Wesleyan University

English 274: “Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarries”

Fall 2009

Oral Interview

with

Cristoph Henning

By Morgan Hamill and Laura Heath

Russel Library, Middletown, Connecticut

December 21, 2009
**Table of Contents**

Information Sheet ........................................................................................................ iii

Oral Narrative: Cristoph Henning ........................................................................... 5

Appendices:

  Transcript of Public Presentation ..................................................................... 16
  Transcript of First Interview .......................................................................... 18
  Transcript of Second Interview ....................................................................... 28
  Project Description Letter & Legal Release Form ............................................. 36
This oral history project seeks to bring forth, understand, and make public the ways in which the history of the brownstone quarries and their continued presence have shaped and continue to shape the Portland, Connecticut, community and the lives of those who live there and interface with the town, the quarries and those who live there.

Interviewee: Cristoph Henning
Interviewers: Laura Heath; C. Morgan Hamill
Date of Interviews: October 23, 2009; November 21, 2009
Location of Interviews: Russel Library, Middletown, Connecticut

Cristoph Henning, at the time of these interviews, is a stone carver and stone cutter working in Portland, Connecticut. He does stone fabrication work for the brownstone quarry operated by Mike Meehan in Portland, along with brownstone and other stone restoration work around the state and country. He was born and grew up in Erfurt, East Germany, eventually relocating to the United States after the reunification of Germany and meeting his future wife. He was trained as a stone cutter and stone carver in Erfurt, Germany, before relocating to the United States. He now lives with his wife and son in Berlin, Connecticut, a few towns west of Portland. His house has a brownstone foundation.

Interviewers' Comments
Cristoph Henning's story and expertise provides an uncommon look into two areas of interest to this project: the nature of Portland brownstone as a stone and an object of workmanship; and the continued role of the brownstone quarries in shaping the trajectory of the Portland, Connecticut, community, as evidenced by Mr. Henning's eventual settlement around the site of the quarries. The reader is able to ascertain the importance of the presence of the brownstone resource in shaping development of the Portland community through Mr. Henning's particular viewpoint as both a stone carver and a relative newcomer to the story of the Portland brownstone quarries.
ORAL NARRATIVE: CRISTOPH HENNING
This section is a narrative constructed out of the text of two interviews conducted with Cristoph Henning by Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill. It has been arranged as to ensure the context and clarity of Mr. Henning’s story and the information he has to share about himself, Portland, and brownstone. See the appendices for the transcriptions which are the ultimate source of this narrative.

When I came to New Haven the first time in 1996, I wasn't allowed to work since I came as a tourist. But I saw all these falling-apart brownstone lentils and I thought, oh, that would be a good step for me as a stone-cutter, stone-carver, to fix that—but I couldn't find out what kind of material that is. I always asked everyone, "What's...where do you get this red sandstone?" Because in Germany, typically, there is not anything referred to as brownstone. Everything's red—red sandstone or colored sandstone. So nobody could give me an answer then.

I grew up in East Germany, as a Catholic, thank goodness, and I had a choice to either be conformed with the system, and have the opportunity to go to higher education, or just to do a regular apprenticeship, and become a craftsman instead. Therefore I could be politically more free, and say, “no, I'm not doing this and I'm not doing that, I'm not participating in this, I'm not gonna go to the army.” It's not voluntary, army, it's mandatory, or used to be mandatory, everyone had to go, and I said “I'm not gonna go.” In the end I didn't have to go at all, just as I wanted to, because East Germany didn't exist anymore. Being Catholic was never a problem for me. It was, basically, in East Germany, being a Catholic was, for me, an opportunity to excuse myself from all kinds of things that I didn’t like in the Communist regime. I could always argue that, “Well, sorry, I’m not marching on Labor Day in downtown because I’m going to church, it’s a Sunday. I’m not coming.” And they couldn’t do anything about it. So. But I think, in East Germany, maybe it’s a special situation because there was West Germany, and everyone was looking, “What is the West doing?” “What’s going on in the East?” It was always the comparison. It’s the same language, and you could get the television from the West and the West could get the television from the East. And the Communist regime wanted to have good relations with the Vatican, for whatever reason, I don’t know. So I had quite some freedom because I was Catholic.

Anyway, I saw some stone cutters in my hometown working and thought, wow, that's kind of cool stuff. They had a big, wooden mallet and I thought, I never saw a big, wooden mallet. It went, blang blang blang, and they're chiseling around and I went, ooh, wow, that's cool. And I couldn't think of any other profession I wanted to do. I was very excited to get an apprenticeship as a stone cutter, which was a two year apprenticeship, and I had to go to school about forty percent of the time, and I was working in a workshop for, like, sixty percent of the time. Got quite some interesting work. We produced a lot of things for the West—Western Berlin...obelisk for the subway system, and for the Olympia Stadium I remember making a step, and all kinds of spheres and some pillars. But I wouldn't have gotten any interesting work in the apprenticeship if I hadn't insisted on it. I was making everyone's life to hell, that I get interesting work. And I was using the law, because in East Germany there was a law that the workshops had to follow a certain teaching plan. And they were for each different skill-set, you had some hours. And I would just hold it in front of my boss and say, “I had these hours already, I'm not gonna do that.” So I was really a thorn in their flesh, but they all liked me. And I finished with the best grade there. They didn’t have a grudge against me or anything. Also, they didn’t punish me for being politically in a different direction or anything like that. I got their full support and they kind of liked the fact that I wanted to learn something. ‘Cause they were only used to people who had to become stone carvers because they weren’t smart enough to do anything else and they regretted to do it.
So I was partly giving instruction to my co-apprentices and had told them how to read a plan, a blueprint, and I remember they, the workers, they got mad at me, for whatever reason. They wanted to make a stink between the apprentices and they went to one of the other apprentices and said, “Here, this guy told you the wrong thing—you’re doing it wrong.” And he got red faced and came to me and said, “What? You told me the wrong thing? Why did you do that?” And I said, “Don’t listen to them. They don’t understand nothing. Go back to your work.” And then the whole crowd of workers, they had to leave.

And then we had the final exam and we had to make a piece. I remember, there was a big discussion between all the masters of the craft. There was something wrong with the templates. I told them, “Look, we can’t do it. The templates are wrong. They don’t fit with the drawings.” And they didn’t understand why and they were discussing, “Why, what’s wrong with the circles here?” I said, “No, that’s not the problem. You didn’t leave any material for the molding on top of that thing.” And they didn’t get it, and then they all laughed and said “You just make new drawings and templates.” So that was kind of good. It was fun. I made the templates and we did our exam, and that was that.

I don’t know if I’m a very good teacher. I don’t think so. I had always big problems teaching my brother basic mathematics but I haven’t done too much teaching, no. I could be fine, but…I have no experience doing it. And it’s not a big desire for me. There are lots of people who just learn something, they turn around and they teach others. I don’t necessarily think it’s so great. But, if I needed some people to help me, I would like to teach them, I think. They could help me. Maybe later on I will teach my son to do things. I tried to do this already, but he obviously just wanders off. He’s six years old. Still lots of time.

I think, if you teach, it’s interesting cause you talk to somebody who has a different perspective. You can also still learn things, find easier ways certain things to do. And it’s interesting to learn about teaching, how to approach somebody, how to try to explain things, and then see the results and then try something different angles to teach the same thing. Could be interesting. But, so far, there is not enough, there isn’t too much work that I necessarily have to teach somebody.

Actually, I had a subcontractor and I had to teach him to cut letters in granite and he is a woodcarver, and these were big granite panels, very expensive, already set in a tower, so that was scary for me. And he knew it. He knew it was scary for me to have him helping me, but the construction company that hired me, they required me to have some other people helping me so it would go faster. And I gave him some granite and he worked on it and I looked and okay, he broke some corners. But in the end he did an excellent job and everything worked out and he said, “Thanks, you trusted me. I know it was a big risk.” But it was a good experience, yeah. But it was his own personal talent and dedication, so it was good that I could find people who have an interest in doing things.

Afterwards I worked for the Church, which I always loved, and I was raised Catholic and it gave me a different view of the world. And I wanted to work all my life on the Catholic cathedral in my hometown Erfurt, Germany. …never, I was never treated like that. We got treated there like dogs in the street. And, within the church, I couldn’t believe it. What corruption was going on, how people there treated…I was never treated from any communist factory or any other institution in East Germany the way I was treated from the Church. I mean, it was just cruel. I stayed there half a year and I left. It sure made a big impression on me. I mean, I didn’t expect that everything was great and wonderful working for the Church, but that it was that bad was quite surprising to me. But that’s my education, that’s not why I became a stone carver.

Well, of course, back then, I was an employee of the Church. That’s always a different situation. If I now work in a church, I’m a contractor. I have a contract and there’s no discussion about it. So I have no problem working in churches, and I like, of course, buildings, anyway. Beautiful churches. I like to restore them. So I don’t have any problem to work with any people there. It has no
influence on my interactions with church members or whatever. I mean, I have no problem with any church and I don’t have a grudge against religions or churches. So that’s no problem.

And I kind of am sad that many churches lose a lot of members, have such a lack of funds, and cannot take care of their now-oversized buildings. It’s a tragedy if they have those beautiful landmarks get lost because nobody is using them in the original sense. Or willing to put money in it.

It’s the same with museums, if you have, like historic houses. I mean, there’s such a need for funds all the time to keep it up, keep the staff paid and everything. I quite admire that they, how they, can get all their fund-raising together and preserve it for the future. Quite a challenge.

I think there’s a big advantage in the U.S. than in Germany: when it comes to restoration, it’s often, one side, state funds. And the state, as it so often doesn’t have the funds, then things get neglected. While here you have more involvement of private donors, you have institutions that have quite some funds available for restoration, like at Yale or Phillips Academy or other big schools. And, you also have the state involved, so you have wider funding possibilities for restoring historic properties and therefore, I think, sometimes, money is overspent. There is often that they spend too much and overdo things rather than limit themselves. For example, I, months ago, worked on a building at Yale New Haven Hospital and they were doing such an enormous effort, cutting out joints that were perfectly fine and then re-pointing the whole building. Which, nobody in Germany, I think, would do. They would just cut out what is broken, re-point that, try to match it to the original. But sometimes it’s certain institutions, they go on and they do everything at once, rather than maintaining it continuously. They say, “Okay. That’s broken now. Let’s take care of it.” I don’t know, they might have, of course they have their reasons. Maybe it’s in the long run cheaper, or more efficient, or from the whole management of the buildings it’s easier to accomplish than having everywhere little construction sites. But often such huge operations going on now. Quite amazing.

Look, all this stuff here is basically stone cutter’s work. [see fig. 1] Anything you see here. And that would be stone carver’s work as soon as it gets more into leaves and fruit and hands and faces and organic forms that are not gonna be made as a template or with a straightedge or some kind of compass. That’s the difference. The stone carving I learned later on. I was working in Munich and I had to do leaves there, which was a little intimidating at first, but then I got it. I found stone carvers there who were excellent stone carvers but they could not cut stone. They thought that the crown of humanity was their stone carving skills but if they had to do another element, they couldn’t do it. The guy was bragging to me, “If you can carve this finial, this Gothic finial, you have done the most difficult piece of the church and there is nothing more complicated you can do.” And then he had to do a simple piece that you had to project lines and he messed it completely up. So, I mean, all he can do is Gothic finials and nothing else. I mean, I can do Gothic finials and all the other things, but I also am able to do this.

Well, I met an American in Germany. Yeah. I met my wife in Germany. She was working there for the University of Bamberg. That’s how I ended up over here.

Anyway, at one point I drove up to the brownstone quarries and introduced myself, and been there ever since and have a little workshop set up in the quarry, and do a lot of fabrication for the quarry. I'm, so to speak, the house-carver of the quarry. Whatever they can't do themselves, they give it to me. They might also give a job to somebody else if it's a big project and it's not suitable for me to do, when they're better off to use machines or whatever, which I don't have and the quarry doesn't
have. Then they get sent out some place else. I ended up here and I guess I'll stay here for a while. I
don't know, brownstone, how long that will be quarried; I can always do something with brownstone.
We used to live in New Haven, and then in Branford, and we wanted to be a little closer so we got a
house in Berlin. So that's only ten minutes, fifteen minutes from the quarry.

I've worked with other sandstones and limestones and granite and all kinds of materials, but I
find brownstone's quite a unique material. Any other sandstone I know has different properties. One of
the properties brownstone has is very high elasticity. You could cut a really thin strip, which I
sometimes did, really thin and long, and you put it in your car and you drive over the bumpy road and
it's not gonna break. You can bend it back and forth a little bit before it breaks. So that's good for
lintels, for example, if there's lots of traffic and there's vibration in the road...if there was a granite
lintel, granite has no flexibility, or very little, and it breaks, from its own weight. But brownstone
doesn't.

The other property compared to other sandstones is abrasion resistance. That's why I have a
hard time sanding it with diamond discs. It's often only slipping over the surface; it's really hard to
process at times. Because of the abrasion resistance. And therefore it's excellent for steps because
you're not gonna wear them out. You can go over those steps for a hundred years and they're still
typically going to be fine. I have to say there's great variation within brownstone. There are some
pieces that are extremely hard and tough to wear down, and others are nice and soft.

I was for years troubled to find out why I can't sand that material, with sanding and the hours
pass and pass and pass and then I measured and nothing had happened. And then I thought I'd do
something wrong, and now after five years I realize it's not me, and it's not the discs, it's the stone, you
know. Many times I was running to Mike, the owner of the quarries, that I have the solution, I found
the right diamond cup who can sand brownstone. And then, a week later, I had to tell him, well, it's not
true, it's not the solution—I don't know what the solution is! Very slow learning curve.

The other thing that's different in other sandstone is, if you split it against the lines, it's very
unpredictable with brownstone. You never know which direction it breaks, if it breaks at all, what kind
of force to use, what kind of width of chisel to use and which angle to set the chisel...so there is no
solution to make sure it breaks the way you want to. When I split the first piece of brownstone I was
sure, because of, obviously, sandstone, it would break right in the middle—and it didn't. It broke in a
right angle. And I thought, oh no, I messed up! But now I know it's not me, it's the stone, you know.
Often it makes it difficult if you have an order for rock-face material, you cut big slabs that have to be
rock-faced on all sides. You don't know if it breaks in and then you have to cut a new piece; it's an
enormous effort. When they had the old quarries they probably had several layers to pick from and
they knew, oh, this layer is better suitable for rock-face than the other layer. Now I didn't have that. We
just got to use what we have. And sometimes it can be frustrating—you put so much hope and effort
into rock-face and you do everything right, but still there's no guarantee it works out.

Yeah, I find brownstone's a very unique sandstone. It also has this marbling which I find
unusual for sandstone. You see a fresh-cut piece, you see those veins, and veins running through other
veins who go in other directions. Sometimes you see veins in other sandstones too, but, they are all a
little different than those. Over time we will not see it because the iron oxide runs over the surface and
makes it all dark and then it all looks uniform and people say, "I want this color," and it looks very
fine-grained. But if you would sand off the surface, you would see it's not that fine-grained. So if I
remove an element, let's say a lentil, I can show the customer, look, you just have a medium-grained
material here, just over time it looked it was a fine-grained material 'cause it's all the same color. So...

I like it fresh cut actually, I like that look. As much as I like the weathered look. It's quite
different because you can have, like, two-inch big pebbles in brownstone, really big—let me find it for
you, another piece of stone here: I made this sign, you can see really big pebbles in there. [see fig. 2]
And I also like that. Which the quarry sells as second-grade material. I find it quite interesting...sometimes you have big, pink pebbles in there, big black pebbles, and then big green stains from roots that went through the mud in prehistoric times. So...quite interesting.

Another great property of course is that you can't really stain it badly. I mean, other materials, like marble, can get stained by colored stone dust, or by the tiniest bit of rust, or from chiseling with a metal chisel on the marble—that's enough metal removed that might make it all rusty looking, and it sucks everything right in. The other sandstones here, like in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, that's more like the typical sandstone I've used. I worked on a project with this East Longmeadow sandstone, and I put it on a wood pallet, and it sucked something out of the wood! And it had some funny discoloration, I thought, oh no, I'm not used to that. With brownstone I never have to worry about any discoloration or any staining. Even if you get an oil stain on that stuff you get it easily out. So that's another great, great property.

The requests the quarry gets for fabrication are things like sills and lintels, any type of building elements, and steps, and then the typical step moldings. For a long time the quarry had to ship out big blocks to Vermont, and then he [Mike Meehan, the owner of the brownstone quarry] got it cut and processed there. The work had always to wait in line. Over time he had less and less big blocks which were suitable for shipping, and he got himself a wire saw, to be able to cut smaller blocks efficiently, at the quarry, himself.

So then, it was good that I was there because I would, for example, do typical etch moldings, and the pieces, he could do it right at the quarry and ship it from the quarry to his client, without long delays with another company somewhere else in another state involved. So whenever he has a little thing that he needs to get finished, I give him a price, and then I do the work...and I can do basically anything, but sometimes, if it's like, 200 window sills, you know, I say from the beginning, "Ship it someplace else please," 'cause I can't do it in the time frame, or I can't do it as efficient. Sometimes you have big projects that involve a lot of fabrication, where other fabricators use CNC [Computer Numerical Controlled] machines, that can just process that quick and cheap and get it out. Rather than me torturing myself and doing nothing else than very basic fabrication, which I'm not too much interested in. I like to do more fancy work. I like to do work with other material too, and I go around the state and other states and fix sculpture and whatnot. So, I do more than just brownstone.

One bigger project was for the Victoria Mansion in Portland, Maine. [see fig. 3] The architect was Henry Austin from New Haven. Originally, I got on this project because the company who got the big job, the job I was bidding on too—which was a little bit too big for me—they were not capable of doing certain elements to the satisfaction of the museum, so they asked me to come and fix it up. And then they asked me for the price of these handrails which were at the time not there; they had to be dismantled. So, I gave them a price, and then after two years looking for blocks we found them and fabricated using the original photo. [see fig. 4]
This is here the work in process: it's a pillar and then there are the cap sand in the original photo you see those, uh, finials, which I'm gonna do this winter. Here's the left over of the original. [see fig. 5] So...it's one big project where you go year after year back again and do something.

The quarry sometimes has problems to get proper heights of layers, so this piece [see fig. 6], for example, has been glued together in the middle, but it's properly colored and it's a very thin seem so you can hardly see it. You see that the veining goes in different directions—it's the only clue. But otherwise, you can't see it. And the glue lasts for a very long time. Even if the glue should fail, it's not gonna fall apart, since the stones are wide enough and have enough support.

The steps. It was fun because nobody knew those handrails, how to do them. They had a photo. So they had to one hundred percent trust me. We had some disagreements about how steep they go up and the reason was, they have different degrees of how they go up, depending on which side of the handrail it is. So the outer side of the handrail is a different angle than the inner side of it. I scared myself a lot because I used some paper templates to define the angle on each side and those are about ten feet long and I thought, “why do you do some flappy paper template?” It’s so critical that it’s right! But it was okay. I think it was the right thing to use the paper template. It was the easiest. And I had other markers that helped me to define the incline of that thing.

The situation with the scroll: you didn’t know if it’s a leaf in there or what is it, but seeing different pictures of it, we determined that it’s just a scroll, this little round thing in the middle. And I had to submit different shapes and forms of it and the director in return mentioned that he’s very particular, he wants it to be right, which I like. I like to have clients who don’t tell me that they don’t care. I like clients who want to have quality, who appreciate quality. I said, “That’s the idea. I think that’s what it is.” And he agreed, and he said, “It should have only one and a half turns rather than three, and it should,” he had some other instructions, and then the next one he accepted right away. He said, “yes, that's exactly what it is.” [see fig. 7] So that was great.

Yeah, so it was fun. I think everyone was a little bit nervous about it. They had waited two years for the stones. Anyway, then they installed it and it fit. And then, I didn’t hear anything for two weeks and then, “Yes! It fits!” Everyone was cheering. I was a little nervous myself. Is it gonna fit? I was pretty sure but I might have done a mistake I was not aware of, you know. But it was right. [see fig. 8]

That's one of the interesting parts of my job: I often have to go to some piece of statue, or a building, and there's something missing. Often we don't know what it is or how it looked like. I used to go to either
archives, try to find historic photographs of what might have been there, or doing things like going to an antique shop and find some old postcards. And based on that you might get an idea. Or on the Broadway Civil War monument in New Haven, there were pieces missing off the Civil War soldier. And he was holding something and only a piece on the bottom was left. And then he had the stick in the hand, but I didn't know what was broken, up over his hand, which was missing, and we knew there was a stick missing, connecting the lower part. So I had to research what kind of equipment they used during the Civil war, and then I found out that this was a sponge-rammer combination. So it was a stick with a sponge to wash the cannon, and the rammer is where you push in a bag of powder, I guess, and the cannonball, I don't know if the cannonball rolls in there by itself. I guess you push the powder in, the ball goes in by itself. So, okay, then you learn about those things, and then I looked for other Civil War monuments, where such a thing is still in place, and I found one in Farmington, in the Unionville section of Farmington. There is a perfectly preserved Civil War monument there. A soldier is holding a sponge-rammer combination, so I easily could copy that.

I gave the price out to the conservator for a missing tip of a rifle on another Civil War monument, without knowing what it looked like. And then, to my amazement, I find that those Civil War rifles have a loading stick that is quite complicated to carve. I thought it's just some pipe end to the rifle, but no, there's also the loading stick and some other things. So, it was a little more complicated than I imagined, but not too complicated, of course. I made that piece and we put it there, but it also involved research.

And I made the baldachin [a type of canopy over a throne or altar] in Mühlhausen, Germany, where a lot of it was lost, and we had to figure out how it looked like. And there we used archives, and I was also walking around going to other churches looking at baldachins there. The conservator there had some other idea how the end should look, but I could prove to him that that wasn't the case at this particular baldachin because there was just a little bit left to prove it. One little corner which made his theory impossible. And then typically you present it to all those highly-paid architects and conservators, and they typically agreed with my research, and so I went on my way producing it, and then putting it into the building.

I prefer to have good imagery and drawings. I did actually a plaque for Phillips Academy up in Andover, Massachusetts, and they still had the original drawing from the original plaque. And the plaque was still in perfect shape, but it had the name re-dedication. They spent, like, six million dollars; the greatest donor wanted to have his name on. So they had to take the old plaque out and add his name. But I could definitely use the font, which I found in the original drawing from the architect in New York, which was from 1915, something like that, so their old archive was definitely helpful. So I definitely prefer if I have good evidence, 'cause I want it to look like the original. Often I have the discussion with the customer, there's a tendency to change things, for whatever reason. “Uh, I want to have it a little thicker, so it doesn't break off as easy.” ‘Cause often I feel, I'll make that thicker and that thicker, and I don't like it; I want to copy it as the original was. And not make it any clunkier and bigger. Uh, I know there's a horse and a cathedral in Basle in Switzerland and there it had been replaced many times, every time getting fatter and thicker. It's just one big thing. It looks so ugly. And I don't want to make things thicker, 'cause it doesn't look as elegant, and then you've destroyed the
proportions. But if the customer wants to have it that way and they paid, paid for it, I have little input, so. It can be frustrating, but...I have to live with that I guess.

Typically I work for institutions, and some conservators know me. Other conservators and companies [that] have worked with me in the past typically find me customers. I used to put out fliers on the street but I stalled because I really didn’t know how to do it, how to promote myself. I would just go to the house that were falling apart in New Haven, put a flier on each step, and I get a job. So, so far, it helps me that other people know me. Even things somebody else could do, I get it because they don’t know if the other person might not be able to do it properly. Even if it’s very simple work. People always want somebody they know can do it.

[The interviewers, Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill, first met Cristoph Henning when he was replacing a piece of the facade on Wesleyan University's North College building. We asked him about working at Wesleyan.] It was the first time. I never introduced myself to Wesleyan, which I have to do at one point. That was the first time and I was asked by Capasso Restoration in New Haven and they had a restoration project and they asked me if I would like to do that and I looked at it. I had, at first, spoken to the person in charge with Wesleyan that, “Well, we want to do the job if it’s under this price,” and “yes.” And I gave them the right price I guess to work there.

I would say that most of the projects I do with brownstone. But I regularly do limestone and granite and also marble. It varies every year, obviously. That’s the thing, I never know what’s coming, you know, I don’t know. Suddenly, I need to do some Briar Hill sandstone from Ohio. That requires driving to Ohio to pick out a piece of sandstone. Because they couldn’t promise me anything that they would ship. They’d say, “Whatever we ship, that’s what you get.” And when I work, I do a detailed carving. I do little figures and small details. If there’s a big stain, then it might not be really good. I might not be able to see anything, if it’s not fairly homogene [homogeneous] color. So I drove there and I get the stone, pretty much for free. And I could finally see the quality or at least the fabrication facility there, so it’s worth the personal relationship to different quarries and being able to go there and pick things out for certain projects.

And another project I had last year was for the library in Branford, which is a, I believe, a Tennessee marble. I’m not sure which state it is from. I didn’t buy the marble. But this marble is [no longer] available in this color, but for whatever reason, they found somebody who still had this color. And I was told that this one pallet of stone was ninety-five thousand dollars. So that’s a lot of responsibility for me. You know, I mean, I know I’m not gonna mess it up, but one piece was an enormous L-shaped molding piece and it was, it’s really hard marble so every time I knocked it was like hitting a bell. Blang! Blang! And I expected every moment it would crack! But it didn’t. It’s pretty tough stuff.

And I used the same material in West Hartford when the Noah Webster statue needed a new finger but the conservator couldn’t get the material—obviously didn’t know that supplier. And they turned the whole statue around and did a core from the bottom, a round piece of the marble, which I then had to make a finger upon. So it was kind of technically interesting. Cause it’s almost like dental work, you have to see what remained of the half of whatever finger it is. It was an oval block so I had to cut a lot of that away and then you have to make a cast of that, almost like dental work, you have to make a cast of whatever the surface is, and then you have to design the finger and project that to this breakout and so it’s—especially if it goes over many corners—it can get very complicated.

I had a similar thing in Lincoln, Nebraska. They knocked the beak off an eagle there at the state Capital. In conservation, you never want to make big cut-outs, you wanna leave every bit of original surface you can keep and then you end up having a super-difficult surface just to touch a piece of stone, which you then, later, cut the beak from. Cutting the beak is easy, but getting the stone to fit perfectly to this breakout, that is pretty tough. I always try to get dentists’ materials, which they don’t
sell to non-dentists...guess you might open a dentist’s shop or whatever! So I was actually going quite
often to the dentist and asking them for this blue paper they use when they make inlays but of course, a
tooth is only very so small, and they are very small papers. So whatever they had was much too small
for me. I was hoping to get big sheets and I can use that. Because black paper wouldn’t work 'cause of
a black speck of something. I used all kinds of techniques. Well sometimes it’s technically very
challenging. When I went to Nebraska, I didn’t know how I would do it. I get there and it’s then you
get the ideas of how to do it. And I have certain techniques that I developed over time and they work
well for me. Then I had to go back to Nebraska after they saw I could do the beak and was then
allowed to do the rest. All kinds of open feathers and talons and stuff like that.

I don't need to know much about minerals when I pick the stone. Typically I would research
what stone it is that has to be replaced; often it is already done by the contractor, whoever hires me.
And they are supplying me with the stone, or I research what it is and, if it's a very detailed piece, I
might actually drive to the quarry and pick out the piece just to make sure I get what I want. And look
at the stone. I did this for a piece for Jonathan Edwards College [at Yale University in New Haven]
where it was a yellow sandstone—it comes with lots of metal, iron minerals in it, and it can be very
brown and whatnot. 'Cause I had fine detail, I wanted to have it a homogene [homeogeneous] color. So
I went out to Ohio and picked it out; it turned out to be actually cheaper—get it right there, I saw the
operation and met the owner—was kind of a fun trip.

So, that's always a concern, that I get the proper material. I have often been frustrated that I had
to use materials that were given to me that were not that proper, for whatever reason: partially because
the conservator claimed that it has to last longer and the piece which we are replacing lasted only seven
hundred years and now we want it to last longer. Which I think's ridiculous. If something lasts seven
hundred years, God knows what's in seven hundred years; why can't they do it again in, let's say, five
hundred years, you know, you don't have to change the material. There was again the baldachin, which
was a, a shell limestone with very small holes, the carving is very detailed, and now I had to use the
travertine with huge holes in it. And that destroys the whole fine details, because—I mean, you still can
see them, but there are big holes in the details. It would be nicer if you had the original material, which
is still available. We'd use that and have the fine—all the fine lines are nice, visible, no big holes in the
rock. But, I couldn't do anything against it. I had to do it in travertine which was also harder to execute
because the stone was harder, and it's also a little harder to work on big holes in the material. And
another project gave me a sandstone where the layouts of the stone were highly visible and they went
into the wrong direction and it was not the right color. It's often frustrating when you get material that
turns out to be not the proper color. And if I get the right colors like I did last year for the Norwich Free
Academy, the Slater Museum, where the color is perfect, right on the spot—and you can't even see that
anything was done in the building—that's perfect then. You know, you walk up to it, if you didn't know
that it was all falling apart before, you would never know that this is not original, and that's good
restoration. You don't want to have it sticking out. Then it won't seem right; it's out of place. So I try to
put a lot of effort in to get the right stuff, get the right color. It's not always possible, but I try.

I typically have to earn money, so I try to make things quick and cheap and try to sell them to
garden stores, like those columns here. [see fig. 1] And that doesn't work, I mean...if you sell them for
nothing you can sell them, but you can't earn money with it. But, I could also do some artwork and if I
could properly promote it—which I probably will in the future, in the near future—then it might work
out over time. But I think I've got to invest a lot of time and effort and money to get there and produce
enough pieces...and then I'm always hesitant because I'm busy with things that get money at the end of
the day, you know; the work I can pay my bills with, and then I have to fix my house and dig in my
garden and stuff like that, take care of my son, so there isn't too much leisure time where I can work on
a project. I'm determined to start that 'cause, I think it could be more satisfying. I had to design a
couple things on my own for some projects in another material, and that was a lot of fun, so...

I would like to do more relief work, ’cause I'm kind of inspired by some medieval wood carvings, where you have the face of the saint, but if you look at the side it's only an inch and a half thick. There, in the art-deco time there was a lot of relief carving, which I really like; there's scenes from workers in the factory, and then all kinds of machine parts they would carve in stone, and some cool stuff.

Well. I think I’ve told you everything about my relationship to the quarry. My upbringing and education. I don’t know. I don’t think there’s anything that we didn’t talk about yet. Well, I have a brownstone foundation of my house. Don’t forget to mention it.
APPENDICES
When I came to New Haven the first time in 1996, uh, I wasn't allowed to work since I came as a tourist. But I saw all these falling-apart brownstone lentils and I thought, oh, that would be a good step for me as a stone-cutter, stone-carver, to fix that—but I couldn't find out what kind of material that is. I always asked everyone, "What's...where do you get this red sandstone?" Because in Germany, typically, there is not anything referred to as brownstone. Everything's red—red sandstone or colored sandstone. So nobody could give me an answer then.

Uh, when I came to, uh, New Haven the first time in 1996, uh, I wasn't allowed to work since I came as a tourist. But I saw all these falling-apart brownstone lentils and I thought, oh, that would be a good step for me as a stone-cutter, stone-carver, to fix that—but I couldn't find out what kind of material that is. I always asked everyone, "What's...where do you get this red sandstone?" Because in Germany, typically, there is not anything referred to as brownstone. Everything's red—red sandstone or colored sandstone. So nobody could give me an answer then.

Well, um...I grew up in East Germany, and, um, as a Catholic, thank goodness, and I had a choice to either be conformed with the system, or...and have the opportunity to go to higher education, or just to do a regular apprenticeship, which I would not have to do in East Germany, and also in Germany. Um...and become a craftsman instead, therefore I could be politically more free, and say, “no, I'm not doing this and and I'm not doing that, I'm not participating in this, I'm not gonna go to the army.” It's not voluntary—army—it's mandatory, or used to be mandatory, everyone had to go, and I said “I'm not gonna go.” In the end I didn't have to go at all, just as I wanted to, because East Germany didn't exist anymore, so...

Anyway, um, that's, and I, before, the reason...I saw some stone cutters in my hometown working and thought, wow, that's kind of cool stuff. They had, like, a big, wooden mallet and I thought, I never saw a big, wooden mallet. It went, blang blang blang, and they're chiseling around and I went, ooh, wow, that's cool. And I couldn't think of any other profession I wanted to do. I was very excited to get an apprenticeship as a stone cutter, which was a two year apprenticeship, and I had to go to school about, like, forty percent of the time, and I was working in a workshop for, like, sixty percent of the time. Got quite some interesting work, but, um, I wouldn't have gotten any interesting work in the apprenticeship if I hadn't insisted on it. I was making every life, everyone's life to hell, that I get interesting work. And I was using the law, because in East Germany there was a law that you had to, the factories had to, the workshops had to follow a certain teaching plan. And they were for each different skill-set, you had, different, some kind of hours. And I would just hold it in front of my boss and say, “I had these hours already, I'm not gonna do that.” (laughter)

And afterwards I worked for the Church, which I always loved, and I was always, was raised Catholic and it gave me a different view of the world. And I worked, and I wanted to work all my life on the Catholic cathedral in my hometown Erfurt, Germany. And I never, I was never treated like that. We got treated there like dogs in the street. And, within the church, I couldn’t believe it. How, what, what corruption was going on, how people there treated… I was never treated from any communist factory or any other institution in East Germany the way I was treated from the Church. I mean, it was just cruel. I stayed there half a year and I left. It sure made a big impression on me. I mean, I didn’t expect that everything was great and wonderful working for the Church, but that it was that bad was quite surprising to me. But that’s my education, that’s not why I became a stone carver.

Well, I met an American in Germany. Yeah. I met my wife in Germany. She was working there for the University of Bamberg. That’s how I ended up over here. I ended up here and I guess I’ll stay here for a while. I don't know, brownstone, how long that will be quarried, I can always do something
with brownstone. Anyway, then, at one point I drove up to the brownstone quarries and introduced myself, and been there ever since and have a little workshop set up in the quarry, and do a lot of fabrication for the quarry.

I've worked with other sandstones and limestones and granite and all kinds of materials, but I find brownstone's quite a unique material. Any other sandstone I know has different properties. Um, one of the properties brownstone has is very high elasticity. You could cut a really thin strip, which I sometimes did, really thin and long, and you put it in your car and you drive over the bumpy road and it's not gonna break. You can bend it back and forth a little bit before it breaks. So it's...that's good for lintels, for example, if there's like lots of traffic and there's vibration in the road...if there was a granite lintel, granite has no flexibility, or very little, and it breaks, from its own weight. But brownstone doesn't. The other property compared to other sandstones is like abrasion resistance. That's why I have a hard time sanding it with, like, diamond discs. It's often only slipping over the surface; it's really hard to process at times. Because of the abrasion resistance. And therefore it's excellent for steps because you're not gonna wear them out. You can go over those steps for a hundred years, uh, and they're still typically going to be fine. I have to say there's great variation within brownstone. There are some pieces that are extremely hard and tough to wear down, and others are nice and soft.

I was for years troubled to find out why I can't sand that material, with sanding and the hours pass and pass and pass and then I measured and nothing had happened. And then I thought I'd do something wrong, and now after, like, five years I realize it's not me, and it's not the discs, it's the stone, you know. Many times I was running to Mike, the owner of the quarries, that I have the solution, I found the right diamond cup who can sand brownstone. And then, a week later, I had to tell him, well, it's not true, it's not the solution—I don't know what the solution is!

Yeah, I find brownstone's a very unique sandstone. That's a good thing that the quarry's open again: for restoration purposes you can get the stone.
Transcript of First Interview

Here follows the transcript of an interview with Cristoph Henning conducted by Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill on October 23, 2009, at Russel Library in Middletown, Connecticut. Questions are prefaced by the interviewer who asked; Mr. Henning's answered are unlabeled.

Laura Heath: This is Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill interviewing Cristoph Henning on Friday, October 23rd, 2009.

(Chatter about Mr. Henning filling out the release form.)

Morgan Hamill: I guess, um, the first thing we wanna know is, just sort of, uh, what your relationship as of now is, with the Portland quarry, and, uh, what role you have, in that.

Um, when I came to, uh, New Haven the first time in 1996, uh, I wasn't allowed to work since I came as a tourist. But I saw all these falling-apart brownstone lentils and I thought, oh, that would be a good step for me as a stone-cutter, stone-carver, to fix that—but I couldn't find out what kind of material that is. I always asked everyone, "What's...where do you get this red sandstone?" Because in Germany, typically, there is not anything referred to as brownstone. Everything's red—red sandstone or colored sandstone. So nobody could give me an answer then.

Anyway, years later Gar Waterman, an artist in, uh, New Haven in the westward section, he actually knew what it was and he drove up to Portland to get me a piece of brownstone. That's the quarry and this really nice guy who, uh, he opened it and, um, after working on this little piece they, Gar Waterman, gave me some air hammer I was not used to, I thought, "My goodness he must think I'm totally unprofessional, right." In Germany we have different kind of air-hammers.

Anyway, then, at one point I drove up to the brownstone quarries and introduced myself, and been there ever since and have a little workshop set up in the quarry, and do a lot of fabrication for the quarry, and some other projects I do... We used to live in New Haven, and then in Branford, and we wanted to be a little closer so we got a house in Berlin. So that's only ten minutes, fifteen minutes from the quarry.

But...so, yeah, and, I guess, sitting right on the source of some great historical material. So, I'm, so to speak, the house-carver of the quarry. So whatever they can't do themselves, the give it to me. They might also give a job to somebody else if it's a big project and it's not suitable for me to do, when they're better off to use machines or whatever, which I don't have and the quarry doesn't have. Then they get sent out some place else.

LH: So, what parts of the fabrication do you do, and what does that entail?

Um, the requests the quarry gets for fabrication are things like sills, and, um, lintels, any type of building elements, and steps, and then the typical step moldings. And for a long time the quarry had to ship out big blocks to Vermont, and then he got it cut and processed there. The work had always to wait in line, that this project would be turned around, and over time he had less and less big blocks which were suitable for shipping, and he got himself a wire saw, to be able to cut smaller blocks efficiently, at the quarry, himself. So and then, it was good that I was there because I would, for example, do typical etch moldings, and the pieces, he could do it right at the quarry and ship it from the quarry to his client, without long delays with another company somewhere else in another state involved. So...and
whenever he has a little thing that he needs to get finished, I give him a price, and then I do the work...and I can do basically anything, but, um, sometimes, if it's like, 200 window sills, you know, and...it doesn't make any that...I say from the beginning, "Ship it someplace else please," you know, 'cause I, uh, I can't do it in the time frame, or I can't do it as efficient. Sometimes you have big projects that involve a lot of fabrication, where other fabricators use, like, CNC [Computer Numerical Controlled] machines, that can just process that quick and cheap and get it out. Rather than me torturing myself and doing nothing else than very basic fabrication, which I'm not too much interested in. I like to do more fancy work, so... And I like to do work with other material too, and I go around the state and other states and fix sculpture and whatnot. So, I do more than just brownstone, also letter carving and stuff. So as a...for example, one bigger project was here for the Victoria Mansion in Portland, Maine. The architect was Henry Austin from New Haven. Originally, I got on this project because the company who got the big job, the job I was bidding on too—which was a little bit too big for me—they were not capable of doing certain elements to the satisfaction of the museum, so they asked me to come and fix it up. And then they asked me for the price of these handrails which were at the time not there; they had to be dismantled. So, I gave them a price, and then after two years looking for blocks we found, we found them and fabricated using the original photo. And...this is here the work in process...it's a pillar and then there are the caps...and in the original photo you see those, uh, finials, which I'm gonna do this winter. Here's the left over of the original. So...it's one big project where you go year after year back again and do something, or... The quarry sometimes has problems to get proper heights of layers, so this piece, for example, has been glued together in the middle, but it's properly colored and it's a very thin seem so you can hardly see it, the seam...but you see that the veining goes in different directions—it's the only clue. But otherwise, you can't see it. And the glue lasts basically for a very long time. Even if the glue should fail, it's not gonna fall apart, since the stones are wide enough and have enough support. And I...this museum had a big restoration in the 70s, and they had to fix those columns, they were all falling apart. And at the time brownstone was not available because the quarry was shut down. So they had to remake those columns out of wood and then spray brownstone dust onto the paint, and it looks like brownstone, but...it's, it's wood. So... And that's a good thing that the quarry's open again: for restoration purposes you can get the stone.

MH: What's, what's, um...had you, had you worked with...well, let me back up. Is brownstone, is it, is it different to work with than other sandstones, or is it...

Yeah, I find brownstone's a very unique sandstone. And, um, any other sandstone I know has different properties. Um, one of the properties brownstone has is very high elasticity. You could cut a really thin strip, which I sometimes did, really thin and long, and you put it in your car and you drive over the bumpy road and it's not gonna break. You can bend it back and forth a little bit before it breaks. So it's...that's good for lintels, for example, if there's like lots of traffic and there's vibration in the road...if there was a granite lintel, granite has no flexibility, or very little, and it breaks, from its own weight. But brownstone doesn't. The other property compared to other sandstones is like abrasion resistance. That's why I have a hard time sanding it with, like, diamond discs. It's often only slipping over the surface; it's really hard to process at times. Because of the abrasion resistance. And therefore it's excellent for steps because you're not gonna wear them out. You can go over those steps for a hundred years, uh, and they're still typically going to be fine. I have to say there's great variation within brownstone. There are some pieces that are extremely hard and tough to wear down, and others are nice and soft and more suitable for, like, other carvings, you know, if you don't want to work too hard. So sometimes you have...for example, those caps here, those two caps—you can't see it in the photo—but if you're standing there you can see they're different color, they're a little different color.
But they're cut out of the same rectangular piece of stone. And one was softer and darker and the other was harder and lighter. Right next to each other. For me it's hard to predict the...when I get a piece of stone, looking at it doesn't tell me—is it hard, is it soft, what is it. But I have, for example, two different blades for cutting them. One which is typically used for granite, and it's really hard, and then I have another blade that's typically used for sandstone, which is more, um, lasts long if the stone is really soft and therefore more abrasive—if the stone is soft it's often more abrasive that if it's hard, so, you know. I was for years troubled to find out why I can't sand that material, with sanding and the hours pass and pass and pass and then I measured and nothing had happened. And then I thought I'd do something wrong, and now after, like, five years I realize it's not me, and it's not the discs, it's the stone, you know. Many times I was running to Mike, the owner of the quarries, that I have the solution, I found the right diamond cup who can sand brownstone. And then, a week later, I had to tell him, well, it's not true, it's not the solution—I don't know what the solution is! But it still doesn't work, so, I have like five different cups, I typically use only one or two, but...so there's this great variety of hardness and workability. And, the other thing that's different in other sandstone is, if you split it against the lines, that means this direction...many people like things rock-face and in historic buildings things are rock-face, that's when you see the broken surface sticking out of the building element...it's very unpredictable with brownstone. You never know which direction it breaks, if it breaks at all, what kind of force to use, what kind of width of chisel to use and which angle to set the chisel, so there is no solution to make sure it breaks the way you want to. When I split the first piece of brownstone I was sure, because of, obviously, sandstone, it would break right in the middle—and it didn't. It broke in a right angle. And I thought, oh no, I messed up! But now I know it's not me, it's the stone, you know. But often it makes it difficult if you have an order for, like, rock-face material, you cut, like, big slabs, that have be rock-faced on all sides. You don't know if it breaks in and then you have to cut a new piece; it's an enormous effort. When, when they had the old quarries they probably had several layers to pick from and they knew, oh, this layer is better suitable for rock-face than the other layer. Right now I didn't have that. We just got to use what we have. And sometimes it's...can be frustrating, you know, you put so much hope and effort into rock-face and you do everything right, but still there's no guarantee it works out. So that's the tough call. ...what else with brownstone... It also has this marbling which I find unusual for, for sandstone. You see a fresh-cut piece, you see those veins, and veins running through other veins who go in other directions. Sometimes you see veins in other sandstones too, but, they are all a little different than those. Over time we will not see it because the iron oxide runs over the surface and makes it all dark and then, it all blanks, and it all looks uniform and people say, "I want this color," and it looks very fine-grained. But if you would sand off the surface, you would see it's not that fine-grained as people think. So if I remove an element, let's say a lentil, I can show the customer, look, you just have a medium-grained material here, just over time it looked it was a fine-grained material 'cause it's all the same color. So... I like it fresh cut actually, I like that look. As much as I like the weathered look, so... It's quite different...sometimes I think it's more...because you can, really, you can have, like, two-inch big pebbles in brownstone, really big. ...let me find it for you, another piece of stone here...and then...I made this sign, you can see really big pebbles in there. And I also like that. Which the quarry sells as second-grade material, I find it quite interesting...sometimes you have big, pink pebbles in there, big black pebbles, and then big green stains from roots that went through the mud in prehistoric times. So...quite interesting. And, different colors. And right now I was asked to make some samples for a project in New Haven and they wanted to have different colors of Portland brownstone. More reddish, more grayish, more brownish. There isn't that much variation but over time if it's weathered...I mean if you look at the quarry wall and those walls on the other side it looks all red...but really reddish-orange and all kinds of colors; that doesn't look like fresh-cut stone.
MH: Was there sort of, like, a learning curve when you first started working here? To get used to the stone?

Yes. (laughs) Very slow learning curve. I've worked with other sandstones and limestones and granite and all kinds of materials, but I find brownstone's quite a unique material. The other sandstones here, like in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts, that's more like the typical sandstone I've used—it breaks easier. Another great property of course is that you can't really stain it badly. I mean, other materials, like marble, can get stained by, like, colored stone dust, or by the tiniest bit of rust, or, like, from chiseling with a metal chisel on the marble—that's enough metal removed that might make it all rusty looking, and it sucks everything right in. I worked on a project with this East Longmeadow sandstone, and I put it on a wood pallet, and it sucked something out of the wood! And it had some funny discoloration, I thought, oh no, I'm not used to that. With brownstone I never have to worry about any discoloration or any staining. Even if you get an oil stain on that stuff you get it easily out. So that's another great, great property. Yeah, I mean, I'm...right now, I think I'm basically...I mean I always could work with brownstone, just sometimes some of the properties are...I mean if you know how to work with stone you can work with any stone; just get used to it. Sometimes if you, if you chisel it on the, on the edge—if it was just a straight edge like here, the layers are parallel going down—there's a tendency that that breaks out easier than in other stones. But once you know that you chisel a little bit flatter and it's gonna be fine. So...

LH: So, is all of your work, kind of, on commission, or do you do any art of your own?

Um...I typically have to earn money, so...I typically want to get paid. I try to make things quick and cheap and try to sell them to garden stores, like those columns here. And that doesn't work, I mean...if you well them for nothing you can sell them, but you can't earn money with it. But of course that's not really artwork, it's just a plain element. But, I could also do some artwork and if I could properly promote it—which I probably will in the future, in the near future—then it might work out over time. But I think I've got to invest a lot of time and effort and money to get there and produce enough pieces...and then I'm always hesitant because I'm busy with things that get money at the end of the day, you know; the work I can pay my bills with, and then I have to fix my house and dig in my garden and stuff like that, so...take care of my son, so there isn't too much leisure time where I can work on a project like...I'm, I'm determined to start that 'cause, I think it could be more satisfying if you do more of your own...I had to design a couple things on my own for some projects in another material, and that was a lot of fun, so...

LH: What kinds of things do you want make?

Hmm?

LH: What kind—

First I would like to do more, like, relief work, maybe, like, not really three-dimensional sculpture, more like—well it's still three-dimensional but fairly flat—'cause I'm kind of, um, inspired by, like, some medieval wood carvings, where you have, like, the face and everything of the saint, but if you look at the side it's only like and inch and a half thick, 'cause you have all those close lines and walls, and...it doesn't look flat, if you look from the front, so that's kind of interesting there. There, in the...during the art-deco time there was a lot of relief carving, which I really like; there's, like, scenes from workers in the factory, and then all kinds of machine parts they would carve in stone, and some
cool stuff, so...maybe some house signs, or other signs. Uh, I wanted to do a project for, uh, some African boy who died in—which I believed—in my hometown, but I find out it happened in Rocky Hill with a family that moved to Berlin. But, that would have been an interesting project. But I'm, I'm not that excited anymore since he didn't live in Berlin, where I live. So I don't, I'm not too interested now, doing something for Rocky Hill, or, uh, to do a monument of mine for something meant in Rocky Hill, but, whatever, I'll find other, other things.

MH: How did you, how did you learn how to work stone?

Well, um... I grew up in East Germany and, um, as a Catholic, thank goodness, and, I had a choice to either be conformed with the system, or...and have the opportunity to go to higher education, or just to do a regular apprenticeship, which I would not have to do in East Germany, and also in Germany. Um...and become a craftsman instead, therefore I could be politically more free, and say, “no, I'm not doing this and and I'm not doing that, I'm not participating in this, I'm not gonna go to the army, with the gun...” I had the choice to say, I will do my army...'cause there's—it's not voluntary, army, you have...it's mandatory, or used to be mandatory, everyone had to go, and I said “I'm not gonna go.” And, um, but, at least I applied that I would not have to use a gun. So, um, in the end I didn't have to go at all, just as I wanted to, because, there's people like me who are supposed to be especially punished by being asked to do that work when they are, like, thirty, but at this time East Germany didn't exist anymore, so... Anyway, um, that's, and I, before, the reason...I saw some stone cutters in my hometown working and was...thought, wow, that's kind of cool stuff. They had, like, a big, wooden mallet and I thought, I never saw a big, wooden mallet. It went, blang blang blang, and they're chiseling around and I went, ooh, wow, that's cool. And I couldn't think of any other profession I wanted to do. Only to be a carpenter in between but then it...I didn't like it anymore, and I wanted to be a toolmaker, and that wasn't right anymore, so I was very excited to get an apprenticeship as a stone cutter, which was a two year apprenticeship, and I had to go to school about, like, forty percent of the time, and I was working in a workshop for, like, sixty percent of the time. And we produced a lot of things for the West, Western Berlin obelisk for the, um, subway system, they had subway bridges which were decorated like, I guess around turn of the century, or early century, or, um, with all kinds of decorations. And...for the Olympia Stadium I remember making a step, and all kinds of spheres and, and some pillars we made. Got quite some interesting work, but, um, I wouldn't have gotten any interesting work in the apprenticeship if I hadn't insisted on it. I was making every life, everyone's life to hell, that I get interesting work. And I was using the law, because in East Germany there was a law that you had to, the factories had to, the workshops had to follow a certain teaching plan. And they were for each different skill-set, you had, different, some kind of hours. And I would just hold it in front of my boss and say, “I had these hours already, I'm not gonna do that.” (laughter) So I was really a thorn in their flesh but they all liked me. And I was, I finished with the best grade there. They didn't have a grudge against me or anything. Also, they didn’t, they didn’t punish me for being politically in a different direction or anything like that. I got their full support and they kind of liked the fact that I wanted to learn something. ‘Cause they were only used to people who had to become stone carvers because they weren’t smart enough to do anything else and they regretted to do it and they didn’t like the kind of work and they weren’t even smart enough to do this kind of work.

So I, I was partly giving instruction to my co-apprentices and had told them how to read a plan, a blueprint and (chuckles) I remember they, the workers, they got mad at me for whatever reason and they wanted to make a stink between the apprentices and they went to one of the other apprentices and said, “Here, this, the guy told you the wrong thing, you, you’re doing it wrong.” And he got red faced
and came to me and said, “What? You told me the wrong thing? Why did you do that?” (chuckles) And I said, “Don’t listen to them. They don’t understand nothing. Go back to your work.” (laughs) And then the whole crowd of workers, they had to leave. They gave up. So… and then we had the final exam and we had to make a piece for the final exam. I remember, there was a big discussion between all the masters of the craft. There was something wrong with the templates. I told them, “Look, we can’t do it. The templates are wrong. They don’t fit with the drawings.” And they didn’t understand why and they were discussing, “Why, what’s wrong with the circles here?” I said, “No, that’s not the problem. You didn’t, you didn’t leave any material for the molding on top of that thing.” And they didn’t get it, and then they all laughed and said “You just make new drawings and templates.” (chuckles) So that was kind of good. It was fun. I made the templates and we did our exam, and that was that.

And afterwards I worked for the Church, which I always loved, and I was always, was raised Catholic and it gave me a different view of the world. And I worked, and I wanted to work all my life on the Catholic cathedral in my hometown Erfurt, Germany. And I never, I was never treated like that. We got treated there like dogs in the street. And, within the church, I couldn’t believe it. How, what, what corruption was going on, how people there treated… I was never treated from any communist factory or any other institution in East Germany the way I was treated from the Church. I mean, it was just cruel. I stayed there half a year and I left. It sure made a big impression on me. I mean, I didn’t expect that everything was great and wonderful working for the Church, but that it was that bad was quite surprising to me. But that’s my education, that’s not why I became a stone carver.

Stone… the difference between stone carver… Look, all this stuff here is basically stone cutter’s work. Anything you see here, and that would be stone carver’s work as soon as it gets more into, into leaves and fruit and hands and faces and organic forms that are not gonna be made as a template or with a straightedge or some kind of compass. That’s the difference, so…

LH: So did you start out as a stone cutter and then learn how to do the carving?

Yes, the stone carving I learned later on. I was working in Munich and I had to do leaves there, which I was, which was a little intimidating at first, but then I got it. (chuckles) And I found stone carvers there who were excellent stone carvers but they could not cut stone. They thought that, like the crown of humanity was their stone carving skills but if they had to do another element, they couldn’t do it because they couldn’t… The guy was bragging to me, “If you can carve this finial, this Gothic finial, you, you have done the most difficult piece of the church and there is nothing more complicated you can do.” And then he had to do, like, a simple piece that you had to project lines and he messed it completely up. So, I mean, all he can do is Gothic finials and nothing else. I mean, I can do Gothic finials and all the other things and, but I also am able to do this.

When I want to get in close like these handrails, curve in different directions. This swing down here, this way, and then curve that way. And they had the original handrails in the basement but they don’t help because you have to do geometrical construction. You have to have the radius and then, how steep it goes, and then you have to do all kinds of geometrical things in order to make them. The original doesn’t help anymore because all the lines are lost once you carve it. They are lost and you can’t easily replicate them by having the original in front of you, that would be simple. You can do it, but it would take much, much longer. It would be much more complicated and it might not fit in the end.

I forgot the question. Oh yeah, yes, did I… I did stone cutting first and then stone carving.

MH: How did you end up over here?

Well, I met an American in Germany. Yeah. I met my wife in Germany. She was working there
for the University of Bamberg and, yeah. That’s how I ended up over here. And I never liked English. I
had Russian in school and French in school. My mother was learning English and she was talking to
me in English and it annoyed me. So everyone learned English in my class. Only I had French. And
now I’m living here. And, um, we lived in Germany for a while, but then my wife said for
advancement she would have to go here and I said, “Okay, fine.” So now we are here for about, I don’t
know, eight years, I think.

LH: Do you imagine yourself staying here and continuing to work brownstone for a long time or do
you want to move around more?

Well, now we got a house and we have a six-year-old, so I guess it’s to school for many years
and I, I just guess I’m stuck here. And in Germany there’s much more competition for stone carving,
stone cutting, so I kind of have it good here. I hardly have any competition. And so, for my business, it
is pretty good to be here and, I mean, on the other hand… I like it here. I like it in Germany, but I’m
not satisfied in Germany and I’m not satisfied here. I guess it’s, if you know many different things,
you’re never gonna be satisfied. Yeah, I would like to spend more time with my mother and my brother
and other family members and friends who I see like once a year, if I’m lucky. But, you know… That’s
how I ended up over here. I ended up here and I guess I’ll stay here for a while. I don’t know,
brownstone, how long that will be quarried, I can always do something with brownstone. But I like to
work with other materials. Brownstone, marble, granite, limestone.

MH: How is, how is your, you said you do work other than just the stuff for the brownstone quarry.
What’s the split between brownstone and other stuff?

You know, what’s the big difference?

MH: No, I mean, like, how much work do you do that’s just the brownstone and how much do you do
other things?

Well, I would, I would say that most of the projects I do with brownstone. But I regularly do
limestone and granite and also marble. But, probably like thirty percent other materials and seventy
percent brownstone, I would think. But it varies every year, obviously, over the, over the long run it’s
this, kind of, but yeah. Yeah. That’s the thing, I never know what’s coming, you know, I don’t know.
Suddenly, I need to do some Briar Hill sandstone from Ohio. That requires driving to Ohio to pick out
a piece of sandstone. Because they couldn’t promise me anything that they would ship. They’d say,
“Whatever we ship, that’s what you get.” And when I work, I do a detailed carving. I do little figures
and small details. If there’s a big stain, then it might not be really good. I might not be able to see
anything, if it’s not fairly homogeneous [homogeneous] color. So I drove there and I get the stone, pretty
much for free, because I’m paying several hundred dollars. And I could finally see the quality or at
least the fabrication facility there, so it’s worth the personal relationship to different quarries and
everything. And being able to go there and pick things out for certain projects.

And another project I had last year was for the library in Branford, which is a, I believe, a
Tennessee marble. I’m not sure which state it is from. I didn’t buy the marble. But this marble is not
long available in this color, but for whatever reason, they found somebody who still had this color. And
I was told that this one pallet of stone was ninety-five thousand dollars. (chuckles) So that’s a lot of
responsibility for me. You know, I mean, I know I’m not gonna mess it up, but one piece was an
enormous L-shaped molding piece and it was, it’s really hard marble so every time I knocked it was
like hitting a bell. Blang! Blang! And I expected every moment it would make Crack! (chuckles)
Crack! But it didn’t. So it’s pretty tough stuff.

And I used the same material in West Hartford when the Noah Webster statue needed a new finger but the conservator couldn’t get the material, obviously didn’t know that supplier. And they turned the whole statue around and did a core from the bottom, a round piece of the marble, which I then had to make a finger upon. So it was kind of technically interesting. Cause it’s almost like dental work, you have to see what remained of the half of whatever finger it is. It was an oval block so I had to cut a lot of that away and then you have to make a cast of that, almost like dental work, you have to make a cast of whatever the surface is, and then you have to design the finger and project that to this breakout and so it’s, especially if it goes over many corners and it can get very complicated.

I had a similar thing in, in Lincoln, Nebraska. They knocked the beak off an eagle there at the state Capital and it was also… in conservation, you never want to make big cut-outs, you wanna leave every bit of original surface you can keep and then you end up having a super-difficult surface just to touch a piece of stone, which you then, later, cut the beak from. Cutting the beak is easy, but getting the stone to fit perfectly to this breakout, that is pretty tough. Especially, I don’t have, I always try to get dentists’ materials, which they don’t sell to non-dentists… guess you might open a dentist’s shop or whatever! (chuckles) So I was actually going quite often to the dentist and asking them for this blue paper they use when they make inlays but of course, a tooth is only very so small, and they are very small papers, these blue papers that they use to get, to see if the gold inlay, if they have to send some wire to get fit, or whatever they use it for. Or maybe it’s done with ceramics. So whatever they had was much too small for me. I was hoping to get big sheets and I can use that. Because black paper wouldn’t work cause of a black speck of something. I used all kinds of techniques. I… well it’s always, sometimes it’s technically very challenging. When I went to Nebraska, I didn’t know how I would do it. I get there and it’s then you get the ideas of how to do it. And I have certain techniques that I developed over the time and they work well for me. So... And then I had to go back to Nebraska after they saw I could do the beak and was then allowed to do the rest. All kinds of open feathers and talons and stuff like that.

MH: So how do people who need some kind of work done find you?

Well, uh, typically I work for institutions and some conservators to know me and then other conservators and companies have worked with me in the past typically find me customers. I sent out, uh, advertising materials to other institutions, typically... Even if they have the information, they might, say, call somebody else and then they say, “Oh, go to Christoph Henning.” Even I have met already this person, I introduce myself already, in the end they find me still of a different source. (chuckles) So, I am sure. I used to put out fliers on the street but I stalled because I really didn’t know how to do it, how to promote myself. I would just go to the house that were falling apart in New Haven, put a flier on each step and I get a job. Actually two, no three jobs, just by going. I try to put ads in newspaper, people call me to put in new sidewalk. I say, I can do it, but why should I get into sidewalk business? So, yeah, uh, typically, I can find all kinds of journals for restorations that could do advertisement, that would be expensive and I don’t think it would be… bring a lot. So, so far, it helps me that other people know me and finding all this quality work so that people trust you, you know? Even things somebody else could do, I get it because they don’t know if the other person might not be able to do it properly. Even if it’s very simple work. People always want somebody they know he can do it. (chuckles)

MH: When we first ran into you, you were up at Wesleyan’s North College replacing the bottom piece on the wall. Do you do a lot of stuff at Wesleyan? Do they call you much?
No, it was the first time. I never introduced myself to Wesleyan, which I have to do at one point. Uh, that was the first time and I was asked by Capasso Restoration in New Haven—there are I think Capasso Restorations in Connecticut, G&L Capasso, and they had a restoration project and they asked me if I would like to do that and I looked at it. I had, at first, spoken to the person in charge with Wesleyan that, “Well, we want to do the job if it’s under this price,” and “yes.” And I gave them the right price I guess to work there. Yeah.

LH: What’s your favorite brownstone restoration project that you’ve done?

Well so far it’s, I believe, the Victoria Mansion. The steps. It was fun because nobody knew uh, about those handrails, how to do them. So they had to one hundred percent trust me. We had some disagreements about the, how steep they go up and the reason was, they have different degrees of how they go up, depending on which side of the handrail it is. So the outer side of the handrail is a different angle than the inner side of it. So. And in the very beginning didn’t, didn’t do too many handrails, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure about it but then I realized that, certainly, exactly how they do it. Yeah, so it was fun. And, and I think everyone was a little bit nervous about it. They had waited two years for the stones, developed some cracks, actually, had to put that so-called dutchman in, so you see the seam here. It had developed a crack, so had to cut a piece out and glue a new piece in. They all were very satisfied with… and, anyway, then they installed it and it fit. And then, I didn’t hear anything about the project... I didn’t hear anything for two weeks and then, “Yes! It fits!” (chuckles) Everyone was cheering. (laughs) I was a little nervous myself. Is it gonna fit? I was pretty sure but you never, I might have done a mistake I was not aware of, you know. I think it’s right and then it might not be, but it was right. And I scared myself a lot because I used some paper templates to define the angle on each side and those are about, almost ten feet long and I thought, “why do you do some flappy paper template?” (laughs) It’s so critical that it’s right! But it was okay. I think it was the right thing to use the paper template. It was the easiest. And I had other markers that helped me to define the incline of that thing. So. I sent them actually a drawing, I had to send them a drawing but if you look at the drawing, you don’t understand, you still don’t understand how it works. It is complicated things and we also only had another, it wasn’t even a photo. I don’t know what, what was the first method of getting a picture. I don’t know the name, if it was called a photo. They had some kind of a… basically, a photo. From the situation with the scroll, which was far away, which was from 1850, which was the only reference of how it might look in there. And you didn’t know if it’s a leaf in there or what is it, but seeing different pictures of it, we determined that it’s just a scroll, this little round thing in the middle. And I had to submit different shapes and forms of it and the director in return mentioned that he’s very particular, he wants it to be right, which I like. I like to have clients who don’t tell me that they don’t care. I like clients who want to have quality, who appreciate quality. And I was surprised that he approved already my… I basically made a clay model and a rough drawing. It was the first thing and I knew, there was just... I said, “That’s the idea. I think that’s what it is.” And he agreed, and he said, “It should have only one and a half turns rather than three, and it should,” he had some other instructions, and then the next one he accepted right away. He said, “yes, that's exactly what it is.” (chuckles) So that was great.

It is always, how quickly that walls thin out. It’s not that complicated, but it’s also… since they also get skinnier on the inside. It’s also a little bit interesting. And… if this little ball was a little bit bigger. And he said, “These things are sticking out too far. I want them flatter.” And I agreed. And I was very happy that he made it flatter. It looks much better. I don’t know if this was the state before, it must be before the change. It’s sticking out a little bit too much. And it’s good because, in architecture, if you can’t talk to your client about the project, you don’t know what they want and what they like and what they’re excited about. You’re on your own, nobody criticizes your work, nobody helps you to get
a good idea going, you know. And it’s also helpful for me if somebody, if something is not clear, if it
can be discussed. “Okay, those are the pros and those are the cons and we have figure out how it is and
come to an agreement.” Especially things…

I, also, in Germany, when I was working in Germany, often I, I had a post card from 1900,
earlier, un-sharp, not high quality, no high resolution, and you had to make out some kind of other
thing. And very far away, and you have to use some clues from the building, from other churches, from
other forms of the building. And then copy whatever’s left of the original element and then get it
approved. Then, then cut it, and then set it in. I, I typically like to do everything. I like to put it in
myself. With this particular project, I’m very happy that the company who put it in was also capable of
doing a good job putting it in. What you typically find is, you put all your effort in and you do an
excellent piece of stone, then you give it to somebody and then you come and look at it and all the
edges are ripped off. (chuckles) It looks completely messed up, you know. “No! I can’t even make a
photo of this, saying that I did that. Now I gotta keep it secret that I did that.” Cause they’ll think that I
ripped the edges off. So I was very happy that they did an excellent job. But typically, it’s not the way
I’m… typically, if other people want to set it, they have no money for the setting, and it’s all bumpy,
it’s not set straight. They break off details. I carved some leaves last year, and it was chipped and they
cut off the back of the thing. I was happy if it still looked half as good after they’re done. It’s the botch-
up work. Yeah. It’s also always interesting setting pieces. So I can set those once I have those
completed. I’m going to set them myself. Cause they’re easy… it’s easy to rip something up, you
know, you put something on and half a leaf is missing. “Oh look, they made it so you couldn’t know I
put that leaf there.” And…

MH: Anything else? I think we’re all set.

    All right.

MH: We’d probably like to talk to you again later on.

    Sure.

LH: We’d like to listen through it and think of some more questions.

    If you like, you can have some photos. I don’t need any of those. But you don’t have to.

LH: Yeah!

    If you don’t need them… but you can keep them.

LH: Yeah.

MH: If we can borrow them, and just make some copies…

    Oh, you can keep them. I don’t need them. I can make copies myself.

LH: Thank you.

    You’re welcome.
Transcript of Second Interview

Here follows the transcript of an interview with Cristoph Henning conducted by Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill on November 21, 2009, at Russel Library in Middletown, Connecticut. Again, questions are prefaced by the interviewer who asked; Mr. Henning's answered are unlabeled.

Laura Heath: This is Laura Heath and Morgan Hamill introducing Cristoph—er, interviewing Cristoph Henning on November 21, 2009, at the Russel Library in Middletown, Connecticut.

Morgan Hamill: Um, we were wondering if you could sort of, um, explain, or walk us through the whole fabrication process from, like, start to end, from beginning to end.

Uh, sure.

MH: Including, you know, if you, if you ever have to to do any sort of, research-type stuff.

Yes, often. (chuckles) Um, well, with general fabrication you would either pick a block, or if you have the luxury to work in a quarry where they can cut it for you, typically, work out with a square block, almost cut to the dimension, and then, typically you would either get the drawing and maybe templates, or you have to make them yourself by going to the building, which you have to replicate the piece of, and make this template yourself. Make drawing and take measurements. And, so the first step is to make sure that the block is square, because whatever it's cut with, the machine is not telling me that it's all square. So you have to adjust the block and then you would eventually cut it to length and the proper size—which is adjusting the block (chuckles)—and then put on the template and scribe the lines, which can be easy or complicated depending on what piece it is. And there are several steps, there can...depending, is it a simple molding, like a step, just like a bull-nose, or just a bevel on a windowsill, or if it's something curved and...or molding that one set on a different surface. So you would work with different templates, scribe it on, and then once you do that, um, today we use grinders with diamond blades where you cut everything out roughly...actually my specialty is to cut right on the line. So I don't have too much finishing to do. And then you make sure that's all correct, you might have to work over with either hand tools or air hammers. And then do several steps, let's say, for bull-nose, you make several bevels, and then you connect that to make it round. Or, let's say you make a sphere, then you have to take a template and connect points, and then, and then you connect all the points with a contour template 'til it's all round and then you just sand it and it's finished. And then eventually, um, in historic preservation we often need, um, correct finish, which we find on the original building—could be tooth-chiseled or point-chiseled or margin-chiseled, and then the middle is tooth-chiseled—all kinds of historic finishes, and then depending on what it is you have to analyze it and then you have to replicate it. It could be an axe, could be axe-finished. We did a lot of sandstone in the past with all kinds of axes...and you jump around and if you can't get the axe you have to somehow create it with a proper chisel that it looks almost like it was axed. And then it should be done. And then you put it one a pallet and somebody's gonna have to pick it up...eventually get a check, I always do. (laughs) Um, yeah.

LH: How much do you—if you were doing a historic preservation project—how much do you research about the history of the building and why...how much do you know about the art history, I guess.
Right. Uh, that's...one of the interesting parts of my job, is that I often have to go to some piece of statue, or a building and there's something missing. Often we don't know what it is or how it looked like. And then...I used to go to either archives, I did that, try to find historic photographs of what might have been there, or doing things like going to an antique shop and find some old postcards. (smiles) And based on that you might get an idea. Or I did, um...on the, on the Broadway, uh, Civil War monument in New Haven, there were pieces missing off the Civil War soldier. And he was holding something and only a piece on the bottom was left. And then he had the stick in the hand, but I didn't know what was broken up over his hand, which was missing, and we knew there was a stick missing, connecting the lower part. So I had to research what kind of equipment they used during the Civil war, and then I found out that this was a sponge-rammer combination. So it was a stick with a sponge to wash the cannon, and the rammer is where you push in a bag of powder, I guess, and the cannonball, I don't know if the cannonball rolls in there by itself. I guess you push the powder in, the ball goes in by itself.

So, okay, then you learn about those things, and, uh, then I looked for other Civil War monuments, where such a thing is still in place, and I found one in, uh, in Farmington, in the Unionville section of Farmington. There is a perfectly preserved Civil War monument there. A soldier is holding a sponge-hammer...a sponge-rammer combination, so I easily could copy that. Um, I gave the price out to the conservator for a missing tip of a rifle on another Civil War monument, without knowing what it looked like. (laughs) And then, to my amazement, I find that those Civil War rifles have a loading stick that is quite complicated to carve. I thought it's just some pipe, kind of, end, to the rifle, but no, there's also the loading stick and some other things. So, it was a little more complicated than I imagined, but not too complicated, of course, so...I made that piece and we put it there, but it also involved research.

And I made the baldachin in Mühlhausen, Germany, where a lot of it was left—was, was lost, and we had to figure out how it looked like. And there we used archives, and...and I was also walking around going to other churches looking at baldachins there. Um, the conservator there had some other idea how the end should look, but I kind of could prove to him that that wasn't the case at this particular baldachin because there was just a little bit left to prove it. One little corner which made his theory impossible, so... And then typically you present it to all those highly-paid architects and conservators, and they typically agreed with my research, and so I went on my way producing it, and then putting it into the building.

LH: Do you prefer when a blueprint of a building or photos of a building, or photos of a monument, or do you like it better when you have to search for it a bit, or kind of have more artistic license with it?

Well actually I prefer to have, like, good imagery and, uh, drawings. I did actually a, a plaque for Phillips Academy up in Andover, Massachusetts, and they still had the original drawing from the original plaque. And the plaque was still in perfect shape, but it...they had to...the name re-dedication, they spent, like, six million dollars, so...the greatest donor wanted to have his name on. So they had to take the old plaque out and add his name but I could definitely use the font, which I found in the original drawing from the architect in New York, which was from 1915, something like that, so their old archive was definitely helpful.

So I definitely prefer if I have good evidence, 'cause I want it to look like the original. Often I have the discussion with the customer...there, there's a tendency to change things, for whatever reason. “Uh, I want to have it a little thicker, so it doesn't break off as easy,” (laughter) 'cause often I feel, I'll make that thicker and that thicker, and I don't like it; I want to copy it as the original was. And not make it any clunkier and bigger. Uh, I know there's a horse and a cathedral in Basle in Switzerland and
there it had, had to, had been replaced many times, every time getting fatter and thicker. It's just one big thing. (laughter) It looks so ugly. (smiles) And I don't want to make things thicker, 'cause it doesn't look as elegant, and then you've destroyed the proportions. And then, of course, if I show that I did that, the they, everyone's saying, “it doesn't look that good.” Well, it wasn't my fault. (chuckles) You know, I can't show my work if it's not perfect, but if the customer wants to have it that way and they paid, paid for it, I have little input, so. It can be frustrating, but...I have to live with that I guess.

LH: Hmm...I guess, how much, when you're picking stone to, a piece of stone to use in a project, how much do you...how do you pick one and how much do you know about the structure of it, the geology, the geology of it, how much do you need to know about that?

Um, well I don't need to know much about minerals, or whatever, when I pick the stone. Typically I would research what stone it is that has to be replaced; often it is already done by the contractor, whoever hires me. And they are supplying me with the stone, or, um, I research what it is and, if it's a very detailed piece, I might actually drive to the quarry and pick out the piece just to make sure I get what I want. And look at the stone. I did this for a piece for Jonathan Edwards College where it was a yellow sandstone, it comes with lots of metal, iron minerals in it, and it can be very brown and whatnot. 'Cause I had fine detail, I wanted to have it a homogene [homogeneous] color. So I went out to Ohio and picked it out; it turned out the be actually cheaper—get it right there, I saw the operation and met the owner—was kind of a fun trip...for the whole family. (smiles) So there was, that's always a concern, that I get the proper material. I have often been frustrated that I had to use materials that were given to me that were not that proper...um, for whatever reason: partially because the conservator claimed that it has to last longer and the piece which we are replacing lasted only seven hundred years and now we want it to last longer. (laughs) Which I think's ridiculous. If something lasts seven hundred years, God knows what's in seven hundred years; why can't they do it again in, let's say, five hundred years, you know, you don't have to change the material. There was again the baldachin, which was a, a shell limestone with very small holes, the carving is very detailed, and now I had to use the travertine with huge holes in it. And that destroys the whole fine details, because—I mean, you still can see them, but there are big holes in the details. It would be nicer if you had the original material, which is still available. We'd use that and have the fine—all the fine lines are nice, visible, no big holes in the rock thing to pale... So, but, I couldn't do anything against it. I had to do it in travertine which was also harder to execute because the stone was harder and it's also a little harder to work on big holes in the material. And, another project gave me a sandstone where the, the layouts of the stone were highly visible and they went into the wrong direction and it was not the right color. It's often frustrating when you get material that turns out to be not the proper color. And if I get the right colors like I did last year for the Norwich Free Academy, the Slater Museum, where the color is perfect, right on the spot—and you can't even see that anything was done in the building—that's perfect then. You know, you walk up to it, if you didn't know that it was all falling apart before, you would never know that this is not original, and that's good restoration. You don't want to have it sticking out. Then it won't seem right; it's out of place. So I try to put a lot of effort in to get the right stuff, get the right color. It's not always possible, but I try.

MH: What's your, um—this is kind of arbitrary, but—what's your favorite kind of stone to work with?

Favorite kind of stone (laughs)...um, I worked once with a—very shortly, just for the fun of it—with a porphyry tuff—I don't even know the English name. It's a volcanic rock which was purple-reddish, soft as chocolate (chuckles), and you could, like, chisel easily and it wasn't abrasive to the
chisels too much, which I found in, someplace in the middle of Germany, in a quarry that wasn't used anymore. And it was a wonderful material. I like, I like certain colors and, um, that was a very nice color—warm, purple color, and...I like, generally I like limestones, even though the color might be a little bland sometimes, sometimes pretty much like concrete, but it's easy to work with typically. A soft limestone, like Indiana limestone, Kansas limestone, or some French limestones, can be quite pleasant to work with. And of course all kinds of sandstones, but they are very abrasive, and you have to sharpen your tools all the time. Or if they are very grainy, have big grain, it's hard to have a sharp edge. Granite generally I don't like too much, but I like it more than I did before I was just rejecting it. (smiles) I can work with granite. Marble's typically pretty hard too, but, depending what you do with it, it can be very nice. Yeah, well, I would definitely pick that volcanic, violet, purple stuff that I found in Germany. That's my favorite even though I worked only one afternoon with it (chuckles). Or there's another one there, uh, Roechlitz basically the same material. Roechlitz are porphyry tuff, which is also not quarried anymore. Very soft, keeps its shape for a long time, doesn't weather easy, and easy to shape, with a nice copper color.

And Portland brownstone, of course, very beautiful. From what is available around here, I definitely like Portland brownstone. It turns a reddish-brown over time. I like the fresh-cut color too, and I also like the, the very coarse Portland brownstone, which really looks like concrete with a purplish tint to it. And that looks really cool I think. And as it weathers over time, then kind of a very, very nice color—can make some nice, cool signs, or whatever. Which is typically seen as a secondary material, but I really like it. I like the first grade Portland brownstone too. Typically I like all kinds of stones if it has some warm color too—it I like yellowish sandstones, too. If it's too gray, and if it's too grainy, too spotty, like salt and pepper granite, then it always depends what you make out of it, but it's not necessarily my favorite. That's why I don't have granite counter-tops, I can't look at them. (laughs) I would prefer marble, definitely, even if it stains easier. It looks nicer.

LH: I remember you were telling us about, um, helping other apprentices who you were working with learn how to do things. Do you teach people how to carve stone, ever? And do you like doing that? And how do you feel about doing it?

Um, I did this maybe on the side for very short time and I didn't do it for a long time. I don't know if I'm a very good teacher. I don't think so. I had always big problems teaching my brother basic mathematics (chuckles) but, uh, I haven't done too much teaching, no. I could be fine, but... I have no experience doing it. And it's not a big desire for me. There are lots of people who just learn something, they turn around and they teach others. I don't necessarily think it's so great. But, if I needed some people to help me, I would like to teach them, I think. They could help me. Maybe later on I will teach my son to do things. I tried to do this already, but he obviously just wanders off. He's six years old. Still lots of time.

Um, and I think, if you teach, it's interesting cause you talk to somebody who has a different perspective. You can also still learn things, find easier ways certain things to do. And you, it's interesting to learn about teaching, how to approach somebody, how you try to explain things, and then see the results and then try something different angles to teach the same thing. Could be interesting. But, so far, there is not enough, there isn’t too much work that I necessarily have to teach somebody.

Actually, I had a subcontractor and I had to teach him to cut letters in granite and he is a, he is a woodcarver so, and these were big granite panels, very expensive, already set in a tower, so that was scary for me. And he knew it. He knew it was scary for me to have him helping me, but the, the construction company that hired me, they required me to have some other people helping me so it would go faster. And I gave him some granite and he worked on it and I looked and okay, he broke
some corners. But in the end he did an excellent job and everything worked out and he said “thanks for...you trusted me. I know it was a big risk.” But it was a good experience, yeah. But it was his own personal talent and dedication, so it was good that I could find people who have an interest in doing things.

MH: So you were, um, let’s see. You were, you were in Germany through, sort of, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification.

Mmhmm.

MH: Did that have any particular effect on the stone-carving industry?

On the industry itself or on me?

MH: Well, both, either, or.

Well, it had a big impact on me because, living in East Germany, they always had these limited funds. I grew up in cities where there are not only war damage, but they had a lot of historic substance. I was growing up in a medieval town, of course. There was about twenty churches. And other nice historic buildings which needed repair and I saw them and I said, “well, nobody learns those professions, there are no professionals to do it, that’s why they fell apart.” So I decided I wanted to learn the profession, going this way because of my, me being Catholic and not wanting to participate in all this communist stuff and keeping myself out of communist organizations as good as I could. Um, I had no other choice anyway, I couldn’t go and, and become a doctor or go to college because they would have required me to sign up for three years’ army service and I would have to be streamlined politically, so...

But, once I had finished my apprenticeship, I realized the reason that nothing was done was because they didn’t have any money. When I worked on the cathedral there, I was mostly used for cutting the grass and raking leaves and cleaning the sidewalk. I mean, we also cut stone, but it was a very slow process. They actually had to send us to the quarry to help with the quarry operation. It was the only way for them to obtain materials for the, the cathedral. So I had to sit there in this quarry operation and, and rock face stone like half the winter. I didn’t like it at all.

So with the Berlin Wall coming down and Germany’s reunification, I ended up getting a job in Munich, and it was the most wonderful experience. Because we had a church, they were spending fifty million dollars on that restoration of the church tower, so there was no problem with money whatsoever. They had all the material you needed or wanted, and I had full support there. I had excellent coworkers who were willing to show me things I didn’t know yet and it was a wonderful work atmosphere and because of the work I did there, I could give future employers, I could show them what I did. You know, it was interesting work. So once they so that, they gave me whatever complicated work they had, and this way, I could advance myself. I was given all kinds of projects, which were an honor to get. And other people said, “How come you get this and not me? I want to do this kind of work.” And I said, “Sorry. You can’t. I get it.” So that was kind of... and I learned a lot of things, taking on difficult projects. And it has all to do with the fall of the wall and the big change in Germany. And, and then, the more interesting work you do, the easier it is to get interesting work, to convince people that you can do it, because that’s always a big scare. If you hire somebody and then, in the end it’s all messed up, you know. That happens. All the time. That’s how I find one of my customers. Because I had to fix things some other company did wrong. And I lost originally the bid on
the project, but then I came in afterwards and fixed up and then got the future projects. That was a good thing, for me to get in there.

So, for the stone industry itself, um, of course, in the West, there wasn’t a big change. But they, maybe found some more employees from the East, because lots of young people were leaving the East and finding jobs in the West in factories when places in the East shut down. But maybe that’s not so true for the stone industry because now a lot of funds from the West, they are also channeled to the East, and they could take on bigger restoration projects. And big restoration companies started up, and they also got interesting work in the East and got money to do it, as long as there was available, I think. By now, they are out of money, all in Germany. But for a while, there was quite a lot of work and interesting work in the East and so it was quite a renaissance.

The bad, the other side of this is that they educated tons and tons of stone cutters and stone carvers and conservators and architects and whatnot and there’s such an enormous amount of qualified people that you don’t necessarily get a good income if you have special skills cause so many people have special skills. Plus, now with all the borders open, you, you get incredibly well-trained artisans coming over from Poland or other countries. I remember, in Munich, we were working with two brothers from, where were they from? Slovenia? And they worked in this field since they were like twelve and they were just so fast. It was unbelievable. I mean, they, they were mostly setting stone, which I wasn’t doing. I was cutting stone. But they didn’t even break out in a sweat and they were done, like, in half the time other people were doing it. And some got really frustrated by that. You know, you work at this a long time and suddenly they come, two guys from Slovenia and do it like nothing, like one two three everything is done. And then you have to explain why you aren’t done. (laughs) So… it was quite fun, yeah. Big changes. Big changes.

But I think by now, at least in East Germany, they, the, the towns, most of them are out of money for big restoration projects, at least in the East. I think they, I don’t know what they spent their money on, but, I mean, I, I am not living there any more since almost ten years. I don’t know exactly what is going on. That’s just what I hear. And the big companies, they have jobs all over Germany. There is a big exchange of big companies from the East go to the West cause they’re a little cheaper and then they get big projects in the West. (chuckles) So I don’t know, I didn’t work there.

LH: Did it become a lot easier to be Catholic once the wall came down?

Um, certainly, but for me, personally, the, I mean, being Catholic was never a problem for me. It was, basically, in East Germany, being a Catholic was, for me, an opportunity to excuse myself from all kinds of things that I didn’t like in the Communist regime. I could always argue that, “Well, sorry, I’m not marching on Labor Day in downtown because I’m going to church, it’s a Sunday. I’m not coming.” (laughs) And they couldn’t do anything about it. So. But I think, in East Germany, maybe it’s a special situation because there was West Germany, and everyone was looking, “What is the West doing?” “What’s going on in the East?” It was always the comparison. It’s the same language, and you can, could get the television from the West and the West could get the television from the East. And the Communist regime wanted to have good relations with the Vatican, for whatever reason, I don’t know. So I had quite some freedom because I was Catholic.

But once the wall came down and I had to work for the Catholic church in Erfurt, that was before the wall came down and was treated there so badly. That was the beginning of my, uh, beginning of the end, I would say. But then I lived in Munich and went to church there, and what they were preaching there was completely against my beliefs. Those rich people there are just, with such intolerant priests in this church, intolerant of other people and other peoples’ problems. I just rejected it. The Catholic Church. I mean, I still, in some aspects, like the Catholic Church but I’m not a
Christian anymore and I don’t believe in all this stuff. So, if East Germany would still exist, I would be an excellent Catholic now. I would still go every Sunday to church, would be very involved. I might have ended up as a monk, even. (chuckles) But, because of the change, I think it happened to many, I got a bigger world-view and saw other things, talked to other people, and quite lost my belief in the process of it. And I’m glad I did. (laughs)

LH: Um, have you worked on other Catholic churches, or on other churches in general? And how does that compared to working on that first Catholic church where they didn’t treat you very well?

Well, of course, now, back then, I was an employee of the Church. That’s always a different situation. If I now work in a church, I’m a, a contractor. I have a contract and there’s no discussion about it. I mean, if they would treat me bad, why would they treat me bad, you know? No, it just wouldn’t happen. There’s no such a thing as you are treated disrespectfully if someone hires you, you treat them bad. But if you hire someone and you treat them badly, they might just leave, you know? (chuckles) Who would do that? So…um, so I have no problem working in churches, and I like, of course, buildings, anyway. Beautiful churches. I like to restore them. So I don’t have any problem to work with any people there. It has no influence on my interactions with church members or whatever. I mean, I have no problem with any church and I don’t have a grudge against religions or churches. So that’s no problem.

And I’m, I kind of am sad that many churches lose a lot of members, are overage, have such a lack of funds, and cannot take care of their now-oversized buildings. It’s a tragedy if they have those beautiful landmarks get lost because nobody is using them in the original sense. Or willing to put money in it…

It’s the same with museums, if you have, like historic houses. I mean, there’s such a need for funds all the time to keep it up, keep the staff paid and everything. I quite admire that they, how they, can get all their fund-raising together and preserve it for the future. Quite a challenge. (chuckles)

LH: Do you think that’s particularly different in the U.S., the, I mean, do you think people care less about keeping those monuments here, or do you think…?

No. No, no. I think there’s a big advantage in the U.S. than, um. In Germany, when it comes to restoration, it’s often, one side, state funds. And if the state, as it so often doesn’t have the funds, then things get neglected. While here, um, you have more involvement of private donors, you have institutions that have quite some funds available for restoration, like at Yale or Phillips Academy or other big schools. And, um, you also have the state involved, so you have a wide, wider funding possibilities for restoring historic properties and therefore, I think, sometimes, money is overspent. There is often that they spend too much and overdo things rather than limit themselves. For example, I, months ago, I worked on a building at Yale New Haven Hospital and they were doing such an enormous effort, cutting out joints that were perfectly fine and then re-pointing the whole building. Which, nobody in Germany, I think would do. They would just cut out what is broken, re-point that, try to match it to the original. But this is sometimes this overkill, you know, that you rip like half the stones out, which sometimes is good for me. (laughs) I can provide new stones even though I think the old one would have still done, you know. Um, but sometimes it’s like, also, certain institutions, they go on things and they do everything at once, everything, rather than maintaining it continuously. They say, “Okay. That’s broken now. Let’s take care of it.” I don’t know, they might have, of course they have their reasons. Maybe it’s in the long run cheaper, or more efficient, or from the whole management of the buildings it’s easier to accomplish than having everywhere little construction sites. But often such
huge operations going on now. Quite amazing.

And then, they’re like, they spend millions and millions of dollars and then often, then, they can’t understand why they have to pay me two thousand dollars for something. I say, “Hey! I put the big sign on your building.” (chuckles) So, but, typically everyone's very considerate. I don’t want any problems. So I am really really happy with where I am and what I can do here, so… can’t complain.

MH: Have you ever, have you ever had an opportunity to work with any of the brownstone buildings right in Portland? Like the school or the church?

Um, I may have done some stones that were used… yes! I made some stones for the, is it Trinity Church? Yeah, I did some restoration down there. I cut some stones for them. And then, I think, in the high school they have some row of just rough blocks and I cut around doors a little bit. A few things, yeah, have opened to me. There’s, there’s a big need on this one building which used to be a local stone fabricator. They have like two lions in front, I understand that it’s some kind of building, it’s used by the health district or some kind of medical institution. It would be nice if they would have some money for restoration. They have a nice balustrade, everything else in perfect condition. Like those lions in front of it, just magnificent, beautiful lions, and they’re in perfect condition. Nothing has to be done to them, which is great.

Other day… a Civil War monument in Portland. Brownstone is often claimed to fall apart right away. No, it’s in perfect condition, I don’t see any deterioration and also, in my hometown now, East Berlin, I mean Berlin, but East Berlin belongs to it, they have sort of a monument which is in excellent condition out of brownstone. So there are lots of examples where you can see that brownstone can last a long, long time if it’s properly done. It doesn’t have to fall apart after fifty or a hundred years. It’s gonna last one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred years, easily. Why some less and some not, I am not hundred percent sure. But sometimes you can tell to pick out a block that might not last too long. And others, often it’s, I got the idea that the secondary material often lasts longer than the first-grade, fine-grained material. Maybe it has less clay in it. So.

LH: I guess one last question is um, one of the things that we have to do for our project is write a short biography of you and why we’re interviewing you. We know we have our reasons for wanting to interview you, but we were wondering if there’s anything that you think that we definitely shouldn’t put in there, or any ideas that you have about your relationship with the brownstone that should be part of that.

Mm. Well. I think I’ve told you everything about my relationship to the quarry. My upbringing and (chuckles) and education. I don’t know. I don’t think there’s anything that we didn’t talk about yet.

LH. Okay! Just wanted to make sure, since we’re… to make sure we don’t portray you in some, leave something out that you would want to say. Yeah.

Well, I have a brownstone foundation of my house. Don’t forget to mention it. (laughs)

LH: Well, thank you.

You’re welcome.
This letter was presented to Cristoph Henning during the first interview.

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Department of English
294 High Street
Middletown, Connecticut 06459
860 685 2360 Fax: 860 685 2361

In the Fall term of 2009, the English Department of Wesleyan University is offering a course titled “Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarry” (English 274). It is supported by the Service-Learning Initiative of the Wesleyan Service-Learning Center.

The course has a twofold objective: first, to educate enrolled students about a significant feature in local history —Portland’s brownstone quarries— that has played a large part in the development of this region, and even as far as New York, Boston, and San Francisco. This industry influenced urban planning and development, and had a great impact on architecture and aesthetics. Closer to home, the presence of the quarries shaped the development of our local towns and industries, including Middletown and Wesleyan University. The second objective grows out of the recognition that history is found, not only in textbooks, but in the memories and stories of the people. Consequently, students seek to interview selected people, Portland residents or those with some connection to the town and its quarries, in order to produce a history of the important relationship between the town and this great geological feature.

During this Fall term 2009, students will learn in the classroom and in practice about the quarries and about the methods and aims of oral histories. Interviews, consisting of usually no more than three separate meetings, will be conducted by two or three students, using either a tape recorder or a videocamera. Interviewees may, of course, choose not to be videotaped, if they desire. The interviews will be transcribed, discussed with the interviewee, and the students will then work to produce a final project. This will consist of a written document, accompanied by an audio- or videotape where applicable. The final projects, it is hoped, will contribute to the local history archives of Portland, Middletown, and Wesleyan University. To that end, copies will be presented to the Portland Historical Society, the Middlesex County Historical Society, and to Special Collections of Wesleyan University’s Olin Library. There will also be a public presentation of the final projects at the end of the course.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Indira Karamcheti
English Department
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06459
(860) 685-3625
I have tape/video recorded an interview for English 274, "Oral Histories and the Portland Brownstone Quarry," a course offered by Wesleyan University in the fall term of 2009. I have set forth my observations, memories, and experiences surrounding the Brownstone quarries of Portland, CT.

I hereby give and grant to Wesleyan University, or anyone authorized by them, the absolute and unqualified right to the use of this tape/video recorded interview for such scholarly and educational purposes as they shall determine.

It is expressly understood that the full literary rights of this interview pass to Wesleyan University, and that no rights whatsoever are to vest in my heirs now or at my death.

I hereby release and discharge Wesleyan University from any and all claims and demands arising out of, or in connection with, the use of such observations, memories and experiences concerning Portland and the Brownstone quarries, including, but not limited to, any and all claims of libel, slander, and invasion of privacy.

I understand this does not preclude any use I would want to make of the material therein.

Narrator name and address (please print) **Christopher Henning**

Signature **Christopher Henning** Date 10-23-2009

Interviewer name and address (please print) **CHRISTOPH HENNING**
850 Worthington Ridge, Berlin, CT 06037

Signature **Christopher Henning** (10/22/2009) Date

Interviewer name and address **C. Morgan Hamill** - 165 Woodlawn Ave, Watertown, CT 06795

**Laura & Fleece** 10/23/09

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF EDUCATION SINCE 1831