Dixon Bain

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

by

Jeanne Houck

Phone Interview
Interviewer: New York City, New York
Interviewee: Brookline, Massachusetts
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Abstract

Dixon Bain served as the project manager for planning and construction of Westbeth Artist's Residence in the West Village from 1967-1971.

Bain begins the interview by describing his background and how he was introduced to the J.M. Kaplan Fund, a foundation which provides support for artists, community outreach, and the enhancement of the built environment. He communicates his involvement training underrepresented factory workers to pass the Local 28 exams, which caught the attention of J. M. Kaplan, the head of the Fund. He recounts Kaplan's interest in the Bell Laboratory Building as a potential site for artist housing, a building familiar to Bain as he was a former AT&T employee. Bain describes visiting the abandoned structure, and explains the many technological innovations which were pioneered there. He tells of meeting with the then unknown architect, Richard Meier, to discuss the relatively new concept of adaptive reuse and how the complex site could become a cohesive center for artists.

Bain continues by detailing the almost year-long process to obtain zoning and financial support for the project. Bain describes working with Joan Kaplan (daughter of J.M. Kaplan), as well as the support he received from Jane Jacobs, Mayor John Lindsay, and others. He recounts the process of convincing the Federal Housing Administration to allow zoning for adaptive, specialty- use apartments, a housing type without precedent. He also describes trying to sell the concept of housing built specifically for artist's needs to government officials and planning boards. Bain remembers the 1968 groundbreaking as a mixed blessing, promising both the continuation of the project, but also the trials of the renovation process.

Bain also describes his multifaceted role as construction manager, recounting meeting with architects, contractors, and dignitaries visiting the site. Bain emphasizes the point that large scale renovation projects were quite unheard of, and the difficulty selecting appropriate contractors. Bain describes his travels to Helsinki, Paris, and London, where he observed several artist housing developments for research on the development of Westbeth. He also discusses the relative ease with which tenants were found, paired with the difficulty in leasing out the commercial space planned as part of Westbeth.

Bain concludes the interview by briefly recounting how the Westbeth project affected his later work. He details the hiring of Peter Cott, who replaced him after the 1970 completion of Westbeth. He also describes a later project to renovate a Hoboken factory into housing, which was cut short by President Nixon's dispersal of the Federal Housing Administration.

Q: This is Jeanne Houck, and I'm working for the Westbeth Oral History Project. And we're speaking today on April 27th, 2007 with Mr. Dixon Bain about his involvement with the Westbeth Project. And I understand you're in your home office right now, Mr. Bain, in, Brookline, Massachusetts.

A: That's right.

Q: So thank you so much for speaking with us today.

A: Oh, it's a pleasure. You don't often get a chance to go back and look at stuff that you did thirty years ago and see how much you can remember and how accurately I can bring it forward. But it's an experience that has in large part stayed with me, because it was, I think, quite a run for the money.

Q: Oh, that's great to hear that you have a strong memory of it. And one of the things I wanted to ask you about is it would be great if you could tell me just a little bit about where you were born and raised, just for background purposes. And then what did you do right before you became involved in the Westbeth project?

A: Well let's skip over the first part of that question very quickly; the usual thing to tell is that I was born in Salt Lake City, and I moved around the country a great deal. I settled down finally after a number of different locations. My father finally decided he liked Ridgewood, New Jersey, which is where I more or less grew up. I went to college from there, Dartmouth, and then went on from there to a bunch of other things, including more graduate education. I was working for AT&T, which is what I was doing when I bumped into Jack Kaplan and his daughter.[1] And what I had been doing at AT&T, which is why I was ready for a move. I had been a speech writer for the senior executive staff there. I wrote speeches on various topics of interest, but I also was permitted to spend a fair amount of time looking at the issues of New York as a city at the time. Not that AT&T was a government agency; it definitely was a corporation, and it was definitely interested in making money. But I was given a fair amount of freedom to work with groups, for example, like the one Kenneth Clark, the famous educator, was working with up at City College where we were asked to help give special training to some applicants for a sheet metal worker Local 28 examination. So that these young kids, mostly Black, but not entirely, who were meant to be excluded by the toughness of the exam questions, would

[1] Jacob Merrill Kaplan established The J. M. Kaplan Fund in 1945 and was its president until 1977. The Fund was capitalized by profits from Mr. Kaplan's business operations, most notably the sale of the Welch Grape Company to the National Grape Co-operative Association. Joan K. Davidson, daughter of the founder, was named president of the Fund in 1977 and served in that capacity until 1993.

have sort of an update on math and an update on English and other subjects. And a number of my AT&T colleagues came up as volunteers and we gave them a review of math, English and history, and lo and behold, much to the surprise of the sheet metal workers, they passed. That's how some of the first Blacks got into the local sheet metal workers union, Local 28 in New York City.

Anyway, from that I was looking around at other things one might do with regard to the city and getting involved more in what was happening in New York. It became pretty clear that, if you work for a very large corporation, there's just a little bit of leeway, basically off to one side. And it's never going to be the main business, nor should it be, of a corporation, because that's why we have a state and federal government. So I began looking around. I had my resume out there. I was looking at foundations and other organizations, and I guess they call them NGOs today, that would be doing this kind of thing. And somehow my name came to the attention of Jack Kaplan, who was at that time a very active, very feisty, very smart businessman, and the founder of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, a philanthropic foundation in New York City.

As it happened, he and Roger Stevens[2] had hatched an idea earlier that summer, as I understand it, that the Kaplan Fund, as a philanthropic endeavor, would join forces with the National Endowment for the Arts to acquire a building which had recently come on the market, namely the former headquarters building of the Bell Telephone Laboratories on West Street, right on the Hudson River, a few blocks south of 14th Street, near the old meatpacking district. It was at the lower end of the meatpacking district end of things. And they had the notion that by proceeding with that acquisition they might be able to do what the prime purpose of the endeavor between the two of them envisioned – namely, how can we assist relatively moderate income artists who want to, or already do, live in New York but really can't afford studio space. They felt it would be wonderful to find a building that would provide them with both at reasonably affordable rents.

And that was the main driving idea behind Westbeth. It wasn't something that I came up with. I think it was probably the invention of Jack Kaplan, who was a very imaginative guy, and conceivably his daughter Joan Davidson may have had some very early input into it. But in any case by the time July and August of '67 came around, my name somehow came before Jack Kaplan, and I don't know who sent it or how he picked up on it. But he called me up and asked me to meet him for a drink. And my memory's going to say late July, but it might have been early August of '67. In any case it

[2] Roger Stevens served as the first head of the National Endowment of the Arts, from 1965 to 1969.

was before Labor Day. And he, being a very shrewd and clever businessman, didn't tell me all that was involved. I'm not sure he knew what was involved all together. No one did at that time. But he sketched the fact that the Bell Telephone Laboratories Building was the site, which I was familiar with, because Bell Labs was at that time part of AT&T, which was a much different AT&T than we have today – much bigger and much more powerful.

He knew that I would know something about it, and he knew that I was interested in things having to do with the city, and here was this chance to turn this property into housing for artists. And it sounded like a pretty nice idea. So we talked a little bit about his thinking there. He mentioned Roger Stevens' role in supporting this through the National Council for the Arts,[3] and how the Kaplan Fund and the National Council would each come up with the same amount of money (at that stage I think it was about a million bucks a piece) to get the project started. And then we would look to other sources, including federal sources, for the balances of the money to actually do the job.

'Doing it' meaning creating housing out of essentially laboratory space, which at first glance didn't sound like a winner, but at second and third and fourth glance it sounded like it had some real possibilities. Because here was this building essentially a block square in the West Village going up thirteen old fashioned stories, by which I mean the ceiling heights of thirteen, sometimes eighteen feet. The place was really gigantic.

It was roughly three quarters of a million square feet of space, as I remember the figures, I might be off there. It wasn't more than a million, though. And so, you might say the bait was on the hook, and I took it strongly and said "That sounds like a lot of fun. I'd like to do this." Without really knowing what I was getting into.

Q: Do you remember when you first went to the building?

A: Yes I do. It was shortly after Jack and I met for the first time. And he said, "Well you, if you're thinking of doing this, you should go take a look at it and become familiar with it." And I went over, as I recall, sometime in the latter part of August. I went by myself as I remember it, but I had an introduction to the gatekeeper, and I had my old AT&T pass. In any case I got in. And had a chance to wander around and see all, I mean I had been in the building before for official business purposes, but then it had had a lot of the scientists and technicians that were associated with Bell Telephone

[3] The National Council on the Arts was established through the National Arts and Cultural Development Act of 1964, a full year before the federal agency was created by Congressional legislation and the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts, which was given the ability to fund projects.

Laboratories. What you have to realize, Jeanne, is that this was in many respects a site that, all by itself, would qualify for historic status, because, among other things, the transistor was invented there. The first talking picture, "The Jazz Singer", was developed and screened in a theater that was there. And many, many other significant breakthroughs in communication technology, which Bell Labs was known for, had actually occurred there. And if no one else had ever come along, I suspect that an effort would have been launched to try to save the building just for those reasons alone.

But Bell Labs was out, and they wanted to sell it, and they had no interest in keeping it. But they also didn't want to give it away.

Q: It was deserted at that time?

A: Well effectively. I mean there was a watchman and various other things, but it was essentially empty. And most of the stuff had been moved out. A lot of junk remained, but in the walk through you could see, once you began to have your right head about you in thinking about it as artist living space, you could find, for example, on the north side of the building there were a number of floors that had eighteen foot ceiling heights, and huge windows. And that of course makes for a rather magnificent artist working space if you're a visual artist, a sculptor, a painter, or whatever. And it was envisioned, I found out in my subsequent first meeting with Jack's daughter, Joan. It was in late August of '67, by which time Jack and I had sort of made a deal that I was going to go to work for the Kaplan Fund. Basically, they paid my salary, and wanted to see what I could do to make this thing happen. It was sort of a generic charge. It was anything from sweeping up the floors to signing the contracts, because there wasn't anybody else there at that time except me, and of course Joan.

[Some Major Design Issues]

Joan and I met on an occasion that I'm remembering in a very windswept place where we had a drink with each other and with Richard Meier, the architect. First time I'd met Richard. I hadn't even heard of him before that time because truth to tell Richard was not yet famous, as he is very much so now. But he seemed like a very smart and imaginative guy, and we struck off a pretty good relationship right at the beginning. And he and Joan and I talked a little bit about the project and what it might entail. And Richard brought forth the idea that, because the building was a fix, that is to say it was going to essentially maintain the form that it had to begin with, what the architects and the owners – owners being the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the National Council—had to do was, "Okay, we got this thing. We're not going

to tear it down; we're not going to substantially revise it. How are we going to work with the fact that on the south side of the building you have this huge courtyard", which it wasn't so much a courtyard then. It was filled with stuff. And on one side of the courtyard was this theater building where the talking pictures were invented, and there was still a huge movie screen and projection booth. On the other side was a three story building that basically fronted the river. Those were on two sides. And then on the third side was the thirteen story brick pile of the Laboratory's building itself. And in the middle of this thirteen story pile of masonry, and some of it was really big masonry – forty eight inches sometimes in the walls – was this courtyard inside the main building. The courtyard required a lot of creative thinking on Richard's part, and I think to some extent Joan's, too. They were already sort of toying with this idea when I came on board, although Richard had not been there very long, as I understand it. We were more or less brought on at about the same time.

And the question was, "Okay, what do we do with this courtyard?" First of all, there was a lot of space in there. That's how you got light to the interior units. But how can you use this? And Richard finally came up with a number of notions that seemed very creative. One was to use balconies to function as fire escapes so you wouldn't have the mess of actual fire escape ladders coming down in the interior courtyard, and turning the courtyard into something of an aesthetic plus rather than a huge negative. Because you entered the courtyard through a very wide and high archway from West Street, and you came up the stairs and here was this courtyard. Richard's notion was two things. One, on the first floor all the way around the courtyard were areas not suitable for residential space so let's see if we can make that into commercial space of some kind. Maybe a restaurant, maybe galleries, maybe who knows what. And then from the second floors up through the, depending on which part of the building you were in, up to the eleventh floor or the thirteenth floor, we'll have individual residences. And all that sounded great, but there was just a couple of little details we had to get over, and the more Richard and I and Joan talked, the more it became clear to me anyway that this was an unprecedented piece of work, that is no one had ever tried this before in the U.S., or, as I subsequently found out, anywhere else at that scale. Because we were talking about well three quarters of a million square feet and all of it space where you have to work within the existing envelope of the structure. And what do you create within it depends entirely, I think, on a bunch of factors. There is your imagination of course. But also what kind of approvals you can get from the city and the state, and what type of financing you can get from, in this case, FHA (Federal Housing Administration), which subsequently became HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development).

Q: I was interested in your discussing some of what you very early on decided as the design, the basics of the design.

A: Well it was decided, Jeanne, as much as anything by the givens of the building.

Q: Yes?

A: A design architect would far rather say, "Okay, here's the site. What a magnificent place right on the river. Let's tear this monster down, and put up something that's new and novel and interesting and well designed and all the rest of that stuff." But that wasn't in the cards. So the question became how do you do what has since become known as 'adaptive reuse', or 'renovation with a heart' or whatever you want to call it? And that was the issue that Richard and Joan and I, and others who were interested in the project, had to face. How do you do this without blowing the bank or destroying what's there? How do you use what's there in the best way possible? And I touched on a couple of ways in which, early on, we began to think about that. Shortly thereafter, I began showing up for work at my 'office' right at Westbeth itself, because I wanted to be close to the project as it was developing, and I was thinking I don't want to be sitting up in an office some time, up on the West Side or East Side or whatever, when I can actually be right here.' So I decided to work on the site, in some quarters set up on the first floor of the building.

[Organizing and Financing Westbeth]

And as I began to spend a little time thinking about what we were on to, a couple of things became painfully evident. One was we had a bunch of things we had to do almost at the same time. For example, one was to finalize a design that works for the maximum number of artists who needed both housing and studio space. Another was to make it happen within the confines of the zoning statute, or change the zoning statute. Another was to persuade the FHA, Federal Housing Administration, that housing moderate income artists was really no different than housing moderate income people, which was after all their charge. That was what they were supposed to do. And they did that by way of insuring mortgages. In other words, you're the bank, you're going to lend the money to Westbeth, but FHA, with the full faith and credit of the federal government, stands behind your loan. If Westbeth goes belly up or defaults or whatever, you, the bank, won't lose your shirt. We'll keep you whole. In the meantime, we want you to lend the money. So we had to figure out a way, through the FHA, and the

bureaucracy and ways of getting them to approve it. Along with city approvals and federal approvals, there's the whole issue of how does the community feel about it. And there we had the good fortune of Jane Jacobs being known to Jack Kaplan, and certainly known to Joan Davidson. And that didn't hurt in meeting with her, which we did several times, and tried to explain the concept of what we were going to do. She immediately sensed this was a chance to make a difference in the neighborhood, if the scale was not so large as to destroy the neighborhood, which is a danger if you've got something that's a block square and thirteen stories high. What happens in there would be important for the entire West Village neighborhood.

But we had to work with all those folks, and then of course we also had to have the political entities in New York City come down on the right side. And this would mean that in our work to get a special zoning district and the tax abatements and related things that were required to make the project move forward; somebody was going to have to spend a lot of time in the Borough President's offices in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan. So it became clear that we had to sort of start doing these things right now, and without any delay, because of one key date – we were in September, 1967 and at the end of June, 1968, the building had to be in our hands or the contract would be in default. In other words, if we couldn't bring it off by then, Bell Labs would say, "Look, you guys have been messing around with this for nine months, ten months, 11 months. And you didn't produce. So the contract says that's it. You are in breach of contract; you guys go away and we'll find somebody else to buy it."

Q: And when there were discussions with the AT&T representatives, that was very clear. They…

A: There happened to be a guy who was heading Bell Telephone Laboratories, and I won't go into the details of it. But Bell Telephone Laboratories was part of AT&T, a highly separate, highly turf oriented research institution, whereas AT&T was an operating company. They ran the telephone network. But Bell Labs said, "Well we're really the big cheese here and we do our own thing." And so I was dealing mostly with Bell Laboratories.

Q: Right. So you had discussions with them.

A: I had a lot. I spent Thanksgiving morning in 1967 in a three hour discussion with the head of Bell Laboratories, who was one tough cookie that I had known before in a business sense, but you know he was just a person who was known to be tough and uncompromising and very smart. But now I

was dealing with him in a different way, as a representative of this new entity, which didn't even have a name yet. We had to strike forward on a deal that they would go for and we could live with. The purchase price was still floating around, for example. And it was clear that Bell Laboratories wanted more than Jack and Roger were prepared to put up, which was the easy money. It was already a million bucks a piece, and you would think two million would be enough to interest somebody. But unfortunately that was for the whole project, not just for acquiring the building and the site. So a lot of that stuff went on, but it was all against the fact that the commitment we had with Bell Labs had to be a contract performance on or before the 30th of June, 1968.

Q: I see. So that was a lot of pressure on you, I can imagine.

A: Well it put us in kind of a straitjacket, because we had all this stuff to do, much of it seemingly, at least to me at the outset, seeming like we had to do it all at the same time. There's no serial connection between A to B to C to D, but rather 'Here's the alphabet. It's all mixed together. You got nine months. Go!' And it took me, anyway, and possibly a few other people associated with the endeavor, a little while to figure out just how complicated this was going to be. I tried to make discrete tasks that would behave themselves and sit still on a calendar while you went after them one at a time, And being aware of the next one being a part of this one. But I ordered it really firstly around trying to get the kind of approvals we would need from the community, because if Jane Jacobs were to have opposed us, for example, we'd be dead in any case, or at least have a very hard time. You're probably too young to remember it, but back in that period of time she was very much of a force in the West Village and in New York. And while planning professionals might not have loved her, she was very good at what she did. And so…

Q: I think it's really fascinating to learn about her, your involvement with her in that you needed her support.

A: Oh, yeah. And we needed the support of the West Village Planning District. And we were fortunate in finally getting that. And then, next in order of priority, we had to get our marbles set up with the city so that we could get the special zoning district we needed. Special zoning because what we were proposing was way outside the limits that were placed on that site, because it was zoned as an industrial site. And they weren't thinking of the number of people per floor in terms of residential construction. So there were a bunch of constraints that came in upon us immediately as soon as we proposed doing this for residential purposes, forget for the moment the fact

that it's not only living but working spaces. That was a new concept altogether for the city, and for me, for that matter. I hadn't seen this done before. Because it hadn't been done before as far as I know in the U.S. So we had to work very closely with the borough presidents, and we had fortunately the assistance that came from the fact that Joan Davidson was quite well known to John and Mary Lindsay. While they didn't cut us any favors, it was also possible for me to get a return phone call from the mayor's office. And that of course is *extremely* helpful in setting up appointments with the various borough presidents and getting to the people who would vote either for or against Westbeth to be able to go forward on a city level.

[FHA Approves Flexible Bedrooms]

But we also had to spend a lot of time in Washington, because there were some key things going on there. I'll make this as brief as I can, but the way in which FHA would agree to insure a loan for housing is based in large part on the fact that the design meets their criteria, but it's based on the number of bedrooms, and the more bedrooms you have, theoretically, the more people. The more people, the more money to help construct this 'safe, decent, and affordable housing', as the FHA likes to put it.

We had a problem with that. Richard and Joan and I, although less so me than the two of them on this one, became set on the idea that if we're going to offer working space for artists, visual and performing, and the key notion for the space is that it has to be adaptable for their needs. And if you start putting in walls, fixed walls, to say, "Well inside this is bedroom one, inside this is bedroom two," et cetera, and this is how we got to a three bedroom unit. They, and Richard was key here in coming up with this, came up with a notion of, "Look, they want to be able to modify their space. They have different needs depending on whether they're working large or small at the present time. We will give them a bedroom count based on total space, but based on movable partitions that can be locked in place but moved the next day to show a bedroom over here rather than over there, but it would be the equivalent space that would normally come with a three bedroom, one bath, one kitchen unit." And this now seems simple. But I can tell you, it didn't seem simple at all to the FHA, and we had an enormously difficult time getting them to think of artists as living here. "Why the hell are we doing this for artists?" We had to keep making the point, "Forget they're artists. In fact what they are is low, moderate income people for whom the current law" – I won't bore you with the initials, but it was then called the 221b3 program, which is now extinct. "It is designed and intended by the Congress to serve this population, so what's the problem, FHA?" "Well these bedrooms. These are crazy. Who wants a dotted line on a floor plan showing where the

bedroom's supposed to be?" And we had to scramble very hard to prove to, or to make a good case for, the FHA that this is what the proposed tenancy really would like to see. And we got several artists who made statements to that effect, because it did seem, in fact, to meet their unusual needs. Because they can't say once and for all they want a studio of the size of 'x', because it's part of their living space depending on whether the kids are a priority or the working space is a priority at the time. You have flexibility to change your space accordingly.

Q: Yes.

A: And that was the idea.

Q: Can I ask you then, were they very lengthy discussions where you needed to prove the case that artists were middle income people, too?

A: No, not middle. Moderate.

Q: Moderate, I mean.

A: The difference is important, because you get into middle income, you're into entirely different set of housing programs.

Q: Right. Moderate.

A: These people were low to moderate, is the way the FHA puts it. And …

Q: Was there a prejudice towards artists do you think?

A: Well mostly because no one had ever designed housing for specific people, with two exceptions. One, there was so called 'elderly housing', which has been around for a long time. And it was a kind of special breed within low to moderate income housing. And there was beginning to be an awareness that there was a handicapped community out there, although this is way, way early for ADA and any of the stuff that came basically in the Clinton administration and following on how to make things more accessible for that sub-population. But the FHA wasn't set to start making exceptions for special populations. Their job was to produce housing. "This is going to be housing, that's fine. Don't put all this other fancy-dancy stuff on it. And everyone will be happier." But of course that was the whole ballgame. And we did have a lot of difficult discussions. Richard did a lot of the work with his architects here, but I was involved in it, and Joan was certainly instrumental in helping it along as well. So finally we got a signoff from the

FHA that the way we were approaching the bedroom count could be made to work. All we had to do was get a bank that was willing to go along with it.

And so all these things began to start lurching forward in the early months of 1968. And as you know, 1968 was a highly historic year for the country, for a bunch of reasons which we won't go into here. But it was probably the most memorable year for me personally, because I was very much involved in the political scene in New Jersey, which had nothing whatever to do with Westbeth, but I happened to be running for one of the Democratic National Convention Delegate slots, one of them anyway. And so that made things a little dicey, because I was almost never home, and yet I had to keep my eye on the fact that I did care a lot about what was happening in politics at that time. And so I kind of watched it happen as I was busy doing one thing or another. I can remember being in a Board of Estimate meeting the day that Tet was announced, and I recall where I was when King was assassinated.[4] And so on down through the year, a year we all remember. It was a very big year for everybody.

Q: When you recall these events, the very big historic events of this time period, did it seem that you were actually in meetings about Westbeth when you heard about these very historic events happening?

A: Often it came about that way. Robert Kennedy's assassination,[5] I remember particularly well. The day after the news came out, I had a meeting that I had to go to, because I'd called it, between the contractor and the architect and myself in which we were trying to negotiate, "Well how will this thing get built and for how much money?" Because we decided it couldn't be an open bid contract. There wouldn't be the kind of response we needed. We needed somebody who had done renovation on a large scale. And so we had made a selected pick of a builder who we thought could do a good job of this, and we were in the midst of intense negotiations with him when this happened. And all of us should have gone to St. Pat's that day, but none of us did. It was just one of those things where time was so tight, we were well into June, June 8th I think that would have been the day after. And all that stuff was going on. And you were probably off doing all the right things. Well I wasn't. I was off doing the wrong things. But I didn't feel anyone had any choice if we were going to make that end of month deadline, we really had to move as fast as we could.

[4] The Tet Offensive military campaign during the Vietnam War began January 31, 1968. Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968.
[5] US Senator and Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was assassinated on June 5, 1968.

So anyway, all these things began to start going in the right direction. Thanks to Jack Kaplan's influence with bankers, he got a lender commitment from Banker's Trust, apparently they knew Jack very well and felt that if he was involved and it was being insured by the FHA, how can you go wrong. And so we got good progress on that. We had the local community behind us. We now had the votes from the Board of Estimate, which required a lot of politicking with the borough presidents' office, particularly Herman Badillo in the Bronx, and Percy Sutton in New York. I spent a fair amount of time with both of those people's staff as well as themselves explaining why this would be a really great thing after they look cross-eyed at you when you say, "This is going to be artist housing." And they say, "What? *What*?" And then after you explain it all to them, then you begin to get into conversation, and they become interested in it.

Q: And when you had meetings, you went of course. Did other people go at different times?

A: Well depending on what was needed, if it was going to be a technical presentation of course Richard and/or several of his architects would come. It was going to be financial and planning. It would be basically me, but I had access to a couple of very good attorneys who knew the FHA much better than I did and gave good advice. And if we needed some other aspect, for example if we were going to talk about some of the technical considerations of the building and what type of structure it was, we'd bring along the structural engineers that we had hired by that time because the so-called construction drawings from which the project would be built, were well along the way toward being finished – as they had to be, because if you're going to seal the deal by the end of June, people have to know what they're going to build from, what its going to look like, what it's going to cost, and how you're going to do it. And so it was probably the most, probably the most crazy time of, probably of my life. Because the politics were getting very, very intense at that time, right after the Kennedy assassination. And the work on the project was getting so intense that I sometimes slept over in the building because there was not much point going home at that hour and coming in early the next morning. So it was a, as they say in the architectural and planning trades, it was a charrette, right down to the wire.

And finally at the end of June, we got to the groundbreaking with an appearance by Mayor John Lindsay and a number of other local dignitaries. But he was probably the most significant speaker. I said a few words. Joan and I said a few words. And on the surface it looked as if "what a sweet thing this is. So it is carefully planned, everything's going forward. Everyone's smiling, everyone's happy." And most of us of course were practically

unhinged thinking, "How are we going to make this thing go in the next two days?" Because the groundbreaking occurred on the 28th of June, right down to the wire. And we finally did make all the dates; got the Purchase and Sale Contract signed, and we closed. The Westbeth Housing Development Fund became owners of the property. We had the drawings. We had a clear sense of how we were going to do it. And it was just a question of starting out towards the end of this incredible nine-month gestation period.

Building the Project

So things started on the second major phase of the Westbeth story, the first phase being planning, a nine month period. And the building of Westbeth, I think, is sort of the next big chunk: roughly July 1st of '68 to the middle of May, 1970. By which time we had our formal opening of Westbeth, with a number of the artists in residence by that time. In that period of almost two years, a huge amount of work had to be accomplished. I committed to my office every day, put on my hardhat and went to work with the stuff I had to do, which included, along with ongoing meetings with the architect, the general contractor and a wide range of city agencies, being on site to represent the project to any dignitaries and neighbors who came by. We had a lot of visitors sent over by Joan and Jack and Roger Stevens, and I was really the caretaker of folks like that. I also was very much involved in one of the major things, along with construction: finding the commercial tenants that we would need to help support the project because we weren't going to be able to support the mortgage loan on tenant rents alone. There was no way that could happen. So we got some special waivers from FHA and from the City, and as it turned out we had a fairly substantial amount of commercial space. And that had to be leased if the project was to be viable long term.

Finding Commercial Arts Related Tenants

Some interesting things happened there. I spend an inordinate amount of my time chasing what I thought would be reasonable tenants. We put it out as an open listing to the brokerage industry in New York. And that would mean that anybody, Spaulding and Slye or whatever, could bring somebody, and if they brought a tenant with whom a lease could be drawn, they would benefit in the commission. But it wasn't exclusive with anyone, because we didn't think we'd get the service we needed that way. So I was running on that side as well as construction management. Jack kept his ears open as did Joan. And she succeeded, through her connections in the arts community, in getting a real find for us. The dancer Merce Cunningham was at the time had a definite need for a studio and rehearsal space. And part of our commercial space was in the 11th floor auditorium, in the rear of the building,

so it got a lot of morning and early afternoon light; gigantic windows on the east and west side; high ceilings. It was beautiful space for that type of function, because that's where Bell Labs and held their news announcements on inventing the transistor, or the first talking picture, or whatever.

So that came forward, thanks to Joan, and I succeeded in finding our first arts tenant in the strict sense of the word, namely someone engaged in the arts who would be able to pay the going rate. I think Merce was given some additional incentives to make it easier for him, because he certainly was not – then or now – a goldmine, but rather an artistic mine of great value. I found a shop that had just recently opened, a New York branch of a famous Parisian entity called "Mourlot Graphics".

Q: Could you spell that?

A: M-O-U-R-L-O-T. "More Lot" it looks like. And they had been doing world class lithography in Paris for maybe a hundred years. They did many of the first impressions of Picasso's work and Miro and other famous artists. And they were known, I found out, as being amongst the tops in the world. And this was the son coming over to establish the U.S. branch that would complement what his father had done in Paris. And I got to talking with him, and we had lunch, and I showed him a space that would be ideal for him in the interior courtyard. He would anchor the east end of the courtyard, where there was a very attractive ramp spiraling up from the ground floor up to the second floor, and if we did our work right and got his huge lithography presses into the building in time, we could still get him in before the building was sealed up on that end of the courtyard, and these huge multi-ton machines could be put in place and be in operation.

And that all seemed quite wonderful, and also quite wonderful was the fact that he and his father invited me to come to Paris and see how they did artist housing at the Cite des Arts. It was something sort of like Westbeth. It was rental space for artists that gave them both studio and living space, but quite modest in a relatively small building which was designed for housing. But nonetheless, I thought, "Well why not? Maybe we'll learn something." So I set out to do that in the spring of '69. I believe. And I also picked up on the same trip a leg over to Helsinki in Finland where they had had artist housing since the 1920s of the type that was designed to be artist's studios-- visual artist's studios. And I think there were twelve of them in one building. And they were designed with high ceilings and the right type of monitor window pointing to the north. They got perfect light and quiet space. Unfortunately, when an artist was granted the right to live there, he had it for as long as he

wanted it, and some of them had stopped being very productive, and were just sort of hanging on there.

Q: This is in Helsinki?

A: This is in Helsinki. Yes. I've forgotten the specific name of the project, but it was quite small scale. But very interesting, and showed a lot of imagination for its time, which was the 1920s. Very nice construction, but it was not really something suitable for what we were trying to bring about in the states. A question of scale became involved in both the Parisian and the Helsinki models, because we were at a massive scale – like ten times or more the size of either of these entities – and they were designed to be housing to begin with, and studio space at the same time. So they were able to do whatever they wanted from scratch, and we were doing, as I said before, adaptive reuse. And I also stopped over in London where, at that time, on the Canary Docks, they were doing some preliminary things that looked like they might develop into artist housing, but they turned out more to be individual artists, many of whom were not necessarily low income, who were moving in this direction and might very well have gone toward a collective or a collaborative. But it wouldn't have been the same thing, and wouldn't have government sponsorship. It would have been an individual thing, like established artists might do on Manhattan's Upper West Side if they had the resources.

Q: And this was somewhere in London?

A: Yes, the Canary Docks on the Thames, just a little bit down from Tower Bridge.

Q: Very interesting. That's very interesting.

A: Oh, I found it interesting too, but I found that it was that none was directly germane to what we were trying to do. But it gave me a lot of ideas, which I brought back and shared with Richard and with Joan; it was a trip well worth while. I think I was gone for ten days in total.

Q: What would you say were some of the ideas you brought back with you, both what you wouldn't want to do and what you would want to do?

A: Well, as I say, what I would want to do was constrained by what was there. So I couldn't just let my imagination fly the way these people had done. But the things that I wouldn't want to do is to segregate the place off in the middle of nowhere, which was the case with the Canary Docks at that

time. They've since gone on to great fame and notoriety, and now it's a rather nice place to live. But now is not then. And so I would have been mindful of that. And Westbeth had a bit of that same problem. Because it was, being the first of its kind, it was way out there in the middle of an area that most people thought of, "Westbeth? Who wants to be on the River, in the meat district?" That type of thing. It also suggested that it's hard to give visual artists enough space. They always need more. Not for selfish reasons, but because their scale tends to often change with the spaces that are available to them. So those kinds of things would be the case. The other would be that when you're constrained to have units that have to be occupied by people of what HUD defined or FHA defined as low and moderate income, that puts a definite constraint on what you can do. No one in Cite des Arts in Paris was in that context, and certainly no one in Helsinki was. These weren't established national artists with a huge pot of money behind them. But they had arrived. They were just getting better. And the government, or private entities, were helping them along with that. Which is really quite different than saying, "How would you like to take three hundred and eighty-four struggling artists, give them a place to live and work, and, because they have this very modest income, they qualify to live in this special low rent setting." That's a different undertaking all together.

So getting back from that trip, back into construction and trying to find commercial leases, and all that went on very much apace. I was looking, of course, for another commercial arts related business, like Mourlot Graphics, but I never found it. I'd wanted to find a theater group that would take over the theater, which would have been absolutely great. I mean here was basically a box set up. That is to say, the four walls, proscenium, good flat stage, and seating for maybe two hundred. And it was not ready to go. You'd have to do lighting and all the rest of that stuff, but it was a theater. And I thought, "Gee, there's got to be somebody out there." And Joan thought the same, who wants to bring the next La Mama to Westbeth, or some such; or some kind of cabaret operation? And we looked at many of those, and some almost worked, and others didn't work at all. But we kept going.

Q: And did you get anybody like that?

A: We got nobody.

Q: But the theater had been part of the original design for the commercial space?

A: Yes. There wasn't much else you could do with it. Because, well, you've been to the development, haven't you?

Q: Yes.

A: Okay. If you stood on the south street, Bethune on the north, and whatever the one on the south part of the project is, and looked to where the fountain is now, I don't know whether it's on this time of the year or not, but there's a fountain in the center of this courtyard, and this big block building off to the right, that's the theater, about four stories high. And a big chunk of real estate. And it seemed very difficult to convert it to anything else. It didn't make good artist space, because there were no windows to speak of, and no floor between the floor and ceiling, which was, if I remember, a hundred feet. And it was perfect for theater, but we did not succeed in finding somebody who could even come there with a reduced rental. So that one didn't work. And then on the other side of the courtyard was a space along the ground floor, facing the river, which I hardly need tell someone like you would make a wonderful riverside restaurant, café, cabaret, what have you. It was a substantial piece of floor area – I don't recall the exact amount it was certainly two thousand square feet. In a rectangular building that had a certain masonry character to it. It was built in the early 1900s. Arched brickways going in and stuff like that. And we had a number of people come forward who we thought would make a match, but it didn't happen. Part of this was the fact that times and circumstances weren't great. But there was in fact something I learned later on called "The Arts Recession" that began in '69, and I'm told continued to some effect up until '74. Some of these brilliant ideas of the '60s, like having a cabaret theater or having a restaurant overlooking a fountain on one side and the river on the other, might have been great ideas, but sponsorship and funding for things like that became increasingly rare as you got closer to 1970.

Q: Yes.

A: I'd like to think, "Gee, we would have had it except for..." I don't think anyone can say that with any certainty, but it didn't help a whole lot that people were not so much "ho hum" to these ideas, as "Well come back and see me in a couple of years when the arts community and the arts climate is a little bit better, and maybe we can talk about it. But right now, we're just trying to keep our head above water." That happened in a lot of cases, ideas or entities that Joan came up with or I did or Richard did or others did. We tried them all, and did a very credible job in the two tenants that we found. But we didn't find enough of them. So what happened as a result of that undeniable fact is that all of the ground floor in the courtyard, which is designed to be retail space or galleries or something of that sort, ended up being gallery space for tenants of the building, which is wonderful for them,

but not so good for Westbeth. Because Westbeth needed the commercial income that had been projected for these spaces, and it wasn't getting it. So there was that type of a difficulty, I wouldn't say 'built in', but as it became, as we went further forward with construction and the rest of it, it became clear that this was going to be a potential Achilles' heel. If you can't get your commercial spaces filled, and that's an essential part of your revenue projections, some serious head scratching is needed on what you're going to do to fix it.

Selecting the First Tenants

But turning to a somewhat more happy circumstance, since I can't solve what we didn't do with the commercial space that didn't rent, there's the fact where initial tenant selection began to move forward in late '69 and 1970. That was organized almost entirely by Joan. She was able to draw upon a wide cross-section of people whom she knew in the arts who were able to give her good advice on what type of criteria should be used so it wouldn't appear that this was just somebody's whim that some painter got in but a dancer didn't. And it was perhaps an inherently difficult if not perhaps impossible thing to do 100% right, but as the criteria came forward, they had to include of course your income. You had to be 'income eligible', as the FHA likes to say. And I've forgotten the income requirements at the time, it's so long ago, it escapes me. But if you look at the CPI (Consumer Price Index) in 1970, you'd get an idea of what might have been considered moderate income. It was certainly not enough to get by on in New York, with both the rental of a studio and the rental of a decent apartment. Anyway, she assembled some board members who were particularly knowledgeable and willing to do some work, and they developed in addition to the income criteria, which was required by law that you had to be a practicing artist, by which it was meant that this wasn't something that when you put down your job as stockbroker during the day, that you picked up an easel at night and painted. But rather this is how you defined yourself. This is what you did. You wrote poetry, or you painted landscapes, or you did sculpture, or you did dance, or whatever. And they had to also think in terms of family size and space needs. The notion being that if you were a poet, you could probably handle a single bedroom, relatively small unit, as long as it had some kind of light, it didn't need to have north light. And it didn't need to have eighteen foot ceilings.

In beginning to winnow the pool of applicants, there were, of course, far more applicants than there were units available. We had to fill 384 spaces with qualified tenants and we had more than that by a considerable margin – perhaps two to one, maybe more. But those decisions would have to be made on objective criteria. And what would hopefully come out is if you were doing

poetry, you get one type of unit. If you're doing dance, you'd have some room in your unit. If you're doing massive sculpture or large scale painting, that element would apply.

And there was probably some gaming going on amongst the artists, I'm sure. "Of course, I do 44' canvases! Don't you know? I just don't have any with me today." But in the main, we had the feeling that insofar as a group of artists could be relied upon to be objective and fair, the selection committee was essential in making sure the people who got the initial picks probably for the most part were the appropriate folks for those accommodations. The rents were modest enough so that they would make your eyes open fairly wide recognizing what you were getting. Also recognizing, though, that not everybody likes to raise children in a thirteen story building in a neighborhood that's a little on the rough side, and hadn't yet come around to its full potential. But back then not too much else was going on over there. They had a housing development that was supposed to go up just south of Westbeth but it never quite got its financing together and didn't happen, at least while I was there. Perhaps they built it up later, I'm not sure. But it would have been in the same general area as Westbeth, but one block further south.

So there were drawbacks, pluses and minuses. But there were a lot of people who were really game for thought of it as being kind of a kibbutznik scene. You had to be a little bit adventuresome to decide to do this. And it seemed like many of the folks we got were just that way. They recognized they were getting a very good deal on rent and well-sized units, and they had a lot to appreciate. They started to make it more of a community than not. And as December of '69 and January of '70 came on, we gained more and more tenants, even though we hadn't finished construction.

Q: And how had the construction been going during this whole time?

A: Well it was becoming less and less because we were backing our way out the door. And I think that in the main, thanks to myself and Richard, not to mention some other people, including the city inspectors, it was going reasonably well. Nobody expected it to look like The Ritz and it didn't, but there was for many a sense that "This is great. I really want to be here."

Picking the General Contractor

Q: Did you have one construction company you contracted?

A: I forgot to mention that. As you know, the normal procedure would be if you're building a skyscraper or a hotel, is you do the drawings, so called 'bid documents', a series of architectural, mechanical, structural documents, that describe how the thing will be put together, what materials are required, and what do you have to buy, what do you have to make to make this thing happen. And say five major construction firms bid on the job. They looked at those documents and they analyze them in detail, and they decide, "Well, for 'x' bucks I can do this kind of work, and so my bid is going to be 'x' bucks plus a profit margin of 'y', and this is my bid." And they're sealed bids, and everybody comes up against the wall of what the competition can do, and if it's a straight and honest competitive bid situation, theoretically the entity that has the best, by which is usually meant the lowest, bid will get the work.

You couldn't do this with Westbeth because there weren't any renovation firms around that did work at this scale. This was a major construction project, and the renovation firms that were in New York at that time were small outfits that would do, say, a couple of brownstones on the West Side, or a string of low income tenements up in Harlem or something like that. They typically were under-financed and understaffed, and weren't very experienced.

Well, we got an entity that, while small, was smart and had some very good people. And by putting them together with another entity to give them the financial legs they needed, we were able to get something that's really crucial – a construction bond to guarantee that the project gets built. In other words they were bondable to do the work, because Starrett Brothers and Ekin, the entity that built the Empire State Building, was on the other end of the deal. They didn't do much in it except to provide the financial wherewithal to assure the bonding company that this was a major financially responsible entity called Graphic Starrett, even though the Graphic Construction portion of it was relatively small. So you might say that Graphic cut its teeth on doing large scale renovation on Westbeth. Did it know everything it needed to moving in? No. Did it learn every lesson it should have? No. Did we get good value for the negotiated money? In the main, I think we did. Richard's view was the same, I think. We could have been taken to the cleaners if we'd had a less skilled architect. We were on top of them every day. And field decisions were made. Small changes were authorized. New shop drawings were made accordingly. And so forth throughout this lengthy construction period. But it happened all the time, every day.

Q: And the company's name?

A: Graphic, like it sounds, G-R-A-P-H-I-C, dash Starrett, S-T-A-R-R-E-T-T, I think.

Q: Okay, we'll check on that.

A: Yeah, and they were the heavy weights. The company does not exist anymore. There is still Graphic Construction, although they may have gone through some name changes, I haven't been in touch with them for a long time, and they were quite knowledgeable. And they had the building trades which are a special deal in New York. You've got to have the trades with you, by which we mean the plumbers, the electricians, the plasterers, the dry rock, finish carpenters, and so on. Graphic hired various subcontractors and pieced out different parts of the job to them, did some of it themselves, but were overall in charge of delivering the product on schedule according to the specifications as set by the architect. And there were daily arguments over what those specifications meant. Is it possible to cut a corner here and cut a corner there; a typical construction setting. And I won't burden you with that, because I don't think that's where we're at for this discussion, although I certainly remember a number of conversations that I had with the so-called 'GC', the general contractor, Graphic, in this case, at what you would call the most inopportune times. Eleven thirty at night. And we had conversations that would go into the early morning hours. Most of them I didn't much relish.

Q: So they, if they were calling you at that time of night, they must have been feeling the time pressure.

A: Oh sure, sure. And they had to complete their work by a certain point in time, or there were penalties associated with it. And that was the kind of contract we had struck with them. And they basically performed the way they were supposed to. Was it perfect? No. But it was pretty good, perhaps the best we could get, in the circumstances. And most of us ended up feeling, I know Richard did, that if he had it to do all over again, there wouldn't be major changes he would make, except possibly the one of 'I don't want to do this. Give it to somebody else.' But to be serious for a moment, Richard was accomplished before he got here, but he had nothing substantial to show for it in his portfolio. He had done nothing 'big', and this was a significant job. And I think there is the fact that he did well enough to have received a 1971 American Institute of Architects Honor Award, which does not come lightly or easily. Westbeth, along with the 1971 award, was a big deal. Richard was very proud of it, and I was too. And it reflected well on everybody. Joan was pleased. I think Jack was, too, although I don't recall his reaction to it. But it

was a nice recognition of what everybody put four years into, because that's really what it took.

Completing the Project

Q: To what do you owe the fact that it was completed so quickly compared to other projects I've heard of this scale?

A: Well other projects that you've heard of, of this scale, say three quarters of a million square feet, would probably be benefiting, Jeanne, by being new. This is still one of the largest rehab projects undertaken that I'm aware of in Boston or in New York still, 30 plus years on. There may be a few that are bigger, but I don't know about them. They certainly weren't for this type of an audience. And so if you're doing it new, you have the advantage of all the fast track techniques that can be used with new construction. They basically set it up on an assembly line basis, you go up with steel one story a day or two stories a day, and then behind you come your sheet rockers and then the plumbers and behind them come the electricians. And then first thing you know you've got a building that's strung with lights at night; and goes up into the sky. And it still takes a long while to do that, but everything tends to be linear, whereas with renovation at this scale a lot of it was back and start, and cut and fit, and then go back and sometimes you had to redo it because things turned out to be different than you surmised.

A big problem on a job of this size and of this age is that they used to build masonry walls a lot bigger and thicker than they needed to. And we occasionally would run into a situation where it looked from all the external measurements that you had a wall depth of eighteen to twenty-four inches that you had to drill through. Well it turned out that there was more on the other side, which you couldn't get at, and it was a forty-inch job. And stuff like that was coming up all the time. Fortunately it's not enough to materially affect the schedule of getting this thing in occupancy by the time in 1970 when we were scheduled to be there. There wasn't quite the urgency attached to that. We didn't have a 'drop dead' date like we had for June 30, 1968. For that initial deadline, we either did it by then or we didn't do it. On the finish end, it was just that everyone really wanted to be finished. The tenants wanted to all be in place, and the construction was due to be over and the dust and the this and the that should be completed, and we should all go on to what we'd be doing in our next lives. That took a while to get to – longer than we wished. Fortunately, it was not enough to trigger some of the cost consequences of the contract. But it was a tough piece of work. I became ill in 1970 with Hepatitis A from contaminated shellfish at a New York restaurant. I had some difficulty doing what I wanted to do in that period,

but we had a fairly good staff by that time and things were beginning to move along.

Following that, in the summer of 1970, one good thing that happened was that Joan and Jack decided that it was time to find a project manager to take care of Westbeth after it was occupied and the construction was completed, and to take it on into what its future would be. And in, I'm trying to remember here, in the mid summer of 1970, we'd interviewed a bunch of people and Peter Cott's name came up in response to the search notices we had, but it did. If you've met him you've found find him to be very pleasant, very knowledgeable guy, and had an interesting background. And we struck it off reasonably well. And I thought this would be a person who would make a good individual to deal with tenants and to deal with the project on an up and going basis. It was running the way, more or less, it was supposed to. He was hired in July or August of 1970 or thereabouts. And he sort of ran parallel with me dealing more with tenant issues, while I dealt with the tail end of the construction and financial issues. And then I separated from the project as of April 1971, and Peter took over from there. And I must tell you that having spent almost four years of my life on it, I was very pleased with what I've been able to accomplish and all the help I'd had from Richard and Joan and others.

But I wasn't looking backward at it as "Gee, I wonder how things are at Westbeth today?" I really was, as you might say, glad to be finished with it and glad to have brought it to a point where it seemed to be working well and folks were feeling pretty good about it. And that's where my story with it anyway ends. I have heard indirectly from various people and the newspaper that things didn't go all that well with it afterwards, and things occurred that a lot of people wished hadn't. There were some revenue issues in part because the commercial space was not ever successfully leased, or at least hadn't been in the first few years. It may be now. I don't know, I haven't been back to look. But those are issues that were ongoing, and not unknown as we were going forward. And Peter I'm sure exercised what initiatives he could to try and make sure those issues were attended to. But how well he faired, I don't know. I went on to do other things after that. And if you had to ask me today, "Well, okay, that's very interesting Dixon, a four year period. But how is it today?" I'd have to go back and look, and talk with the tenants. Because I don't honestly know. You probably know much better than I what the current story on it is. And I can't wait to read what you've got to find out. Find out what it is I've been missing all these years.

But I've stayed in touch with Joan, who is a very nice person. And she's been very kind to reciprocate. And until he died I was occasionally in touch with

Jack. And that basically, I've talked at you for an hour and fifteen minutes. I've not been very generous in letting you ask questions. I guess that sort of brings me to the end of what I thought was a summary in the project's various phases.

But I do have a photograph, which if I could get the original to you I think you'd get a kick out of seeing it. It shows me in the courtyard, summer of 1970, and I'm there talking with a reporter, and it shows Richard's very magnificent courtyard behind me, with all the balconies and Mourlot Graphics is busy in the end of the courtyard. Everything looks pretty rosy, and I'm talking to this reporter about it, and I'm not stressing the bad sides, but rather the good sides, and it looked pretty good. I'm afraid though that all I have is a Xerox of a newsprint, and that doesn't tend to reproduce very well. But I'll send it along for interest sake.

Q: That would be great. And maybe we can find the original if we have a reference to it.

A: Well it would be from the Bergen Evening Record, and it would be from August of 1970. When I send you the clip, it'll probably still have the date line on it. And it shows this kind of polar bear looking person – that's me, I had a beard at the time. Rather bushy and full.

Q: Oh, that would be good.

A: More current. Beardless, but nonetheless me.

Westbeth's Legacies

Q: Well, in thinking about the legacy for Westbeth, what would you say it was, first of all for your career as you went on, maybe, that's a very big question I'm asking, but in brief, maybe where did it fit into influencing what you did next in your life? And then maybe we could just have a few comments on what you think Westbeth's overall legacy or significance might be to cities?

A: Well the latter is tougher than the former. What I can say of the former is that we had, and it's something I forgot to tell you by the way, is that we had to set up Westbeth Housing Development Corporation as a so-called 501(c)3, which is I'm sure you recognize is the tax designation of a non-profit. And it had to be a non-profit entity in order to participate in the FHA financing. And Joan was the president and I was the executive vice president, and someone from J.M. Kaplan Fund's office was the treasurer, and we had a

regular corporation there that was registered, and this laundry list of trustees, and board of director members; all these people who were names to conjure with in the arts community of the seventies. And we proceeded down this whole path as a non-profit. And I do not believe the organization has ever converted to any other status, because it would probably be a problem for FHA. The thirty year term for a mortgage would have expired I guess a little while ago. I don't know what the story is there. Maybe it isn't non-profit anymore.

But as far as where this led me is that after four years of working for Jack, and having a lot of interesting times with Joan, and getting to know Richard and some other people in the design community in New York, I thought, "Well, why not try this as a for profit. Not for artists, but just find ourselves another factory. We've shown that you can convert factories into housing very successfully." And in that respect Westbeth has a lot to recommend it. I do not believe it's ever been tried at this scale before. There have been smaller versions. And converting factories into housing is sort of kind of a ho-hum these days, but in the late '60s and early '70s, that was one of the reasons it got an American Institute of Architects Honor Award, because this was Wild West stuff. No one knew how to do it. And Richard deserves a lot of compliments from his colleagues for showing that it could be done, could be tamed, and could come out with pretty good results.

When I tried it the next time for a profit entity, but nothing whatever to do with Westbeth, we optioned a factory in what was then the down and out dumps of Hoboken, which of course in those days you didn't go to unless you were making 'On the Waterfront'. But we didn't have anybody who looked like Marlon Brando, so we didn't try that, we tried to build housing. And we found this vacant factory; if you're old enough to remember what slide rules used to look like, maybe you aren't. But it is a device made to make math simple for architects and engineers and scientists. It was made for the most part by German firm called Keuffel and Esser. And they had a factory in Hoboken, about three blocks from the waterfront. Full block site. Somewhat like Westbeth, only smaller by a substantial amount because it was a smaller block and only four stories high. As we took an option on the building, we thought, "Well okay, let's get FHA financing for this one, and let's just do housing for regular folk, low and moderate income. It won't have to be artists, they can be whatever." And we'll do it as a 'for profit', which you can also do, it just is a different set of rules. And we got into the design on that one. This now would have been 1972. Yeah. '71, '72. I had taken a year out to go up to the Graduate School of Design and MIT's urban renewal program in the period after leaving Westbeth, and had a very interesting time, because I came back much more on the academic side of how I might do this,

and thought I might write a book about it. But all these things came forward with the idea that in 1972, after leaving the environs of Cambridge we had (we being a developer, an architect, an engineer and myself) a foursome, decided to do this thing as a partnership. We had a good project and we had a good design. But in that year of 1972, following the famous election, in December Mr. Nixon came up with a whole new approach to housing. What he said was all current programs are cancelled, we're not going to do any more of them, no more FHA insurance programs. And we're going to devise a new way to do affordable housing. This was a seismic event to people in the housing community. This is probably more than you want to hear. But the fact of the matter was that what Nixon did was cancel like forty years worth of the way in which housing was produced – namely, with FHA insurance. And subsequently launched its replacement with a new program called "section B." What happened was we were in the queue to get approved, but as luck would have it, we were in the queue two, three, four positions late, and when the window came down on Christmas Eve that year, we were rung out to dry, which is really not part of your story. But …

Q: It's an amazing follow up to the story of Westbeth.

A: Yeah, amazing, and ironic to follow in every respect. So what happened was that the four of us were sitting on a letter of intent to buy this building, serious money was on the table, we had architect fees, legal fees and lots of other fees, and there clearly was not going to be a project, because without FHA insurance, which we missed really by a whisker, we couldn't do the deal. So we were pretty grim that Christmas time. All of us went home to a cold hearth and a cup of porridge that we didn't much like. And so that's what happened when we didn't move quite fast enough. And it was a salutary lesson. I haven't gone bankrupt since, but we had a good time doing it then. The four of us are still good friends. And each of us is doing different things. But we didn't do that. Keuffel and Esser deal subsequently was done. And of course Hoboken, as you likely know, is not now such a bad place to be. It's come up a lot since those days, and is no longer a very grimy waterfront town. Rather, it is now a place that looks across at a rather magnificent Manhattan, and there's lots of folks who don't want to pay Manhattan rents but love to see out their front window that live there now.

Q: Yes.

A: Maybe you know some of them. But that's a different place altogether than the one we were dealing with. So that's my legacy; it would be fun to do this again. And if you're doing this to try to make money, which is the take we tried for the second time around; these other guys hadn't been involved in

Westbeth. They figured I'd be smart because I had. Well it didn't do too much good because we failed. But after that time, we've each stayed in touch with each other, and each of us has come along in our own way and done somewhat similar type things. The lawyer still does law, and the architect does architecture. And the engineer is still involved in engineering work. We never tried a second venture. We figured one was enough. And that's really the end of the Westbeth tale for me and how that influenced where I would go, among other things. It turned me into a non-developer. Because the fact of the matter is if you're going to be a developer, you have to recognize you're on a very high wire. And you may get across to the other side, and receive piles and piles and piles of money, but you may go flat on your ass with no net. And if you have children, and I had three at the time, and a mortgage, you need to be very, very careful. And what I decided was, I wasn't going to shoot crap again, because the next time might be successful, but it also might not. So I stopped being a developer for sure. And went on to study housing in various forms. And ended up with a consulting firm here in Cambridge. I've worked for a bunch of time. Now as you know I'm on the ultimate side of the triangle, I actually sell real estate, which I've never done before. And I do residential and commercial work in the Brookline and Boston area, which is very interesting in its own right, but quite different than the places we've talked about.

Q: Well this has been a great history. And I'm so glad we had a chance to talk today.

A: Me, too. And you very well might have some questions. I don't think I've stumbled into any inaccuracies, although who knows. When you see the text, I may think, "Did I say that?" But I think you've got a fairly digestible account.

Q: I'm going to pause right now.

A: Please.

Q: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW