**Oral History Interview with Valerio Orselli, September 8, 2018**

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<th>Narrator(s)</th>
<th>Valerio Orselli</th>
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<td>Interviewer</td>
<td>Sarah Dziedzic</td>
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<td>Place of Interview</td>
<td>Cooper Square Committee/Community Land Trust office on East 4th St.</td>
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Quotes from Oral History Interview with Valerio Orselli

Sound-bite

“My name is Valerio Orselli, although some people call me Val for short. I’m currently the Project Director of the Cooper Square Community Land Trust. Prior to that, I was for some twenty years the Director at Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association... Prior to that, I was the Director of the Cooper Square Committee, which has a long history of combining community planning with community organizing to accomplish its goals, which is the preservation and the development of housing affordable to low income families, working class families, and to allow them to remain in their community in the long run...

We are basically trying to do one thing, the only way to keep housing permanently affordable: that is to decommodify the housing. So you can’t make a financial profit, but you can make what you call a social equity return. Not financial equity, but social equity. And what that translates into is very simple: if instead of paying $1,400 a month for your apartment, you pay $350 or $500 a month, the leftover money can go into paying for a better education for yourself, or your children, better healthcare, travel, profession... Another benefit, which we’re trying to encourage even more, is you can put money aside and start a business.”

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Additional Quotes

“My family was in Italy during the Fascist period, and my father was a vehement anti-Fascist. When they give out ration cards for people to pick up basic supplies, my father took the card, said, “I don’t take anything from Fascists,” and ripped it up. But my mother on the other hand had to feed the family, so she had to go to talk to the Fascists and say, “I lost my card, I need a replacement,” so that’s how it was done. But my father hated Fascists. He would have hated Donald Trump and then some. During the war in Italy they were encouraging families to have children, particularly boy children for obvious reasons. And they give you a special bonus if you named your boy child—probably the girl child after another equivalent female—Benito. That was Mussolini’s first name. My father had two children when he was in Italy, during the
war; I came after the war in ‘48, and he named me Valerio. Valerio was the nom de guerre of the Partigiano leader, who executed Mussolini.” (Orselli p. 9–10)

“Well, initially, I didn’t know very much. My involvement was either civil rights, or it was about the anti-war movement, plus going to school full time. When I started working at Cooper Square Committee, my first take on it—urban renewal—I said, they look to me like they’re a bunch of well-meaning people, but the way they go about it, they don’t understand the harm that they do in terms of displacement and so on. But it didn’t take long to figure out that that’s not true. They were fully aware of what they were doing. It wasn’t merely a question of taking down derelict buildings to build better housing; it was taking down the buildings and the people living in those buildings. And they would never be able to come back. They were promised that, like they were promised to the people living in Seward Park. And it took us generations to get that promise fulfilled. Most of them, of course, now are dead, but their children are qualifying and some are getting apartments there. Not that many.

Then, of course, with the experience of fighting against planned shrinkage, there was no longer any doubt. Now, with urban renewal, the weakness of urban renewal is that you had to notify the tenants that they’re going to be evicted. That gives them a chance to fight back, and that’s how the Cooper Square Committee came into being in 1959. But with planned shrinkage, you don’t have to do anything, like Roger Starr said, let natural processes take place. With some encouragement from the city, of course. You know? … They had about 25% cutback in police and fire protection. So the neighborhood became unsafe, buildings were torched, sometimes by tenants to get priority for public housing, other times by landlords to try and collect insurance because the rents are not sufficient to their needs. And all these gardens that you see on Loisaida, those were buildings that were torched in the ‘70s! Natural processes.” (Orselli p. 16–17)

“So we basically held our ground. The city wouldn’t rent apartments to homeless or poor people; we moved them in. We made our own leases and gave it to them so they could go to Con Ed to get Con Ed service. [00:50:10] That’s when we were fighting Roger Starr. And then after the fight was over, when basically they agreed to do what we were demanding—essentially what we did is we, besides putting epoxy on the door of the HPD office across the street, we also did a
community clean-up. In other words, we took every garbage can, with the support of the community, and dumped the contents by the city office, so they couldn’t get access.

The city retaliated at that point by cutting off services, including delivery of fuel; this was the winter. So we were trying to maintain the building as best we could. The boiler broke down. We had one of our people who is a boiler mechanic, who still lives here, across the street, David Barkin, but it was not a tenable situation. So that’s when we agreed to meet with the city, and they made a deal that if we got rid of the garbage, they would allow us again to start renting apartments out to low income people, and restore our funding, which, we didn’t have any.” (Orselli p. 18)

“…And when we sought the Attorney General’s approval for the co-op plan—because that took years also—there were two or three things that the AG emphasized. First of all, having a building on 3rd Street, a building on 4th Street, a building on Second Avenue, Stanton Street, is not common. You can have a thousand units in a co-op, but they’re all contiguous for the most part. And here, they’re all over the place, built at different times, with different problems, initially, in selling. And the AG agreed to do that because of the common history of struggle, because of the urban renewal plan. Which was also one of the conditions that were met when the Lower East Side/East Village District was designated historic, they referenced the Cooper Square struggle as residents. [01:15:05] The second thing was that they needed for us to get the tax abatement; you know, they were not approving a co-op owing sixteen million dollars, actually fourteen million dollars that we certainly wouldn’t be able to pay. And the third one was the role of the Community Land Trust. Without the Land Trust, we would not have been able to co-op these buildings. That was said to us verbally, not in writing.” (Orselli p. 26–27)

“We determine how to set our rents based on two things, square footage and the use of the space. By that I mean that if you look at an apartment, the main cost of what it costs to maintain that apartment are in two areas: the kitchen and the bathroom. For obvious reasons, that’s where all the plumbing is. The other rooms might have an electric outlet or two, might have a radiator, but it’s relatively minor. Most of what we spend to maintain the apartment is in the kitchen and the bathroom. So we proposed a formula: for the first 350 square feet, the rent will be charged 95¢ a square foot. Anything above the 350 square feet will be based on 35¢ for
the non-core areas. So you paid up to 350 square feet, you pay 95¢, above that, it will be 35¢ cents. Which, basically, worked to the benefit of large families. And that’s why when we take a building in, under that kind of program, the rents are pretty much uniform.” (Orselli p. 45)

“So I’ve been mostly a Lower East Side resident since 1968. But that includes my four or five years in Louisiana, and it also includes my time in Brooklyn. But even when I was living in Brooklyn, I was working here. I very much feel that I’m part of this community. And I’ve seen it changing drastically. I remember once going to, before the renovation pursuant to the Lower East Side Cross Subsidy Plan, I remember going to Loisaida east of Avenue A, along with a Black tenant and a Spanish tenant. And one of the local drug dealers said, “Who are you, the mod squad?” [laughter] They weren’t used to a group like that being together.

It’s been, how can I say—it’s been rewarding to have been part of a number of struggles…” (Orselli p. 47)

“People refer to our neighborhood here as a gentrifying neighborhood, and I used to also refer to it that way. I don’t do that anymore. I consider it a gentrified neighborhood. People are being pushed out in all kinds of ways, from unscrupulous landlords, or even scrupulous landlords. But the sheer fact that the rent stabilized rents keep going up and up, and up and up, to the point that they become unaffordable and the work that we do, compared to the need, is a complete mismatch. We helped to preserve a few hundred units in our neighborhood here, and we lose a few thousand units every year, who become destabilized.” (Orselli p. 48)
Summary of Oral History Interview with Valerio Orselli

Valerio Orselli was born in Pontedera, Italy, and emigrated with his family first to Brazil, and then to the United States in 1960 when Orselli was eleven years old. His family settled in Mamaroneck in Westchester, a town with stark class divisions. The presidential election of 1964 turned Orselli onto the politics of the Left and jump-started his work as an organizer and political agitator. He became engaged in the anti-war movement as a member of the War Resisters’ League, the Yippies, the Poor People’s Campaign, and the Harrisburg Defense Committee.

Orselli first served as a volunteer for the Cooper Square Committee in 1972 when he was living on Mott Street—his first formal work in housing—and soon joined the staff as an organizer working to support low rents in the neighborhood, and fighting the City’s strategic tactics to remove low rent and working class tenants. He briefly worked with ACORN as an organizer in Louisiana, and returned to New York City in 1981, when he was hired as the Cooper Square Committee Executive Director. As Director of the Cooper Square Committee, he led a community-based process to develop the Revised Cooper Square Plan to renovate—rather than demolish—dilapidated city-owned buildings. This plan eventually led to a commitment from the City not only to finance the renovation but also to turn over ownership to a non-profit housing company. The Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association was formed in 1991 to manage these properties, which Orselli headed for over twenty years; the Cooper Square Community Land Trust was created at the same time to own the land on which the properties were built.

As an advocate for low income housing (as distinct from “affordable” housing), Orselli led negotiations with Housing, Preservation and Development to establish the first cooperative in the United States for formerly homeless families. He also advocated to maximize low income housing within various redevelopment projects, and brought additional properties into the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association through a unique co-op conversion plan developed to decommodify housing.

Altogether, the unifying principle of Orselli’s work on the Lower East has been to ensure that low income people and people of color could be the beneficiaries and not the victims of urban renewal.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic
General Interview Notes

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

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

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

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

THANK YOU!
Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: All right. Today is September 8, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Valerio Orselli for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. And we’re here in the office of the Cooper Square Committee. So can you start by saying your name, and introducing yourself?

Orselli: Sure. My name is Valerio Orselli, although some people call me Val for short. I’m currently the Project Director of the Cooper Square Community Land Trust. Prior to that, I was for some twenty years the Director at Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association. The Cooper Square Community Land Trust is the owner of the land underneath some twenty-one buildings that have been converted into a non-profit co-op—not a limited equity co-op, a non-profit co-op—which is owned by the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association II, to be exact. The cooperative corporation. Prior to that, I was the Director of the Cooper Square Committee, which has a long history of combining community planning with community organizing to accomplish its goals, which is the preservation and the development of housing affordable to low income families, working class families, and to allow them to remain in their community in the long run.

Dziedzic: Thank you—

Orselli: Ok.

Dziedzic: —great introduction. So I wanted to start by asking a little bit about your background, and especially since you’re so involved in community organizing, what the community was like where you grew up.

Orselli: Well, it seems like a simple question, but it has a long-ish answer, ok? I was born in Italy in the province of Pisa. I’m saying that—the actual town was a small town that nobody knows about; everybody knows Pisa. Pontedera was the name of the town. Its claim to fame is it has the headquarters for a company called Piaggio that builds the Vespa. My father used to work there for a number of years until he had a big argument with his supervisor. He felt he wasn’t getting along, so he quit the job and moved to Brazil. First by himself, and then with the rest of the family. And basically, I grew up in Brazil. I was five years old when we moved to Brazil, and I stayed there until age twelve, when finally—this was my father’s dream—to come to North
America because the finances were better. You know, they had a saying in post-World War II Italy of “America of the shoes,” which is the US, and “America of the clogs,” which was South America; you still did fine, but not as well as North America. So my father decided to come here. And we came here in 1960, and I’ve been here ever since.

Initially, I was a great believer in the American tradition—everyone has an equal opportunity, everyone has a right to succeed, and America’s a peace-loving country—until 1964, when Lyndon Johnson was elected, running as the peace candidate, against the evil Barry Goldwater, who was going to nuke the whole world. And it turned me decisively to the Left. At that time I was living in a town in Westchester called Mamaroneck, which has its rich side and its poor side. My family was working class family, ok? And I became politically engaged there. I helped organize a group which was a Larchmont-Mamaroneck peace group. Nothing fancy; I would have preferred it be a branch of SDS, but that was too radical for my fellow anti-war activists there. We organized demonstrations, and we were so active that the Westchester group, Women Strike for Peace, would join our activities, because they didn’t have their own activities in a public way.

From there I graduated in ‘67, and from there, I became fully active in the anti-war movement, while going to college at Hunter College. [00:05:01] And we were involved—I was involved in Stop the Draft Week, resistance to the draft, everything we could to try and put an end to the war. I became involved with the War Resisters’ League, and also with the Youth International Party, I think better known as the Yippies. And we did some actions. I went to Washington for the first large anti-war demonstration, it was back in 1967, ok? Where we tried to levitate the Pentagon.

Dziedzic: Right!

Orselli: We didn’t succeed, for some reason. But we made our point. Subsequent to that, I was involved in the last organized campaign by Dr. King, the Poor People’s Campaign. Spent some time in Washington there. And then in ‘68 along with the resistance and the Yippies and all anti-war groups, we went to Chicago. I think this is the fiftieth year since the event took place, where we went there to peacefully demonstrate for the end of the war. And it would have remained peaceful were it not for the police riot that took place at that time. And then I remained involved with the anti-war movement after that.
I became part of the Harrisburg Defense Committee, which was a group organized to defend the Berrigans, who were being accused of all kinds of charges, including conspiracy to kidnap Henry Kissinger, which was a figment of the government’s imagination. They seized on a government informant within the jail, where Father Phil was being held, and he made all kinds of allegations back and forth. I think the whole process cost, like, a million dollars, to defend the Berrigans, and then it turns out that the great conspiracy was love letters between Phil Berrigan and Sister Elizabeth McAlister. And after they were let go from prison, they got married! That was the conspiracy. That’s how the times were in those days.

And I was involved with the resistance, trying to convince people to resist the draft—not to apply for an exemption or something from the draft, but to resist it. And when the war started winding down, I did some volunteer work for the Cooper Square Committee, that was back in ‘72, roughly.

Then an opening became available for an organizer at the Cooper Square Committee. It wasn’t something I had been involved in before—namely, housing. It wasn’t, at that moment, a priority for me, since I had an apartment on Mott Street, where myself and two roommates shared an apartment that rented for $37.19, ok? So it was quite affordable. But I was very glad to take the job, and as I said, to many people, I was amazed by the salary. I was used to getting paid, for example, $50 a week working for the Harrisburg Defense Committee, and I was the second-highest paid person. The highest paid person was the fundraiser, ok? So when they offered me, I think, $7,500 a year, that was like a fortune to me. So I worked as an organizer for Cooper Square Committee, organizing rent strikes, demonstrations for this issue or that issue, mostly focusing on housing. And then eventually the director left, and after a hiatus I applied for the position, and I became Director of the Cooper Square Committee.

And as often happens, after a period of peacefulness, there is a struggle with the city. Because the Cooper Square Committee in those days had a single source of funding—that was as a project area committee required by federal legislation that says there has to be community participation in the implementation of an urban renewal plan. And we were the community participants, because it was our plan, that Cooper Square Committee’s alternate plan, that—after we defeated Moses and his slum clearance committee plan—was adopted by the city. The plan had a lot of virtues. I hope I’m not skipping around too much, or talking too much.
Dziedzic: You can take a break when you like, and then I’ll go back and ask you a couple follow-up questions.

Orselli: Sure. Well, the alternate plan, what was significant about it for those days—today, you’re going to say, well, what’s the big deal—is instead of massive displacement, that the Moses plan would have called for, and demolition of all the buildings from Delancey Street to 9th Street, from First to Third Avenue, our plan called, first of all, for residents to be the beneficiaries, and not the victims, of urban renewal. [00:10:14] Second of all, that because between the time a site is designated for urban renewal, an implementation takes place. There could be any number of time periods from a few years, to ten, twenty, thirty—or if you look at the Seward Park site—fifty years.

So we said, the development has to take place in stages, and people should have the right to remain in occupancy until the development was imminent. And stages meant we would take people from—we take a largely vacant site, very few buildings, or no buildings, vacant land, build housing there, and then take people for the next phase and re-locate them there. And only then do we then go to the next demolition phase, until we came to the end of the project.

The plan was adopted by the city, but subsequent to that there were a number of things that happened. The federal government withdrawal from affordable housing construction, the city’s fiscal crisis, the state fiscal crisis, politics, and that we were in a situation where the new head of the Housing Development Administration [HAD], which is now Housing Preservation and Development [HPD], using the city’s fiscal crisis, tried to promote something called planned shrinkage. And planned shrinkage basically took something from a medical model—namely, if you have, like, an airplane accident, and you have someone’s on the verge of dying, and someone has a broken arm and a broken leg, who do you help first? You help those with the least amount of injury. Applied to the urban context, it meant concentrate city resources in the better-off neighborhoods, and allow natural processes to take place in the other neighborhoods. Specifically cutting back on police, and fire protection, so that we have arson, we had rampant drug dealing taking place, and people “voluntarily” moved out—something they refused to do under urban renewal, they “voluntarily” did it under planned shrinkage.

Well, we fought back. When the city was taking the city housing stock that they had purchased for the purpose of our plan, and they were supposed to be kept fully occupied until development was imminent, they started stripping vacant apartments and not re-renting them.
The idea was to—basically they call it consolidation; once the building became half vacant, they would take the remaining tenants and put them into another building that was half vacant, and then demolish the building in between. Well, we fought back against that. We did a few unconventional things: put epoxy glue in the lock of the city’s office to make them unable to get in to get their tools to do the stripping of the apartments. Sit-ins, we occupied the offices for days at a time. I developed a good relationship with one of the workers there, one of the supervisors; we spent all night long playing chess. We still remain friends, he’s no longer working for HPD, but he’s retired. I’m semi-retired.

But the outcome of all that is that the city tried to de-fund us. At one point, they circulated a memo internally (of course we had our own people within the HDA that fed us information) that said giving funds to Cooper Square is like giving hand grenades to the PLO. Which sounded a little bit excessive, but flattering in some ways. But we fought back, and we managed to get funding back, and after we got the funding back, we continued.

We managed to mount the city-wide campaign, because they also tried to cut funds from other groups around the city, they were part of a city-wide PAC coalition. We fought back against that, and we managed to mobilize enough political support that Roger Starr either quit or was let go from the HDA. And then we moved forward towards implementation. But again, due to the lack of significant city funding, we were finally able to get Section 8—that was the new federal housing program by the government to subsidize developers—and we were able to build two projects. One sponsored by us, Thelma Burdock Apartments, that was named after one of our founding members, who was the director of the, what do you call it, the settlement house—escapes my memory now.

Dziedzic: Oh, Henry Street?

Orselli: No. It was at Second Avenue and, near Houston Street. And we were able to partially implement our plan. I remember as we’re talking.

Dziedzic: Yes.

Orselli: Church of All Nations, right, settlement house.

We were able to get two projects built, one a Section 8 project on Stanton Street below Houston, and the second one sponsored by JASA, that’s the Jewish Association of Services for
the Aged, a Section 202 project, after they agreed to certain community demands, which included racial integration. JASA’s a great organization, providing great service for the seniors. But they have a lousy record of integration. We went through and looked through their occupancy records—they’re supposed to file every year—in a mixed neighborhood or a white neighborhood, there’ll be like one black or one Latino out of a hundred and seventy occupants. In a black neighborhood, like Coney Island, they had maybe thirty apartments out of two hundred apartments. And that was not a good record. And when we questioned them about it, their answer was, well, white people live longer. We didn’t accept that, and we came up with our demands, and they agreed to it at the very last minute.

The project then went before the Board of Estimate. We’re being attacked for being anti-senior citizens. “How can you oppose the housing for seniors?” But they agreed to our demands, and the project went forward. And they were very proud that this was their first integrated project in New York City.

At that point we had gotten all that we could in terms of new construction, but we were faced with a problem: our buildings had been kept fully occupied by initially low income people from the original population, and then in the ‘80s, by homeless families that we had moved in. With no prospects of any new housing being built, and in housing that was being poorly maintained by the city, and deemed deserving of demolition back in the early ‘70s. And that’s where we decided we had to come up with a revised plan for Cooper Square. And from there, we go on to the creation of Mutual Housing Association, the Land Trust, I don’t know if you want me to stop, and—

Dziedzic: Yes—

Orselli: Ok.

Dziedzic: —let’s stop there.

Orselli: Sure.

Dziedzic: Thank you. I first want to go back to Mamaroneck, and ask whether that’s where your family first went—

Orselli: Yes.
Dziedzic: —from Brazil.

Orselli: Right.

Dziedzic: And just ask you to talk a little bit more about you said that there was kind of the wealthy side, and the poor side—

Orselli: Yes.

Dziedzic: —or the working class, and the upper class, and just sort of describe that in a little bit more detail—

Orselli: Sure.

Dziedzic: —and describe how the war started to kind of become part of your consciousness.

Orselli: Well, first of all, the extremes were like, poor people do not have terrible houses; we had a decent two family home half occupied by us, my family, and half occupied by the landlady. I didn’t see any really decrepit housing there. On the other side, there are a few things I learned. For example, at one point, I think I was in seventh grade, I took a liking to a young blonde girl. Somehow I got her phone number, and I decided to ask her out on a date. I called up her number, and a man answered the phone and I said, “Is this—” I forgot her name now whatever her name was, “—house?” And he said, “No, this is the butler.” [laughs] I said, ok, I now we are not in the same class here, that’s for sure. It’s not like they had a lawyer or something.

I moved around a lot in that neighborhood, and you actually had to walk like a half a mile, if you went to the rich side of town, to get to the house. There’s that much land around it. The other thing is, I was put back two grades when I first came here because I didn’t speak any English. So I was supposed to be in seventh grade, they put me in fifth grade, and I did fifth grade and sixth grade there. When it came to the seventh grade, I spoke pretty good English. And they put me in seventh grade.

My first experience with class difference is I had signed up for conversational French, and the teacher saw me, and saw my background, and she took me out of the class, sent me back to the principal’s office, saying “He doesn’t belong here.” [00:20:10] And the principal walked me back in the class, and said, “Yes, he belongs here. He met the requirements.” Then I went to see the principal at the end of the semester, and I told him, look, I was put back two grades
because I didn’t speak any English, but now I do, I would like to see if I can be put forward. And he said, “Don’t worry, by the time you get to college, everything will be ok.” So I was a seventh grade student, what was I going to do? But he checked my record, and I had a really good class record. So next thing you know, he said I’m going to eighth grade. So next thing that happened is I showed up, same teacher—French—but now in first year French. And she does the same thing over again. Well, he’s supposed to be in conversational French, not here. And the principal said, “No, he belongs here.” French is not something that working class people sent their children to.

I learned, another experience, I realized was, for example, in the yearbook for the seventh or eighth grade, students wrote what they were going to be when they grew up. And some people said a lawyer. I’m going to be a whatever, a professional, doctor; those were usually Irish or Jewish. And then you had the Blacks and the Italians. That was the only school. That’s why you had real integration—the only high school, or in between school, available. I’m going to be a barber, I’m going to be a security guard, I’m going to be all these professions that people who have little education are stuck into sometimes. So that was a lesson for me in class differences.

Then of course there was the turning point from being a patriotic, whatever, immigrant, I became an anti-war activist. I remember one time, I proposed for the class that—the beginning of the class we have ten or fifteen minutes dedicated to current events, where people get a copy of the New York Times and read through the main stories, and people had a chance to talk about it. And of course I always spoke about Vietnam. So I remember to this day, one student turned to me, and she said, “Vietnam, Vietnam, I’m sick and tired of hearing about Vietnam!” This was ’65 I guess. I told her, “I think you’re going to be hearing a lot more about Vietnam with the years ahead.”

Then the other thing of course is when I was attacking Barry Goldwater, everybody was on my side. Everybody hated Barry Goldwater. But after the election and the escalation of the war, the composition of my friends and acquaintances changed. Some people that were once not that friendly became friendly, and people that were friendly were no longer friendly. Was a very divisive issue in those days. But I—

Dziedzic: How did—

Orselli: Yes, go ahead.

Dziedzic: How did the draft affect your high school?
Orselli: People took it for granted that you had to go in. It didn’t occur to them to fight. My first instinct was not to resist; it was to try to get conscientious objector status, which I never got. But I was really proud that although Mamaroneck was, and probably still is, a Republican town, we were the only anti-war group in the area. I don’t know if other cities, other towns in Westchester had it, but we were the only ones. And there was a group called the CNVA, The Committee for Non-Violent Action, that was sponsoring a march from Boston to the Pentagon, I believe, and we learned about it because of my contacts with the anti-war movement in New York City, and we decided to join them. So they were marching, maybe twenty or thirty or so people through Westchester headed towards the city, and then they came to the outskirts of Mamaroneck, and they had a crowd of forty or fifty people who are joining them! They were like, astonished. [laughter] And then we marched with them, a number of us, all the way to New York City, that’s where we dropped off. We ain’t going to go all the way to the Pentagon. But it was an experience.

My favorite teacher was a professor. He actually had a professor status, his name was Professor Thomas Rock. I think he had a PhD—yes, he had to to be a professor. And I had him for advanced placement American history. And he gave me the privilege, after I asked him—you were allowed, on your senior year, to teach a class of your choice, in any subject. So I picked American history and he granted me that favor. So I did something—I forget what even, about the Civil War or something. So I really liked him. In fact, he really knew his stuff, and he really made you immerse yourself in American history. So when I applied for conscientious objector, I asked him to write me a letter of recommendation. And because I trusted him so much, I said, “This is where you write the letter, and you send it to.” Said, “Fine, I’ll take care of it.” Years later, I was able to see the letter, and it was along the lines of, “Don’t trust this person. He’s a Communist. He is not a conscientious objector. He’s on the side of the enemy,” something like that, really outrageous. That’s not something I expected from him but those are some of the experiences I remember.

Dziedzic: What did your parents think about your activism?

Orselli: Well, you bring an interesting subject up. My family was in Italy during the Fascist period, and my father was a vehement anti-Fascist. When they give out ration cards for people to pick up basic supplies, my father took the card, said, “I don’t take anything from Fascists,” and
ripped it up. But my mother on the other hand had to feed the family, so she had to go to talk to the Fascists and say, “I lost my card, I need a replacement,” so that’s how it was done. But my father hated Fascists. He would have hated Donald Trump and then some. During the war in Italy they were encouraging families to have children, particularly boy children for obvious reasons. And they give you a special bonus if you named your boy child—probably the girl child after another equivalent female—Benito. That was Mussolini’s first name. My father had two children when he was in Italy, during the war; I came after the war in ‘48, and he named me Valerio. Valerio was the nom de guerre of the Partigiano leader, who executed Mussolini. [laughter]

So in regards to coming back to the US, initially, it was like a turnaround for me, because I was patriotic. At least, as defined, and all of a sudden it’s changed. My father had already gone back to Italy at that point, and none of my brothers—I had one brother here, one brother who still lived in Brazil—none would have been supporting the war. And neither did my mother, though she wasn’t politically active; she was the pragmatic one. But they had no objections to my participating in the anti-war efforts. Although they had some bad experiences. For example, for a while they were living in the Bronx, and the landlady came to see my mother and said, “You think your son is a good boy going to college? He’s actually raising hell in Chicago.” Because she saw me on TV.

But my parents—my mother’s main concern is safety, not about what I was doing, but not get hurt. And those were violent times. Particularly in Chicago, where the police was completely undisciplined. I remember being on the streets, and the police squadron coming towards us with their batons, and they were slapping them here (on their palms), chanting “Kill, kill, kill.” They showed up—the National Guard, in military gear, and their Jeeps with something in front of it, like a barricade. We actually were glad to see them. Because they were disciplined. They were professional, unlike the police. So—

Dziedzic: Were you hurt during that protest?

Orselli: No. I was not. I was tear gassed. It became standard equipment, in those days—in college they gave you a little gift bag from different companies, toothbrush, toothpaste, and we used the gift bags to empty them out and put wet handkerchiefs inside, and we carried them around so when they’re tear gassing us, we could cover our faces with it. But I didn’t get in trouble, in those days.
Later on, when I was working with the resistance. And I did go to Washington. We got arrested a number of times. [00:29:58] Including at the Pentagon. [laughs] But I never got physically hurt. I mean, I spent a few days in jail, that’s about the extent of it. There were just too many of us. Too many draft resisters; you couldn’t put them all in jail. And you couldn’t even prosecute them all because there were so many.

When they had the first draft lottery, I was number seventeen, which meant I should have been called within the first two weeks or so of the call up. And I kept seeing the numbers going up and up and up, and nobody called me. Until we got to, like, close to the two hundred mark. And then they called me, and I was going to school full-time, but I had opted not to take a deferment, so I sent them a letter saying, “I’m going to school full-time, but I’m not asking for deferment. In fact, if you want to understand my reason, I’d be glad to come and talk to you.” So they sent me a letter back saying—because I sent it on resistance stationary, so they were really clear of what I was going to say, and I wrote a letter about all the people being killed in Vietnam, and we shouldn’t be there, and so on.

They called me in, and I went there with a friend of mine, who was also one of the Chicago 15, that was also involved in the action on the draft board in Chicago. And we got in there, nine o’clock in the morning, place was packed with other people who had all kinds of reasons for being at the draft board. And we were one the first people there but they didn’t call us. So we waited, people came in, more people came in. And believe it or not, we started singing “Alice’s Restaurant.” We kept singing all day long, and giving people draft advice. The place eventually was emptied out, it was like five o’clock, and they finally call us.

And they call us and they say, “Well, Mr. Orselli, what can we do for you?” I said, “I don’t know. I didn’t ask for this meeting. You called me in for this meeting.” So they ask the secretary, say, well, he sent this letter, blah blah blah. And so, “Ok, Mr. Orselli, in that case, we won’t need to talk to you. You don’t have any business here.” And I said, “Well, at least I’d like to read the letter.” So I read the letter. “Ok, thank you, Mr. Orselli, you can go now.” I said, “Wait, I have a character witness here, and he also would like to speak to you. And he’d like to turn in his draft card.” And they said, “Well, we’re not here to help you to break the law.” So ok, all right, so we went out. I told my friend John, and he got a little annoyed because we’d been spending all day long there. So he said, “Ok,” so he took his draft card, ripped it in half, and threw it on the desk of the secretary. And we went out. We’re out on the street, and the chair of
the board came back and said, “Oh boys, please wait a minute, ok?” And I tell you, it reminded me of a Mel Brooks movie, “Oh boys!” You know the movie I’m talking about?

Dziedzic: [laughing] No, I don’t.

Orselli: I forgot the name, but it takes place in Russia. Anyway, he said, “Ok, what can we do for you?” “Just wait here, wait here.” And then before you know it, several police cars pulled up, and he said, “This is them. Take them, ok?” So the police told us to get in the car. There was a police car in front of us, a police car behind us. Drove us to the precinct. And while we were there, the head of the draft board went to talk to the police captain. And the police captain was saying to him—because we were right there—“Well, sir, taking a little card and ripping it in half and throwing it on the secretary’s desk, it’s going to be hard to make a case for assault.” “Yes, but they broke the law. They’re supposed to carry draft cards,” or something like that. Said, “Yes, well, that’s a federal crime. You need to call the FBI on that one.” So, “Ok, where can I use the phone?” “There’s a public phone right over there.” [laughs] And he said, “Do you have a quarter I can use?” It was like comedy, ok? We were laughing!

I was supposed to go back to Washington, DC, because I was working with the resistance in Washington, with coffee houses, which we had in those days, and the captain said, “Look, there’s nothing we can hold you on, so you can go.” I said, “Yes, wait a minute, but we’re not familiar with White Plains.” That’s where the headquarters, the draft board was. “You’ve got to either bring us back to where we were, or we got a train to catch.” So he took us back, I believe, to the train station. [00:34:59] And we left from there, and then we went to Washington. But it was funny in those days, all day long singing “Alice’s Restaurant,” and they just ignoring us. Anyway.

Dziedzic: But on the other hand you have this front row seat to how weak the authorities can be, in a sense, or how malleable, or how ridiculously stupid! [laughs]

Orselli: Ridiculous, it was mad, yes.

Dziedzic: I mean, that must have fuelled the resistance in a totally different way, I suppose—

Orselli: Right.

Dziedzic: —knowing that these people can be really easy to dupe.
Orselli: Well, what they count on most is people’s fears. I mean, subsequent to this interview at the draft board, I was called in for induction. I showed up, and basically I brought a stack of cards about the different exemptions you can get, where you can get help. One of the military people there said, “Well, it’s against the law to distribute any material here except our material.” And I said, “Yes, but anything that you have in your possession is your property. They can’t take it away from you,” and to all the people there. So at the end of the day, they decided—oh yes, also, you would go the induction center fully dressed, and then you had to get down to your underwear. And I had buttons saying, “Resist the draft.” But when they got me down to my underwear, I had somebody paint my back, something like “Victory for the Vietnamese.” And they weren’t too happy with that.

But it was like a combination in those days, that the war was so absurd that sometimes you had to use absurdist techniques. That was what attracted me to the Yippies. The Yippies and the resistance sort of worked together at different times. It wasn’t like—people debate the Vietnam War and say the war should have been won, if only we had done X, Y, and Z. My response to people like that is, the war should never have been fought. It’s not a question of who won, who lost; the Vietnamese won, but we should never have gone in there. I still believe that. That was a major catastrophe that ruined American society in many different ways. From inundating the younger generation, to turning the older generation to the moral majority, or the silent majority, which persists to this day. Ironically, Donald Trump was against the Vietnam War, and yet he counts on the same base as Richard Nixon counted on, diminished.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit more about the tactics of the Yippies?

Orselli: Oh, yes well, I wasn’t—

Dziedzic: And that kind of absurdist approach, too, to resistance.

Orselli: Well, they did some interesting things, like they went to Wall Street. I wasn’t part of it—– that’s why I say they. They went to Wall Street and took a whole bunch, like a few hundred dollars in single dollar bills and released them on the Stock Exchange Floor. And these people that were dealing with if not millions, hundreds of thousands of dollars’ transaction on a daily basis, they scrambled to grab these dollar bills. It was amazing. Of course, now, you can’t do that anymore because they have glass plates, whatever, that prohibit that.
One time—in those days, there was a tendency to do petty shoplifting from stores food and so on. The Yippies decided to come up with a new tactic; we went to a department store—I can’t remember its name now—on Union Square, and instead of taking anything, we put things there. Which didn’t make the manager very happy. He escorted us out, but he couldn’t accuse us of any shoplifting because we were bringing things to the store. We used to meet at the Alternate U, the Alternate University. And we would go and prepare for whatever action we had. One time we were interrupted by, I think it was the—no, no, the San Francisco Bay’s Bread and Puppet Theater. It was a beautiful sunny day, and we were immersed in a room, no air conditioning or nothing in it, and I said, “What are you guys doing here? You gotta go out in the street!” It was that kind of atmosphere.

And what people don’t know, also, and I haven’t seen that report in the book, is that initially, after we decided to go to Chicago for a demonstration, we sent some folks over to Chicago to talk to the gangs there, one was the Black P. Stone Rangers, I think it was called. [00:40:02] And they told us not to come because they were afraid that there was going to be a strong police reaction, and the Black community would be the biggest victim of police brutality. So we cancelled our participation. We were not going to go to Chicago. And then there was the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and we said we have to go, and we went. You know. But initially, we cancelled it.

_Dziedzic:_ Yes, on the request of the community.

_Orselli:_ Yes.

_Dziedzic:_ So you mentioned living on Mott Street.

_Orselli:_ Yes.

_Dziedzic:_ Can you talk about when you moved to New York City, and where you lived and what the neighborhood was like at the time?

_Orselli:_ Well, for a while my family moved to the Bronx, and they lived in the area that’s now called Wakefield. But I had my issues with my brother because my father had gone back to Italy, so my brother was trying to act like a father. I was of age, and wasn’t going to go for that. So I moved out.
I moved in with two friends of mine at 219 Mott Street, which is sort of across the street from the proposed Haven Green senior housing, or other people call it the Elizabeth Street Garden. Unbeknownst to me at the time, the apartment that we got was in an area with a lot of anti-war activists. That’s how I got the apartment, through a friend of ours who was an anti-war activist. And it was Little Italy, really Little Italy, it had Italian bookstores, plenty of Italian restaurants, bakeries. It was also under the stewardship of the mafia, ok?

At one point, I was home, and I remember we had a—well, John, the Chicago 15 guy, and his girlfriend were staying with us for a few days, me and my girlfriend at the time. And his girlfriend came in out of breath, and she says, “Oh my god, you don’t know what I went through.” I said, “What happened?” “Well, I was coming from uptown down here, and I was being stalked by a guy. And then, when I crossed Houston Street, the guy turned around and ran away.” I said, “Well, that’s the neighborhood.”

One time, I went to a pizzeria at Prince Street and Mott, corner of Prince and Mott. I think it’s a pizzeria now, but it’s not the same pizzeria. And we walked, me and another friend of mine, Bob, a roommate, and we went to the counter. There was a guy sitting at one of those booths with a gold ring on every finger and a three-piece suit, and a hat. And we went to the counter, and we said, “We want a slice of pizza.” And the guy behind the counter said, “What? What do you want?” And the guy with the diamond ring said, “They want a slice of pizza, give them a slice of pizza.” He only had about three slices. That’s all he had in the pizzeria.

Dziedzic: You mean it was a front, or—

Orselli: Yes, of course. Yes. [Dziedzic laughs] Absolutely it was. But it was a safe neighborhood, for sure.

Dziedzic: Because it was guarded, in a sense, by—

Orselli: Yes. Now, amongst themselves, that’s a different story. I mean, we had—I forgot the name of this gangster that got shot down a few blocks away from where I lived when he was having dinner or something at the clam house, Umberto’s Clam House. But they didn’t mind us.

The problem we had, if anything, is because our block was filled with a number of anti-war activists. There was an organization called the Minutemen. And the Minutemen, at one point, came to our building, 219 Mott, and they put stickers that had the crosshairs of a rifle, and
it said, “Traitors beware.” And they were not just making empty threats. Sometime later, this group CNVA, that I mentioned before, they had a farm in Voluntown, Connecticut, CNVA farm. Then at one point, the people who run the farm were notified by the FBI to be careful because the Minutemen were planning an action at the farm. And sure enough, they came. The FBI was there, and they had a shootout with them, and the wife of one of my friends got shot by them. So the threat was real.

Dziedzic: Yes. So what did you know about some of the housing situations that were going on in the city—the neighborhood-based stuff—the attitude of the city toward certain neighborhoods, the shrinkage that you described? [00:45:04]

Orselli: Well, initially, I didn’t know very much. My involvement was either civil rights, or it was about the anti-war movement, plus going to school full time. When I started working at Cooper Square Committee, my first take on it—urban renewal—I said, they look to me like they’re a bunch of well-meaning people, but the way they go about it, they don’t understand the harm that they do in terms of displacement and so on. But it didn’t take long to figure out that that’s not true. They were fully aware of what they were doing. It wasn’t merely a question of taking down derelict buildings to build better housing; it was taking down the buildings and the people living in those buildings. And they would never be able to come back. They were promised that, like they were promised to the people living in Seward Park. And it took us generations to get that promise fulfilled. Most of them, of course, now are dead, but their children are qualifying and some are getting apartments there. Not that many.

Then, of course, with the experience of fighting against planned shrinkage, there was no longer any doubt. Now, with urban renewal, the weakness of urban renewal is that you had to notify the tenants that they’re going to be evicted. That gives them a chance to fight back, and that’s how the Cooper Square Committee came into being in 1959. But with planned shrinkage, you don’t have to do anything, like Roger Starr said, let natural processes take place. With some encouragement from the city, of course. You know?

Dziedzic: The city just cut service after service after service, and—

Orselli: That’s right.

Dziedzic: —then people voluntarily leave.
**Orselli:** They had about 25% cutback in police and fire protection. So the neighborhood became unsafe, buildings were torched, sometimes by tenants to get priority for public housing, other times by landlords to try and collect insurance because the rents are not sufficient to their needs. And all these gardens that you see on Loisaida, those were buildings that were torched in the ‘70s! Natural processes.

**Dziedzic:** Yes.

**Orselli:** Roger Starr was quite a person—if you’re going to do history, you should do some research on Roger Starr. He wrote an article in the *New York Times* magazine about how the city is predicated on the notion of taking the peasant and moving him to the city to make him become the urban proletariat. If we don’t have jobs for him in the city, why not have him go back to the country? Well, of course, there’s no jobs in the country either but that’s beyond—the other thing he’s known for is that he blamed the demise of New York City on gay movement. Don’t me ask to explain that one, I don’t know—but he blamed the gay people for it.

**Dziedzic:** Yes, I’ll save that for another day. I’m always thinking about, people want to get—all this stuff with Steve Bannon and the *New Yorker* festival, people want to get to know the enemy or something.

**Orselli:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** Well, I think, why don’t—

**Orselli:** He should have been allowed to come, that’s my take on it.

**Dziedzic:** Well, I always think, well, why don’t we spend more time understanding our allies and what our allies need? You know, that’s kind of—I can’t do it all, so I just—someday when I feel like listening to and learning about the enemy, I’ll go deep into Roger Starr. [laughs]

**Orselli:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** So I can you talk about your introduction to the Cooper Square Committee, and what your first exposure to them was?
Orselli: When I first came to the Cooper Square Committee, that was late ’72, I guess. After I got over my happiness over the salary I was going to get paid—I was still paying $37.19 rent, so $7,500 was more than adequate. And the plan was to get the plan fully implemented. And we went through all kinds of hoops. First of all, the lack of federal funding, so having to rely on city and state funding, and while it’s still true that we could get state funding, we were faced with—what’s the word that they use? Tipping point. And that is, if there’s too many low-income people in the neighborhood, the whole neighborhood’s going to go down the tube, so we have to have more middle income. So we changed our ratio. I think it was supposed to be sixty percent low, forty percent middle or moderate. We had to go for the opposite percentage, and still, we got no funding. So we were in dire straits.

Dziedzic: And that was what the city said about your plan, you have to switch those ratios.

Orselli: That was the state, the state.

Dziedzic: State.

Orselli: Yes. So we switched it, and it got us nowhere. So we basically held our ground. The city wouldn’t rent apartments to homeless or poor people; we moved them in. We made our own leases and gave it to them so they could go to Con Ed to get Con Ed service. [00:50:10] That’s when we were fighting Roger Starr. And then after the fight was over, when basically they agreed to do what we were demanding—essentially what we did is we, besides putting epoxy on the door of the HPD office across the street, we also did a community clean-up. In other words, we took every garbage can, with the support of the community, and dumped the contents by the city office, so they couldn’t get access.

The city retaliated at that point by cutting off services, including delivery of fuel; this was the winter. So we were trying to maintain the building as best we could. The boiler broke down. We had one of our people who is a boiler mechanic, who still lives here, across the street, David Barkin, but it was not a tenable situation. So that’s when we agreed to meet with the city, and they made a deal that if we got rid of the garbage, they would allow us again to start renting apartments out to low income people, and restore our funding, which, we didn’t have any.

At that point, I worked, and other people, like Lisa Kaplan for example, who was very active in the neighborhood, we worked for like eleven or thirteen months with no salary because
we got cut off by the city. So we agreed to clean up the front of the city office, that was the basis of it. And we did that at a meeting at HPD, 100 Gold Street—HDA in those days. And we said, ok, well, we got this meeting. We’re glad we got these problems out of the way. And then, “We have another meeting we have to go to,” the HPD people said. I asked, “What kind of meeting?” “With the Internal Revenue Service.” Because the IRS had frozen our bank accounts, and they wanted to talk about us with the city agency. I said, “Oh really? Well, if that’s the case, we’d like to be present for the meeting.” And they grinned and said, “We’d be happy to have you at the meeting, and talk about why you are not paying your taxes.”

So ok, we went after we had a meeting and we declared a peace truce with them. We went to meet with the IRS. So I said, “What’s the problem here? Why is our bank accounts frozen?” He said, “Well, we have a problem here; you guys owe the IRS a lot of money.” And I said, “Is the money that we owe”—I’m making up a number now, I can’t remember it anymore—“$23,700.55?” “Exactly,” he says. So we looked for a cancelled check that had the stamp of the IRS on it. Somehow the check was sent where it was supposed to be sent, but it was sent maybe and deposited in the wrong account. So the guy went, “Hm, ok. I need a copy of this check, but I think I can have your accounts unfrozen as of tomorrow or next week.”’ I said, “Good.” “But there’s still a problem.” I said, “What’s the problem?” “Well, you’re ten months late paying these taxes.” I said, “Yes, well, then you came to the right place. Talk to these people here, because they’re the ones who withheld our money.” And the guy said, “Wow, I heard of long delays involved in day care center, but not this.” So they were put in the hot seat. So it was a really big victory for us in those days.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Orselli: So—

Dziedzic: There’s one more thing I want to clarify with you—which, well, two things. One is, so when you joined as director of the Cooper Square Committee, and you had your background with all kinds of the anti-war resistance and peace movement, how did that meld with the politics and the tactics of the Committee as it already existed before you arrived?

Orselli: Well, I was interviewed by a number of people for coming to the organizer position, not the director position. And the, there was the chair, who was a woman named Lois Dodd, who’s
an artist, who resides on East 2nd Street. The director of the organization was Genoveva Clemente, and I don’t know who else was there, except for Frances Goldin, who was a founding member. So when I described my involvement in the anti-war movement, she was ecstatic. So that was something I was also surprised by—I thought maybe they would have a negative opinion about it. So after the vacancy occurred, I applied for it, and I got the position. Again, either way, we’re faced with the defunding, because of our opposition to Roger Starr and planned shrinkage. And then I should mention, I worked for the organization till 1977.

In ‘78, I left for several years to go work for ACORN in Louisiana. So I went to Louisiana. I was initially assigned to organize groups in the Lower Ninth Ward. That was also an experience. I had my car, a beautiful used Chevy Impala, which probably would be worth quite a bit of money now. And it was in perfectly good condition when I bought it. But when I went to organize in the Lower Ninth Ward—I’m sure it happens to you, too, when you get ready for a meeting, you’re concentrating on what you’re going to be discussing at the meeting, and nothing else? Well, I was doing the same thing, and before I knew it, I would hear, the car would go boom, boom, boom, boom. That was all the potholes because Lower Ninth Ward is not exactly the best neighborhood in New Orleans. So after a few weeks of it like that, my car started getting in bad condition.

But I worked for ACORN there, and then I also was asked to open up an ACORN office in Baton Rouge, in Louisiana. That was also education to me. I was organizing a group in an area of north Baton Rouge. It was called White Plains Brookstown neighborhood, I believe? It was a long time ago. And I was looking for a place to meet, and the two prime locations for a meeting that could have been available, one was an American Opinion bookstore. I don’t know if you know American Opinion, it was a magazine that’s run by the John Birch Society.

Dziedzic: The John Byrd Society?

Orselli: John Birch Society’s like ultra right wing. They have connection with the Koch brothers. The father of the current brothers was a founding member of the John Birch Society. On the other side—I forgot which was east or west, but one was in the east, one was west—was the Great Hall of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. And, of course, we couldn’t use either one. I found another location within the neighborhood that was satisfactory. That was educational, yes.
Dziedzic: Wow. The other question I want to clarify for myself is that, which is a very basic question, which is the buildings that you became involved with, that the Committee became involved with, how was it determined which buildings, which tenants you were protecting and which lots you had access to, and which buildings you were trying to get renovations for?

Orselli: Oh, after we went past the new buildings? Well, we wanted to get them all renovated. The way it was—this was during the Koch era, and Mayor Koch was promoting something called economic integration of a neighborhood, which meant building luxury housing in low-income neighborhoods. So we had a dialogue with him. We said, “We can support that. But we also need you to support building low income housing in upper income neighborhoods.” That didn’t go over too well.

This was also the time of the major drug epidemic, and every cinder block building in the Lower East Side was a front for drug dealers. They opened up a hole, and there was a market there. So Koch came up with the idea of demolishing all those buildings because they were drug havens. And we said ok to that also. But since the biggest drug dealers operate out of Wall Street, start at Wall Street. So that didn’t fly. And we knew that. They were just politics.

So then we realized that there was no more federal funding to create newly built housing. We had to switch to renovated low income housing, and the mayor still wanted to build market rate housing, so we offered him a deal—called it kind of a deal with the devil. We allowed the city to develop largely market rate housing on two vacant lots in the north and south side of Houston Street in exchange for twenty-five percent of the units for low income, and sufficient funding to renovate all the buildings in the Cooper Square area that were under the purview of the city. And that didn’t happen overnight, but they finally agreed to it.

And after they agreed to it, they came back to us and said, “Look, under what program do you want these buildings to be renovated?” And they had in those days, TIL, Tenants Interim Lease, community management. We looked at them, and we said, “We don’t like these programs because the end result after renovation is either the city pays for one or more systems, not the whole thing, or they pay for the whole thing, but the end result is stand-alone co-ops. And our experience with stand-alone co-ops is that even if they start with the majority of the residents being low income, it doesn’t end up that way. For a number of reasons: one is even if the building’s fully renovated, after twenty years, you need to have a new boiler installed. Or major repairs or replacement of the roof. Major capital improvements, in other words. Which our
tenants—in those days, when we did that, they were making an average of fifteen thousand a year—could not have afforded. So the city said, “Well, what do you want?” Also another thing is, under those programs, the only enforcement mechanism was a regulatory agreement and an enforcement mortgage. Pieces of paper—no teeth behind it, ok? Because they’re not self-enforcing. So that’s when we came up with the idea of creating two entities, the Mutual Housing Association, and the Community Land Trust. Ok? Can I take a short break?

**Dziedzic:** Yes, sure! Sure.

**BREAK IN RECORDING**

**Dziedzic:** Ok, so you were talking about the origin of the idea for the Mutual Housing Association and the Community Land Trust.

**Orselli:** Right. So there were two problems with the existing city programs. One is the fact that they ended up being individual co-ops, that would not be able to pay for major capital improvements at the end of the useful life of the systems, and the other one is that all too often, the boards of such HDFCs [Housing Development Fund Corporations] do not fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. That meant that apartments were sold under the table because there was really no enforcement mechanism. They didn’t increase the rent or the maintenance fees on a regular basis to keep up with expenses and building needs. And they didn’t properly maintain the buildings. So we said, “We don’t like those programs,” so they said, “What would you like instead?”

We had been working with some graduate students from the University of Amsterdam, and also we had Walter Thabit, who was a member of the board, a founding member and also a planner, and people from Pratt. And we scheduled a number of community meetings, because the Cooper Square Committee is a membership-based organization. And we looked for different possibilities, including TIL and community management, and we proposed a new approach to the housing, which was the creation of a Mutual Housing Association. What that meant was, instead of having individual buildings, we proposed to take all the buildings that we had, and re-develop them as a single cooperative.

That allowed us to create what’s called an economy of scale. Buildings were able to share the income and expenses. Income also meant commercial income, because about half the
buildings had storefronts, and half did not. And if you have an individual co-op, the building with the commercial income does well, the one without it doesn’t do well. Here, the income was shared. They had a common history of struggle, because they all were involved in the fight against the original urban renewal plan. And by bringing the buildings together, we were able to purchase insurance, fuel, supplies, services, at a discounted rate. Helping to keep the housing affordable.

And in addition to that, instead of having a single building with a small reserve fund, we had a common reserve fund, so when the time came to pay for a major repair, like it has happened, since it’s been more than twenty years since the building renovated. The money to make the repair didn’t come from a single building, it came from all the buildings united. Unless all the buildings had boiler fails at the same time, we were able to maintain it. And when I left the MHA, there was a reserve fund of close to a million dollars. At the same time, the affordability of the units was, ranged from 26.5% to 35.5% of AMI. In real numbers, it means a studio rented for, like, $350, and it was affordable to a household making $17,500 a year. Which is unheard of in New York City. All too often, $17,000 is cheap rent for an apartment, ok? So we were able to keep the housing affordable from that point of view, the economy of scale.

The other problem that we had to address is about our boards not being fully accountable. And if they’re not fully accountable, what to do. Well, in the worst case scenario, the city, if they do find out something is wrong—which basically means they don’t do the paperwork—they take them back. We said, “That’s not good. We don’t want to be taken back by the city.” So we created a Community Land Trust [CLT]. [01:04:56] And essentially, the proposal we made is that when the city conveyed the buildings to the Cooper Square MHA, the buildings would be conveyed to the MHA, the land would be conveyed to the Land Trust, and the Land Trust executed a ground lease for ninety-nine years, renewable, through the MHA HDFC. And by having a ground lease, meaning the Land Trust owns the land, they were also entitled to appoint, one third of the MHA board as a monitor, as a steward. And that is going on to the present day. They have five members appointed by the CLT. They look to make sure the finances are done properly, the repairs are being done, that rent fee increases or maintenance fee increases are increased every year. And the housing has remained affordable all these years.

It also has another benefit, which is you can’t sell your apartment because if I have my apartment to sell to you, and you’re going to pay me, say, a cheap price—$500,000—your
lawyer will say you’ve got to do a title search. Because what you want—what you’re liable to—want is a clear title. And when they look at the title, they find that the title is encumbered by the Land Trust ownership of the land. So the Land Trust does not approve. Not only you get evicted, but you lose your money. So that has been a serious deterrent to speculation. Not a complete deterrent, because there’s always something else you can do, meaning you can sublet. Ok, legally, of course, it’s allowed, but also illegally, ok?

Dziedzic: So two clarifying questions then: how does ownership look when you can’t sell?

Orselli: Right.

Dziedzic: How does ownership look when it’s not a real estate investment?

Orselli: Good question. It has been clarified by me, in terms of my own research, by working with the Catholic Worker, and reading about Dorothy Day’s beliefs—although we didn’t get our inspiration from Dorothy Day—and that is, we are basically trying to do one thing, the only way to keep housing permanently affordable: that is to decommodify the housing. So you can’t make a financial profit, but you can make what you call a social equity return. Not financial equity, but social equity. And what that translates into is very simple: if instead of paying $1,400 a month for your apartment, you pay $350 or $500 a month, the leftover money can go into paying for a better education for yourself, or your children, better healthcare, travel, profession.

We have a member, one of our tenants, who works for La MaMa. La MaMa pays very little money, but it’s what they want to do. And they can afford to do it because we have the housing here. Another benefit, which we’re trying to encourage even more, is you can put money aside and start a business. We have a really good, albeit small, restaurant, called Piccola Strada, 77 East 4th Street. Their food is excellent. Italian food, and I think I know Italian food, and it’s excellent. And it’s reasonably priced. And they were interviewed recently by a foundation, I guess, and said, “Where did you find the money to start a business?” “Well, we put money away every month for a few years, because the rent was so cheap, and we were able to start a business.”

That means the difference between financial and social equity is, if you’re able to sell your money for market value, you do well, but next person doesn’t get the apartment if they’re low income because they can’t afford it. In this instance, you get your apartment, you can stay there in perpetuity, you can pass it on to your children, and if you ever do move out, then the
same opportunity is provided to another tenant, who needs affordable housing—which is a major priority for the city now. And it’s counter to the prevailing paradigm that the city has been using for many years.

One of our buildings was renovated pursuant to the TIL program. And they distributed to the tenants of that building a frequently asked questions brochure. One of the frequently asked questions was, how soon can I sell my apartment? And the HPD corrected them, of course. You can sell shares in your apartment because you don’t own the apartment, you own shares. You can sell shares in your apartment from the moment you take ownership of the building. But you’re better off waiting till the renovation is completed because they’re going to be worth more. I mean, I couldn’t believe, I saw it in black and white, but it’s there. [01:09:55]

By and large, our community bought into this model. But times are changing. The original tenants were replaced by their children, who may not have been part of the struggle. And of course, when we had a significant number of people moving in by way of the lottery, they had no part of the struggle, and they didn’t share the ideology. So we ran into problems. We had a case of a board member who had a leadership position at the organization, and owned a condo in Larchmont, New York. And we had to take drastic action to get rid of her. Hopefully, maybe she was the only one, but I know it’s not. They’re hard to find. But if we did not have the Land Trust, I feel very strongly sure that the MHA housing would no longer be affordable.

Dziedzic: And the other question I had was how people will talk about how they have to raise the rents to pay the property taxes. So how do property taxes work for the lots owned by the Community Land Trust?

Orselli: Good question. First, in general, most HDFC co-ops get J-51 tax abatement, which is good for between twenty and twenty-seven years, and then you’re on your own. And you’re supposed to raise the maintenance fees sufficiently so you can afford to pay the full taxes when the taxes become due. Many if not most HDFC co-ops have not done that, and they’ve been facing a crisis. I went to a meeting for our buildings along with Andy Reicher from UHAB [Urban Homesteading Assistance Board], to try to talk about a different tax abatement, and that’s the problem they had—that the boards did not fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities, and now they needed a break.
In our case, because we do not have a profit-making aspect to the co-op, we advocated, first, to try to get J-51. We couldn’t get it because it took so long to renovate the buildings—with tenants in place being relocated temporarily—that we missed the deadlines for J-51. And I’m giving you a simplified version, ok? The city was supposed to get us J-51, and then they turned the task over to us, and the documentation was lost by the city. But we advocated, and we finally were able to convince the city to give us what they call an Article XI tax abatement. Article XI require that the families be of low income, meaning of eighty percent of area median income or below, and of course to abide all kinds of re-sale restrictions. And we were really happy to do so, it wasn’t a problem for us.

So our buildings, after we fought for years to get J-51, and failed, except for two or three buildings, were granted full real estate tax abatement for forty years, renewable, as long as we agreed to extend the restrictions. And actually provide the tax abatement for the commercial as well as residential, which generally does not happen, retroactive to the time we took ownership of the building to the present time. That was about five years ago. And then of course the residents are exempted from real estate taxes; the commercial had to pay taxes, which was a rude awakening for them, because they weren’t aware of that. The city sent them tax bills that were ten months due. You know, retroactive. And we had to try to explain to the commercial tenancy why it was their responsibility to pay. I said, they paid no taxes for ten or fifteen years. But that’s how it’s done.

The only difference we had with the city—it wasn’t difference—but the only thing we wanted to add to the regulatory agreement for tax abatement is that where the regulatory agreement and the land lease differ in their requirements, the stricter requirements shall prevail. And they agreed to that. So that’s where we are today.

Dziedzic: So as long as you continue to offer the housing to low income residents and have resale restrictions, then—

Orselli: Right, yes.

Dziedzic: —as of now, there’s a full abatement on property taxes.

Orselli: Yes, that is correct. And when we sought the Attorney General’s approval for the co-op plan—because that took years also—there were two or three things that the AG emphasized.
First of all, having a building on 3rd Street, a building on 4th Street, a building on Second Avenue, Stanton Street, is not common. You can have a thousand units in a co-op, but they’re all contiguous for the most part. And here, they’re all over the place, built at different times, with different problems, initially, in selling. And the AG agreed to do that because of the common history of struggle, because of the urban renewal plan. Which was also one of the conditions that were met when the Lower East Side/East Village District was designated historic, they referenced the Cooper Square struggle as residents. [01:15:05] The second thing was that they needed for us to get the tax abatement; you know, they were not approving a co-op owing sixteen million dollars, actually fourteen million dollars that we certainly wouldn’t be able to pay. And the third one was the role of the Community Land Trust. Without the Land Trust, we would not have been able to co-op these buildings. That was said to us verbally, not in writing.

But there was another group called MHANY, the Mutual Housing Association of New York that’s in Brooklyn, they had two and three family homes. They wanted to do, similar to what we did, to convert into a co-op, and they were turned down because they didn’t have a Land Trust in place. The AG used to work previously for UHAB, and she had seen what happened with HDFCs when they’re on their own. And we were given the approval. By way, not of a formal co-op plan but a no-action letter. Are you familiar with no-action letter? Essentially, when you do a co-op conversion, they had to go through a series of books—you had to have a red herring, and then you had to have financial reports for every year, and someone—which if you’re doing twenty-one buildings, would have been quite expensive—auditing reports for each building. Because of the fact that there’s no profit involved, because of the current history of the buildings, because of the Land Trust, the Attorney General had the ability to issue a letter, which is called a no-action letter, that says if you plan to convert these buildings to a co-op, we will take no action to stop you. And that, legally, is sufficient for us to go ahead.

Dziedzic: So that was the big approval, the no-action letter.

Orselli: Yes, very hard to get, but we got it.

Dziedzic: And the reason why the other co-op conversions that you referenced, in Brooklyn, for example, would be turned down is that, is how effective the Community Land Trust is at enforcing the resale restrictions.
Orselli: Right. Yes. Right now, they are facing a crisis in different parts of the city. I’m working with the East Harlem Community Land Trust to help them out, also, but even in Harlem, a lot of the HDFC co-ops are failing. And the city came up with a solution to the failing HDFCs, which is, they’re called ANCP, Affordable Neighborhood Cooperative Program. And if you look at it—under TIL you’re supposed to have elections every year or two, you’re supposed to have financial records, you have to know who’s the tenant of record, who’s not. The ANCP program requires the same stuff. But I call it a TIL on steroids, because essentially they say, if you don’t do that, we’re going to take you off the program. So they failed under TIL, and you’re going to put them in a program that requires even more discipline than TIL. I don’t know where that’s going to go.

But we are looking at the other factor that we haven’t really discussed is, despite the economy of scale that I referenced, and despite the Land Trust’s existence, expenses are going to keep going up. And even at a discounted rate, fuel’s going to cost more today than it was a year or two ago. And the same thing with insurance. The only way to also insure permanent affordability is to expand the Community Land Trust and the MHA to other buildings. So we’re now in the process of doing so. We’re in the process of taking over two buildings that had problems with taxes on East 3rd and East 4th Street. And there’s another building that was just notified that they’re going to be taken out of the program effective October 1, on East 3rd Street, on the Hell’s Angels block. Because they didn’t do any of those things that I mentioned—didn’t have elections, they’re using storefront space for storage instead of getting income from it—and we’re hoping that maybe we can help those tenants by bringing them in. And we need to do that.

The other thing we’re working on, which you may have heard about, is we’re looking at church property. We’re looking specifically at Nativity Church. That used to be the church where Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker, used to go and pray on a regular basis. And the archdiocese wants to sell the property for market value, which could be as much as fifty million dollars. And we felt it was like an outrage that they would do something like that, particularly with the church identified with Dorothy Day. They initially refused to meet with us, and then we, with the help of a local priest, Father Sean McGillicuddy, from Most Holy Redeemer—that also supervises Nativity even though the church is closed—we were able to meet with the real estate director of the archdiocese, a man named David Brown. [01:20:11]
We basically gave him a proposal where we offered him $18.5 million dollars, $5 million up front and then the rest over a period of time, and we would take over Nativity to create 113 units of senior housing, which is very much needed. And that can be another conversation we can have—people are staying in place, aging in place, and before you know it, they become prisoners of their apartment. There’s no elevator in that building, they have walk-ups. He never answered yes or no to our proposal, except for a few months later we mounted a campaign in which we had people sign and mail these postcards to the archdiocese, asking the archdiocese to meet with us and to move forward our proposed plan.

He finally agreed to meet with us—the real estate broker for the archdiocese. He formally rejected our plan because he said, it’s not $18.5 million, it’s more like $10 million because a dollar today’s worth more than a dollar tomorrow. And that’s real estate dictum. But because of the pressure that the archdiocese fell under, they agreed to put the sale of Nativity Church on hold to give us an opportunity to come up with an alternate proposal. And that’s what we’re working on right now.

Dziedzic: Well, the residential buildings that you’re looking at, that you’re interested in taking over, the ones that are kind of eligible for your intervention or acquisition by the CLT are ones that are basically in some kind of tax crisis and then would go back to the city? Or are they buildings that already have a relationship to the city, and like you said, they’re failing to meet their—

Orselli: The buildings in question all had relationships with the city, but they failed in their fiduciary responsibilities—to keep it as simple as possible of an answer, ok?

Dziedzic: And then for buildings like the church. Is the church in a similar situation, or is this the CLT looking at kind of commercially viable, potentially market rate buildings, but advocating for this transition even though there’s not a profit to be made?

Orselli: The church is the biggest owner of real estate in New York City. They also developed a substantial amount of low-income housing. The problem is that they are, for reasons good and bad—the bad reasons is what’s making the papers nowadays, like in the last two years, the New York archdiocese paid out like $16 million dollars in payments to victims, ok? But they also had to do, let’s say repairs on the church structure. Like right now there’s major repairs work being
done on Most Holy Redeemer, for example. So the way they look at it is, they want to sell properties to raise the money. And which properties are the most valuable? Well, the properties in gentrifying or gentrified neighborhoods like Nativity Church.

They would be much more open to having a real discussion or dialogue with us if we were talking about doing properties in the South Bronx. But we’re not in the South Bronx, we’re here. And people are very insistent that they want to remain here. There’s a great deal of attachment to the Lower East Side. And we’ve been through our own tragedies like the Second Avenue fire, for example, which ended up with about ten of their tenants being moved into MHA apartments. One of the tenants, Mildred Guy, is a schoolteacher and she’s part of the parish council. And she says, “I want to remain here.” Ok? We’ll need to find a way to make a deal.

We tried to appeal to the social justice precepts of the church. Like, Pope Luis XIII, he issued a pastoral letter back in 1891, talking about permanently affordable housing that is owned by working class people and that can be passed on to new generations. Pope Pius XI, forty years later, reiterated the same principles, and appealed to the church to do so. But no success, it seems. There’s a possibility in opening up, because partly of our modest role in this—and I think it is really modest, but we’re not the only ones—they’re going to have a conference in November at the Vatican about the proper use of church property. I think they’re focusing less on housing, affordable housing, than on other inappropriate uses, like converting a church into a nightclub, for example. But we’re hoping to be able to present a paper to the Vatican as part of this conference that will raise the issue of affordable housing based on the very principles cited by two different popes. And of course supported by Dorothy Day.

I can go on about Dorothy Day because I made it my business to read about her, and read about what she did. She’s very much part of the Lower East Side history. I don’t know if you ever interviewed her, you should have.

Dziedzic: No, unfortunately not.

Orselli: Yes, she passed away about twenty years ago, so, too late now.

Dziedzic: Yes. Let me see if there’s anything that I have written down in terms of the history that I think you—

Orselli: Sure. And I’m sorry if I’ve been rambling—
Dziedzic: No, you haven’t, actually, there were some kind of foundational pieces that I wasn’t able to understand that you’ve helped explain, so, that’s been very helpful.

Orselli: I can give you also an organization description, if that will help you to put together a narrative of some kind.

Dziedzic: Well, I read through the whole website of the MHA—

Orselli: But that doesn’t cover the CLT as much.

Dziedzic: Oh, yes. Yes, anything you have, I’d be happy to look at.

Orselli: Sure.

Dziedzic: So I guess I want to go back to this, the second time that you were the director—

Orselli: Of the MHA.

Dziedzic: Actually of the Cooper Square Committee.

Orselli: Ok, the Cooper Square Committee.

Dziedzic: Back to the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Orselli: Yes.

Dziedzic: Which to me seemed like when some of the renovations actually got underway.

Orselli: Just the beginning of it, yes.

Dziedzic: I would like to hear about—it seems like you were, as you mentioned, talking to the federal government, the state, the city—

Orselli: Right, right, right.

Dziedzic: —a lot of unpredictable funding—but when renovations actually started, can you talk about that, and where the funding came from?

Orselli: Sure. Well, I’m going to tell you another very significant point, which is that not everyone in our community supported our plan. And they were led by a gentleman named
Antonio Pagán, who was a councilmember for this area because of a crazy electoral situation—the vote was split. And he happened to be a resident in one of the buildings slated to go into the MHA at 7 East 3rd Street. He would come to those meetings that I referred to before, where the committee was asked to give input, and he would say comments—he would keep his hands raised from the beginning of the meeting to the end of the meeting, to make sure that every chance he got, he would be recognized. He would say, “I don’t understand why in a capitalist society, I should not be able to sell my piece of the rock.” And he did organize his people, including temporary tenants, to sign the petition and their building went into TIL. And they did well, basically. They had commercial space on the ground floor, two storefronts. But he was vehement in opposition to the Mutual Housing Association project, ideology philosophy.

I don’t know if you know much about our friend Antonio, but he was elected to office with the support of real estate. The small property owners of New York, real estate whatever, the rent stabilization association. And he actually went as far as making a promise to local speculators, like this gentleman named Richard Boodman. I actually like Richard Goodman, although he’s a self-described speculator, that if he got funding from Richard and SPONY [Small Property Owners of New York] for his election, he would help Richard to gain ownership of one or more of the Cooper Square buildings. Pagan was like Donald Trump, he didn’t have any set beliefs. So he didn’t have any loyalty to the people that gave him the money, and ironically, if you put myself and Richard in a room to talk about Pagan, my comments would be mild compared to what Richard’s comments would be. He said to me at one point, “I know what you stand for. I didn’t know what Pagán stood for.” He stood for himself, essentially. So we had first to defeat Pagan.

When this process—before we took ownership of the buildings, or even before the buildings could go ahead with renovation, they had to be approved at the City Council. And as you must know from working with the Greenwich Village Society, if a Council member is opposed to a project in their district, that project is basically dead. Well, we organized a major campaign—we being the Cooper Square Committee at that point—and we met, individually, more than half of all the City Council people. [01:30:06] We were helped by the fact that Antonio was not the most likeable person in City Council. He made it a habit of coming to a hearing to make himself present; ten minutes or fifteen minutes later, he would leave and never come back.
But we did our homework. We explained to people what the whole struggle was about, and when time came for a vote, I forgot the exact number of all council people there are, it’s like fifty or so, something like that? I forget. But every single council member voted for our project, with two exceptions: Pagán and a gentleman named Ognibene, who was a councilmember from Queens. A Republican, at that. Everyone else voted for us.

So after that was done, we moved ahead, and we started doing the renovation. We started with two buildings—well actually, we started with one or two vacant buildings. And then we went on to two buildings. The first building was done—I guess because the renovation we did it to was not finished yet—with the tenants in place. So we basically got half the building vacated, and we did renovation there, and then we did renovation on the other half of the building. An experience I will not repeat. I don’t support—except if there’s no other choice—a renovation with tenants in place. Because it’s hell. They’ll tell you, “Don’t worry about dust. We’re going to put special plastic to ensure there’s no dust.” It never works, ok? We were going to do that with the second building until we found out there was asbestos in the hallways, so we couldn’t do it.

And after that, everybody else was relocated to other places. Because the buildings were largely fully occupied, we could do no more than, say, two buildings at a time, and the renovations took around eighteen months each. So we took from, what was it—I can’t remember anymore—1990 to 1996. 1996 we took over ownership of the first ten buildings after renovation was completed. And that was only the first ten. We had another eleven buildings that we had to keep doing it. And, the way that the city does—basically they try to do cookie cutter type of renovations, and we knew that our tenants would not go for that. So we involved the tenants in putting together the architectural plans for the building. We basically said, “What do you want?” and we also told them, “These are the rules.” A one bedroom has to be at least eighty square feet.

I used to have—I used to live here, initially, back in the early ‘70s, in a building, 75 East 4th Street. I had what was called a two-bedroom apartment. The two-bedroom consisted of two long, whatever, corridors, six foot to nine foot each, with an arch in the middle so that it designated which was a bedroom from the other one, and with a window. That, after renovation, became a studio. One building, the city wanted to do all studios, and the tenants said, “We don’t go for that.” So we encouraged the tenants to refuse to move, and they stayed put until they got their preferred redevelopment option accepted.
Sometimes they were not very wise, the tenants. Like the building 75, that I just referenced, most people went along with the idea of either having two bedrooms or studios. Two bedrooms by combining two apartments, and studios by, like, taking my two-bedroom, and making it into a studio. So some people said, we need privacy, we want to have a one-bedroom. The one-bedrooms are ten square feet smaller than the studios. That’s what they ended up with. You couldn’t even put a queen sized bed inside it. Because these were, really, tenement buildings.

As much as I appreciate historic preservation—and of course we supported it when it came to designating the neighborhood as historic—those buildings were deserving of demolition. But they had historic significance if you look at the designation statement by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, there’s French this, Italianate that. But, we’re fine. We supported it because we saw historic designation as a deterrent to large-scale development and market rate housing. But it had its victims, just designation. Groups that don’t fit the cookie cutter model—for example, the Catholic Worker. Ok? They are a non-profit organization, but out of principle, they do not have non-profit status. They do not want the government to give an approval. So they get none of the benefits, and all the problems of designation. And they can’t even get money to do the renovation, because they don’t have a 501(c)3, [01:35:06] out of principle; they could get it. But I think for the most part the designation was helpful rather than unhelpful.

**Dziedzic:** The original plan was to move some people—to build new housing on some vacant lots, and then to move some people to that.

**Orselli:** Phase one, yes.

**Dziedzic:** So was that ever able to happen?

**Orselli:** Yes, there were two projects that were built back in 1985—occupied in ‘85, built in 1984. One is 10 Stanton Street, which is between Christie and the Bowery. Another one on 5th Street, just around the corner from here. That’s the JASA project for seniors. That was it. Everything else had been for renovation, except for the new housing built by Avalon Bay, where we got twenty-five percent of the units for low income families. The rest was market rate. As far as the funding is concerned, the original plan that we offered to the city is to allow the city to sell the vacant land to a developer in exchange for what I described, the twenty-five percent low
income, and also sufficient funding for the renovation of our buildings. But the city’s always looking for money. So in reality, they sold the property, the land, to the developer, but they also, the city, also applied for federal funding.

They got funding from a federal program called HOPE 2, Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere. A Republican plan that would require co-op conversion. We were already planning a co-op plans—that wasn’t a problem for us. But they forced the same model—in order to be able to get the federal funding—on a group on the west side, and they were not ready for co-op plans. They opted to do rental. So they pushed them, they failed. And the city had to take back the buildings. The other thing, when I go to meetings with other entities, like the Ford Foundation, or even groups all over the city who are now asking for our expertise and advice to start CLT’s, I say, “This is more effective, the CLT model, than the traditional model of the city giving you a regulatory agreement, and legal paper, which is not self-enforcing.” But is not a panacea. It is not a cure for everything. And second of all, even if I were to tell you that this is an ideal model because it worked for us, it’s not necessarily going to work for you or for you or for you, unless it’s adapted to local conditions, and accepted and supported by the local community. You cannot impose a model on a community; it’s not going to work. That’s what happened on the west side. It was imposed and it didn’t work.

Dziedzic: And this was wholly organic, in a way.

Orselli: Yes.

Dziedzic: Don’t want to make it sound like—take the labor out of it, by calling it organic, but it was continually adapted and revised—

Orselli: Absolutely.

Dziedzic: —to fit the conditions.

Orselli: We had to deal with conditions. But also had to have an active role by the tenants of the buildings affected.

Dziedzic: Are you able to talk about some of the differences in the buildings, and the tenants that are part of the MHA, compared to some of the squats in the neighborhood that got converted to co-ops?
Orselli: Well, that’s another sore point. Cooper Square started out, when it was part of a coalition called the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, in support of squatting. And our members, many of them, engage in squatting, and we even did it here during the fight against Roger Starr. But during the early ‘80s, we participated in a community planning process, sponsored by the Joint Planning Council, to come up with a community-based plan that would meet local needs. And it had two or three different parts, which I don’t want to go into, like one part just calling for mandatory inclusionary zoning, which only recently has come to fruition, although we had it here as of about ten years ago. Another one called for a local enforcement unit, to protect the rights of tenants, and the third part called for the redevelopment of the housing, all of it, for low-income people.

We faced opposition to that from different groups, including folks in the Grand Street co-ops, who felt we already had too much low-income housing. So the ultimate agreement was a compromise, fifty-fifty deal. Fifty percent would be low income, concentrated on the buildings that existed, and fifty percent would be market rate, in the vacant lots. [01:39:58] We eventually won approval from the city for such a compromise, that had the support of the community board. So all the vacant buildings were set aside for low-income housing. And that’s when this new squatting movement came in, and it took them over.

This was not the exclusive view, but it was the view of most of the active members of the Joint Planning Council, that just—tried to put themself at the head of the line. There were people that were waiting patiently for the housing to be built, and they took it over. So they took over a number of buildings. We did not support them. I was pilloried all over the place—a sellout because “he didn’t support the squatters.” By and large, while there were homeless people that were part of the squatting movement, and there were some minorities, there were a lot of white people who had other choices. And took over buildings. Many, if not most, were eventually evicted. But some managed to remain.

The remaining buildings must have been during the Margarita Lopez period of time—they agreed to make some kind of a deal with the city. The city would provide them with loans or grants to renovate the buildings, but then they had to abide by resale restrictions. These were the people that were accusing us of being “Sellouts,” and “The Revolution Today,” “Time is Up,” all kinds of slogans. Well, when they came across the documents about resale restrictions, all of a
sudden, they became capitalists. They said, “Why can’t we make a profit like everybody else from these properties?” Well, because the documents say you can’t.

But to me it confirmed those suspicions. You know, pseudo revolutionaries, who are not willing to compromise until they felt they could make some money out of it. So that’s my opinion. There’s books written about that struggle in which they are very sympathetic to the squatters, and they proposed that if only the squatters could join with the Joint Planning Council, they could get so much further. But the two were totally antagonistic.

**Dziedzic:** And the ways in which those buildings went co-op was also, the first time that the MHA proposed that the buildings do a co-op conversion, it was a no eviction conversion, that’s right?

**Orselli:** Right.

**Dziedzic:** And the, a lot of the squats didn’t have that option, it was, they needed to come up with a down payment, or they would get evicted from the co-op, is that right? It was a different conversion process.

**Orselli:** Yes, I don’t know all the details, because we were not involved in that, ok?

**Dziedzic:** Yes.

**Orselli:** But yes, they had to come up with some money. But they didn’t want to just get their money back; they wanted to be able to reap a windfall profit. So the other thing also I need to mention about the Cooper Square MHA CLT model is that in other co-ops, you had to take out loans, in order to make the rehab happen, that had to be repaid. The city, in our case, because of the agreement we made, gave us basically grants. They were loans in the form of enforcement mortgages, meaning if you break the rules, we’ll take the buildings back, or you had to pay us the money we gave you. But if you follow the rules, upon the expiration of the mortgages, the buildings were free and clear. And we could actually probably have sold them for profit if we had wanted to, but that’s not our goal. Our goal is to keep the housing permanently affordable. And since the entire rehab was paid for by taxpayer money, we found there was no justification to allow people to make a profit for it.

**Dziedzic:** Can you talk about the cube building?
**Orselli:** Oh, my goodness, sure.

**Dziedzic:** [laughs] Am I just bringing up all the contentious stuff?

**Orselli:** The cube building was a vacant building, like back in the mid-‘80s. There had been attempts to renovate it a couple of times by private owners and somehow there were fires, so the building, when we got involved with it, was like a shell of a building. We were contacted by a group of homesteaders—you could call them squatters but they were homesteaders. They were trying to homestead the building and renovate it through their own efforts. And we agreed to help them. And we confronted the city. Different times, we had—there’s a picture somewhere of one of our tenants, Mike Landin sitting on a ladder to prevent speculators from going to visit the building.

This was after Roger Starr was gone. Or was he gone? Yes, he was gone—right, they had a new nemesis called Anthony Gleidman. And Anthony Gleidman wanted to dispose of the building under something called the dollar sales program. [01:45:04] What that meant is that you could purchase that building for as little as a dollar, but you would not get any city subsidy to renovate it. It’d be entirely up to you, which meant market rate housing. So we opposed that, and we worked initially with the homesteaders—about two or three, not many. Eventually they dropped out, and we applied for funding from the New York State Homeless Housing Assistance Program [HHAP], also New York State Housing Trust Fund, in some way.

As we continued to oppose what the city was doing, which was moving ahead with the ULURP [Uniform Land Use Review Procedure] proceeding to dispose of the building. And of course we tried to get support. We were lucky, in certain respects, and that was first, we had a new regime with HPD with Roger Starr gone. We met with the deputy commissioner there, and we asked him, look, if I wrote to get funding, will you give certain priority to our project? He says, “Yes, I can do that.” And second of all, can you give us a temporary site control letter, because to be able to apply for funding, you had to have a site control letter. And he said, “Yes.” Ok, right now, let’s get the letter. So right on the spot—he was very supportive of us—he gave us a support letter. We walked it over to the state HHAP office, and we were in the running for funding.

Now, what happens next is that HHAP agreed to give us a substantial amount of money, I think it was like $650,000, plus we had to get additional money elsewhere. But the way it
worked is the HHAP was supposed to submit a letter of the buildings that they proposed to fund. And Anthony Gleidman was supposed to approve the list. Well, as a result of certain internal things, we were notified, based on the original list, that we had been approved for funding—before Anthony Gleidman had a chance to strike us out of the list. And then he said, “Well, you included this building, I didn’t want that building to be funded,” said, “Ah, it must have slipped through our fingers here. You can go ahead and tell them that you rejected them for funding, but it’s on you.” So he wasn’t willing to show his face publicly against the project.

Now, the other thing was that the building was being ULURP’ed by it being in the dollar sales program. And out of principle, we refused to apply under dollar sales program. But we had gotten political support. So when the Board of Estimate finally decided on the destiny of this building, the resolution they passed was, it authorized the city to try to convey the building to an applicant or a non-applicant under the dollar sales program. So we were awarded the building as a non-applicant to the dollar sales program. We were able to get that—we got money from the state, we got money from everybody—we had to give money to HPD. We paid them, like, $17,000 for the building, which was being offered to speculators for a dollar a piece.

Then we renovated it, and the building was occupied on Christmas Eve, 1988. We’re reaching an anniversary here, now. And it was very touching. I went to 10th Street—it was a flower shop—and I got a Christmas tree, and we brought it down to the storefront space that was vacant at that point, and we lit it up for Christmas Eve. And then I had the infinite pleasure of taking a whole bunch of children—there were children of the tenants—I had one girl on my shoulders, and one child in each arm. And we walked them over to their new homes.

I would say, to this day, first of all, the maintenance fees are outrageously low. A one bedroom rents for $330. And it has an elevator. I would say more than half of the tenants that moved in back in 1988 are still there. In some cases, it’s not them, in some cases, it’s their children. We have some new people that came in. Our claim was that the biggest problem with homeless people is the lack of housing. And it’s still going strong.

The secret to that, why it’s still affordable, is we have something like twenty-five hundred feet of commercial space on the ground floor, and a wireless antenna installation by AT&T on the roof. [01:50:05] Which is one of those things we’re emphasizing. Many groups, when they do low income housing development, they rely on subsidies from renting a portion of the units to market rate tenants. If we have no choice—again, we’re not purists whatever works,
works—but we do think that market rate tenants along with low-income tenants can have a destabilizing effect on the concept of community, so we prefer to use commercial space. For the MHA buildings, for example, some 27% of our income comes from commercial space. And I think that’s the way to go. Actually, I was at a meeting with Ken Wray, who’s a director of CATCH, Community Assisted Tenant Controlled Housing—I think that’s what it stands for—up in the Bronx. I asked him what percentage of his operating income comes from market rate residential, and he said 27%. I said, “That’s the same percentage we use, but using commercial space.” It’s a matter of emphasis.

Dziedzic: Yes. Yes, with this current administration’s approach to low income housing, I know there was some issue with different entrances into the building, and just all these— anyway, your point is very clear to me, that it undermines community, or it can.

Orselli: There was an issue about the entrance of the cube building, by the way, since you mentioned that. And that was, the guy next door to the cube building, a guy named Evan Blum, he was the owner of a company called Irreplaceable Artifacts. And he had a warehouse next door to it, and he wanted the building. And one of his complaints was that if you’re going to do the building, put the entrance on 1st Street, not on Second Avenue, where I have my entrance, because it’s detrimental to my business. He was a piece of work. Back in, I guess, maybe the year 2000—I don’t remember exactly—he did some work on his property without a permit, and despite a stop work order—he was going to do a café out on the property—and he took down a load-bearing wall, so there was a partial collapse. As a result of the partial collapse, when the Department of Buildings came to demolish it, because the building was structurally unsound, they also pulled away the wall of the cube building because the two were attached. So the tenants of the cube building had to be evacuated, and put into shelters, or had to move in with family members.

I ran into him on the street, when I was taking some pictures of the building, he says, “You must be happy now. You finally got me out of the way.” I said, “Yes, I’m really happy. You made twenty-two families homeless once again, and I’m very happy with that, for sure.” And in the meantime he was crying to the New York Times that he lost his two cats there.

Dziedzic: Well, I wanted to ask about what are the organizations—the other organizations, community organizations, housing organizations—that have been, I guess, allies through all of
this? I know, in a way, it kinda seems like everybody’s fighting for their own piece—but on the other hand are there organizations that you’ve been able to have long term relationships with?

**Orselli:** Well, first of all, ironically, this project that I talked about, when we got the deal with the Lower East Side Cross Subsidy Plan for the area east of Avenue A that resulted in like over a thousand units of low income housing—that’s the good of it, and I’m fully in support of that. The bad of it is the number of member groups like the Joint Planning Council—member groups—started to switch their hats from being community organizers to being developers, because they got this money from the city to renovate the buildings. So it was a great deal of diminution of organizing activities, because that’s something we used to do way back then, but we don’t have to do that anymore. And I think that was a capital mistake, ok? A number of those groups went under, for all kinds of reasons. Pueblo Nuevo is no longer there, Action For Progress, no longer there, It’s Time is no longer there—these were our premiere organizations. Cooper Square has managed to remain because they remained faithful to the idea of organizing as the main priority. Cooper Square Committee—there’s that movie being made about Frances Goldin and the Committee—

**Dziedzic:** Right.

**Orselli:** —called *It Took Fifty Years*, and it looked like it was a long time. But they overlook, or they don’t give enough emphasis that Cooper Square did more than fight to redevelop the area in terms of housing, but they created organizations. [01:55:04] Cooper Square Committee created the BRC, the Bowery Residents’ Committee. It was called a committee because it was a committee of Cooper Square. It was organized by the gentlemen named John Tussa, who was a social worker, and Cooper Square gave him his first loan to get started, and office space. Then they got to be so big that once, on the Cooper Square Committee, I compared budgets and their surplus was bigger than the Committee’s entire budget for the year. And I’m sure they have grown since.

They did a food co-op. They organized the Lower East Side Drug Free Zone Coalition, the Lower East Side Co-op Watch, where Janet—forgot her last name—but she had a block, and it was literally named after her. Janet Freeman. A wonderful person. She should have been interviewed also, but she had a terrible vice, which was smoking. I used to talk with her
regularly, say, “Janet, you gotta stop smoking.” And she would say, “Leave me alone! Leave me alone.” And as usual, she decided to stop smoking only months before she passed away.

As far as current organizations, we do work with a number of them. We work with the Lower East Side People’s Mutual Housing Association. We work with FAB [Fourth Arts Block], which is a cultural group, because we’re also involved in helping create a cultural district here. We work with the community board. I’m trying to think of groups. Well, Greenwich Village Society, we work with them. We work with Good Old Lower East Side, and the MHA and CLT work with the Cooper Square Committee. The Committee particularly has been very helpful to us, in helping us to crunch numbers for the Nativity project, and helping to organize meetings and events. And, of course, we work with the MHA. But there’s not that many. And we do some work with AAFE, but AAFE pretty much sticks to the Chinatown area.

Dziedzic: What’s AAFE?

Orselli: The Asian Americans for Equality. Margaret Chin, the council member, used to be director, before she ran for City Council.

Dziedzic: And how did your role change when you became the Executive Director of the MHA?

Orselli: It’s a good question again. As the Director of Cooper Square Committee, my role was clear: I was an advocate for affordable housing. And, many a time, an advocate against landlords, of one kind or another, or speculators, like the whole fight against Pagán—we led the fight. Once I became Director of the MHA, there was a shift—a little bit—in terms of the MHA’s philosophy. It was evolving in the direction of being like a conventional manager-owner, and it didn’t seem to deal with the contradiction of the tenant as a landlord.

What I tried to promote when I was Director there is something called an MHA with a human face, meaning we had to be able to pay our bills on time. We had to be able to have the staffing to deal with the problems of the buildings—particularly before renovation, when we started taking the buildings over when they were under horrible condition because of poor management by the city. But that did not mean that we had to be punitive. One of the issues in question, for example, is when the city was a manager, an owner, subletting was rampant. And the reason being that the rents in those apartments were like $90, a $150 a month, and they cost
$200 to $300 per hour for an attorney to take a tenant to court for a holdover for illegal sublet. So they never bothered to do it. Occasionally they might, but not frequently.

And they were used to tenants doing certain things. For example, we had a tenant in one of our buildings that during the summer would go and spend a couple of months with his mother and he would put somebody in the apartment without notifying anybody. So that was technically an illegal sublet. And he also had mental problems, he was not the brightest person—he had mental issues, and so on. So my predecessor took that tenant to court to evict him for breaking the rules. And I intervened, and I said, as long as he can cure the problem, we should not be evicting this person. I got the support of the board to do so, and he was able to come back to the apartment. He wasn’t making any money for it, just charging him the same thing he was paying for the rent.

When it came to the tenants, typically if you didn’t pay your rent, you got a harsh letter saying you haven’t paid your rent. Pay it now, or else. [02:00:02] I said, there’s many reasons why people can’t pay their rent. They might have had sickness, they might have lost their job, they might have some kind of problem. So I developed a system where the first letter you get is, your rent was not paid this month, is there a problem? If you need assistance, you can come talk to us, we can talk to the Cooper Square Committee, and so on, so forth. And if he or she ignored the letter, and then another month went by, and they weren’t paying, then they got another letter, which was much stronger, saying you haven’t paid for two months; if you don’t pay by a certain deadline, we will have to take you to court. And wherever possible, we would make payment agreements for the people—pay their arrears in installments till they caught up, we helped them get a one-shot deal to pay arrears. As long as you work with us, we’re very willing to work with you. Not only ideologically, but practically. It costs money to take a tenant to court, and if we evict the tenant, we’re just going to fill the space with another low-income tenant. It’s not like the rent goes up twenty percent.

Dziedzic: Right.

Orselli: And the same thing with holdover proceedings. Because we had a very poor population, we also had a troubled population, ok? And we had a case where the tenant’s apartment was in such terrible disrepair—even though we gave it to them brand new—and it smelled so bad, that everybody in the building was affected. So this is where we drew the line: you’re affecting the
quality of life of other people, and we took this elderly couple to court. They were mentally disturbed and they were appointed a guardian by the courts, and after a hearing or two, the guardian requested their permission to withdraw from the case. And the judge says, “Why? You can’t withdraw from the case. You’ve been appointed to represent their interests.” And they went back and forth, and finally the lawyer who represented them said, “Your honor, I’ll stay on the case as long as I don’t have to go to their apartment to meet with them.” Because, she complained to us later, after she left their apartment and went back to her office, people were giving the fishy eyeball because she smelled bad, just by being in contact with them.

So we got an order of eviction against them, and the judge was appalled by the next motion we made—we asked the judge to stay his order to give us a chance to take the tenant to court, to State Supreme Court, to have a permanent guardian appointed to them. And that took another year. I’m not sure how many of our tenants were happy with that decision, but I felt it was warranted by the conditions. They could not help themselves, you know? I’ve been trying to instill that, not always with the full support of the staff I used to have, because they felt that sacrificed efficiency. In regards to that particular case I mentioned, about the tenant who illegally sublet the apartment, the then-director went to a board member, said this person is disabled, and that’s why we gotta do it this way, and the director said, “There are places for people like them.” And the board member said, “Yes, and this is one of those places.” So that’s what we try to do. We’re not landlords, even though we had to do landlord duties.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm. Well it seems like, as you said, when you decommodify housing, then your approach to a lot of the different aspects of housing actually really changes.

Orselli: Right.

Dziedzic: So the monetary motivations, or capitalist motivations, are gone, and so—

Orselli: Right, that’s right.

Dziedzic: —why throw somebody out on the street if—

Orselli: No, there’s, it’s not like we’re the good guys and everybody loves us. There are people who don’t approve of some of the things that I instituted. One of the things I was pushing when I was director of the MHA is for growth for the reasons I pointed out to you. Other people felt, no,
we’ve got our buildings, let’s stick to managing our buildings, and let’s not do anything more in terms of expansion. And of course, let’s not take people from the outside to come in. We had conflicts over the ten victims from the fire on Second Avenue. I had them approved by the board on an emergency basis. There was supposed to be a board meeting that night to talk about other issues—basically, extermination in the buildings—and the then-chair cancelled the meeting to allow me time to work with these fire victims. And other people from the board says, “How dare you!” You know, “We are here, we need to have a meeting!” And we had to defend cancelling a board meeting to talk about extermination to take care of the victims of the fire on Second Avenue.

We also brought in people from Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Katrina. [02:05:03] Victims of fires—not the Second Avenue fire, but another fire nearby. Not everything is hunky dory. There are people that came from a building, not part of the original universe of buildings, but were a failed co-op. I was able to work with them, organize, bring them into the MHA, overcoming the conflict we had with the faction that wanted to go into traditional TIL because they wanted to make money. Same person who was part of that struggle later on said, “Let’s not take any more buildings in. Let’s concentrate on that building, and fuck the rest of the world.” That comes with—growing pains, I guess you call it. Sometimes it can be a little bit disheartening, but that’s how it goes when you’re dealing with housing in New York City as a commodity.

Dziedzic: When you bring in new buildings to the MHA, are the rents of the original buildings different than the new buildings?

Orselli: It depends on the circumstances. If the building—like the one building that we have now on 3rd Street, that was an additional building, essentially they’re under the same rules as we were, so there wasn’t much of an adjustment. They were taken over under a program, so when the building was taken over into the TIL pilot program—that’s the one where I mentioned about the city encouraging speculation—their rents were pretty much the same as the MHA rents. The reason being that the city usually determines the transitional rents based on the number of what they call the zoning room. A bedroom is one zoning room. A kitchen is one zoning room, the bathroom is a half a zoning room. And, what that means is that in some cases, the tenants in a
one-bedroom paid a lot less than tenants who have a two- or three-bedroom, which mean families.

We determine how to set our rents based on two things, square footage and the use of the space. By that I mean that if you look at an apartment, the main cost of what it costs to maintain that apartment are in two areas: the kitchen and the bathroom. For obvious reasons, that’s where all the plumbing is. The other rooms might have an electric outlet or two, might have a radiator, but it’s relatively minor. Most of what we spend to maintain the apartment is in the kitchen and the bathroom. So we proposed a formula: for the first 350 square feet, the rent will be charged 95¢ a square foot. Anything above the 350 square feet will be based on 35¢ for the non-core areas. So you paid up to 350 square feet, you pay 95¢, above that, it will be 35¢ cents. Which, basically, worked to the benefit of large families. And that’s why when we take a building in, under that kind of program, the rents are pretty much uniform.

You know, if you know the square footage of an apartment on 4th Street, and then you were offered an apartment on Stanton Street, you can pretty much figure out what the rent is based on the square footage. Although there have been a number of increases over the years. If it’s a building that is not coming from a traditional program, for example the buildings we’ll be taking over in November are rent stabilized units, and they pay substantially more than our tenants pay. Because the rules that they were renovated under was that they be remaining as rent stabilized; we can’t bring them in. So they’re going to be charged a higher amount as rental units.

Dziedzic: Hm. But the Community Land Trust will own the land?

Orselli: The Land Trust will own the land, and the newly established Two Buildings Tenants United HDFC will own the buildings. And they will be managed by the Mutual Housing Association. If they could be converted to co-ops, we would have conveyed the buildings to the MHA, but they can’t be converted to co-ops, so it has to be a separate deal.

Dziedzic: What do you think the benefit has been of being involved in this issue for so long?

Orselli: Well, first of all, I’m very happy to have been under the tutelage—I guess you’d call it, or the wisdom—of our founding member, Frances Goldin, who’s still active today. Although much less so. It’s good to know that the work I’m doing, particularly in terms of
shifting the paradigm from profit and fiscal equity, may be shifted by the new emphasis—now everybody looking at the CLT as a panacea, which, as you know, I don’t agree with—to a non-profit model, and pushing social equity. Unless the government owns the housing outright, the only way to guarantee affordability is by promoting social equity. The only other way to have the housing affordable is to have the funding be paid for by a governmental entity. Because, otherwise, even if the government gives you a very low interest loan, the loan has to be repaid. And that means that the rent has to be higher. It’s simple arithmetic.

**Dziedzic:** And you mentioned that you lived a few minutes away from here; how long have you lived in that place, or have you lived in this neighborhood the whole time that you’ve been working with this organization?

**Orselli:** Well—

**Dziedzic:** Minus the Louisiana part.

**Orselli:** For a number of years, I also had to move to Brooklyn, because my first marriage didn’t work out. Before that, I was a homesteader on 13th Street. And also lived in a Cooper Square building, lived in Little Italy. So I’ve been mostly a Lower East Side resident since 1968. But that includes my four or five years in Louisiana, and it also includes my time in Brooklyn. But even when I was living in Brooklyn, I was working here. I very much feel that I’m part of this community. And I’ve seen it changing drastically. I remember once going to, before the renovation pursuant to the Lower East Side Cross Subsidy Plan, I remember going to Loisaida east of Avenue A, along with a Black tenant and a Spanish tenant. And one of the local drug dealers said, “Who are you, the mod squad?” [laughter] They weren’t used to a group like that being together.

It’s been, how can I say—it’s been rewarding to have been part of a number of struggles, including the recent struggle to bring back CHARAS, El Bohio, the cultural center that was there. It was a center of organizing activity, cultural activity, and the reason the building was sold at auction was purely political retribution by Pagán and Giuliani against their political enemy. It was not a rational decision on their part. In fact, I was part of a delegation that went to meet with the deputy mayor—I forgot his name now—at City Hall, where we had a developer lined up to, that was willing to do the work at the CHARAS/El Bohio and use it for non-profit
purposes. So ok, we only have a few more questions, we’ll fax them to you, you respond back, and it’s a done deal. And then the question never came, and then the building was auctioned off. Talk about bad faith.

Dziedzic: Yes. What’s your response when people talk about everybody’s getting pushed out, no one can live in New York anymore, the neighborhood’s changing? Beause on one hand, you’ve seen that in a way, but also you’ve done so much to combat that.

Orselli: Well, there’s no question about it. People refer to our neighborhood here as a gentrifying neighborhood, and I used to also refer to it that way. I don’t do that anymore. I consider it a gentrified neighborhood. People are being pushed out in all kinds of ways, from unscrupulous landlords, or even scrupulous landlords. But the sheer fact that the rent stabilized rents keep going up and up, and up and up, to the point that they become unaffordable and the work that we do, compared to the need, is a complete mismatch. We helped to preserve a few hundred units in our neighborhood here, and we lose a few thousand units every year, who become destabilized. And then we have all these really outrageous events, for example, at 47 East 3rd Street—you might have heard about it—there was a building occupied by fifteen rent stabilized tenants. The landlord sold the building to a new owner. The new owner served eviction notices on all fifteen tenants, on the basis of personal use. Personal use meaning you have to use it for yourself, or your family—I think there was even a baby computer room, if I remember correctly. [02:14:58] And the penalty is, if you don’t use it for personal use, you can no longer raise the rents on the remaining tenants.

Dziedzic: Ever.

Orselli: Right. But there were no remaining tenants. So he cut his financial losses by paying them off to move, because they were going to lose anyway, because the law doesn’t say one apartment or two apartments, it just says whatever you’re going to use for your personal use. And they were evicted. Some of them ended up in our buildings again. I mean, we made them apartments available. He’s now an active member. His name is, it’s a Greek name, Economakis, I think is his name. He’s a member of the local Community Board No. 3.

Dziedzic: One of the people that bought the building?
Orselli: The guy who bought the building, yes.

Dziedzic: Mm.

Orselli: Ekonomakis, that’s it. And his wife, I understand, taught or teaches a course on displacement at the City University. Either that or NYU, I’m not sure now.

Dziedzic: Wow.

Orselli: Talk about irony.

Dziedzic: Oh yes. That hurts. I also wanted to ask about permanently affordable housing—how do you feel about the reliability of the word “permanent?”

Orselli: First of all, on the issue of affordable housing, I avoid using that term. And again from experience—not even from thinking about it philosophically—a number of years ago, the old Anderson theater, on Second Avenue and 4th Street, was sold, and the developer wanted to get a certain approval. So he had to come before the Community Board for approval, and of course he was being attacked for “We need affordable housing here!” He was building luxury housing. And he said, “Affordable housing? I’m not sure what you mean by that. My son who’s a doctor can’t afford it here!”

So we use the word low-income housing, or very low-income housing. It can be done. There are certain programs, even though I’m not fully supportive of those programs, that can do at least on paper—for example the Inclusionary Zoning Program required that the low income units be kept affordable in perpetuity. In terms of Seward Park housing, for example, even though the housing’s not very affordable, it does have housing that’s affordable to families, like fifty percent, and sixty percent of area median income, which is relatively low. And it was a compromise. Fifty percent affordable, defined by different AMI’s, and fifty percent market rate. And we met with Councilpeople—even Councilpeople that were supportive of our efforts said you’re never going to get permanent affordability. If you’re lucky, you get forty years.

And even though we supported the basic aspects of the compromise, we were not going to sign on without a promise of permanent affordability. And our council member for that area, Margaret Chin, got the city to commit to permanent affordability, and it’s written into the documents. It’s up to them to figure out how they’re going to do it. They might have to increase
the market rate rents more, or charge more for the commercials. It can be done, ok? But it’s not easy to do that.

**Dziedzic:** Yes. And you mentioned that you’re semi-retired.

**Orselli:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** I’m wondering what are you working on now?

**Orselli:** Well, I was working full time and a half at the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association. Besides having to work with the AG’s office to get the plan approved, then having to smooth the problems we had when the commercial tenants got a big tax bill and having, of course, to work with the city to get the tax abatement approved—it was something, I guess, that I felt had to happen. I had served there for twenty years. I didn’t always agree with certain positions of the board, and they didn’t always agree with certain positions of mine, so I decided it was time for me to move on.

And I happened to—not by planning, but by the way things worked out—for example, the attorney general’s office in New York State had secured a settlement from a local bank for all kinds of malfeasance that translated into several million dollars. [02:20:02] So the AG, working with HPD and Enterprise Foundation, had agreed to provide funding to groups throughout the state to create or expand Community Land Trusts. And in this neighborhood, we were the sole functioning Community Land Trust. As a matter of fact, we’re the sole functioning CLT right now in the city. There are MHAs, but no CLTs that actually own land, as we do. So the position was offered to me, and I said, why not? And there wasn’t that much funding coming through, so it was apart-time position. So it’s a semi-retirement position, but it’s more like three-quarter time.

And it’s promoting the mission of the MHA and the CLT. I’ve also been involved with the East Harlem/El Barrio CLT, to help them get off the ground, because that organization was started by a former tenant of Cooper Square, so they’re using pretty much the same model. And we are also working with organizations around the city. There’s an organization that definitely will be worth Greenwich Village Society to talk to, called NYCCLI, the New York City Community Land Initiative, which was created by the New Economy Project. And they’re having workshops to help people to create CLTs, or expand CLTs. They have a workshop

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coming up next week to talk about how to partner with developers. And in terms of the legal documents, they pretty much rely on the Cooper Square legal documents. They change them, and they adapt them, but they use it as a base, including HPD. So that pleases me that we’re no longer just a voice in the wilderness, but actually some people are listening to us now.

**Dziedzic:** Indeed. Yes. I just wanted to ask about, I mean, you mentioned that Land Trusts are not, you don’t see them as a panacea—

**Orselli:** No.

**Dziedzic:** —but do you have any specific advice to maybe other organizations in the city?

**Orselli:** Sure. Can you, can I take another break?

**BREAK IN RECORDING**

**Dziedzic:** Thank you. So I wanted to ask about any advice you might have from what you’ve learned, working so closely with Cooper Square for other kinds of Land Trusts, specifically in the city, I guess.

**Orselli:** Well, like I mentioned, a CLT is not a panacea, it’s just another way of helping to ensure permanent affordability. So step number one in that process is you have to have support from the community. Without that support, you’re not going to get anywhere. Secondly, you have to have some realistic possibility of acquiring property, be it a vacant lot or a building that can be brought into the process, that’s what’s happening for example in East Harlem, about three or four or five buildings that they’re in the process of acquiring. [02:25:04] You have to combine community organizing with community planning. One without the other is not going to work.

You need to have tenants as active and as involved as possible, in the entire process. They have to own the process, they have to own the land. I mean, not the land of the building—in terms of participation in the development of a property. The other thing is that, something I didn’t realize on day one, our community supports us, we’re moving ahead. I didn’t realize enough that it has to be a multi-generational effort. Because the community already is going to change, and the people that supported you and your efforts are no longer there. And they have not, many of them—assuming you’re successful—gone through the struggle and the process to win what you ultimately won. So you might find that you say follow me, and look behind you,
there’s nobody following you. It has to be done. We have not done, in my opinion, enough tenant education and training, that goes beyond the initial generation that was part of the struggle.

We had done some workshops, about how the MHA works, and how you can get services. How you can hook up with churches and synagogues or social service providers. But we have not done enough education regarding the mission of the MHA and the CLT, and why it is in our best interests, and why social equity, at this time, is preferable to financial equity. It’s not an easy sell, when I keep referring in conversation to the Lower East Side, when everybody else calls it the East Village. That’s one of the things that the hippies and the Yippies, myself included, did wrong. You know, back in the ‘60s, there was only one village, Greenwich Village. And that was clear. The Bowery was another village, except when it was the Bowery Village, which nobody was going to call the Bowery Village the Bowery Village. But we called it the East Village because we were just as good as they were, and we had as many hip people, as many writers and poets and artists as Greenwich Village. And real estate said, wow, that’s a good idea. You know? And they adopted that. It didn’t come from them, it came from us. So that’s what I mean by the neighborhood changes. They have to involve the community, and keep it involved. That’s crucial.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm. Well, that might be a good place to end, actually. [laughs]

Orselli: Absolutely.

Dziedzic: Unless there’s anything else that you think you want to mention, or—

Orselli: No, but I’m accessible, if people want to talk to me—you have, you know how to contact me, but if anybody needs it—

Dziedzic: Of course, yes.

Orselli: —here’s a couple of cards.

Dziedzic: Thank you so much.

Orselli: And we’d really like to see this movement grow. And right now, it seems the right time because the mayor wants to maximize the available affordable housing, as he calls it. And there’s efforts underway in practically all the five boroughs. There have been workshops in which even
groups from Queens and Staten Island showed up. And the Bronx. Nos Quedamos, and East Harlem, Far Rockaway. The council member from Queens is actually one of the big supporters of Community Land Trust. So it’s hopeful.

But the city has not yet done, which we’re pushing, is, one, when it comes to disposition of city-owned property—and I don’t mean merely HPD property because there’s not much left. It was disposed of mostly under Giuliani. But any city property, from the Department of Transportation, Sanitation, that is not utilized, they should prioritize disposition to Community Land Trust. And when a developer wants to develop such properties, he should be required to partner with a non-profit Community Land Trust. That’s one thing we’re pushing. We also need the city to open up their purses a little bit because right now, other than the money that’s coming by way of Enterprise, which as I mentioned was part of our settlement for some bank that went afoul of the rules, there’s no city commitment at this point for CLT to be funded, except by way of existing loan programs, participation loan program—loans. Not really grants, ok? And that needs to be implemented, because again, the more you have to borrow, the less affordable the housing’s going to be.

Dziedzic: And there’s even, there’s programs that are for first time home owners, but it’s really limited to that owner—

Orselli: Yes. [02:30:01]

Dziedzic: —it doesn’t pass on, as you mentioned, so.

Orselli: That’s right, yes.

Dziedzic: All right, well, thank you so much.

Orselli: No problem, glad to. Honored to be interviewed.

END OF INTERVIEW