

LPC OK'S TRANSPARENT BUILDING FOR TRIBECA HISTORIC DISTRICT

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

When Joseph Pell Lombardi first went before the Landmarks Preservation Commission to present the Glass Atelier—a new, loft-style building in Tribeca with a facade built almost entirely of glass brick—many preservationists were shocked by the commission's admiring response.

Not Lombardi. After nearly 40 years of landmarks reviews, Lombardi said, he had every expectation that his six-story, see-through structure would get the official go-ahead. "I'm trained as a preservationist, not just an architect, and that's how I approach the process," he said. And sure enough, only two months later and with minimal changes, the architect returned on May 4 to win unanimous approval.

While many projects have made modern reinterpretations of traditional styles—think Aldo Rossi's Scholastic Building in Soho, or Herzog and de Meuron's 40 Bond Street—Lombardi has pioneered an intriguing alternative for designers facing New York's notoriously contentious landmarks-review process: Begin with the period style, and tweak it ever so knowingly. "It's taking traditional, vernacular buildings, but doing something different with them, so they read as 21<sup>st</sup>-century buildings," Lombardi said.

The architect had previously used this strategy in Soho, where he rehabilitated one loft building and reconstructed its neighbor with a facade of riveted steel—"the modern equivalent of cast iron," Lombardi explained—while another project differed from its period neighbors only through the use of oversized windows that, to the trained eye, are unmistakably modern.

For the Glass Atelier at 401–403 Greenwich Street in the Tribeca North Historic District, Lombardi designed a Romanesque-style loft building of unmistakably Tribeca stock:

arched windows, colonnaded mullions, and other period details. The only real difference from its 150-year-old predecessors is that instead of brick, Lombardi is using glass, along with a clear acrylic material for window frames and other hardware.

It's an approach the commission has embraced as it seeks out historically appropriate buildings that don't simply mimic the past. Fred Bland, a commission member and principal at Beyer Blinder Belle, called the design thrilling, and others praised it as an "exciting interpretation" of a historic style. Even preservation groups shared an appreciation. Nadezhda Williams, a preservation associate at the Historic Districts Council, said the group's chief complaint was that two existing buildings would be lost in the process.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the building is where Lombardi first got his inspiration: a magazine ad for Pittsburgh Corning's new glass brick. The easy part was figuring out whether it could be laid in a running bond instead of stacked, as glass brick is traditionally laid. (It could.) The more difficult part was finding a developer willing to put the bricks to the test. And the rest, as they say, is history. **MC**



Lombardi's Glass Atelier in Tribeca.

COURTESY JOSEPH PELL LOMBARDI

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