

RUBBLE WITH A CAUSE



**What looks like a
junk heap to
most developers
is priceless history
to architect
Joe Lombardi.**

BY JOANNA L. KROTZ

JOSEPH PELL Lombardi is 47 years old, and while the world isn't beating a path to his door — yet — city officials from Venice, Italy, did come knocking recently. They wanted the maverick architect to help restore a couple of 15th- and 16th-century palaces.

Times have changed for a man whose passion for restoration work once got him dismissed as a dreamer or, worse, an eccentric. These days, it no longer seems foolhardy for an architect to risk his career, talent and bank account on saving New York's historic buildings. Now such zeal is not just trendy but downright dollar-wise. "I expect to earn more than 100% profit," says Stephen Anfang, one of the real-estate investors who recently commissioned Joe Lombardi to rehabilitate three SoHo warehouses at Prince and Greene Streets.

The SoHo project led to an exciting discovery. Most people assume that the 1880s cast-iron buildings typical of SoHo, now protected by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, were always black. But in researching the history of these three buildings, Lombardi learned that they were originally industrial versions of Victorian Painted Ladies, those gingerbread houses with brightly painted facades. Needless to say, Lombardi is pleased as punch to be restoring the lively exterior colors — especially *continued on page 22*



since, this time, he didn't have to buy the buildings outright to perform his particular brand of magic.

In the mid-'60s, when Joe Lombardi went through his architectural apprenticeship, fashion dictated that buildings should be new, square-edged and clean. No client and certainly no architectural firm would invest hard cash in pure restoration projects. "I worked on retrofitting historic interiors, adapting new insides to old shells," recalls Lombardi, with a dismissive wave.

That was not at all the work Joe Lombardi had in mind: "I'm opposed to the notion of gutting interiors and then fixing them up." So Joe Lombardi became both architect and developer — a daring move for a novice with unconventional ideas and no track record.

He bought his first building with partners for \$2,500, then "leveraged up," making enough money on one building to invest in another project. "At first," he recalls, "it was very tight, very tough and very scary." But Lombardi saw no alternative. "Traditionally there's a stigma attached to restoration. Developers think it's 'arty' and too expensive. They don't want to hear about beautiful architecture. They want to hear about money. As a result, economics have played a big role in my career."

Lombardi has been responsible for hundreds of New York brownstone and loft conversions or restorations in Murray Hill, the East and West Sides, in NoHo and SoHo. He's also worked on Cartier's classically-styled mansion on Fifth Avenue and on several museum restorations, mostly upstate. Lombardi sums up the early years quite cheerfully. "I've had to prove myself," he grins, knowing that he has.

Lombardi's apartment, home to the architect, his artist wife Nan and, occasionally, their two grown sons, shows just how well the architect puts his money where his mouth is. He lives in the 33-story Liberty Building, built near Church Street as office space in 1909. The Gothic skyscraper narrowly missed the wrecking ball.

In 1978, Lombardi and two partners purchased the building. He meticulously restored its exterior, elevators and lobby, bringing everything back to glowing authenticity. Inside, Lombardi converted the offices into residential co-ops. He sold the units in 1981, just as the idea of living way downtown was catching on, keeping the 29th-floor co-op for his

own. The apartment — originally the boardrooms of Sinclair Oil — has marble floors, American-walnut wood paneling and huge, handsome rooms with sweeping views of the city. It's a majestic and calming space, filled with the craft of the past.

The Liberty Building sale turned a handy profit — "about 50%," says Lombardi. "Most developers think 20 to 30% is pretty good. I always argue that it's cheaper to do a restoration, but developers still think it's less expensive to tear out what's there and put in something new."

These days, Joe Lombardi is arguing less and less. The economics of building have clearly changed. Not only have new construction costs skyrocketed, but in 1986 the government began allowing significant tax credits for certified rehabs of old buildings. With the right paperwork and the right vintage architecture, it now pays for homeowners and landlords to rebuild history.

The buildings which architecture people seem to want most to restore are Victorian — made in a period that flourished in America from about 1850 to 1885 and a bit beyond. Ornamentation and, usually, exuberant color characterize Victoriana. "Anything worth doing," goes the Victorian dictum, "is worth doing to excess."

Lombardi himself is one of Victoriana's fans. In 1979, he paid \$75,000 for a dilapidated Victorian home owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Located in Irvington-on-Hudson and called the Octagon House, the home was built in the 1860s in what was then a popular two-story, eight-sided shape. Besides some massive structural support, Lombardi has faithfully resurrected the Painted Lady in all her glory — restoring every one of the 25 original shades of pink, red, salmon and gray colors on the exterior.

So when that group of SoHo investors appeared in 1985, Lombardi insisted on doing a microscopic analysis of a century of paint layers on the Prince and Greene Street buildings. "No one had ever done one," says Lombardi. The laboratory turned up the surprising news that the warehouses had originally sported colors. The window sashes were a maroon red (quite common for Victorian style), while the lintels, capitals and other decorative elements were taupe. The facade was painted a cream color. Those landmark SoHo buildings were 19th-



century Painted Ladies — rather conservative ones in comparison with the familiar wood-frame Queen Anne gingerbreads with their riot of color, but Painted Ladies nonetheless.

"We bought the building because we love it," says Giorgio DeLuca, an owner of 121 Greene St. and a partner in the Dean & DeLuca gourmet food shop around the corner. "It's the most thorough restoration of any building in the area. We bought it at about \$6 a square foot, spent about a million dollars on the restoration, and we'll sell the lofts for about \$170 a square foot next spring. But believe me, it was a three-year labor of love."

Although Joe Lombardi has already started commuting to Venice, he's still frequently on-site at Prince and Greene Streets these days, checking details. The new white-oak doors, built 15 feet high and 4 inches thick by an upstate specialist, are

installed. All the cast iron has been recast and restored. Maroon and taupe have been painted over the creamy facade, so the Victorian details stand out from a block away. What's left: The unique, round glass balls that will be inserted into an egg-crate cast-iron grid at street level and then back-lit — so the building will glow as people walk by. Plus, the interiors, which are done last.

Joe Lombardi has only one regret. "We couldn't restore the sidewalks," he says, "though we checked into it. There are just too many tons of concrete poured over the old cast iron. Can you imagine what that would have looked like: cast-iron sidewalks in front of the building?"

"It's a pity," says the restoration architect, shaking his head. ■

Joanna L. Krotz' book, "Metropolitan Home Renovation Style," is now available as a Villard paperback.



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