

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Homes

Treading on Medieval Ground

Rediscovering a Forgotten Château in France's Auvergne Region

**Restoration Architecture and Interior Design by Joseph Pell Lombardi
Text by Joseph Giovannini/Photography by Jaime Ardiles-Arce Published
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A rose may be a rose may be a rose, but there are castles and there are castles. New York preservation architect Joseph Pell Lombardi could tell at first glance that Château du Sailhant, the Auvergne castle he was restoring for a New York real estate developer, was ancient even by French standards. The long, thin slits in the stone walls overlooking the dry moat meant they were designed for the longbow. “When I arrived at the drawbridge and looked up, I knew in a split second that this tower predated the crossbow, which to me was very exciting,” says the architect. “It was therefore a very early structure—10th or 11th century.”

The virtue of restoring a building that hadn't been touched in 100 years was that the 19th-century historic fabric remained intact. Pointed turrets punctuate the forested hillscape, but the picturesque beauty belies the château's role as a fortress during the Hundred Years War.

Lombardi had always wanted to work on a medieval building, but medieval buildings are understandably scarce in the United States. In addition to converting industrial buildings in downtown New York into residential lofts, the preservationist has a passion for restoring grand historic houses, and few could be as intriguing and challenging as this château fort with the five Rapunzel towers.

Physically imposing, with basalt ramparts growing out of a volcanic promontory, the château reigns over a Romantic landscape, with a crater lake fed by a waterfall. The pointed turrets punctuate the forested hillscape, but the picturesque beauty belies the château's role as a fortress during the Hundred Years War.

A serious preservationist doesn't tear into a historic structure on a hunch, and Lombardi's diligent investigation of its history laid the groundwork for how he and his team, which included Vincent Trinh, Caroline Schweyer, Christian Corvisier and France Brunon, would proceed. Sometime in the 10th century defensive wood towers, called donjons, were rebuilt in stone; Sailhant's donjon still stands at the prow of the site. In the 13th century high perimeter walls were erected around the forecourt and a dwelling was built into the fortifications. During the Renaissance it was embellished with classical details. In the 17th century the château served as a farmhouse and, in the 18th century, when dormer windows were added at the attic level, as the residence of a bishop. The revolution saw it revert to a farmhouse.

With the rediscovery of the Middle Ages in the late 19th century, the owner medievalized the château with two additional towers and matching conical pepper-pot roofs, even as he modernized it with plumbing. "Many châteaux were Romanticized, especially under the influence of the architectural historian Viollet-le-Duc," notes Lombardi, who worked for 10 years to restore Sailhant.

For a century afterward the château remained untouched, but leaks had damaged its structure and three of the towers rested on risky masonry. The plumbing and early-20th-century electrical systems were antiquated. The ensuing conservation effort required stabilizing the turreted towers with steel.

The virtue of restoring a building that hadn't been touched in 100 years was that the 19th-century historic fabric remained intact. "In a conservation project of the complexity of Sailhant, I had to return again and again to the preservationist maxim that the facsimile is always worse than the ruin," says Lombardi. "The kitchen, informal dining room, library, main dining room, salon, chapel, bedrooms and bathrooms were all retained in their 19th-century locations. I didn't try to re-create a facsimile of rooms predating these."

He did, however, allow one change in the floor plan. In the 18th century, the great room on the second floor had been subdivided into three bedrooms, and Lombardi removed the bedrooms to return the grande salle to its original role as the state room, a Gothic hall centered on a Renaissance chimney, where the seigneur would hold audience.

The architect also acted as interior designer: "Keeping the 19th-century decoration was a choice but also a necessity, since most of the original plaster with any frescoes had been stripped," he explains. The decision was also very practicable, given the voracious spaces of a large building. Nineteenth-century furniture in France is not as highly valued as other historic periods, and Lombardi found affordable pieces and even suites in local brocantes and antiques stores, as well as on the Internet. He furnished the library with a complete suite of neo-Gothic-style pieces to match the existing bookcases.

A visitor to the site happened to bring a swatch of the original dining room wallpaper, which Lombardi duplicated. After chromatic analysis of the ceiling and the woodwork, he had all the pieces of the decorative puzzle. "That room has become one of the highlights of the house," he says. "It's green wallpaper, very château-esque. The room shimmers with the candlelight."

"If you're on a quest trying to go back in time, you're not always successful. It's essentially like time travel, and if you do find the answer to your quest, it is a little miraculous."

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In the volcanic Auvergne region of central France, Château du Sailhant looms over 100-foot perpendicular cliffs. Architect Joseph Pell Lombardi, a preservation specialist for the last 40 years, restored the 12,500-square-foot château fort, which had not been modified for 100 years and whose earliest construction dates to the 10th century.



“The objective was conservation of the structure and interior design that totally respected the building campaigns,” explains Lombardi, who outfitted 19th-century rooms, like the grand salon, with period furniture and art. The 16th-century mantel is original to Sailhant.



In a corner of the salon, Louis XIII chairs are grouped around a games table and 19th- and early-20th-century Auvergne School paintings hang on walls covered with a Zuber faux-stone paper.



“The library is furnished with a complete set of hand-carved furniture in the French neo-Gothic style,” says Lombardi, who researched every phase of the château’s history, inside and out. This suite was carved by a local craftsman from the oak beams of Reims cathedral after the church was bombed during World War I.



The 19th-century kitchen, with its period copper cookware and kerosene lamps, has been updated with a La Cornue range. The terra-cotta tiles were produced in Les Rairies in western France, and the floor is paved with six-inch-thick volcanic stone.



At the base of the château, a 60-foot-high waterfall cascades into a prehistoric lake formed by a volcanic crater. Lombardi notes that “the sound of falling water can be heard in many of the rooms, including the master bedroom.”