott really had to become sort of a mini anchor in a way. And it did. Because it had a big enough footprint. It wasn’t a tenement building, so it had a more interesting available set of retail spaces in it. And Bob rented to a lot of—he would turn down the higher rents—you know, ask him about this—people would come down and they’d offer him a rent and he’d go, “You

know, that's just not the right use, because I need this to flip not only the building but the avenue."

[01:05:02] He rented to—what was her name?—Brokaw. Her husband was a newsreader for one of the networks.

Vural: [01:05:07] Tom Brokaw?

Gill: [01:05:08] Tom Brokaw. His wife started what was called Penny Whistle, I think, a kids' store. That was great there. People saying, "Aah, you know, all these stores are rich men's wives." It wasn't true. Frank Stella [Clothiers] opened. I think he's still there on the south corner [of The Endicott]. That's not the same guy but the same store selling men's—kind of nice men's clothing. And a bunch of other uses like that that went in and out some of them. The restaurant spaces always had a tough time. But it did really—it really did work because that kind of critical mass of retail there flipped that end of the avenue. It sort of dies, still to this day, going north of there to some degree.

Vural: [01:05:55] Well, I read that he [Robert Quinlan], for instance, in this building [on the southeast corner of Seventy-second Street and Columbus Avenue] was really intentional in who he put in the retail spaces, sort of with the same idea that they had to be really interesting and—like there was a boot shop that only sold—right?

Gill: [01:06:09] Oh, yes, yes. They were—Al Martinez and what was the other guy's name?—they were lovers and they were kind of cute and energetic and I don't think they knew what they were doing, but they rented the store just next to our front door called To Boot and they sold cowboy boots. Who sold cowboy boots in New York? Well, everyone loved cowboy boots. They

were expensive. They were really good cowboy boots. Evidently, it was like the best place to get cowboy boots in New York. Who knew?

[01:06:34] And then after that worked for a couple of years, then cowboy boots weren't cool so they went into shoes and they sold really good shoes. And then when that was working pretty well, they opened stores in little kind of boutiques in department stores all over town—Bendel's and places like that. So, you know, that was the kind of incubator retail that Bob wanted and that Columbus Avenue needed and that really worked well.

[01:07:00] And he's still to this day—it's interesting, he's got, I've forgotten how many stores, thirty-some-odd stores on the avenue. You know, he's sensitive to this stuff and “No, I'm not putting that guy in, it's not what we need. Yes, I can get fifteen bucks more a foot but I'm just not going to have him.”

[01:07:22] *And*, it was Bob who really—I'd gotten involved, it's a long story as to why, but I'd been involved, after I left working for Bob, in Times Square and I was one of the founders of the Times Square Business Improvement District down there with [Carvel] Rusty Moore, who I'd met on the east side at Bridgemarket. And that was such an interesting experience, because Times Square was still not what it is today. We were there just before it flipped. And that was really an education for me. And I said, “Bob, you've got to do a B-I-D on Columbus Avenue.” He said, “Oh, things are going well up here.” I said, “No, no, the point is B-I-Ds do lots and lots of things.” And Columbus Avenue wasn't in kind of a crisis the way Times Square was where they *had* to have the social services, they *had* to have the cleanup, they *had* to have the policing.

[01:08:12] What it does is create a community of landlords, where you're forced to kind of talk to each other because you're paying money. It's a mandatory contribution and you've got to sit

down every once in a while and decide how you're going to spend the money. And there was a great deal of resistance. When you get to the Brusco's, they may not remember this, but they were very resistant. They didn't know who these guys were. They wanted to collect their rent, but the idea of paying money for a B-I-D was not something that interested them. We convinced them because they were pretty—they were central. If they'd opposed it, it wouldn't have happened. And the people on the community board weren't too happy about it.

Vural: [01:08:49] Why's that?

Gill: [01:08:53] How unsubtle should I be? People have their power bases and this is one of the things we faced very early on in the operation of the Times Square Business Improvement District because that was a big B-I-D. There, our budget was six and a half million or something like that. Now, it's probably three times that. But we found instantly as we started out—they were a bunch of very, very smart business involved in the business improvement district—we found instantly that people would be coming to us with kind of political issues and the like, wanting to enlist us. So, you said, "That's not what we're here for. We're here for our core interests and that's what we're going to do."

[01:09:48] I think the—there's a thing called the Upper West Side—what is it called?—I'll think of it in a second—Chamber of Commerce. I've never figured out what the Upper West Side Chamber of Commerce does, except run two street fairs, one on Columbus Avenue and one on Amsterdam Avenue to pay Andrew Albert's salary, but I don't think they do much else, frankly, and they never have. And I think they were—they were very much opposed to it because they felt that these B-I-Ds would suddenly point out that they weren't doing—excuse me—they

weren't doing jack shit for the community. We would have some really concrete stuff that we'd do.

[01:10:21] So, the B-I-D was—Bob bought into that and realized that if he could get all of these disparate owners—and they were very disparate owners—talking to each other that would help. Some were already very on board. Some already got it. To the extent that Dan [Daniel] Brodsky was involved in it, and others like that that were experienced landlords, there was no issue. But for some of these guys—guys they all were—an education in this and establishing a community to talk about what had been accomplished and how to keep it on track was important.

[01:10:56] I mean, we can talk about the way these avenues go through waves of change. And as they do, the ones that continue to work. as Columbus Avenue has, have a community of landlords that understand that these changes are things you have to watch out for because they can be a hazard. All of a sudden, you're getting offers from big national stores for a lot of rent and you kind of have to say, okay, I get it, *but* if we become a mall, we die, because who's going to care? And you've got to have a mix of local, service, retail, and fashion stuff that's unique and stores. Liana, 326 Columbus, Bob's first building, I think she's been there since the time of Robert Moses, practically. And she thrives and it's a great, really special, high-fashion store.

[01:11:52] The little jewelry stores that are still thriving and coming back and forth really matter because they're unique. And yes, you can have a—Tommy Hilfiger opened his first store in one of Bob's buildings, but I don't think Bob would have rented the rest of the building to nationals because that wouldn't have done. And the other one that went in there was Coca-Cola Clothes. That lasted about ten minutes. But that's okay because it was sort of—it was Coca-Cola and I've forgotten his name, some Indian guy, deciding they wanted to try an experiment in retail. That

kind of thing you want because that's something people talk about. Do you want a Gap? Yes, maybe one. Do you want three Gaps? No, you don't.

[01:12:38] And I think the idea kind of at least keeps people talking about the fact that you have to do what needs to be done. I mean, I worked for the Hahn Company, which is a big shopping center company, and you realized these guys have it down to a science. Again: buy cornfield, get rid of corn, put in shops, make a lot of money by creating a mix. And it's the mix that matters. And if the mix doesn't work, back to corn. If that fails, soy beans, but you ain't doing retail. And these strips, it's important to keep them a little bit focused on that. And the B-I-D has managed to do that on Columbus Avenue. And that was Bob really pushing the idea.

Vural: [01:13:26] So the B-I-D started in '99.

Gill: [01:13:29] Is that right?

Vural: [01:13:29] Did it take a long time from you saying to Bob "Let's think about a B-I-D" to actually being a BID?

Gill: [01:13:36] The process of getting them approved is not easy and I've forgotten how long it took. It took a couple or three years. I think we talked about hiring Rusty Moore, but didn't. I think we did it ourselves. I've forgotten now. But basically, you have to really build a consensus, because it is, you know, it's a mandatory, self-imposed assessment collected by the City. And it was an interesting thing because the Brusco's and some others were pretty skeptical and they said, "Look, we don't want to get locked into this. What if it doesn't work?" And we kept having to say, "You guys, that's the point is if it doesn't work, you'll have your annual meeting and you vote a budget of zero dollars and zero cents. It's your decision. In which case, the B-I-D goes away. So how much risk is there?" And that finally won the day.

[01:14:36] But it is a lot of talking, a lot of back and forth, and again, you had to deal with the Upper West Side. You know, we see what kind of the radical right, or radical left, whatever you want to call it, the ancients, even older than I, that are kind of sitting fighting about trees around the American Museum of Natural History, ignoring the history, the fact that the museum was there before the neighborhood, that there was a specific arrangement to put it where it is so that it wouldn't gobble up Central Park, but instead gobble up its own park, now arguing that it shouldn't gobble up the park. These are people that are resistant to *any* change and that's part and parcel of the Upper West Side. So, you start a B-I-D, you have to fight that resistance, because also the word "business" doesn't go well on the Upper West Side. You know, we believe in bargains, we believe in cheap, so we don't believe in business. Business is bad. Business is capitalist. We're socialist.

[01:15:30] So, that, you know—it took a while. But then, you'll see as you talk to Bob, he's a very smart guy—obviously—and I think his academics was he studied law but decided that he didn't understand law so he stopped studying law. I think he has a master's in Italian. And, you know, he lived in The Dakota until, as he points it, he couldn't afford to anymore because he had kids, and big apartments on Fifth Avenue were cheap, big apartments on the West Side weren't, ironically. But he was a great face for this because he'd go out and say, even though he's a developer, "When this happens, we're in trouble." And people would go, "Okay, he gets it, he's an Upper West Sider." And he could and he did.

[01:16:27] And that whole process worked its way through the minefield after a while. I mean, at one point the community board said, "We're not approving this until you get some more consensus" and sent us back to do another six months or a year's work. I've forgotten the details now. It's a long time ago.

Vural: [01:16:42] So, next time when we talk, I'm going to ask you more about the J-51 tax abatement program and the role it played.

Gill: [01:16:50] Well, Bob can really explain that in great detail, because that's really what enabled all of this.

Vural: [01:16:53] And then I also—but I don't think we should do that today—I want to talk to you much at length about the waves of change and when we first met you talked about how what happened on the Upper West Side and on Columbus Avenue specifically was really important, kind of a torch-bearer, I think you called it. So, I want to save that, though, for our next conversation. But I wanted to ask you—one of the things I sent you was an article I found from 1987 about the Metropolis restaurant in The Endicott going bankrupt.

Gill: [01:17:25] That was in The Endicott, yes.

Vural: [01:17:27] And you wrote back and said, "We learned a lot from that bankruptcy." And I was wondering what you meant by that.

Gill: [01:17:32] We learned a lot about bankruptcy. I mean—and again Bob can tell this better—but I would say we had half the stores committed to and that wonderful lobby, original lobby in the space, was not rented. And some of the pertinent street-front spaces were not rented. And Dino De Laurentiis came along. He was married to Anna Magnani then, I think, and his son had just died, as I remember, in a plane crash or a car crash or something like that, and he was a wreck. He had a daughter, but he's an Italian. Daughters are nice, but they're not sons and your heir is a son. And I know that I was told that this became his mourning project, sort of.

[01:18:25] And he came. He had an office in the Gulf & Western Building and he came and he said to Bob, not knowing, I think, that Bob was fluent in Italian, by the way, and said to Bob, “Well, I want to rent this, I want to rent that, and I want to buy out all your other tenants and I want the whole building for my food store.”

[01:18:45] And we went to see him in his office. The Gulf & Western—big office, big windows, big Mussolini desk, little Dino De Laurentiis behind it [chuckles], and Bob just basically said, “No.” And as we were leaving, he said, “I’m not going to—I’ll rent you what I have, but I’m not going to rent you the whole building. I’ve got tenants. I’m just not going to do it.” And as we were leaving, I said, “Bob, it’s a lot of money.” He said, “Yes, he’s got a lot of money and he does big projects, and he has big flops.” He said, “I’m not going to commit 100 percent of my building to what could become a big flop,” which of course as it turned out was very wise. He came in and he poured money into this. He hired—it was really funny—he hired a bunch of the dumbest WASPs. I think he thought somehow that if he hired WASPs that they would know what they were doing, because he was an Italian and he wasn’t from New York.

[01:19:40] Well, they didn’t know what they were doing. They were idiots. He was hiring the dumbest guys who otherwise couldn’t get employed. And they would rent apartments from us too, saying, “Well, we’re bringing in cooks from Italy and we need an apartment.” And we’d say, “Okay, here we’ve got an apartment and we’ll rent it to you for X,” and X was about 1.5 the market rent, expecting like any good New Yorker they’d go, “Wait a minute, that’s ridiculous.” And they’d go, “Okay, where do I sign?” I actually had to redo the database for our residential rents to take out the twelve apartments or so that De Laurentiis was renting because they were skewing everything way too high.

[01:20:16] He operated for a while. New Yorkers would go in. And there was a very, very highly—I've forgotten the guy's name—oh, I'll think of it in a second—Adam Tihany—very, very well-known restaurant designer who does lots still to this day of high-end restaurants, very smart guy. Hired Adam, fluent Italian, so they could discuss it all, and he poured money into this place.

[01:20:42] If you went in and you were a smart shopper—and all Upper West Siders are smart shoppers—we have Fairway [Market] for Christ's sake. It's not what it was, but you go in, you look, you buy, you pay what you have to pay, but you don't pay more than you have to pay. And you compare and people would walk in there and they'd go, "Ah, beautiful, but too expensive." It wasn't—the prices were the same—but you'd rather go to a place with sawdust on the floor because it felt like you were getting a bargain. The long and short of is it didn't work and after a couple of years of lots of money being poured into it.

Vural: [01:21:15] This was DDL Food?

Gill: [01:21:17] DDL Foodshow, it was called, yes. So, I've forgotten how long it was there, two or three years. Then—did they rent? I think they sublet to Metropolis, because they were on the hook for the lease. I've forgotten the details, but Bob will remember better than I will. But it was a big space and Metropolis went bankrupt. And we learned a lot from that because neither of us had ever been through a bankruptcy. And bankruptcy laws are *very, very* strong as to what—they rip your control as a landlord away from you with almost nothing except the use clause of the lease applicable, and the rent. And that's it. So, you learn to very carefully write a use clause, because if you're going to say, okay, you can sell clothes and there's a bankruptcy, you can have

a store in there that is *not* a store that you want. You don't want a discount guy. So you learned to write your use clauses that are very, very tight in case of bankruptcy.

[01:22:16] We learned about litigation. We learned about bankruptcy sales, where they sell equipment and just basically guerillas come in with Sawzalls and cut your stoves out of your building with the gas on and there's nothing you can do about it because it's under the jurisdiction of a federal bankruptcy court. So, and that was interesting.

[01:22:37] And that space has been not an easy space for years. It's now got two restaurants in it. One, a very good Chinese restaurant that lives a lot on takeout, as so many Chinese restaurants do, which is great because then you have a base income. You don't have to worry too much about how many people are actually eating in the restaurant. And the other that, after a tortured process, has done pretty well. It's called The Milling Room. Very good food. Very faithful bunch of people. A kid, it's his first restaurant in the U.S.—Mexican, father's a restaurateur—and we through hell with him, went through hell with him and several iterations and a big lawsuit. But now, thank goodness, he's doing well and paying rent and everyone's happy and we're—you know, it all operates.

[01:23:31] So that dynamic doesn't stop. I mean, a good landlord always has to deal with tough spaces and takes chances. Bob took a chance on this guy that's in there now. It was a big chance and it looked like it had been a mistake for a while, but it worked out.

[01:23:47] So, talk Bob through this. I'd be interested to hear his take on it all.

Vural: [01:23:50] I will. Well, also it's interesting because I live in a co-op and the co-op owns the retail space.

Gill: [01:23:58] Which of course is a big change. It used to be master leases because you couldn't—the eighty/twenty rule.

Vural: [01:24:02] Right.

Gill: [01:24:03] That was it.

Vural: [01:24:04] Yes, yes. So, but that totally changes the economics of the co-op if you don't own the retail space, obviously.

Gill: [01:24:09] It is. But of course what worries me is that as that change ripples through, as these master leases expire, the condominium—I mean, The Endicott is a cond-op. So, it's two condominium units, one retail, one residential, the residential is owned by a co-op in turn. And that's what Bob has always done, because you don't want to have a master lease, you want to own it fee simple. You want to control it and you want to make sure you can control it in perpetuity. And that turned out to be very wise. Everyone said, "Oh, don't worry, a master lease is fine because the co-op will never be able to rent it for more than twenty percent of their gross income anyway." Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's fifteen percent. Maybe it's ten percent. I've forgotten what the law was, but the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] changed the law. So now co-ops can control them themselves and collect the rents directly without losing their status as a co-op.

[01:25:00] You know, what worries me is that co-ops don't make decisions based upon what's good for the street. They make decisions based upon—who knows what they make decisions based on? I mean, my meeting after this is with my co-op board. You know, [chuckles] co-op boards can be myopic, but they won't generally have experience in nor should they have experience in retail.

Vural: [01:25:26] Right. So, what I'm going to do for today, because we're almost out of time, I did want to ask you about a couple of people—and we definitely will talk again.

Gill: [01:25:35] Great.

Vural: [01:25:36] Can you tell me about George Beane? How do you know him and how have you worked together and how does he fit into the—

Gill: [01:25:41] George is a really interesting character and he loves to talk and he's very good at it. He and Bob were very good friends and they started out together. In fact, George's company is called—they named their companies after their respective grandfathers. Bob's was Fortune Molloy, who was evidently an inventor of feckless things, and George's was A.R. Walker. And so when George and Bob—basically they were duplicating each other's efforts. Bob needed money investors, not somebody like George who's hands-on. But George was still involved at the beginning of The Endicott. By the time I came along, he was gone. They'd broken up.

[01:26:23] And they're friends, and remain friends, and their wives are friends. Both have very clever wives, very striking women. It's an interesting friendship. It's a little bit of a competitive friendship. George and Bob are very different. Bob's very much the businessman and he is very meticulous about money, raised from a working-class, Irish Catholic family in Connecticut. And George is from a much more patrician background. And George *loves* his buildings. He loves his moldings. He loves—and dealing with George with retail—George, if you're listening, I apologize—is a pain in the ass, because he really wants to have a tenant that he has a relationship with and that he feels is exactly right for his building, because he *loves* his buildings.

[01:27:17] And sometimes that's smart and sometimes it's not, you know. And you have to temper it, in my mind, a little bit with business. But George is fascinated by urban planning and is very knowledgeable and very well-read and knows lots of people, and he has enriched the whole process because he comes at this from more of an academic approach than Bob does. You know, Bob is—this is his business, he loves it. George is more fascinated by the minutiae of it all, and he loves the characters. I think that's where the friendship comes from is they just love telling stories about people [chuckles]. And so George will tell you stories. It'll be great.

Vural: [01:28:02] And tell me about Nicola Brusco and the Brusco family.

Gill: [01:28:05] I know there are two—and I'm not too clear on this—there are two Brusco families. They're cousins. They I know owned here long before the idea of gentrification was anything. They were plumbers and boiler—oil guys. And these, a lot of these buildings, were owned by plumbers and oil guys because they could afford to own them. I mean, these buildings—rent-stabilized, rent-controlled, breaking down all the time—if you'd go in and fix it yourself, or do it at cost, you could make the building work. If you couldn't, if you were just an outside investor and you pay professionals, you had to pay managing agents, you had to pay—it didn't work. Just the money wasn't there. I mean, people were paying 15, \$20,000 for a brownstone on a side street, so figure it out. The math just didn't work.

[01:28:53] So, these guys, the Brusco's, were—again I'm never too clear on who the cousins are, but it would be interesting to learn more about how that works—they were on the ground before all this happened and kind of were picked up and swept along, I think delighted, but perhaps surprised. I don't know. I'll be interested to see what you learn about that.

Vural: [01:29:19] And they now own a number of buildings and rental properties. They rent out apartments.

Gill: [01:29:25] Rental properties and a good deal of retail and they're—you know, they have—they're very much—you know, they're kind of they have their inhouse contractors and they're very careful about money to this day and they do what they want to do and they do it their way. You know, and they're good at that. I think—I've forgotten—one of the cousins became a lawyer so that they could deal with the leasing and all of that stuff. Again, I never could keep the two families quite straight. But ask. Find out. It'll be interesting.

Vural: [01:29:53] I will. Okay, so before we say goodbye, is there anything else you feel like I should know today?

Gill: [01:30:02] No. No, we covered a lot of ground.

Vural: [01:30:05] We did. Great. Thank you.

Gill: [01:30:08] Good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]