

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Kurt Steger by Cynthia Tobar on August 20, 2014 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Kurt Steger has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Kurt Steger

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Kurt: My name is Kurt Steger and I'm a sculptor.

Cynthia: Fantastic. How long have you been as sculptor for?

Kurt: Wow, It goes back. I think we're approaching 30 years now. I was a carpenter, furniture maker, and cabinet maker prior to this.

Cynthia: Where were you born?

Kurt: Oakland, California.

Cynthia: And how long have you lived in Bushwick?

Kurt: Two years this month.

Cynthia: As a relatively new Bushwick resident, would you share with me your thoughts of what it's been like for you as a sculptor and an artist to live in the neighborhood these past two years?

Kurt: Well, it started out as a big challenge. It was a challenge finding studio space here and affording it. As a sculptor I need space. I need large space. I need access to materials. So it took a while to develop that. Around the same time there was incredible support here and through other artists and like-minded people. I felt incredibly supported, both in finding space and finding my materials.

Cynthia: How long have you lived in New York City before you decided upon settling in Bushwick?

Kurt: Bushwick is where I first landed.

Cynthia: Bushwick is where you first landed. What attracted you to it?

Kurt: I was living deep in nature prior to this. I was in the southwestern corner of Virginia in the Blue Ridge Mountains for the past 4-1/2 years and living pretty much by myself in a small cabin in the wilderness preserve. And I really experienced the power, the healing capabilities of nature, and that's always

been an important aspect of my work and my care for the environment and nature. It really felt like my best work could be done in the city, bringing that element of nature and spirit into the place where most people on earth are living or are going to live in the urban environment.

Cynthia: Can you tell me a little bit about the piece that we're sitting in right now and the story behind its creation and its inspiration?

Kurt: Well, this piece came from well first, again, having access to space, getting out of the studio and having an outdoor space. It's really an extension of the studio work I was involved in which were shamanic objects. Actually I was calling them shamanic weapons, weapons to fight the ignorance that drives us to destroy our planet and go to war. So this piece became an extension of that. When I was invited into this space I wanted to create a sacred space around the idea of healing. So I wanted to clear away the gravel and what was covering the earth and have a bit of ground for people to be close to. The inspiration of this piece is built on the idea of a Inipi or Native American sweat lodge. So it's built in that style but more in that spirit. I created a space that I felt was sacred by smudging it with white sage and building the space in what I call a good way.

Cynthia: How did you hear about Appalach-Wick and why you felt this space would be suitable for this sweat lodge that you created?

Kurt: It kind of came to me. Peter Hopkins who runs ArtHelix, he came by and did a studio visit with me, saw the way I worked. He wanted to do a project that was really about building by hand and using craft in the creation of art and also to have community involvement with these. When I talked to Peter, it felt like a perfect fit. He invited me into this space and it all just developed out of that.

Cynthia: Beautiful. Going back to your brief time as a resident here in Bushwick, can you tell me about what your experience has been living here for those two years and where you currently live, your neighborhood, your neighbors, where you're working?

Kurt: I've got to say it's been a fantastic experience. The first year was challenging creatively to find my center again. There's so much distraction and so much artwork out there, it really made me question concepts of my work. So I had to solidify what the intention behind my work is. That was hard. That was a challenge. That was my only inner challenge. As far as the community itself, it felt incredibly supportive. When I opened up my studio for Bushwick Open Studios my neighbors came through the door. My particular neighborhood is primarily a Puerto Rican neighborhood and it was the first time in my life that I lived as a minority. It was really eye opening, that sense of separateness. But once I opened up the doors and invited my neighbors into my studio, into my

intimate space and showed them what I was doing, there was a deep connection that was made. It was beautiful. Through that I was invited into their homes and it felt like there was a bond made at that point. And that's probably deep into my whole art practice into that sense of the importance of community and opening up to each other, especially those that have come from different backgrounds.

Cynthia: Can you describe an example from that Bushwick Open Studios experience of like having people come from the street basically, neighbors and strangers alike coming in and what their reaction to your work was and to what you were doing?

Kurt: I think my strongest memory of that is the children that came in. They were the ones that brought their parents in. It was so heartwarming to see kids come in and really engage in the work and ask questions and then take those answers and tell their parents about the work and what it's about. At the same time, it's a kind of heartbreaking story. There was a little girl who came in and spent a good two hours in the space. I was asking her about making art herself and she said that she loves making art. It's her favorite thing in the world. I asked her if she gets to make art in school and she said not anymore because she's in fourth grade and art only goes through third grade. And that was such a heartbreaker to me. It brought out the activist in me and I've been talking to other artists that work with kids. I've been hearing about the difficulty, not of finding art teachers but of finding space for the arts. I know for myself as a young child art was so important to me and it was my form of expression. I truly believe that it's such an important aspect of growing up and somehow I would love to bring art to the younger people in my neighborhood. I think also it just speaks of the power working locally. There's so many problems in the world and one can feel overwhelmed by it but just touching our own neighborhoods it brings back that sense of power of realizing that you can make a difference in the world. It starts in our own homes.

Cynthia: Talking about your own home, do you feel a part of Bushwick? Do you feel that you were welcomed into the community in the brief time that you've been here? Do you feel that you have encountered any challenges or misconceptions either on the part of people who you've met who didn't know you very well or vice versa and any idea of what you thought you would be coming into before you became a resident here versus now having been a resident and seen for yourself first hand what it's like to live here?

Kurt: My perspective of this is somewhat unique. I see so many artists that are moving to Bushwick are younger artists coming out of art school and they have a built-in community already. Here, coming with my wife, and we're both in our 50s. We're older. We're developed as people and we're quite self-reliant in that sense. What I did notice, it wasn't so much of a cultural divide but I saw the age divide. It was very interesting that I would come

across an African-American man or a Hispanic man in my same age bracket and we would give that nod to each other on the streets. And then I would find that I wouldn't get that same nod from a Caucasian 24-year-old man on the street. But as far as building a community here I found that the art community is both open and closed. I find that there are the cliques in the community but I also find that end trust and trust of the people that I need to meet and who need to meet me, we do find each other.

My priority is my work and my studio practice, and I find by opening up both my studio and my work are really the doorway to who I am and that's where I built community.

Cynthia: And can you name examples of how you become involved locally within the Bushwick community as an artist and as a resident? State me some examples of that and describe them.

Kurt: First entrance is showing up for art openings and receptions which is not my favorite place to be but it is a place to meet other artists and make connections. But more so Bushwick Open Studios I found is a wonderful place to meet people because as an artist I think for most of us our artwork is the doorway into who we really are. So that was quite a significant way to meld into a community here. Basically through opportunities of showing my work in this particular venue of Appalack-Wick where I've had my work outdoors with a fence so people can see the work. I spend mornings and evenings here. If people stop and spend enough time looking through the gate I'll let them in and we'll have a conversation.

Cynthia: As a person coming in recently, what has your experience been with the current housing crisis, affordable housing crisis in New York City and how it pertains to people in Bushwick? What are your thoughts on that?

Kurt: It hasn't affected me directly. I've been very fortunate to have found right off the bat a good and fair studio space as well as rental space. Well, back up. I did go through four studios before I found my current one. So there was a lot of moving around and for a sculptor that's a challenge because we have a lot of machinery and materials to be moving. But I've seen it my local neighborhood, my street is just now changing. They sold the first building and it's quickly turning into a condo and already street parking is getting difficult and there's a lot of talk on the street with the locals that have been there for a couple generations now whether they are going to stay or sell. Right now we've got several families living on the block that want to stay but the developers are starting to up the price and it's becoming very tempting. We, unfortunately, as renters already are looking at our exit plan. What's it going to be and where are we going to go? Unless we get really lucky, we expect to be priced out. And it's difficult to know that you can't put down permanent

roots. It's a challenge on one level and it's also an opportunity to let go of permanence.

For myself it's been relatively nomadic in my life. It's not a hardship. I've chose to live this way but it's sad to see local families with the writing on the wall that they will be priced out of their own homes. I think we're in a big time change right now. Talking to the locals it's kind of a sweet spot right now. Bushwick has come a long ways and when I speak to the locals that have been here for generations they love the fact that it's safe now on their streets and they love the fact that their property values are worth so much. I think this is that sweet time and it's going to be two years out before there may be a lot more animosity of what has happened to their neighborhoods.

Cynthia: What do you, in your role as an artist and as a local resident, see could be a possible solution to this type of a dilemma so that we don't see what happened in Williamsburg happen to Bushwick? In regards to this idea of the only way we want to provide an alternative to displacement. What would be your suggestion?

Kurt: My personal idea around this is I would like to see a lot of dialogue with property owners who are at this stage where their properties are worth quite a bit. I'd like to see a really professional dialogue with them opening up the potential that instead of selling their properties off to developers that they can act as a bank and be selling these properties to groups of artists and as a legacy, as a chance to pass on the community spirit that they grew up with with the idea that artists have that community spirit as well and they're here. They want to stay here. And to educate property owners that they can do just as well financially as acting as their own bank without the risk and they'll take the mortgage and if there's a default they'll have the property back. I think there's a great opportunity to educate property owners. But I think the big piece would be for them to have a sense of ownership of passing on good will and leaving a legacy in their investment.

Cynthia: What would you like to accomplish during your time here at Appalach-Wick?

Kurt: What I hope for this space is to express the importance of having a space to come into and drop away from our busy lives for a few moments and talk and share our stories in this case close to the earth, close to the elements, and by sharing each other's stories to have a little bit more of an intimacy with each other, that we can get to know each other in this space, this lodge, and then when we see each other out in the world we already have another level of connection to each other then we can further have a discussion of our lives.

[End of recorded material at 00:19:53]