

He restores castles in Europe but he lives Downtown

By Josh Rogers

Joseph Pell Lombardi looks at an office building and he sees a residential building-to-be. It might happen in a few years if the office market in Lower Manhattan takes another downturn, or it could happen in the next millennium.

"In a thousand years, most all of the old buildings will still be here because they're so handsome," said Lombardi during a conversation in his apartment in a converted office building at 55 Liberty St. "And more importantly they're built to be bigger than they can be as far as the replacement," he noted, explaining that the costs make it unlikely the large Downtown buildings will ever be knocked down to build new structures.

"Someday this is going to be an ancient collection of skyscrapers, and this ancient collection of skyscrapers probably will be fully inhabited by residential people. It will be a great old historic village."

He says the notion of a central place where people go to work is "only a 100-year-old idea," and that technology might someday make offices obsolete.

Lombardi, an architect, preservationist and a developer, knows something about converting old buildings to apartments. Over 30 years, he has done it well over 100 times in Tribeca, the Financial District, Chelsea, and in castles in Hungary and France.

"A medieval castle is analogous in many respects to a 19th-Century warehouse in Tribeca," he said. "In terms of the way you approach it. In terms of how you want to save as much of the built environment as you can."

He said he first began noticing the beauty in architecture at age six and by the time he was ten, he thought the townhouses on the Upper West Side needed repair.

"As long as I can remember I wanted to be an architect involved in old buildings, which was kind of unusual," said Lombardi, whose father Joseph was an architect. "As a little kid I used to spend my time looking at old buildings and I wanted to be an architect and fix them up."

'A medieval' castle is analogous in many respects to a 19th-Century warehouse

Most architects he went to school with at Carnegie-Mellon as an undergraduate (he also has a masters from Columbia) dreamt of designing new buildings, but he said he always wanted to restore what had already been built.

His first residential conversion was in 1971 at 874 Broadway in the Flatiron District.

In 1980, using tax incentives under the J-51 program, Lombardi was a principal in the conversion of 55 Liberty St. to apartments. He ended up moving into one of the floors — the former executive office and dining room of Harry Sinclair, owner of Sinclair Oil. A handful of other buildings were converted in the Financial District under J-51, most notably 3 Hanover Sq.

Five years ago, a similar tax incentive plan to encourage residential conversions was passed and more buildings — about a dozen large ones — have been converted. Lombardi said more office buildings have been converted this time because there are established neighborhoods nearby in Battery Park City and Tribeca with amenities like supermarkets.



Downtown Express photo by Corly Lee

Joseph Pell Lombardi

"A lot of people thought it was a crazy idea," he said of converting 55 Liberty 20 years ago. "It was prior to Battery Park City, prior to the revitalization of the Seaport. While there had been conversions in Tribeca, Tribeca was still very much an empty section of the city."

And now there is the Amish food market on Washington St., and a larger food store is due to open on John St. later this year.

There are thousands of people living in the Financial District, although it still has a commercial feel to it.

"The tricky thing about the Wall St. area is that there is so much square footage, so the residential character doesn't display itself as strongly," he said.

Now that the office real estate market has strengthened in the last two years, the rate of conversions has declined, but Lombardi sees buildings which would be ideal to convert whenever the market takes a downturn.

Twice, he designed conversions for 20 Exchange Place only to have deals fall through. He said Tribeca's A T & T Building will someday make great apartments. A T & T sold the landmark building this year to Rudin Management, which plans to rewire the building to accommodate web-hosting firms. Lombardi said he was part of a group that made a competing offer to A T & T.

"I think someday — it could be 20, 30 40 years from now, it'll get converted," he said.

In addition to the architecture, he likes living Downtown because of the continual change.

"There's a sense of energy that has stayed for 20 years," he said. "It hasn't become old hat yet. It hasn't stabilized because there's constantly new and exciting projects."

Lombardi, 59, is now divorced. He and his ex-wife raised two sons in Kip's Bay before moving to Liberty Tower.

He currently is working on conversions at 79 Lighthouse St., 145 Hudson St., 146 Duane St., 17 Park Pl., and 14-22 Leonard St. — a project in which he is also the developer.

He calls himself "a Downtown guy," but he also has interests in Europe. Through his involvement in the World Monuments Fund,

he visited Hungary soon after the fall of communism, and offered to restore some of the country's historic castles for what he thought would be pro bono work.

When he was finished, the government gave him a castle on the condition he restore it.

"I never expected their generosity," he said. "I wanted to help. It was the kind of country — if you went there you wanted to help and the best way I could help was with the architecture."

He said Europe provides him with the chance to work on buildings that just don't exist in America. He has restored the 12th-Century Chateau in Andelat, France and the Erdody-Choron Castle in Hungary.

"I don't have much opportunity to get much earlier than the 18th Century [in the U.S.]. It's very exciting to me to work in France on a house that dates back to the Tenth Century."

He maintains an office in Budapest with five employees in addition to the main office of Joseph Pell Lombardi and Associates in the landmark — of course — Temple Court building on Beekman St.

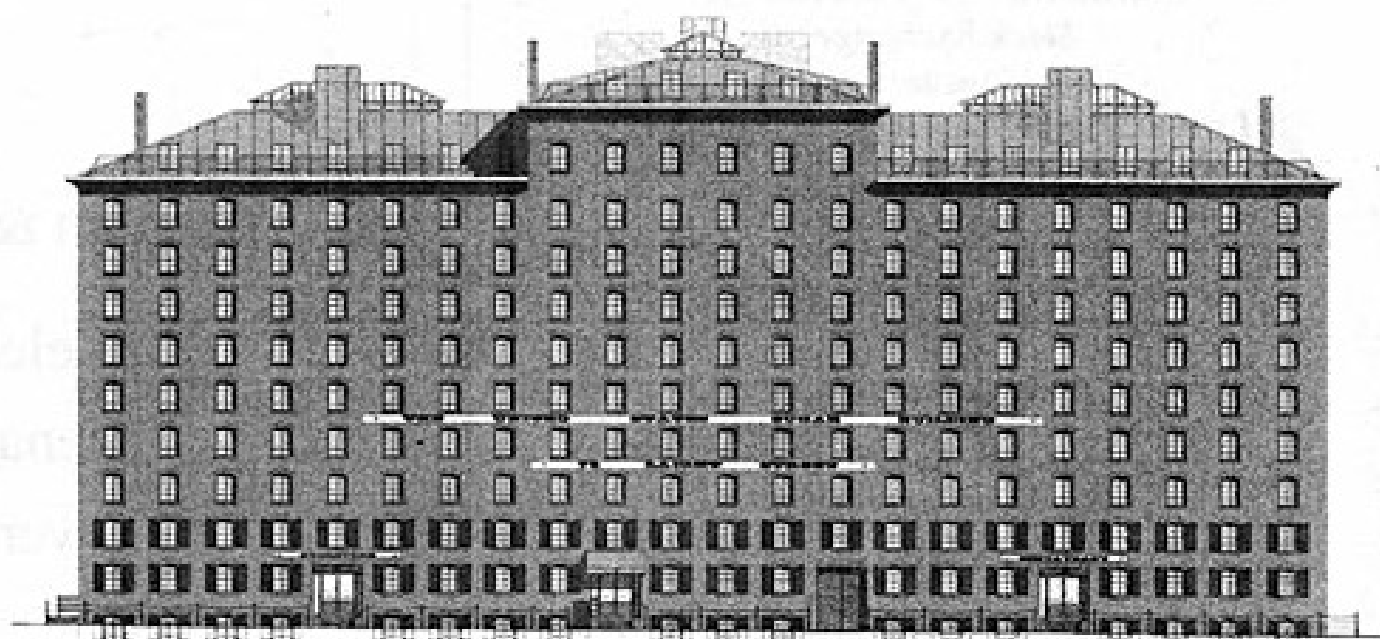
Over the last few years, about two dozen Lower Manhattan buildings have been individually landmarked, a development Lombardi couldn't be happier about.

Landmark designation is "the best thing that can happen to a building, to a district, to an owner and to a developer," he said. "That was such an alien idea, five, ten, 15 years ago, but the developers have really advanced themselves into accepting that. The more we landmark, the better."

As might be expected, his 2,500-square-foot living space is full of antiques, such as an old-fashioned phonograph. When he moved to Liberty Tower, Lombardi became a collector of Statue of Liberty models. Some were souvenirs sold to pay for the original statue. He has put one model on every window sill since nearby buildings block his view of the real statue.

As the grandson of immigrants from Naples, Italy, the statue has another meaning for him:

"I have this vision that my grandparents, all four of them, saw that Statue of Liberty and it meant something special to them at that moment."



Joseph Lombardi's design to restore and add to the old United States Sugar Building at 79 Lighthouse St.