

Joan Davidson

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Westbeth Oral History Project

By
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ABSTRACT

As the daughter of J.M Kaplan and a member of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Joan Davidson was involved in the founding of the Westbeth Project, an artist's residence in the West Village.

Davidson begins the interview by giving a brief history of her life prior to the founding of Westbeth in the late 1960s. She then discusses the formation of Westbeth, an idea generated Roger Stevens of the National Endowment of the Arts after a long internal study by the NEA, which highlighted artists need for both affordable housing and work space. She describes the equal partnership between her father, J.M. Kaplan, and Stevens and their negotiations about the building's location and financing. Davidson also describes other key players in Westbeth's evolution, including: Carolyn Kizer, head of literature for the Endowment; Rachele Wall, a city councilman who worked closely with Kizer; and Ray Rubinov, a progressive and creative mind behind the Kaplan Fund.

She also discusses the Fund's relationship with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and points out that it was relatively easy to obtain the building for Westbeth because of a slow New York economy and little city interest in that particular part of the Village at the time. Davidson also reviews some of the high-profile members of an advisory committee which had input into the standards by which artists would be selected for residency, including a diversity of artists—such as writers, painters, photographers, actors—who were of all colors, sexual orientation, and religions. A variance of family type, age, and nationality was also encouraged.

Davidson then discusses Richard Meier's role as architect of Westbeth, including details about his selection and as his first major project. She describes the concept behind using rent from commercial spaces in the building, such as Merce Cunningham's dance studio, to subsidize the residential units. She highlights the level of excitement and enthusiasm among Westbeth tenants but also goes into detail about the problems the building faced as a housing community; like any other housing project, issues with tenants and managers arose from fingerprints in the elevator to questions of succession within an apartment. She says the hope was that Westbeth would act as a way station for artists but describes the difficulties in not having a legal agreement to ask people to move out. She recounts how over time, tenant/artist living situations became much more complicated.

Davidson concludes by praising the design. She speculates about the building's relative success as a result of a very "freewheeling" system, a time before philanthropy was seen as a "job". Finally, she credits the creation of Westbeth to Roger Stevens' and Carolyn Kizer's enthusiasm and her father's imagination.

Q: This is Jeanne Houck. I am interviewing Joan Davidson. What's your full name that you like to go by?

A: Joan Kaplan Davidson. Two names are enough.

Q: I'm interviewing Joan Davidson on March 13th, 2007. We're at her home in New York City. Thank you so much for discussing the founding of the Westbeth Project. What I'd like to do before we start talking specifically about Westbeth is to talk a little bit about your family background, where you grew up, where you were living right before the Westbeth Project and how you came back to New York City after being away for awhile. So if you can just set the scene.

A: Well my family grew up in Westchester County. We lived there. My three siblings and I went to a small radical school called Hessian Hills, one of the early progressive schools. And we stayed there until I was in the eleventh grade. And then we finally moved to New York to a brownstone on 80th Street. I finished my last two years at The Lincoln School. The old Lincoln was a famous school. And then I went to Cornell. Then I went to Bank Street Teacher's College and taught at Little Red and Dalton. Then I got a job teaching up in the Adirondacks. I went up there for two years. And then I had some friends in Washington, D.C.; this was in the 50's, I can't believe it! It was The Truman administration. I had some friends in Washington who said I ought to come down there. And they passed my name around, to get a federal job. And I got a job long distance- the Voice of America – whatever it was called then. At that point I knew Russian pretty thoroughly. So theoretically I was going to go down to translate Life Magazine into Russian. But it was very misleading. This was the time of McCarthy; it was the age of Joe McCarthy then. There were security clearances and all that stuff, and so I was not about to be hired. (haha) Because I had belonged to every left wing group in college. So I went to Washington and then batted around for a while. And finally got a job with Lyndon Johnson who was then head of the Senate with his Armed Services subcommittee I was working in the Senate, which was a marvelous job. I was lucky to get that. It was great fun. I shared a house in Georgetown with my sister, who was working for a magazine, and we had a ball. We just had a wonderful time in Washington.

Q: What magazine did you sister work for?

A: The New Republic.

Q: Ah, very good.

A: And we played football in the Q Street playground every weekend with Jack Kennedy and Scoop Jackson, and all these people. So it was a high life in Washington. This was before air conditioning. And it was wonderful. And then I got married down there. Oh, and then I left the Senate job, and took a

teaching job. I taught second grade at the Georgetown Day School. A friend of mine was head of the school, and she had an emergency. She had a pregnant teacher at the last minute. So she needed someone to take over. So I dropped my Senate job and went to teach. I was very cavalier about this whole thing.

Q: You had studied to teach.

A: I had done that and I had taught. And I knew her (and she had loved the school.) So I took over the second grade in the Georgetown Day School. And I met the father of one of my students. I got married in three weeks! He was the Under Secretary of Interior [C. Girard Davidson]. He worked in the government. But then when Ike, when Truman was defeated by Eisenhower, all the good Democrats quit. My husband had always wanted to live in the northwest. So then we moved out there, and he and his partner started a law firm, which grew into the biggest law firm in Oregon. We lived there in Oregon for a thousand years. And all my four children were born in Oregon. We lived there and they went to school. That was fun, too.

Q: When did you move to Oregon?

A: I was married in '52. And then we moved immediately, really. In the next year we moved out to Oregon. We lived there until we went up to Alaska in the last few years. We lived in a little town called Wrangell, Alaska. And then, little by little, we started coming back to New York. We bought a big house in Brooklyn Heights. And that's at that time, in '67-ish, I think. And then my father wanted me to become more active in the fund. So this was in '66 and '67, and the first job he dumped on me was building Westbeth which is just about when it happened. Because he and Roger Stevens of the National Endowment had been in negotiations for quite a while, trying to find a place and work this deal out. Roger Stevens, you know, came to my father about the idea behind Westbeth. You know that whole history.

Q: Well, tell us a little more about how Roger Stevens knew your father. Had he known him before?

A: Yes, he had.

Q: And then how did he approach him about Westbeth?

A: Well I'm a little shaky on that. It was very informal as I remember. Stevens and my father had been friends in New York. That's where I knew Stevens was a theater producer. In New York he had done plays. And so they had crossed paths. I don't think they were close, but they knew each other. And Stevens came up with the idea of housing, a place for artists to live and work. It had to be in New York City, of course. And this was a

project that was the result of long internal study on the part of the NEA, and they had decided to pursue. They were very new of course. It was brand new, you know. Kennedy had established this in the '60s, and here it was, '66, I think. Roger Stevens had pretty much decided this was going to be their major initiative.

Q: Westbeth?

A: Yes, Westbeth. Well, they didn't have a name for it then. But they wanted some artist place in New York City. And it would be available to artists from all over the country, and so on. So I don't know how he decided to come to my father, but he did. He knew about the fund and how my father had already created small artists coops. He actually knew that my father was entrepreneurial. And he would move fast, and could make his mind up what he wanted to do. And so the two of them then decided they would do this as a partnership, and they then went chasing all around New York City, these two old geezers, looking for the ideal building. And I don't know how many other places they looked at, because I was not really in the picture.

Q: Do you recall if they even went into other boroughs besides Manhattan?

A: I think they did, yes. I think they were pretty far flung in their search. And I'm not sure how they discovered the building, whether someone put them on to that or what. I don't know the origin.

Q: Do you recall, did they actually go look for buildings themselves?

A: They did.

Q: Or did they send people?

A: No, no. They looked. They hiked up and climbed down. (haha) They went under and over. And yes, it was the two of them. It must have been great.

Q: An amazing adventure for them.

A: Yes, I think so. And another person you might talk to who was very involved with Roger Stevens was Carolyn Kizer. Have you talked with her?

Q: We can talk after the interview, because I've been trying to find her.

A: I have her number.

Q: That would be great.

A: And she was then, she worked very closely with Roger Stevens. She was I believe the head of literature for the National Endowment. She was very much involved in this whole decision about Westbeth. So anyway then, how they found it I don't know. But they settled on the Bell Labs Building. Bell was just leaving and moving to New Jersey. It wasn't a building, in those days; it was a collection of five buildings. I mean there was the lab, which was a separate thing. Then there was the office building, which was separate, and various other in-filled buildings there. But they saw the possibilities. I mean they had the imagination, I think, to see it. It was a wonderful setting, at the River, in the West Village, Greenwich Village, which all seemed right. And so they went for it. And you have the whole story of the financing, of how it was done?

Q: Yes, we can talk about that. To backtrack just a little bit about the actual site, do you recall, no one was using it at the time because the Bell Labs had already moved?

A: They had moved, yes.

Q: So it really was abandoned, would you say?

A: There may have been some office use still. The labs part had moved. I vaguely remember that there were still people in the long skinny office building. The architect would know that.

Q: I'll look into that. And then also to backtrack one second more. It was the National Council for the Arts, which became the NEA. And then I had not realized that they saw this as a major initiative.

A: I think so.

Q: Can you speak a little bit about what they thought their mission was? At that time?

A: Well, they, under Carolyn's guidance, at the same time, they did a major support for small magazines everywhere; poetry and small magazines and publishers and so on. And so there was a big push in that direction for writers. And then they felt, I don't know what they did for musicians and other people. But I think they felt for painters and sculptors, this was the most important thing they could do. Find a place where they could work and live. Because that was the hardest thing, and of course every artist wanted to be in New York: then and now. And so they figured this would be sort of a major new accomplishment. If they could find something, and they very much hoped, as did we, that this would be the first. This would be a model. And then they would be repeated in every major city. It never happened, but that was the plan.

Q: Repeated in every major city?

A: That was the hope.

Q: That was a wonderful vision. With the partnership between the Kaplan Fund and the NEA, do you see it as perhaps a true partnership in the very beginning? It seemed like it was very equal, from what I've read. Equal in terms of energy put in and financing.

A: And money put in. Yes, I think it was. And that was really the background before I got active in it. I really only came into it because my father dropped it in my lap, to tell you the truth. After he and Stevens had come to an agreement, and figured out the financing and who would do what. Then he said, "Well, I'm going to turn this project over," to me. It was my job then to pull it together and figure out how... and at that point he was talking with Dixon Bain, whom he was about to hire just for the foundation to be a general staff person. And then he, when this thing sort of arrived, he said, "Well, you know, I want you [Joan] to plan it and organize it and run it, and I want Dixon to work with you and really make it happen."

So he threw us both in sort of quite casually. He suddenly realized he had this major project on his hands because he had come to the agreement with Roger I think without really thinking through the implications. And then Roger was quite happy to dump it on the Fund, and let us produce it. I mean it was all just a big idea between those two. They hadn't really thought about how it was going to come into being, you know. That was the way things worked in those days. It was sort of a handshake relationship. You know? You do this, I'll do that, and we'll create it. They hadn't, I don't think, thought through the implications of what would be required. So then Dixon was thrown in, though never really hired for that purpose. He was hired just because he was a bright young man to help the Foundation, and be a staffer. I was thrown in because I was there. I had just come back from Alaska, and didn't have anything much to do. My father thought, "Let's keep her busy for a while." So I think it was partly because he trusted me, but partly because he just thought he'd give me a nice project since I'd just come back to New York. (haha) We were living in Brooklyn then.

Q: I want to come back to that moment when you became involved, and step back for a second, because I'd like to know a little bit about how your father and the Kaplan Fund saw their mission. Why in the 1960s did artist housing fit into the vision of the Kaplan Fund? How did your father get interested?

A: My father's relation with the foundation was very haphazard in those years. He popped in, and he did what he wanted to do. He abandoned it for a long time and tended to his business, and left it. We had one very energetic staff person then who really did everything.

Q: Who was that?

A: Ray Rubinov. Have you heard of him? Well he did everything, and he was a very progressive, liberal guy. And he pushed my father into doing a lot of socially useful things. And he may have been the impetus for the artists housing, I'm not sure. Because it was very much a hot issue in Greenwich Village at the time, and we were involved in the Village...and I don't know if the idea came from Ray or what, but my father got in, my father was a big believer in cooperatives anyway-- food co-ops, labor co-ops. The idea of a housing co-op I think appealed to him, out of his general interest in cooperatives. And then Ray was very involved in the Village. He was in the politics in the Village and so on. So between the two of them, they kind of drifted casually into this, and bought a few buildings. My father loved real estate. He bought a few buildings, and turned them over to artists, and made them into co-ops. And so he was already thinking about artist housing, which he really had come out of from a real estate point of view. But it was all sort of in the mix. So then Roger Stevens came along with his big idea, which seemed like really an extension of what he [J.M. Kaplan] had been doing already. I think he'd done three – aren't there three? Talk to Carol Grietzer who was very involved in those. I think there were three smallish buildings in the Village that he had bought and turned into co-ops.

Q: Carol Grietzer was talking about it yesterday with me on the phone.

A: Yes, she was very involved with that. She helped them make it. She was what? City Councilman then?

Q: Yes, and she recalled working with your father. And he, the Kaplan Fund, had provided the seed funds for a smaller housing project in the Village in the early to mid-60's.

A: They were just regular brownstone townhouses. I think he did three of those. It came out of his own commitment to co-ops. It came out of Raymond being involved in Village issues, and artists, needing housing. And so it led sort of naturally to Westbeth, and Roger Stevens may have known, I'm not sure, but he may have known about the co-ops.

Q: Charles Abrams is a name that I've been running across because he was with the City Planning Department, or Housing Department.

A: He was a housing expert, and he was a friend of my father's, too.

Q: So there must have been discussions between them

A: Yes, it was in the conversation, definitely. And it was considered the new way to go. And it did; it all came together. But it was extremely informal, the relationship between the two of them.

Q: There is some history about how the finances were worked out. Is that anything you want to do in summary?

A: I am not clear on that. I think Peter Cott might be a good source for that. I think he, of all the people in our life, is who knew about that, who handled the finances with dad. Lothar Stiefel was our main guy. You come across his name?

Q: No, not yet.

A: He was my father's accountant. And he handled all the financing arrangements, which I was delighted to leave to him. So Dixon may also know that.

Q: But there was a relationship with HUD.

A: Yes. Westbeth was a part of Section 8 Housing.

Q: And when you came in, were there already issues resolved in terms of getting the right zoning? Or did you need to work on any sort of zoning issues with using the space and using the site? What was the New York City Government's role? As you came in, did you recall having to deal with them a lot?

A: No, because it was abandoned territory over there. It was a wasteland in the West Village. It was meat markets, and entirely industrial commercial. There was no city interest at that point in preserving or reserving it for housing or anything. It was just written off as abandoned, and an abandoned neighborhood. I don't remember any difficulty in getting it established. I don't think there was any particular city interest at that point. And then later Jane Jacobs came along and of course with her housing discussion, and that turned attention to this neighborhood a little bit. But it was wilderness when we were there.

Q: It was wilderness? But this was Greenwich Village that had a legacy of the arts.

A: Do you remember what the economy was.

Q: How would you describe the economy?

A: The economy was going down madly until the early seventies, when it was really at rock bottom. So when our first tenants moved in in '70, I think the city was if anything grateful that something was happening over there. So there was no resistance that I can remember at all. Carol [Grietzer] I think again would know about the neighborhood.

Q: It's very interesting.

A: It's interesting how it was perceived in the Village. I think there was general enthusiasm for this project, as I remember.

Q: Was it in the newspapers early on?

A: Not really, not for a while.

Q: So your father wanted you to get involved in running this project. And you were the person who ran this project with Dixon Bain. What was his role?

A: Dixon did the entire construction. He dealt with contractors, with the builders, with all the union problems and everything else. He was the Clerk of the Works. My role had more to do with defining the nature of the community, which nobody had thought about. The NEA had pretty much decided it was going to be all painters and sculptors and talented people and so on. And we then, this committee, which was not very active, but I did find the members of it. Do you have that?

Q: Here is a list of the members of an advisory committee you founded. [this list was in Joan Davidson's files, and the GVSHP has a copy of this list]

A: Here were the original members. Jack Bauer, head of the Whitney. You know, all these people were distinguished people.

Q: Let's go through the list.

A: Let's see who's still alive.

Q: Jack Bauer, Head of the Whitney. Arthur Cohn,

A: Cohn – brilliant publisher.

Q: Elaine de Kooning.

A: Dead. They're all dead. Paul Douglas was a political guy and a businessman. Arthur Drexler from MOMA [Director of Architectural Design, MOMA] was a very good friend of mine.

Q: This is an amazing list.

A: I know! I know!

Q: There are filmmakers, Ellen Gifford and Adam Giffard.

A: Well her name is different now. And he died, she is Ellen Huxley now. She's a very good friend of mine, too.

Q: And then there's Jane Jacobs.

A: Well she wasn't really involved. Tom Hess [editor] was involved. Thomas Hoving [Director of the Metropolitan Museum] was occasionally involved, but not really. Ellie Monroe, there she is and she was involved. Billy Kluver was big; he was a big video guy [President, Experiments in Art and Technology]. He wasn't terribly active. Katherine Kuh [art critic, Saturday Review] was very involved with us. She was a critic. Stanley Kunitz was involved – the poet. They're all dead, alas.

Q: The Reverend Howard Moody is here on the list.

A: Yes, I remember.

Q: He's doing well and we might talk with him.

A: He might be worth talking to. He was quite involved. Who is this one?

Q: Peter Mennin?

A: Oh, he was Head of Julliard. I don't think he was much in the picture. John Niemeyer was a very close friend of the family. He was head of Bank Street College of Education. Alwin Nikolais [dancer, choreographer] didn't do much. Robert Rauschenberg; I don't think showed up.

Q: Who's Ruth Richards?

A: She was someone from one of the co-ops [that Kaplan had done prior to Westbeth]. [On the list she is listed as "Artists Tenant Association, 799 Greenwich Street].

Q: Ruth Richards was in a co-op in Greenwich Village?

A: I don't remember. She was very feisty and a bit of a trouble maker. She was not in Westbeth, but I think she stood for the co-op housing people. Jim Rosati [sculptor] was a doll. He's dead. Alan Schneider [5 East 20th Street] is dead. Remember, he was the famous director. So we tried to have some people from every discipline. Alex Schneider was a wonderful violinist and a family friend. Helen Stewart [Director, La Mama Company] is still there, but she didn't have too much involvement. John Szarkowski [director, Department of Photography, MOMA] is still there. Do you know him?

Q: No

A: Rachele Wall was a Village activist and a civic leader. You could ask her to talk; she worked very closely with Carol Grietzer. She was very active in the Village.

Q: And she was involved in this committee?

A: She was a big part of this. Yes. Jim Wines [sculptor] was involved. I think he's still with us but has moved out of town. And [William] Zeckendorf, of course, was Zeckendorf.

Q: Well what we're looking at is a list. It's called 'Wesbeth's Sponsors.' This actual list looks like it was from the time period, by the phone numbers.

A: They all have names?

Q: How early on did you organize this group of advisors?

A: Isn't Geldzahler there? Because he was part of this? Is he there?

Q: Let's see.

A: He was actually quite involved with us.

Q: Henry Geltower. I don't see it on this list.

A: Well maybe he was ex officio because he was then Cultural Commissioner of the City. The way Kate Levin is now. He argued very strongly, I remember, for mixing it up. And making it a diverse community with all disciplines. That was the first big decision we came to out of these discussions.

Q: Where did you meet when you had these discussions?

A: Usually in my house or somebody's house.

Q: And you pulled together these people. Would you say that was one of your first things you did when you came in?

A: Yes, because I was trying to figure out who lives in this place. You know, what are the standards, what are the goals. What kind of a community is it going to be? Is it going to be a little isolated dormitory, or is it going to be a regular neighborhood of the city? Was it going to be part of the Village in an active way? Or is it going to be isolated like an artists' colony? Very early on we rejected that idea. This is New York, and these are sophisticated people. They want to be part of the city. If you want to be in a colony, you go to MacDowell! [MacDowell Artists Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire]. This is the city. It was a very early kind of universal decision. Everybody, people

like Geltower, very strongly said, “Look, it has to be open to all disciplines.” Then we decided how do you define a discipline? What does that mean? Commercial artist? Television people? So we batted that around quite a while. What is an artist? By our definition? And so we said, “Painters, yes. Sculptors, yes. Musicians, yes. Writers, yes. Photographers, yes. Actors, theater people?” And then that further got refined. And then we said, “All right, just actors? How do you define an actor? Someone who’s been in a play? So we finally decided you choose the creative person. So in terms of theater, that means first dibs go to the playwright before the actor. In music, first dibs go to the composer before the performer. So that was kind of the obvious, the creative people.

Then what Ellie [Munro] said is you have to be committed to it, this was your life’s work. You were not a dabbler or a Sunday painter. You lived by your work, essentially. So those were the questions we addressed. And then we said, “Okay, how do you get diversity?” First of all, you’re open to all disciplines. So then second, we had a big discussion – are we going to get into quality questions? Do you have to be good? How do you define that? Who’s going to decide? So should we have juries? No. Should we have site visits? No. These were big discussions, but in the end, I think we mostly agreed, “No, we’re not arrogating to ourselves. You know, we’re not an arts institution. We’re housing!” So we simplified and simplified and simplified.

And finally Ellie Munro started the selection process, and the person she worked with, Tanya (?)¹, and I suppose Ann Sperry was in on that, too. They established the process of choice. Which I think was very wise. And they said, “Okay, you’ve got to be a working artist. You’ve got to live by it. You have got to be good. You have to be beyond a student. You have to be a professional person. And your professional qualifications are established by three people of your choice. You choose three people in your field who will recommend.” So we kind of left it to them to make the case for themselves. And Ellie and Tanya knew most of these people in the arts personally. They were very experienced. First of all they knew most of the applicants. Some people they didn’t even bother with, “Yeah, that person’s good, fine. We want them.” It was very loose, frankly. This little subcommittee was very hip. They knew people, and they knew people who knew people, so they could kind of check. So quality was pretty easy to establish.

So we decided, “Are we going to have opinions about style?” Abstract versus realist? Contemporary music or classic? No. We decided again, the ideal in terms of substance was diversity, and that you’d have to establish a certain level of excellence by this system, and then their style is up to them. I’m not going to get into the style business. And making choices on the kind of art you wanted... so we avoided that. So we took care then of the artistic

¹ Thalia Selz is the name of woman Ellie Monro worked with on the selection process. This information provided by Gabrielle Selz, Thalia’s daughter, in 2011.

qualifications I think. And then we talked about community per se. And we wanted families. We wanted families and children. We wanted all sexual orientation, all colors, all religions. And I think this selection committee was quite conscious of that diversity, and leaned in favor of diversity, after the qualifications were established, then I think they made a conscious effort to balance things. To have everybody – old and young, and people from the Midwest and local people. Some foreigners you know. So we wanted to mix it up as much as possible.

Q: And so what you came up with was a very clear criteria for how to do the selection. And it was clear in terms of you wanted the tenants to have diversity, to have professionalism established, and to have seriousness. And when you came up with this criteria was it the advisor group that came up with it, and then the selection committee was a subcommittee?

A: Yes, they actually interviewed people.

Q: They sat down with people? And interviewed them?

A: It was really Ellie, Tanya and Ann, pretty much. And I chimed in where there were question marks, but when they were clear, you know, they did it. But the advisory group first established the philosophic framework, and then gave them their direction, really. And then they picked the actual people.

Q: What was the spirit of the group? When they had discussions about what Westbeth would be?

A: Exciting. Everybody had sort of the thrill of being pioneers. We knew that this had not been done, and we were really making a mark, and establishing a model. But everybody hoped it would be replicated. Haha. It never was.

Q: It was really quite a time of experimentation.

A: Yes.

Q: In the country, it was a time of experimentation. So this was very much part of that time period.

A: It was, yes. And there was a lot of new art and all of these movements. There was a sense of the modern world taking over.

Q: What was the art world like, in New York City at least at that time? That's a big question, I know, but if you could characterize it a little bit.

A: What was going on in the late sixties? Rauschenberg and all of those people. It was the New York School.

Q Right. And Andy Warhol of course was doing his activities.

A: Yes, that whole crowd. [James] Rosenquist, [Robert] Rauschenberg, [Adolph] Gottlieb – all those people. And architecture was in also kind of a renaissance. A lot of, when you think of all the superstars of today, they were kids then. And as you know, there was Richard [Meier], and no one heard of Richard Meier. He came out of nowhere. This was his first project, except for the house he built for his mother.

Q: How did Richard Meier get involved?

A: He had been at Cornell, but then he went to the Harvard Design School with my brother. And they were classmates, and my brother suggested him. We were sort of casting around for an architect. And Richard said, “Well, there’s this bright kid in my class.” We interviewed him and we liked him. And we said, “What the heck! Let’s give him a shot!” (haha)

Q: So it was a quick process?

A: It was so informal, the way you did things then. You know? You met somebody, you like them, you hired them. There were no commissions and corporate boards and outside consultants and headhunters and all that nonsense. None of it! We just went out and got him. And so here was this, my brother was very young then, as was Richard. Over lunch or something he said, “Well there’s this guy. He might be worth a try.” And he happened to have done a superb job. I mean it was Richard who figured out how to pull all those fragmentary buildings together into one. So it happened to be a brilliant choice, a lucky accident, really. Then Meier had just hired Tod.

Q: Tod Williams?

A: Yes, and put him on this project, and then Tod lived in the place. So I think that will be a very interesting to hear from him what it was like, living there. And I remember those early days when people were moving in. And when you think how fast we did this. My father and Roger I think were pretty well resolving it in '67. I think the plans were pretty much in final form. And Dixon came on, and organized the construction with Richard’s office. Our committee got very busy and we started finding people. People were moving in by '69. That was two years after we got the idea for the thing. I mean it’s a miracle of speed.

Q: Yes.

A: And everybody kept telling us, “Oh, build it new. You know, it’s just going to cost so much.” It cost much less. It cost fifteen bucks a foot, if I remember, which even then was considerably less than new construction. So it was

economical, and it was fast. It was beautiful. And it was the deal of the century. I remember people moving in. Those were so exciting, those days when they moved in. And you know the way Richard designed it? Everybody got those two heavy closets) which were supported beams.) They were so strong they could support. And you got your standard kitchen. Everybody had the same kitchen. Everybody had the same bathroom; One kitchen, one bathroom. And a number of these closets depending on the size. Little ones got two, big ones got more. So people were so excited to move in and create their spaces out of nothing. There were wide open spaces. Then it was so much fun to see how they did it. I mean so much ingenuity that these artists had, you know, in the way they formed their own little environments out of these simple elements. It was just brilliant to see. And I was very much involved in visiting the building; I don't know if Ann Sperry or Ellie Munro were. I don't think so. They weren't in the building. They sort of worked in an office. But I was very much running around seeing all these things because it was so exciting. And it was a very warm, supportive atmosphere. People would invite me in; we would have dinner. It was all very friendly in those early years.

Q: So you would be on site?

A: I was on site a lot, welcoming people and helping them get settled in. And I loved it because I was just so fascinated with their ingenuity in creating their own spaces.

Q: What kinds of things do you remember?

A: Well people would sometimes string a bed across the two moving closets, like a sleeping platform up there. Or people would set them in such a way that they could have paintings, canvas storage, you know, tucked away, making a closet or storage of their works. Or push them way back to the side and have maximum open space. Or they'd put them in the middle and make a wall divider with a bedroom behind it. So there was just these simple things, and you would never imagine they could have (haha) been used in so many ways. So it was marvelous to see what people did. And they used color, and they brought in rugs. And they brought in furniture, and they did things to the windows. You know, anything went as far as we were concerned.

Q: As I recall there were no walls.

A: No walls. That was a desired thing, yeah. So some people used the whole thing as a studio and just put a little bed somewhere. Other people made a proper bedroom and defined it and put in different spaces. You know, so it was right. And musicians obviously used it differently than painters did. And some people were dancers and they had real wide open spaces (haha). So it

was fascinating to see. And I imagine it still is fascinating to see the variety. Some people grew jungles of plants all over. (haha) It was really wonderful.

Q: People were moving in, and there was still construction going on in other parts.

A: Yes, there was. Yeah, it went on.

Q: So right away getting people in seems to be a priority.

A: It was.

Q: To get them their home.

A: I think that they were beginning to move in really in less than two years from the beginning of renovation...the first people. A lot of people moved in in '69, and it was filled by '70.

Q: How early on did the selection process occur? I mean, if this was a two years' process...?

A: No, it was pretty quick. I don't think it started until just before they moved in. I think we did that whole thing in several months. .

Q: To what do you owe the fact that this place was created so fast?

A: Everybody was so excited about it, you know. They just wanted to push it. And I think it was a lucky break on my part that I chose Ellie [Munro]. Ann [Sperry] was working for me, and you know I lent her to the project. Ellie was just perfect, because having been an art writer, she knew people all over the lot, and was very smart, had good judgment and high standards herself. You know, she could sort of size things up in a minute. And her colleague had been with the Modern Art Museum.

Q: Her colleague she worked with.

A: Yes, Tanya.

Q: Tanya.²

A: Who had been a curator and so on? She was in the visual arts, and she was very well informed already. They didn't start from zero. They came in

² Thalia Selz was the first wife of Peter Selz, who was the Curator of Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1960s. (Information provided by Gabrielle Selz in 2011.)

with a point of view, and they knew people. So I think that was a luck, I don't know how I chose them. That was an accident.

Q: Sorry, I'm going to pause for a second? Okay?

A: Okay.

END OF TAPE ONE

Q: We just took a pause and now we're back. And it's still March 13th, at 157 East 75th Street, talking to Joan Davidson. And I'm Jeanne Houck, and we're talking about Westbeth. And you were just talking about how it was fortunate to have Ellie Monroe be heading the committee.

A: The selection committee.

Q: She was a good choice for who to select as tenants because of her vast knowledge of the art world.

A: Yes, she had been a writer and her husband had been a distinguished art critic. And she just was very conversant in the whole art world. She knew everybody. She knew every institution, and had really good judgment. .

Q: And then you were also mentioning that when I interview Dixon Bain, part of what we need to do is talk about who you were renting to commercially as well as the tenants, because that was the concept.

A: The concept was that the commercial spaces on the ground floor would support the project, keeping the rents low, to subsidize them. And that had a mixed record of success. Some things worked, some things didn't. They're still struggling with that. It didn't ever really come together the way we'd hoped it would. Now I think it's probably different, because that's such a desirable residential community they probably can rent those spaces for a lot. But it was a struggle then, because it was such a wilderness area. And it was also the bottom of the market. I mean New York City was just in tough, tough times. So we sort of had a run of bad luck there for awhile. I think the theory was valid, but the location and timing was wrong. (haha) And I think all that is changing now, so well maybe in the end it will come to pass as we hoped it would.

Q: There was Merce Cunningham as a commercial tenant.

A: Yes, he's a long time tenant.

Q: One of the longest I would say, commercial tenants.

A: Yes.

Q: He came in 1970.

A: That sounds right.

Q: Do you recall where he was in his career at that time?

A: Oh, my goodness! He was barely in the middle. And he *loved* the space. And you can see why. It's a fabulous studio, with windows all around it. Bright. And of course he bestowed great honor on Wesbeth just by being there. It made everybody feel good. There have been a lot of really distinguished people there. Including alas some suicides, you know.

Q: Diane Arbus was one.

A: Yes, Arbus.

Q: It is probably the most well known.

A: Yes.

Q: Well, it was such a diverse community of artists. Who are some of the people you think of—There are many people that stand out, I know. Would you mention a few?

A: I shouldn't start doing that.

Q: Because ...

A: I'd leave out the most important one, probably.

Q: Yes, but maybe a better way to put it is, since you were on site a lot in the early years, what was your sense of how the people themselves got along with each other?

A: Well, I thought it changed over the years, inevitably, as it had to. I think there was such a level of enthusiasm and excitement in the beginning. It was kind of like summer camp. (haha) You know? Everybody wanting to know their neighbors and so interested and supportive and helpful. And there were all kinds of community events that went on and they had exhibitions and they had get-togethers. And little by little, inevitably, that slowed down. And first of all people were busy working. And secondly you know personality things developed as they do in every, any community. And some people didn't get along with other people, ... and tenant questions arose. I remember being there for one meeting and a major subject of conversation was fingerprints in the elevator. (haha) So it was just like the Upper West Side or The Bronx or anywhere else, you know. It was just an apartment house! With all those problems. So stuff happened. And then some things

were serious. I remember there was a terrible episode when there were charges of child abuse, and so forth and so on. So all of that stuff began to emerge. And then we had a parade of managers. And some were good and some weren't. And that also added to the problems. And then Peter Cott came along, and he was very successful, he lasted a long time. Kind of smoothed the waters a lot. But then other people weren't able to, and there were antagonisms between staff and management. Then all the issues of succession came up and haven't been solved since. As in for instance if a couple splits up, and the artist leaves, does the non-artist spouse then have the right to keep the apartment or should it be passed on to another artist? What happens with children? Do they inherit the apartment? Can people sublet? No, but they were doing it. So all these residential issues then began to emerge, so it wasn't just on the high plain of art and culture, it began to be on a rather lower plain of apartment struggles. Could people upgrade? Did you give someone in a smaller apartment the first shot at a bigger apartment when it came available, or did it go to someone on the waiting list? So all of those questions emerged and as far as I know they're not solved yet.

Q: There were all these questions that had to do with any housing project, then?

A: With any housing, exactly. With the added fillip of you're dealing with people who maybe aren't the working artist, and what are their roles and rights. You have families and marriages. So there was that. There was then who decides. There were always management issues in that the Kaplan Fund was very much a part in the beginning, but then we severed our connection with Westbeth [in 1973]. And so they were never clear about what does a Board of Trustees consist of, and there were changing legal requirements. How many non-tenants, and how many tenants should there be? I don't quite know where it stands at this point, because the whole relationship with HUD changed. So the management picture changed. So I think they have now, the Board of Trustees that is a majority of non-residents, I believe, right?

Q: Yes, but I am not certain.

A: And they've hired a manager. It seems to be fine at the moment. But I'm not up on the current management picture at all.

Q: Well going back to the early management and the early years when people were moving in, I remember we talked at one time about the idea of how long can people stay.

A: Yes.

Q: And that was a major discussion.

A: Right.

Q: What happened? What was proposed and what ended up happening with how long people were able to stay at Westbeth as residents?

A: I think the idea of a fixed term was pretty much voted down on the grounds it would bring undue hardship and so on. But the hope was expressed, very firmly, both by our end – management side – and also by tenants coming in that they hoped there'd be a reasonable period of about five years. And then you would move on.

Q: I see.

A: P.S. Nobody moved. Why would they? The best deal in the city. It still is. But that, I think is to some extent a failure. I see it as a failure, because it was very much designed as a way station. You would get your feet on the ground; you would get through a difficult period in your career, and so on. You would establish yourself and then you would go on, and leave the place for a new person coming in. And that just didn't happen.

As you know, many people there now were the original tenant. Forty years or so. So that didn't work out. So in retrospect, maybe we should have had a fixed term. I don't know.

Q: It was something you had hoped for, and you had talked about.

A: We did. Very much.

Q: But it was shot down, the idea that it would be in some way a legal agreement to ask people to move on.

A: Yeah, that was shot down.

Q: As a requirement.

A: Yes. People felt that would be unfair because maybe there would be situations where it would cause tremendous pain, and yack yack yack, but we sort of expected that people would honor it. Certainly there was an informal expectation that you would get your own place after a while.

Q: It seems to me to be a question that comes out of really understanding the trajectory of an artist's career.

A: Yes.

Q: They have these moments where they need this help.

A: Right. That was the idea, very much. Just by then of course rents were rising all over the city. And times were getting better. It was harder and harder to find another place. So they stayed. And then they passed it on to new generations, new family. And so I think a lot of those questions have to be revisited. They really do. I think the values and the ideas and the goals were right. I think they were true and right then. I think they still are. Because it's still, as we know, it's increasingly difficult for artists. And so I think we need a Westbeth. We need lots of Westbeths and lots of other help. But on the other hand it has to be legitimate. It has to be for the people who really deserve to be there. The right to be there shouldn't be full of insurance salesmen, you know, and hedge funders. Whatever they are. (haha) So all of that needs to be re-examined. I think the self-sufficiency; the financial self-sufficiency has to be re-examined.

Q: And that was the original idea as it was founded that Westbeth would pay for itself.

A: It would pay for itself.

Q: It would pay for itself, and so some very good arrangements were made with the mortgage. The percentages were good, and the city gave some sort of support?

A: The city gave something. Lindsay was very supportive.

Q Do you remember specifics about what he did?

A; I don't remember the specifics about what the city did. They were supportive. Some tax thing. So we had Feds, city and I don't think any state involvement. But you have to get that from Dixon. All of that.

Q: I think we can end for today pretty soon. I would like to end maybe with a few comments on what you see as the great innovation of Meier's design or what would you say particularly stands out for you as a great accomplishment in his approach to Westbeth?

A: Well I think his design was wonderfully imaginative, and he saw how to relate walls (including funny spaces). And he did a brilliant thing in the office building, which was the main residential building, because it had these long corridors with, in the middle of it was a hallway, and on each side were little itty bitty offices, some facing in, some facing out. And so it was totally divided in this long business. What he did was eliminate the middle corridor, and then cut across sideways so he took advantage of the total space. And then he devised a system where half the apartments were double – two floors – and half were single. I'm trying to remember because he salvaged the space. He made a new hallway somehow so that you could enter, and on one floor you entered the single apartments, and then on the floor below you

entered the double apartments, so that in some ingenious way he saved maximum space. And then he made public spaces in the big lab buildings, and he made kind of passageways that connected them – kind of ramps. And he gave everybody their round terrace. That was sort of a signature. And he made a beautiful kind of a park design down below with a wonderful fountain in it which has been *wrecked*, I regret to inform you, and that should be restored to his design. It was open to Bank Street in a very generous, welcoming way. That has been walled off, which looks sort of hostile, and that should be removed. And it should be open to the street again.

Q: It's a beautiful design.

A: Yes.

Q: Very exciting. And to see it restored would be a great thing.

A: Yes, now we have to worry about a skyscraper going up on the north side of it. But I gather that Bob Stern has come in and improved the design, so it's better now than it was originally. And there's now a nice park in Abingdon Square. It was a pretty ratty little backyard when we were there. Now it's become an elegant park. And of course you know what's happened to the West Village. It's the center of the universe now.

Q: Yes, it's beautiful. So I think any last comments for today's session?

A: I think Westbeth is a token of the times then, of the whole sort of freewheeling way of operating. The Foundations operated in that way, in a way those entrepreneurs like my father did. You know, they kind of had an idea and they up and did it. And it was the end, it was sort of the period when foundations cared passionately about the work they were doing. They believed in their causes. And it was before the age of philanthropy as a profession. I'm afraid in many cases it's become just a job. And it has to go through all kinds of hoops and knots and approvals. Whereas in those days, a foundation could decide to do something, and just do it, and with joy and enthusiasm. And Belief! And I think it was a different age, and the city was kind of desperate then, and welcomed anyone willing to take on any project. So it was kind of an accident of its time, and the imagination of my father, really. I think he deserves an awful lot of credit. I mean I don't know even in those days how many other foundations would have just jumped in like we did. I don't know why Stevens didn't go to Ford or one of the biggies. He didn't. There was Roger Stevens, and I think he was that kind of a guy, too. That's why he ran the NEA. He had an idea; he didn't have to pass it before any congressional committee or anything. You know, he just up and did it. And Carolyn Kizer at the NEA was that way, too. She was a very creative person. And I think those two were the main movers. You should definitely talk to her.

Q: We'll definitely try talk to her.

A: Yes.

Q: This is great. I really appreciate talking with you today.

A: It's fun to remember!

Q: Yes.

A: Those glory days.

END OF INTERVIEW