

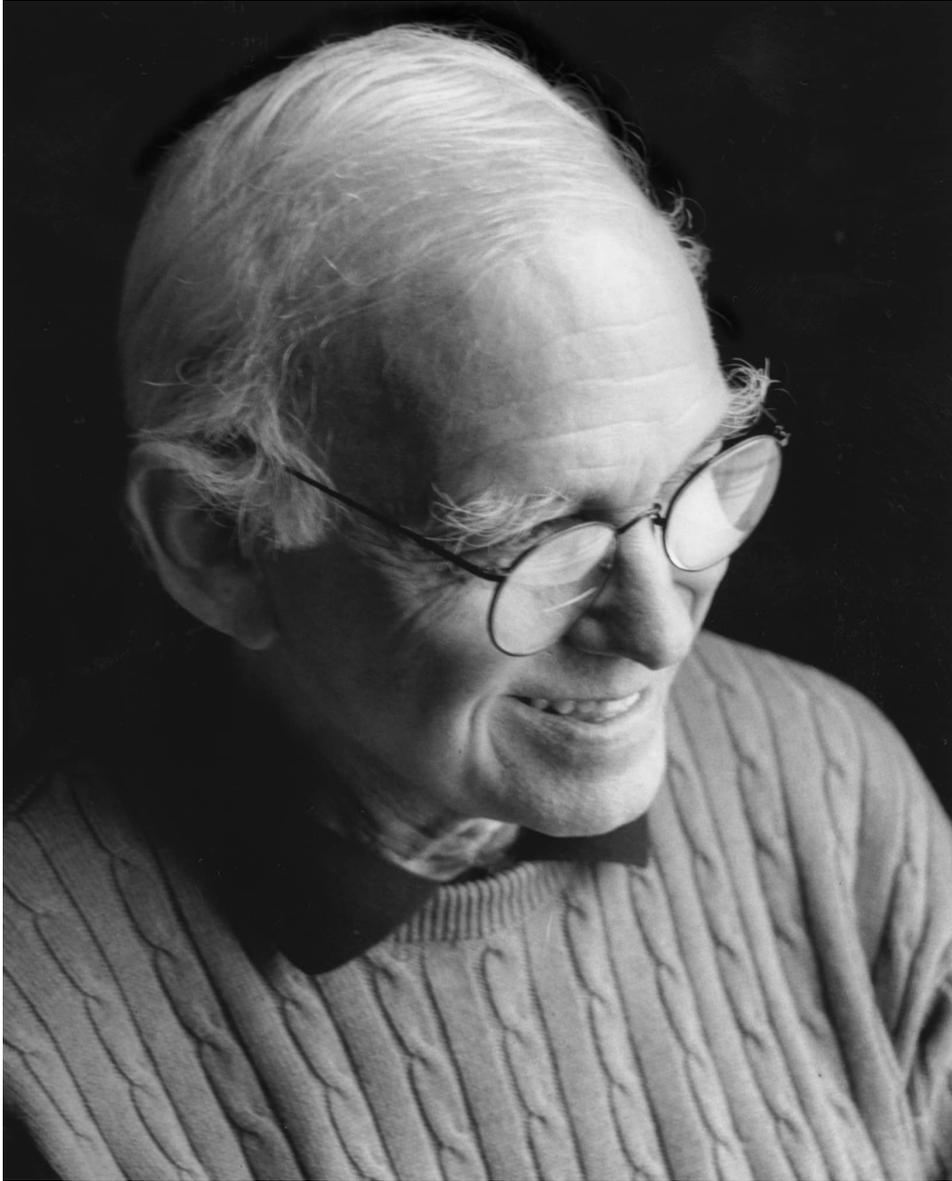
**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview
JAMES POLSHEK

By Sarah Dzedzic
New York, NY
September 21, 2017

Oral History Interview with James Stewart Polshek, September 21, 2017

Narrator(s)	James Stewart Polshek
Birthyear	1930
Birthplace	Akron, OH
Narrator Age	87
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	Polshek's home off Washington Square Park
Date of Interview	September 21, 2017
Duration of Interview	93 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Archival Format	.wav 44kHz/16bit
Archival File Names	Polshek_JamesGVSHPOralHistory_Access_PortionsOmitted.wav [986 MB]
MP3 File Name	Polshek_JamesGVSHPOralHistory_Access_PortionsOmitted.mp3 [112 MB]
Portions Omitted from Recordings	4 discreet portions; silence inserted
Order in Oral Histories	33 [#3 2017]



James Polshek, Photo by Michelle Leong/Ennead Architects

Quotes from Oral History Interview with James Stewart Polshek

Sound-bite

“I am James Stewart Polshek, and I have lived in the Village, on and off, since I graduated from Yale, from architecture school, in 1955”... “Washington Court was an example in urban design terms of adding the new to the old. In actually quite a literal way...we took advantage of the zoning code that does allow the building to be bulked up to seven or eight stories, I think it’s six and a half or seven now, and so that was the first important step. The next was the choice of materials, the details of the window openings, the chimney pots on top of the building, which are real fireplaces below, the little, and they’re wonderful little apartments... That building does reinforce my, at least my contention that—or, my beliefs”... “And yet, the building seemed to encourage yelling and screaming, and not just the community planning board, you know, ‘We’re losing the Village!’ and then it all subsided, and a lot of people think it’s been there forever. And that is my most ambitious Village project, I think”... “I had a very clear vision of what it should be, and a, very persistent about what that, and then how it was presented, and spoken of, and so forth. And I went to all those Village meetings. I mean, they weren’t fun, but it’s fun to look back.”

Additional Quotes

“And I was a pre-medical student, it was sort of expected, and I was for three years, and I wasn’t comfortable with it. I met my wife-to-be at school. We took a couple of courses together. One was an art history course, and I did so well in it that the professor, having apparently looked up my academic record, said, ‘You know, you should think about switching to architecture.’ And I did. Practically the next day. (Polshek p. 2)

“...architecture is a healing art. Very much in the same way that medicine is a healing art at its most idealistic.” (Polshek p. 6)

“I am not sure that it was totally conscious at the time, but I am well-known as a Modernist in a stricter sense. In fact, my buildings are—can only be considered eclectic, and I’ve always been very—found historic preservation very important.” (Polshek p. 6)

“...my career began with a fluke in 1961, ‘62, with my going ultimately to Japan, and doing two major buildings there. And, and it was a complete accident, I was thirty-one years old, and I was, I’d done brownstones, here in the Village, Upper West Side, and friends’ kitchens, that sort of thing, but a real building? No.” (Polshek p. 8)

“So it’s been a kind of grand life, and the Village has been a very big part of it. And I was on the board of the Greenwich Village Society for quite a long time. And my only legacy was the suggestion to have an awards program that honored people, things, places, parts of buildings every year, and then continues onward.” (Polshek p. 11)

“My very first house, that led directly to Japan, was at 241 West 11th Street, and was an old brick townhouse, and which the owners that commissioned me were well known to the Japanese corporation that hired me to come to Japan and do their new laboratories. So there was a linkage back to the, to the Village.” (Polshek p. 13)

“Well, it, you know, like a lot of buildings, it will sound silly, but—they design themselves, to a very large degree. Building codes, local traditions, market forces, available materials, all of those things, and many, many more, the architect’s ideology and so forth, it becomes a big stew, and the architect does not control all of those ingredients. So, what I said was this: I knew the blocks on either side, and they’ve remained the same, in these many years, and was aware of that. I knew that we couldn’t—yes, we didn’t want a pancake building, it would be of no interest. I wouldn’t want to be associated with it, so—and we had certain rules about how high it could go, and then the window formation, and the relationship of small to large openings. There are design considerations to avoid the kind of boredom that a block-long building on an important north-south thoroughfare really deserves better than. But it also was influenced by housing in the Netherlands that I was familiar with, and famous for, for low-scale housing. So they are, in Czechoslovakia, there are lots of influences that are wrapped up into it, of a formal nature.” (Polshek p. 13)

“I think that an architect has a central responsibility in kind of creatively mediating those things, finding a third way. Cause there always is a third way.” (Polshek p. 23)

Summary of Oral History Interview with James Stewart Polshek

James Stewart Polshek grew up in Akron, Ohio, and attended Western Reserve University in Cleveland, first as a pre-medical student, and then switching to architecture after an influential experience in an art history class on Modernism. He went on to study architecture at the graduate level at Yale University, and then moved to New York City, finding a low-level job working in an office with architect, I.M. Pei, and, before long, moving to Greenwich Village where he has lived ever since.

Polshek's career as an architect has involved many buildings across the globe, while his work in Greenwich Village has focused on complementing the neighborhood's historic architecture, scale, and character. Notably, he designed the Washington Court apartments, completed in 1985, which was the first new residential building to be constructed after the designation of Greenwich Village as a Historic District in 1969. He was also involved in projects for other Village Landmarks, including what was then a branch of the Emigrant Savings Bank on Sixth Avenue, and the Grace Church School.

Indicative of his commitment to historical context, Polshek is responsible for adding "preservation" to the name of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, while he was Dean of the school from 1972–1987.

Compiled by Sarah Dziejic

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: Ok, today is September 21, 2017, and this is Sarah Dziedzic, interviewing James Polshek for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. And we are here in the Village in Mr. Polshek's home. Can you start just by saying your name and giving a brief introduction?

Polshek: I am James Stewart Polshek, and I have lived in the Village, on and off, since I graduated from Yale, from architecture school, in 1955. Sometimes a little north of what is formally the Village, on 17th Street. And I am eighty-seven years old, going on eighty-eight, and have practiced architecture for the last fifty years. And continue to, but then I, now in a far more limited way.

Dziedzic: Let's start just by getting a little bit of your background, so, can you talk a little bit about where you grew up, and just—

Polshek: Yes. I had a very, very typical middle American background: I was born in Akron, Ohio, which isn't quite the middle, and I was born in 1930, and grew up during the Depression, and immediately thereafter, the Second World War. So, while it was an extremely stressful time for many on both coasts, it was not that obvious there. And it was such an ordinary and pleasant and predictable time. There were very few social stresses, and my father was a successful businessman, and there was, we lived very well—not opulently, but well. We were Jews in a very small community and therefore, in some ways, we were, became increasingly assimilated. Culturally assimilated. Not religiously, I mean, we went to the, as they were called then, the temple, twice or three times a year, and my father was progressive in his politics, and my mother progressive in her cultural pursuits, and I had a sister, single sister, who still lives in Cleveland. No other siblings. And a series of dogs.

Dziedzic: How did the Depression affect your family, your father's business?

Polshek: Well, it did effect it. It effected both of them, actually. My mother went to work, which was a kind of, I felt it to be something that one should not talk about, you know, in those days, women didn't work. But she sold some rather limited edition of children and baby's clothing, you know, and basically to people she knew and friends. But my father was very, he was very

nervous about it, but his business really was uniforms, and so forth, and so he, the war didn't treat him badly. And Akron was the rubber capital of the world, all the tires were made there, I mean, it was very, very busy and active. But there was some sense, as we got into, maybe I was eight or nine years old by that time, when you begin to sense those things.¹ Younger than that, really. Of insecurity. And some tension about it, as I recall. But otherwise it was actually a very stable, happy family, you know, it wasn't Ozzie and Harriet, but, and my father was an intellectual, although he actually never had a formal education. Came from Hungary when he was about seven or eight years old. But he read a lot. [00:05:09]

Dziedzic: And you said he was—

Polshek: And I was, I suppose the most important thing is that I was encouraged, almost driven to, and my sister (Judy), too, that he would say, over and over, as we became older, that you can do anything in the world that you want. Except one thing: go into business. And in fact, neither of us did. [phone rings] Excuse me. Nope. Whenever it says Arlington, Texas, or some weird place in North Carolina, I know it's—

Dziedzic: Not really for you.

Polshek: Don't answer. So, it was very pleasant growing up. I was gregarious, kind of a playboy. My grades were not good at all. I was lucky to go to any college, but I had a very influential uncle, who was a famous surgeon in town, and he helped. So I ended up going first to Western Reserve University in Cleveland, although my parents had applied to Harvard, Yale and Cornell, like parents would do, but I mean, I wouldn't have a chance. And I was a pre-medical student, it was sort of expected, and I was for three years, and I wasn't comfortable with it. I met my wife-to-be at school. We took a couple of courses together. One was an art history course, and I did so well in it that the professor, having apparently looked up my academic record, said, "You know, you should think about switching to architecture." And I did. Practically the next day. And then I went one more year there in the architecture program, and it was basically a beaux-arts program that had not entered the twentieth century yet. And I was very unhappy, and she (my wife) graduated, and I got accepted at Yale, so we moved to the east, and went back only for family visits from then on.

¹ "Things," i.e. insecurities—political and economic

Dziedzic: What was the subject of the art history class that you took?

Polshek: It was Modernism. And we were given small buildings to analyze, and I just had an intuitive grasp for what it was all about. And I enjoyed it. And, you know, I'm a student enjoying a very terrific professor, and that, there was just no question, and my parents accepted it. Well, they probably knew it was coming, cause I would disappear into the house. It was a kind of big house, and it had a, what probably was once a ballroom in the attic, and it was a big, big space, with a wooden floor, and I would sneak up there and use shirt cardboards to make houses, and I don't think they actually knew what was going on in my head, that that was part of it. So I did that, and Yale was wonderful. It was four years. So I actually—it was an eight-year trip, after high school. And I got married in 1952, which was my second year in New Haven. And, so that's the background.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about the Yale architecture program?

Polshek: Well, it was, it's a complicated topic, I'll try to be very brief. Yale had already—because of its proximity to New York, it already had in place a visiting professor program. Big name architects would come up there. Philip Johnson was very active in the school. He actually was on my final jury. And he didn't like what I did. But, the dean of the school was already a very well-known American architect named George Howe. He had been a partner of a man named Lescaze, who'd come from Europe, and they did the famous bank building in Philadelphia, Philadelphia Society for Savings building. And he, he was an old-world gent. Leather-lined pockets, he always had a flask in one, you know, and he would go to dinner with students, we would invite him. He would hire and bring to the school the kind of fringe teachers of architecture, or people just beginning. One famous one was Louis Kahn, of course.

But another was a man named Eugene Nalle, N-A-L-L-E, and he had also gone to Yale. I think of him as being so much older than I was, he probably was, but you don't know. And he mapped out a curriculum, which was really an amalgam of the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Mies van der Rohe was head of school, and Harvard, under Walter Gropius, and the [word unclear] [00:11:19] in Ulm, in Germany, which was a kind of post-Bauhaus. So it was academically very rigorous, and drawing was very important. He didn't allow books or magazines (into the studio). He kind of tried as best he could to shut out the world, and he succeeded, but many students hated it. You know, they came to become architects to create, to

make beautiful things. Nalle was very influenced as a teacher, and the assistants he hired were very interested in Japan. And that had, that did color my whole life, really. My experience in Japan. And after that, in Scandinavia.

So it was a marvelous education for two years, and then it reverted, kind of back to the old system. Vincent Scully was the famous professor, and he, like many art historians, he kind of elevated the power of the individual in the work. The architect as artist, which I have, to this very day, never agreed with, even though I belong to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where it's deeply committed to the idea of architecture as an art. But, and it can be, sometimes. But it's not something to base a set of teaching principals on, in my view. Which is fairly rare.

So it was a good time, and I graduated in 1955, and I didn't know where to go, and we both decided we'd love to go to New York, like everybody, I suppose. And it was a—I asked a younger professor, and he said he didn't know exactly what the name of the architect was, he said—this is the way people talked and thought in those days—he said, “He's a Chinaman.” Well, the Chinaman was I.M. Pei, and worked in an office, which was not under his name, it was really William Zeckendorf, Sr. And it even wasn't his name, it was the name of some kind of waspy real estate developer, Webb and Knapp. But I got a job, very low level, but it was not, I was not emptying wastebaskets, I was actually drawing and doing the cores of buildings and elevators and so forth.

But it, I was just thinking about it, because Pei is a hundred years old, and the GSD at Harvard is having a centenary symposium thing and they invited me to be on one of the round tables. But I just answered them, after thinking about it for a while, that I was just, couldn't free up the date. Partly because my daughter lives in Boston, and I was going to Boston. And they were going to fly me up, and the whole business, and it, those things, they never really get down to the core of any basic truths. They (symposia) are basically honorific. The topic was the emergence of modern practice. Pei at Webb & Knapp was a kind of bridge point, between—well, there weren't many modern practices; there was one generation. Most of the architects had come out of Harvard after the war. And opened up practices, and I fell into the second generation after that. And my practice is, I guess, considered somewhat unorthodox.

I would—I don't think I have one of my books to give you here, it's down in the basement, but I could get you my book that was published two, maybe three years ago. And it's still around, and it's in circulation—[00:15:57]

Dziedzic: That's *Build, Memory*, right?

Polshek: Yes, yes. If you've seen it, there is, and if you're interested, you certainly seem to be knowledgeable about—were you an art history major, or something?

Dziedzic: No, actually. I don't know how it happened. [laughs] I'm interested in places and landscape.

Polshek: Anyway, there's, well, there is a foreword. I had other books before that, but this really is the most personal one. And it describes philosophically where I'm coming from, and where I went to, and sixteen projects are elaborated on there.

In fact one—this happened last week. I went to a movie across the street at the IFC, called *Columbus*. It had rung some weird bell, and we had nothing to do, and it's close. It's about Columbus, Indiana, and about a half hour into the movie, my wife gripped me, I just, I might have dozed off, and she said, "It's your building." And there was the, the young woman who's kind of the star, not very interesting by any literary or narrative standards, it's very beautiful, actually, done by a Japanese² director, and she was showing this Korean young man whose father is an art historian but who came to Columbus and had a stroke. And the son came because he was in the hospital, the whole movie, you saw him at the beginning and I think he died at the end. But the son, who's a very handsome Korean, and the young woman was maybe out of high school? Maybe college. I think she had, yes, I think she was just out of college, interested in libraries. And the first building that shows up is I.M. Pei's library.

And then the two Saarinen churches there, the Unitarian churches, very, maybe the most famous and certainly the most interesting building in the city. But there are thirty or forty or more buildings by kind of name architects there, because the town, Cummins Engine Foundation, pays the fees, therefore whatever building committee there is, and whether it's a hospital or a school or a bank, they're happy to have that gift, and so they have a committee who'll select from their list of architects. So I was commissioned to do a mental health center, the last one built under Kennedy, the Mental Health Act. And here's the Korean, and she's showing him her favorite buildings, it's like the third building she went to, and he has said he doesn't, he's not interested in architecture. He and his father have never related to one another,

² The director is Korean, not Japanese

and he looked at that, he said, “Oh, that’s Polshek.” And I’m sitting in the fourth row [laughs] and she said, “Well, it’s a wonderful building, but it’s a little shabby, or it was.” Concrete gets dirty, but actually it looks pretty good. And he said, “I just read his book, and I read the chapter about Columbus with particular interest, because my father was coming.” And the chapter on Columbus is about that building, and he went on to talk about it, and he, he more or less said what I wrote, both in the foreword and then later, which says, for me, that architecture is a healing art. Very much in the same way that medicine is a healing art at its most idealistic.

So that was amazing, I’m trying to get a clip of it, and I haven’t heard from them yet. So. Anyway, it’s in that book, and the book tells a lot, if you ever need, or are interested. [00:20:11]

Dziedzic: That’s an amazing story of kind of seeing yourself on the big screen.

Polshek: Yes, yes. It was just by total surprise. [00:20:19]

[OMITTED] [00:20:40]

Dziedzic: You mentioned kind of the healing properties of architecture, that it’s a healing art. So I wondered if you could kind of talk about how you learned that architecture was that way, or whether it was through practice.

Polshek: I am not sure that it was totally conscious at the time, but I am well known as a Modernist in a stricter sense. In fact, my buildings are—can only be considered eclectic, and I’ve always been very—found historic preservation very important. When I went to Columbia, as dean, the program was not even a degree-granting program, but it had been nurtured by a very well known, very important professor named James Marston Fitch. And I, the first thing I did was change the name of the school and put “preservation” into it. And upped their budget, and hired new people, and I had always practiced, one of the first, one of the earliest buildings I did in New York was a restoration of the Friends Meeting House on Gramercy Park, making it into what is now Brotherhood Synagogue. And that was, it was interesting on a lot of different levels, but the—and then I moved to the Village, I mean, that’s, we could, we looked on the Upper East Side, we looked on the Upper West Side, and either we couldn’t afford it, or—the first place I lived was actually in a dilapidated brownstone on East 62nd Street right off of Madison.

We really didn’t know where we were. I mean, we were in our early twenties, and we didn’t realize it was such an expensive neighborhood. But this was not, it was a ninety dollar a

month apartment with one bedroom. And, a lot of the people that lived in the building plugged their electricity into the hall. You could see [laughing] wires coming out, so it was not a very ritzy place, but it was a ritzy neighborhood. But after that we did move downtown, and we've been here ever since. I mean, we've been here, in this particular apartment, since the first year I was dean at Columbia. We were on 9th Street, where we had a terrible fire in the middle of the night, December 17, 1972. And we were burned out. We got our children and our dog and a houseguest out, but that was it. And lost just about everything. Things, some things were restored, Japanese [phone rings]—oh. Let me see, my, I'm sorry.

Dziedzic: Do you want to take off your microphone, if you don't mind?

Polshek: Oh, oh, oh, it's my daughter. [phone conversation] Daughters first. But she did pick it up, I didn't think she would. Ok, I'm sorry, that may mess—does that mess up your tape? Ok.

Dziedzic: No, that's fine. You were saying that you've been here since [19]72.

Polshek: Well, no, in this building. Before that we were in an 1854 building on 9th Street between Fifth and Sixth. That's where the fire was, we were on the top floor. And it was, it was a shock. I mean that's, I hope it never happens to you, but it was a five-alarm fire, and, you know, firemen were hurt. Nobody, we weren't, and we had friends next door, but it was—and then we paid, we didn't, the insurance company paid for us, and we moved into 1 Fifth Avenue. And we had a great apartment, because we had a beagle, and it had a big terrace, and it worked out very well. So we were there for three months before we moved here.

But even before this, before that, we were living on, once on Charles Street when we came back from Europe for a while, then I guess eventually we were on 17th Street. In two different locations, as our children grew older, but right on the Stuyvesant Park. So I picked kind of historic neighborhoods. And the scale is what is so appealing. But I didn't neglect historic preservation in my work, and so that if you look at the sixteen projects I picked out there, and then others that will be referred to, many are additions, modern additions to historic or at least dignified older buildings. And that has always been very interesting to me, and continues to be. I'll jump to the, right now to the end of the story—since I, I don't like to use the word “retired,” because I never really retired. I keep an office there, but I don't go in very often, and I became involved in a number of projects around town, one being Four Freedoms Park, that Louis Kahn

did, who was my professor there, so I had had a long history with him, and I, they asked me to be on the board, and my job was really to try to interpret what he might do in a condition, which was unprecedented at that time. Particularly, and it's still a problem, it was designed and but not built before there were any handicapped, no disabled rules, so there are disability problems now, with law suits and so forth. And I'm on the board for the Climate Museum, which is a project that's sort of self-descriptive, but it's slowly moving up the ladder of fundraising and publicity and so forth.

And then I was on the Art Commission, as the only architect member, because that's the way the city charter is written, which I don't agree with, but—I mean, it puts too much weight on one person. But I served on the Art Commission for ten years.

I was still in the office, but I really wasn't running things, and I was—there were partners, and they were, they're doing what they do. And, then, most recently, and I'm really just beginning, and I'm not sure where it's going to lead, a new museum at Sing Sing. It's really a criminal justice museum, but it's a history museum also, and it is really, part of it's on the prison grounds, I mean, partially in the secured section, and there are seventeen hundred inmates there. A lot of people think it's empty. It's not. It's right on the Hudson, and I'm very excited by that, because it, my career began with a fluke in 1961, '62, with my going ultimately to Japan, and doing two major buildings there. And, and it was a complete accident. I was thirty-one years old, and I was—I'd done brownstones, here in the Village, Upper West Side, and friends' kitchens, that sort of thing, but a real building? No.

But, in Japan, it was a lot easier than you would think, I mean, you had such support. So, it was an accident. And this prison job, if it goes well, as I think it's going to, was also a kind of accident. I was recommended to somebody on their little board up in Ossining, New York, by the woman who edited my book. Because they needed—and they're right, I wasn't aware of it at the time, but they really needed a much bigger idea to kind of merge the existing and the new. So it brings me—even though Japan was all new, all new in an old culture. So that's sort of the bridge of my career. [00:30:19]

Dziedzic: You mentioned that you were attracted to the scale of this kind of historic neighborhood—

Polshek: Yes!

Dziedzic: Can you describe that, and describe how you were sort of encountering it, and the kind of culture around the—

Polshek: Well, we're seeing the kind of, the worst consequences of excessive wealth and real estate development around us. Happily, I'm not seeing it out this window, but if I turn and look a little bit to the northwest, I see Hudson Yards. And, actually, the north window here looks directly at the Empire State Building, you'll see, directly, when you get up. And while a city can tolerate one or two truly iconic, formally iconic buildings, it can't take a lot of them. It destroys neighborhoods. And it's destroying the neighborhoods around these. Partly that's because of the sort of upscale rents that are pushing small merchants out, so the small mom and pop stores are soon to be gone.

There may be one or two hold-outs, but as long as you have this kind of diversity in the scale of buildings, the people that are attracted here, the mom and pop stores, even small restaurants—although those, you know, one has to expect they're going to get more and more luxurious, and noisier, and darker, and, that the scale, meaning both the psychological scale, and of course, obviously, the physical scale, the size of fenestrations, the materials that are more absorptive of the light (masonry as opposed to glass), and now it is only glass, glass, glass, which is expedient, but inappropriate so frequently. Expedient and easy and cheap, given in mass amounts. So that is, and it, I don't think it's romantic, just, you know, knowing neighbors. And you have little children, they know that doormen are part of the texture of the neighborhood, and it's very different if you walk up Park Avenue than if you walk up lower Fifth. Not so different in economic attainments of the people who live there, but they are different in the spirit of the relationship. So that, we're just, we've always been comfortable here.

And when I was at Columbia, I invited, it must have been fairly early—I mean, Wednesday night there's a speaker—I invited Jane Jacobs once, when she was, she was not nearly as famous as she is now, and also it may have been the same year, the second year I invited Robert Caro, who wrote *The Power Broker*. Now famous for Lyndon Johnson's biography. *Power Broker* was about [Robert] Moses, and a lot of it was what Moses wanted to do with the Village, Washington Square Park, and highways zipping through and so forth. So, I used my academic platform to express the personal views, always happens, and I'm happy I did. And I had the opportunity to meet and get to know—I never got to know Jane very well, but I

did Robert. I know he asked, he called me, I did some very complete research. I did the Clinton Libraries, so he, there's a section about Johnson, and the Johnson Library, he wanted to know more about. And so I tried to help him. It was fun. And that's, I don't know—

Dziedzic: How did the—it sounds like you developed a deep interest in the planning and the preservation part while you were at Columbia, and brought those together in a sense, and I know that you worked on some planning aspects, and that's of course a part of building buildings—

Polshek: I did. [00:34:57]

Dziedzic: —in the city, and so I'm just wondering how you became, I guess, aware of the principles of planning and even urban design—

Polshek: Well, it was really more urban design, but the planning was more out of political sympathies, and it would probably—it was basically policy planning. Physical planning was in the—it was really part of the architectural curriculum, urban design was a section. Well, it's inescapable, it's—they are all connected. It's insufficient just to do a beautiful structure, and ignore the social and economic implications that I was talking about before. Or the design of a city, meaning the relationship of one part of it to another part of it. And I've always been, we travel, I mean, I had a Fulbright to Denmark, and I guess at that time we would sneak out of Copenhagen and drive to Paris as much as we could, overnight, and stay for two days, and drive back, and said to one another that one day we would have a little apartment in Paris. And we do. And, we bought that in 1987, which was the year I resigned from the deanship. It's a little teeny pied-a-terre, but it's beautiful. And it's in a three hundred and fifty year-old building, which is now causing us a lot of pain; we can't even go there, cause they're changing pipes, I don't know, something, it's a mess.

But so, you know, from Akron, Ohio to a kind of Eurocentric worldview is a big leap. That, it was over many years. And, so we, and we've traveled a lot, I mean, it's getting hard to do now, but, and in those travels, absorbed a lot, about Prague, about every European city we were in. We've never been to Poland. But we promised to. But I don't know if and when. But we, mostly western Europe, and Southeast Asia. And I've been to Russia a couple of times, on a, conferences having to do with the very topic you asked about, preserving the old while building the new, and this was sponsored by the State Department, and went to Saint Petersburg, which is

a really extraordinarily beautiful city. I do know it was very cold, too, but blue-skied. So, all those influences of travel, of books that I read, and I'm not a voracious reader, but, never read much fiction, but in a way—I mean, I committed myself to the practice fifteen hours a day, and it's, it's—[phone rings] I hope she gets it. She did.

Dziedzic: Ok.

Polshek: So it's been a kind of grand life, and the Village has been a very big part of it. And I was on the board of the Greenwich Village Society for quite a long time. And my only legacy was the suggestion to have an awards program that honored people, things, places, parts of buildings every year, and then continues onward. And other than that, I just am a financial supporter. And when asked I help out other ways, occasionally, too.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask you about a few of the buildings that you worked on in the Village and the vicinity.

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: So, this is getting away from what you were speaking about, about the old with the new, or taking an older building and adding a new part of it, but I wanted to ask about Washington Court, which I— [00:39:57]

Polshek: Well, that was, yes, you're right, except Washington Court was an example in urban design terms of adding the new to the old. In actually quite a literal way. That building site, that program, that is the number of housing units in it, could have been a two-story building. It would have been three—would have had a base of commercial and then two floors, and that would be totally ridiculous in terms of maintaining that kind of optimum scale, and so we took advantage of the zoning code that does allow the building to be bulked up to seven or eight stories, I think it's six and a half or seven now, and so that was the first important step.

The next was the choice of materials, the details of the window openings, the chimney pots on top of the building, which are real fireplaces below, the little, and they're wonderful little apartments. They're very, they're very small. I haven't been in any. I stopped by not so long ago, asked the doorman a question, and he was reluctant to answer, and I said, "Well, I designed the

building in 1980.” So he said, “We all thought you died!” [laughter] I said, “No, I didn’t.” So that building does reinforce my, at least my contention that—or, my beliefs.

Dziedzic: Right, and how were you approached for that project? How did it come about? That you were the architect.

Polshek: I’m not sure. I was, you know, as when I was dean, I was practicing also. I may have been on the board of the Municipal Arts Society at the time. I was for ten years, so it’s not unlikely that it was around then. And developers probably saw that as a plus, you know, that it’s—an architect is kind of accepted by those people. And that probably would be something, cause they never built anything for that fellow before or after. And they were, they were really very reasonable. And yet, the building seemed to encourage yelling and screaming, and not just the community planning board, you know, “We’re losing the Village!” and then it all subsided, and a lot of people think it’s been there forever. And that is my most ambitious Village project, I think. I’m trying to think. I mean, I just, I’ve done so many different projects.

Dziedzic: Do you remember presenting the design to the Landmarks Preservation Commission?

Polshek: I had to do that. But I don’t remember it. I, no, I don’t, I don’t remember. I know, I remember that it was required, and that I was very involved in it, and it was a very contentious meeting, I mean, there was, you know, people yelling, the crowd would come down, and they’d be tamped down, so I would, I remember the histrionics, but I don’t remember the history.

Dziedzic: So this was after, after the community was up in arms about losing a parking lot, right? That was—

Polshek: That’s correct, that’s when it was. Well, of course, there was a good reason it was never built on, which is the subway and in addition the trunk sewer, which is gigantic, it’s almost eight feet in diameter, and it runs right underneath, so the structure had to be very, very light. So it was an interesting challenge structurally. How to do it. There’s a lot of air inside the building, and the back part looks more like German workers’ housing in the 1930s than it does, but it is in scale of the Village. I’ve always been very proud of that building. And here I’m living on the same street. [00:45:02]

Dziedzic: Well, I walked right by it without noticing it, and had to go back to—

Polshek: Yes, it's not, it doesn't stand out.

Dziedzic: And I've seen images of the inside of it, too.

Polshek: Oh, you have!

Dziedzic: The ceilings are high—

Polshek: Yes—

Dziedzic: —and that cuts down on the construction material.

Polshek: —that's right. And it blows up the size. I mean, it's like, pumped full of air. But that's to the advantage, and it's where they marketed the—and it's been full, always. [firetruck passes] Sorry. And I don't think I've been in any other buildings of that, that large in the Village. My very first house, that led directly to Japan, was at 241 West 11th Street, and was an old brick townhouse, and which the owners that commissioned me were well known to the Japanese corporation that hired me to come to Japan and do their new laboratories. So there was a linkage back to the, to the Village.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how you came up with the design for Washington Court?

Polshek: Well, it, you know, like a lot of buildings, it will sound silly, but—they design themselves, to a very large degree. Building codes, local traditions, market forces, available materials, all of those things, and many, many more, the architect's ideology and so forth, it becomes a big stew, and the architect does not control all of those ingredients. So, what I said was this: I knew the blocks on either side, and they've remained the same, in these many years, and was aware of that. I knew that we couldn't—yes, we didn't want a pancake building, it would be of no interest. I wouldn't want to be associated with it, so—and we had certain rules about how high it could go, and then the window formation, and the relationship of small to large openings. There are design considerations to avoid the kind of boredom that a block-long building on an important north-south thoroughfare really deserves better than. But it also was influenced by housing in the Netherlands that I was familiar with, and famous for, for low-scale housing. So they are, in Czechoslovakia, there are lots of influences that are wrapped up into it, of a formal nature.

Dziedzic: Are those influences visible on the front, or within the courtyard space?

Polshek: Both, but in different ways; in the front, more nostalgic. On the back, you know, more rigorous, minimal. I would always argue with my younger colleagues; I put these tile dots on certain points to indicate floor level behind and to really, frankly, decorate. And, you know, a lot of the young women and men that worked with me would tell me it was building nostalgia, and that was not what they were trained to do, and nobody trained anybody to do anything. And it was the right thing to do. And it's interesting. If you look at the block, south of it—it also comes to the corner here—it's almost the same height and, in general shape, and yet it's a completely banal building. With strange-colored brick, and boring windows, and no real clear designation of the base from the top. And, again, that's very traditional, the idea of an articulated base using different materials and of course lots of glass, because they're commercial enterprises. And the top of the building, which is articulated as a profile. And it's a very, it's very prominent at dusk, as the sun sets, and actually even in the morning, you see those chimney pots. And the pitched roofs, and I did that completely consciously. But when I presented it, you know, to Landmarks, that was a big plus, but actually to some of the people who were staunch preservationists, it was the wrong thing to do. Well, they didn't want anything. I mean, that's, that—[00:50:44]

Dziedzic: And then there were some that wanted restoration sort of to a particular period, so either—

Polshek: Yes, and there was that, too. But it worked in the end.

Dziedzic: Yes, so what was the—I know it was the first construction, first building built after the designation of the historic district.

Polshek: Was it really? I didn't realize, I wasn't aware of that. That may be, though. I'm sure the, for instance, when we moved here, these were not the windows. I mean, this was a French door, but they had small panes, and these were just, I think this was just two double-hung windows, very small ones. The whole thing on this floor, well, it was about six months before the Landmarks Commission was formed, so I could do it.

Dziedzic: Oh! [laughs]

Polshek: But they can't make me to undo it now.

Dziedzic: But yes, what was the reception like, once the building was, once the scaffolding came down?

Polshek: I think it was, I think it was good. Surprise. You know, and even compliments. I sometimes, you know, walked. I'd see a couple of people together pointing at the building, whispering, and I would sidle up and try to hear. I couldn't hear much, but I could hear very nice things being said. "It's charming," or whatever, you know, it's—I mean, I've had lots of those kind of experiences, different buildings. And some much more, the Brooklyn Museum for instance, addition to one of the great beaux-arts buildings, something I don't think could ever have happened in Manhattan. It happened there, but it was Brooklyn, and people would take greater risks, and the politics were less vicious. The most egregious example is the planetarium.³ Huge glass box on the back of this historic, nineteen, no 1871 building. And now it's going to be added on to again, on the Columbus side. By a Chicago woman who's very talented. I think it will probably be terrific. But we'll see. You know, it's always "We'll see."

Dziedzic: Mmhmm, mmhmm. I was looking through some old newspapers to see what the community, if I could see what the community response was—

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: —to the building, and, you know, there were some typical complaints about, you know, it's the, that Washington Court was a symbol of the way in which Greenwich Village was changing. And that was negative in some regard. But it made me wonder what sort of, you know, what goes into the architect's design, if anything, in terms of, is this luxury housing, is it affordable housing—

Polshek: Well, it wouldn't have been—yes, probably—

Dziedzic: It seems—

Polshek: —wouldn't have been much different, even if it had been affordable housing. There's nothing inherently luxurious about the materials or design. I suppose a roofscape like that carries with it certain risks, but they're risks down the line, that is, storm damage, or whatever, but no, I

³ In the Rose Center of the Museum of Natural History

just, all I remember is I had a very clear vision of what it should be, and a, very persistent about what that, and then how it was presented, and spoken of, and so forth. And I went to all those Village meetings. I mean, they weren't fun, but it's fun to look back. [00:55:02]

Dziedzic: I also saw that the, your firm won an award the following year.

Polshek: This one?

Dziedzic: From the City Club of New York, and I wondered if that was in relationship to Washington Court.

Polshek: Not necessarily. I think that award was called the Bard Award, and it was the city, yes, it was the City Club. It's the same City Club that stopped the Diller Island project, off of 13th Street and the water. Yes, and I think it was not just for one single building, I think it was for that and also a university physical health center, gyms and dance studios for Queensborough Community College, in Queens, and other things. Housing up in Twin Parks, in the Bronx. I'd have to—my long-term memory's pretty good, so I would have to sit here for a while.

Dziedzic: It kind of just made me think about the, I think people have been saying, "Well, there goes the neighborhood" since, you know, the 1830s, or something like that, in Greenwich Village—

Polshek: That's correct, yes.

Dziedzic: So—

Polshek: Well, it hasn't gone; it's been kind of miraculous.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Polshek: I mean, there are places that, I mean, I don't know what the date is of the, I think it's the Brevoort, no, not the Brevoort, I think it's 2 Fifth Avenue, where the buildings that face the park are red brick, and lower in scale, and then the big white giant building is behind it. Which was an intelligent way of approaching it, if you had to have that big building, which is a shame, because right across the street are, on both sides of Washington Square North are these historic townhouses. In there, it's more like England than it is anything you find here.

And developers are, if you know my career and my occasional public outbursts, I am not sympathetic to the idea of real estate development, as naïve as that may seem to anybody. Because it's sort of in this system we live under, it's inevitable, but if there aren't the (public) constraints of local organizations like the Historical Society, Andrew Berman—you've probably met him, I mean, he's really created—when I was first on the board, you know, they were scared to death they'd have their tax-exempt status taken away if anybody criticized anything in any public way. And that changed over time. Andrew has been a miracle worker, and continues. Now, the Village, you know, it was once really strictly defined boundaries, and ended, I guess, Park Avenue South, Lafayette maybe. But now it really is, they take the East Village, and they go north to 20th Street, and—

Dziedzic: South Village.

Polshek: And south, the South Village; it's expanded in its definition. But he rides his pony all over the place, and is very clever, and very, and really feared by the real estate community.

Dziedzic: What sort of actions have you been part of that, either as a citizen or as, you know, maybe professionally, as an architect, around having an effect on the development of the area. Or even outside of this kind of designated area. [00:59:42]

Polshek: Well my, you know, organizational activities, both Municipal Arts Society and the local, our local—and others, as well, in the city, I also was one of the co-founders of, it's called Architects for Social Responsibility, are architects, planners, and so forth. And the, it was kind of a copycat idea, after physicians, but it was really kind of started as an anti-nuclear group, but grew, never, never very large. You cannot, one can't generalize that architects are born as political animals, because the, very often, it's seen that there's politics, and there's art here, and never the twain will meet. Which is childish. But, so that, I was very active for a long time with them, but I began to peel off after time. My attention span is now too short for long meetings. [01:01:05]

[OMITTED] [01:01:28]

Dziedzic: Are there sensitivities to, for architects to become involved in development? Or real estate issues? Because you would need to have a partnership with a developer to—

Polshek: Well, there are, there is a new kind of conglomerate form that has grown up called Design-Build, in which the architect and the developer work, you know, closely together so that, as one is drawing, they are already ordering materials. And it speeds up the time, and in theory, probably and in fact, simplifies a fairly arcane process. But I have never been sympathetic to that. I really think that, like, what is that game? Paper, stones, scissors or whatever—

Dziedzic: Rock, paper, scissors.

Polshek: Yes! Well, the quality of the architecture, not just in its formal aspect, but in its expression of principles and, is sacrificed in favor of paper. We may be the rock, but the dollar bill is gonna have the last word. So I, I—but there have been some successful, but mostly, and not here necessarily, San Francisco for much more, Boston certainly, are more progressive in that way.

But it's, it can get out of hand. I mean, here, to just, was it today? Yesterday, coming down from—we do nothing now but go to doctors and they're all on the Upper East Side it seems, so once in a while, if we feel like it, we just take a cab down the FDR and if you do, you go by Roosevelt Island, and of course at the tip of which is Four Freedoms Park. And the (new Cornell) campus—and I was very involved in it, because, being on the Design Commission—but there's one building there that wasn't brought to us for approval. It was compromised in advance. We could do nothing about it, because Bloomberg wanted it, and the Mayor, he was great, and he was hands off in most cases, with, never really tampering with what the Commission did, but in that case, he did, so they built this twenty-six story housing tower.

We really worked very hard with architects⁴ on the low-rise buildings in terms of the reflectivity of the materials that were used, and the way they were lit up, and so forth, and they're turning out very well. And right in the middle of it, one thing you see, is this yellowish, twenty-six story tower, about three hundred feet south of the landmark Queensborough Bridge. And it came about as, again, a compromise of the developer and the mayor, his office, and the forces behind it, including Cornell, and it really is, it is a sin. It's, I mean, there are a lot of bad buildings going here and there, but this is a very bad one. [01:05:17]

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

⁴ Thom Mayne and Weiss/Manfredi

Polshek: You'll see it, I mean, that is, you'll say, "My god, there it is."

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Polshek: It's not a question whether it's really an ugly building or not, it's not about good architecture or bad architecture, it's a shouldn't-be-there.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Polshek: They could have built it on the other shore and had a boat that took people back and forth. But, it's, what's the old expression—thinking outside the box. Anyway. What's done is done.

Dziedzic: Yes. I'll take a look the next time I'm traveling—

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: —on the Queensborough Bridge. So, a couple other places that I wanted to ask you about, a couple other projects.

Polshek: Yes, we're good.

Dziedzic: The Emigrant Savings Bank.

Polshek: Ah!

Dziedzic: That's, could you talk about that project a little bit?

Polshek: Well, it was, I think I inserted myself into it. They were going to move in, and I don't know what I did, I didn't know anybody to call, and the Milstein family owned the bank, as a matter of fact, but I didn't really know them then. But somehow, or maybe I offered to do it for nothing, whatever I did—so I tried very hard to keep it from going higher than the frame of what was there, but I introduced almost cartoon-like pieces of cornice and so forth. I'm surprised you even knew about that.

Dziedzic: Well, I'm familiar with it from your other book, *Context & Responsibility*.

Polshek: Oh, ok! Yes, yes. No, to me, it was a matter—it was about proportion, and so forth, and, you know, and it happened.

Dziedzic: I think what you had written is that you were approached by the Landmarks Preservation Commission to submit a new façade, because the current—

Polshek: Yes, that's probably—

Dziedzic: —façade somehow—

Polshek: —yes, that's solved.

Dziedzic: —disapproved of some other person.

Polshek: Occasionally, and at the Design Commission, we did that a lot. It's not exactly fair game, but when a supplicant, as I call them, comes in with a project, and it's hopeless, the only thing you can do is quietly take them aside and say, you know, "Here's a list of three architects, and if you pick one of these, you're gonna be ok." And they almost always do it. So I guess that's, I had forgotten that, yes.⁵

Dziedzic: But, so that was a typical situation for the, for the Landmarks⁶ Commission to—

Polshek: Unusual.

Dziedzic: —to connect to you.

Polshek: Yes, well (in the case of Washington Court) I guess I was known already as being a friend of the neighborhood, and maybe even then living in the neighborhood. I think I was, actually.

Dziedzic: I think it was—

Polshek: What year was it?

⁵ This is how my firm received the Newtown Creek Water Control Project—long before I served on the PDC

⁶ Public Design Commission, not Landmarks Commission

Dziedzic: I think it was shortly after Washington Court, if that's possible.

Polshek: Sure. Sure. Which I think was 1980, so, yes, it could have been.

Dziedzic: And that, is that the branch that was on Bleecker?

Polshek: No. What, a branch?

Dziedzic: The branch of the bank?

Polshek: No, no, it's right on Sixth Avenue.

Dziedzic: Oh, ok.

Polshek: There's a bank in it again. It's I think a Citibank or something.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Polshek: It's right south of Greenwich Avenue. But on the West Side.

Dziedzic: I think it might be an Apple Bank, if that's possible. I'll take a look.

Polshek: Yes, there is an Apple Bank, down here. On Sixth and West 4th Street.

Dziedzic: And another space, the Grace Church School.

Polshek: Yes, they were, you know, when I think about it, there were a lot of things that—I think that was basically a planning study. I'm not sure that we ever did anything physically to it. I did the Church of the Heavenly Rest. There actually was some work, but, you know, very often, architectural projects begin with planning projects, when they either have insufficient budgets, or whatever, and that's certainly one reason that architects seek out those planning projects, because, like Renzo Piano's campus for Columbia north of 125th Street, you know, I was surprised it would ever actually be a reality. But it is. And it began with nothing but, you know, things on paper. [01:10:50]

Dziedzic: I, last month I interviewed Beverly Moss Spatt—

Polshek: Oh my!

Dziedzic: —who was, I believe she was the chair of Landmarks when Grace Church was possibly—

Polshek: I think so.

Dziedzic: —about to demolish those houses on Fourth Avenue that they then put the school into.

Polshek: Yes. Yes.

Dziedzic: Is that right?

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: So I was curious, you know, you said in your book that this was a, you know, kind of a stable institution that was interested in preserving its historic building.

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: But where, you know, where things had been at the time that Beverly was involved was that they wanted to raze the buildings and were upset that the community had stopped them.

Polshek: The Church was.

Dziedzic: That's right.

Polshek: Well, it goes always to the board leadership of churches and hospitals. And they, they can be, you can be assured—and it's got much worse than it was then. Because developers on the boards of museums, I mean, the whole debacle with the Museum of Modern Art expanding westward, destroying their own Folk Art Museum, all came about from inside the board.

[01:12:13]

[OMITTED] [01:12:32]

Dziedzic: I think that, you know, it⁷ was also probably a financial decision, too, I mean, I think right around the time is when the city was, you know, basically bankrupt, and, you know, it was

⁷ The decision whether to demolish or restore buildings of historical significance

a recession, and, but it was interesting for me to read your take on it, you know, that you're developing a master plan for them to figure out how to utilize all of these historic buildings—

Polshek: Yes, well that's—

Dziedzic: —and in a celebratory way, whereas ten years ago they'd been grumbling. [laughs]

Polshek: Yes, it sounded, yes, well, things do change though they've, in a weird way, there are many institutions that have gone through those—Friends Meeting House, uh, not Meeting House, the Friends School, on 15th Street, and their expansion, it's just been a continuing battle, between, internal and external, and I really, I think that an architect has a central responsibility in kind of creatively mediating those things, finding a third way. Cause there always is a third way. And if I succeed, that's what I will do up at Sing Sing. Because they had spent two million dollars on studies, and they're very mediocre. And miss, kind of miss the point, or didn't have a point. And there's, it's such an ugly place, it needs whatever it can get. And they're, they're I've acted in that [phone dings] capacity—is that her again? Same thing. She likes to send messages twice. Yes, and all this makes me nostalgic for the old days, when I was more actively involved in, I don't, for years now, I haven't had the appetite. I have the energy, but not the—not the patience.

Dziedzic: Do you recall, if not with the Grace Church School than maybe with others, when you were asked to do a master plan of some sort, were you specifically looking at the architectural questions, or were you working with other professionals, and part of a more comprehensive group developing a plan? [01:15:03]

Polshek: Well, no, all—yes, it would be hubris to not. Sometimes we would bring people in, and sometimes they would, there would be a kind of leader on the part of the institution. Usually a lawyer. And we'd grapple with the lawyer, but nobody would ever give an architect carte blanche to do that for an important—and I mentioned the Church of Heavenly Rest, but I, there have been many other institutional commissions that did not result in buildings, where we had an input. Sometimes I did. I mean, one is in the book, South Street, Seamen's Church Institute, now it's the Blue Troop School. But I designed it, and it was in a landmark district, but before that, a developer had a building there, but he couldn't get it together, and I hated it, and didn't like working on it, and he wasn't paying his bills, that didn't help. And so he sold the property to the

church, and a member of the board was very enlightened about and interested in architecture and in preservation, and hired us to do the new building. And that was a, it was a tussle with Landmarks too. And it's very—I don't know if you're familiar with it, it's right on Water Street. Little building, it's not very big, and it's gotten a lot of awards, and it's—

Dziedzic: I do know there's a lot of really beautiful buildings down there, or—

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: —at least a handful.

Polshek: Yes, a handful, yes.

Dziedzic: I'm not sure which one it is, though. So, have you ever been, I guess this is another question that kind of comes from my understanding of the Grace Church situation and how that evolved over time, but between this and maybe even the Emigrant Savings Bank, were there instances where you were working with organizations that maybe had been kind of mandated to work with an architect and where you had to establish a kind of rapport with that organization, not just with the community or with the developer but with that organization?

Polshek: Well, there probably were, but I, no, I can't really remember. I know that the Brotherhood Synagogue on Gramercy Park, they wanted to put an outside elevator on, and, you know, they felt that they're the client, I'm the architect. Therefore, and it's like a developer: we'll tell you what to do, because we pay you. And I, in that case, I prevailed upon them. It was such a historic location, and historic building. But there were—I mean, there's just, I don't know if it's kept up or not. I haven't been there recently, but there's a, was a beautiful garden, memorial garden that I designed on the side, and even that raised hackles, and, you know, I was on both sides of the street. That worked out, but there—I just can't think of them now. I don't know what your procedure is with this, does it get transcribed, or what?

Dziedzic: Mhmm, and then I'll send that back to you, and you can—

Polshek: Yes.

Dziedzic: —kind of footnote clarifications.

Polshek: Yes, I wouldn't, I mean, I've tried to edit, in the past, manuscripts that people sent. It's so painful, it's so difficult, because every ah and um and pause, you know, and so I'd rather—

Dziedzic: Well, we won't have the ahs and the ums, but it will be verbatim, and we'll kind of—

Polshek: Yes. Because the reason I ask that is that with a little scratching of my memory in reference back to that earlier book, and other things that I have, I might come up with other stuff. But it seems to me, I, given, I mean, you have a lot there now.

Dziedzic: Yes. Mmhmm, mmhmm. Yes.

Polshek: And if something comes in, comes to mind, which it may, because literally tomorrow morning I have a meeting at the office to prepare for a very elaborate presentation of credentials for my nomination for the Gold Medal of AIA, but we are one of three, and the way it's presented to the organization, which is the AIA, but in Washington, is a third party presents my case. [01:20:29]

Dziedzic: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Polshek: And a former student is going to present my case, who was dean at the University of Virginia for a long time, and in order to do so we're allowed to introduce new material that wasn't in the original presentation. And in that discussion tomorrow, something may come up, and if it does, I'll call you.

Dziedzic: Yes, that would be great. That would be great. I wanted to ask, I think just about maybe one more building, and I'm not, my first question is really just how involved—

Polshek: You know what, I've been fooling with these glasses the whole time, I can't see out of them. Well, these are my computer glasses. I just looked, I put a little blue nail polish on the end.

Dziedzic: No wonder. [laughs]

Polshek: No wonder is right. Ok, so go ahead.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask what your involvement was with the design of the Standard Hotel, along the Highline. Or above—

Polshek: Not very much. By that time I was beginning to slow down and the partners were capable of working independently on projects. I suppose that if there's any legacy there, aside from individual buildings that I was the designer of, which were many, up until the early [20]00s or later, it's that I was able to pass on the practice. Which has maintained the quality and the standards and the principles to a very large extent. Now, that hotel, people were horrified by that, you know, that big a building on the edge of the Meatpacking District, though there was no well-organized opposition. But the building is very consciously oriented east-west, so that there's no wall either from the water, and then there's one bend in it. Which probably has more to do with the interior—you don't have that infinite corridor.

But also the kind of very honest use of materials, and, you know, there isn't a lot to deal with, and the way it of course straddles the Highline. That's the most important thing of all, if it had anything to do with it, it was that. But, no, that—I was, yes, there are projects the office undertakes now I'm not altogether happy with. I wouldn't want to see that in print, but I don't want to be the, you know, the crusty old guy, bitching and complaining, but in general the work is actually very good, and it continues in a way that avoids the pitfalls that you get into when you get too large, and it is a large office now. But the second generation after me are beginning to peel off now, either retire or set up their own offices. So, time marches on.

Dziedzic: And you had written about the, it sounded like a kind of dialogic relationship with the younger generation of architects when you were first bringing on new people—

Polshek: Well, I hope I did, and I did, and I encouraged them. And it was, it arises in a way out of the recognition that there are some things that I do very, very well; some things I don't do as well, and so you got to fill in the blanks. But the blanks have to be responsive to the, you know, the terra firma in which they rest. And it's not false modesty. I, it takes—what did, Hillary [Clinton] wrote a book with that title—it takes a family to do something or other. And it, it both takes a family to make a village, or a village to make a family— [01:25:07]

Dziedzic: I think it's *It Takes a Village*, I think that's what it is.

Polshek: *It Takes a Village*.

Dziedzic: I think that's what it is.

Polshek: To do something. But, it is, it's a highly collaborative undertaking that gets out of control if one particular figure is celebrated excessively. Everything goes out of whack. The same thing if they allow themselves to be driven by economic considerations or a personal style, and if you get many partners, they all want to have, you know, they all have families to bring up, and things to do, and places to go, and so it can get to be a difficult—and I, one of the reasons I bowed out as early as I did, and it was over ten years ago; I'm not completely out, but pretty much. There got to be too many opinions. Expressed in, just, and people being intimidated by other people. And it wasn't that I wanted to be the boss, it just, it got so I couldn't control the dialogue, or encourage it. But that is the price you pay for, you know, big is bad, small is beautiful.

Dziedzic: Something that I read about, some assessments, I guess, of your work, your career, were that you had not necessarily—and things that you had written, as well—were that you had not necessarily wanted to have a trademark style, and that in fact your work, your career, you can look at the buildings you designed and not necessarily say, “Oh, that's, that's a Polshek”—

Polshek: Well, that's true—

Dziedzic: —but you could say—

Polshek: —that's—

Dziedzic: —on the converse side, that you had designed things that were appropriate to the context and—

Polshek: Well, that's true.

Dziedzic: —to the situation.

Polshek: That's absolutely true. And the building I mentioned in Columbus, Indiana, the big idea—and I always use the big idea, the big idea is that it kept this creek from being straightened by the Corps of Engineers. And in so doing, it gave a institution that most communities like to deny even exist, it gave them a beautiful front door from a public park, but it gave them a back door on the other side of the creek that connected to the general hospital. And so, and, it preserved, we had to dig out anyway for wherever it was, and one side or the other, so that

budget was used to widen the river. So there was no—and I don't know what it has, they changed the name slightly. It was called Quinco, for the five counties of southern Indiana, you know, the current so-called vice president, that's his hometown, is Columbus.

Dziedzic: Oh.

Polshek: And I was very surprised to hear that. But that's where Pence comes from. So I want to begin to, if we can, wrap up.

Dziedzic: Yes, yes, I guess I just have, you know, just wanted to ask you if you have any other kind of concluding thoughts about —

Polshek: Well, I love to talk, so, you know, I could go on for a long time in detail on any one of these things. I insisted that the office take health care, a long time ago, and they didn't want to do it—oh, we'll lose money, and difficult; I said, we just have an obligation to do it. So I accepted a commission to do a geriatric care unit out of Long Island, LIJ, Long Island Jewish Hospital, it has another name. And that led to a lot of work out there, and it's really interesting work, and you feel like you're doing something that is not just another (profit-making) motel or hotel. And it has grown so that it's provided, you know, a kind of protection from ups and downs in the economy, which there have not been for twenty years. But ordinarily every ten years, there is a recession that effects building very dramatically. [01:29:55]

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Polshek: And so they're doing all this work for NYU, I mean, virtually a whole new hospital, and up at, and another building, tower for Sloan Kettering uptown, and New York Hospital, one beautiful little ambulatory care building there. I love that building. And I didn't have much to do with that, except I was in, my role really was the encouragement to go about it and apply the same kind of ideas, so that the building in New York Hospital, where everything is gray brick and kind of ersatz Gothic, is Gothic-feeling. It's just a warped glass wall, but it's gray, and it's really a very delicate building. And it's for ambulatory care, so it gets an enormous amount of traffic to all specialties. I mean, practically all my doctors are in that building. So I get good service, but [Dziedzic laughs] I did—I was not the principal on that building. I encouraged the principal, and guided the presentation to the board members, but I didn't do any more than that. I

mean, you have to, too many architects hang on for too long, and they start to accept really awful commissions. Right across the park, what is it called, the Kimmel Center? [01:31:37]

[OMITTED] [01:32:36]

Polshek: So, you can call me if you need clarification—

Dziedzic: Right, yes.

Polshek: —and I'll be happy to cooperate, and I may say, "Oh my God, I forgot to tell you this or that" in the next couple days, or maybe not.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm, yes, that's perfectly fine. Well, thanks so much for taking the time today to let me—

Polshek: Well, you're very, a real pro.

Dziedzic: —talk with you. All right, thanks so much, we'll, we can end the interview there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]