

## A peek inside Irvington's historic gem

by Jennifer Stern

Of all the historic sights in the quad-villages, none is as striking as Irvington's Armour-Stiner Octagon House, the four-story pink, gray and red confection that graces four acres just west of the Old Croton Aqueduct on West Clinton Avenue.

Many have driven or walked by the property hoping to glimpse the interior. Fortune (and a beautiful fall day) smiled on some 200 lucky Irvington Historical Society members, who last Sunday toured much of the first floor and the grounds and saw and heard a slide show and lecture from the building's owner, architect Joseph Pell Lombardi, a 1958 Irvington High School graduate.

In the 18 years since he acquired the National Historic Landmark from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Lombardi, whose eponymous New York City firm specializes in restoring historic buildings throughout the world, has dedicated himself to restoring the building to the domed form created by its second owner, tea merchant Joseph Stiner, who in 1871 acquired the original smaller and plainer octagon-shaped house built by banker Paul J. Armour in the early 1860s.

Lombardi's talk was sponsored by the Irvington Historical Society, which has grown to more than 400 members since it was resurrected by President Peter Oley and others about two years ago. For each of two sittings, about 100 people crowded into the house's first-floor salon, beneath a high ceiling and colorful crown mouldings, to learn about the house and its restoration, and a little bit about its resident ghost.

The owner said that among his many years in historical preservation, he has done no work that has been "a greater love or a greater interest than this house." And indeed, restoring the 7,500-square-foot structure has been a labor of love, from the 120-page analysis of the exterior and interior paint layers to the serendipitous discovery of photos that helped him recreate missing decorative elements to the near-heroic attempt to save the building's two-story dome.

Lombardi began his talk by explaining that when Armour



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The Octagon House in Irvington is a National Historic Landmark. At right, one of its parlors.



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acquired the property in the 1860s, land speculators were planning to turn the area around West Clinton Avenue into a separate village, Abbotsford, and had mapped out lots and side streets along the avenue that was to be its main drag. But the mood of the times did not suit the plans, and Abbotsford failed. Only Armour's house and one almost directly across the street from it were built as village-oriented houses. Instead, wealthy city dwellers began buying up large pieces of the area's property for their country seats.

Eight-sided houses were somewhat of a fad at the time Armour built his house, Lombardi explained, thanks to the ideas of phrenologist, sexologist and amateur architect Orson Squire Fowles. Lombardi said Fowles was both right and wrong about the advantages of an octagonal house.

Fowles said an octagonal house would be more spacious than a four-sided one, but Lombardi said this was clearly wrong as the first-floor layout attests. The floor has four rectangular rooms — the salon, kitchen, dining room and entrance hall — and four tiny tri-

angular ones — the tea room, library, solarium and pantry. "The triangular rooms," Lombardi said, "do not work."

But Fowles was right, he said, about the panoramic views an octagon shape affords as well as its advantages for ventilation.

However, it was Stiner who made the house what it is today: the only domed octagon house in the world. A flamboyant figure who owned the 19th-century equivalent of Starbucks with his string of 70 tea houses, he added the dome and the decorative elements that Lombardi has worked so hard to restore. Lombardi said his house is one of the few known examples of Pavilion Architecture in the U.S. "The notion of a house built to amuse" — the characteristic of pavilion buildings — "is rare in our history," he said.

Showing a 1978 photo of the house, he said the building was clearly deteriorating when he acquired it. The previous owner, Carl Carmer, an author, poet and historian who lived there for 30 years, either did not have or did not spend the money to keep it up.

However, Lombardi said, Carmer did much better by the building than another owner might



TOM RIVIERA/Enterprise

Detail from the Octagon House porch.

have. He said the most dangerous thing for a historic house is an owner with a lot of money who will renovate and change it at will. "The Carmers kept the house intact and did not compromise it," he said.

The biggest problem with the building in the late 1970s — and the one that needed to be corrected before all other restorations could go forward — was the condition of the dome. He said the original builder had neglected to put a tension ring around the base of the dome to keep it from spreading. As a consequence, the dome had settled 18 inches; had split in some places, letting water in, and had twisted some in its settling.

Some consultants said the dome

was beyond repair, but Lombardi made a last-ditch effort to shore it up that not only raised it but twisted it back into place. He used a series of cables around the outside and inside of the dome that, reminiscent of orthodontia, were tightened once a week over two years.

Once the dome was back in place, other repairs could begin. Lombardi likened the job to putting together a half-million-piece jigsaw puzzle of which 40 percent of the pieces were missing. He said his bible for the restoration was an 1885 photo of the house, but it could not reveal all the elements. Pieces of the house were restored sometimes by sheer luck. The design for some missing pieces of the roof cresting,

of which there was no good photo, was discovered when a woman sent in a photo of the grounds that showed a piece of that cresting stuck on top of the well house.

One element Lombardi did not have to restore was the resident ghost, which, with the audience's urging, he explained was a very nice female ghost whose presence could be detected in a scent of lilacs, and in the opening and closing of doors and windows and occasional moving of other objects.

(Speaking of spooks, the house is also the star of a 1981 horror film called "The Nesting," about a Gothic novelist obsessed with an eerie Victorian mansion. Movie critic Leonard Maltin gives it two stars.)

The restoration job continues, Lombardi said. He is recreating as much as possible the interior and its furnishings — including some old wallpaper being recreated by a British firm — as well as the out-buildings, including the carriage house currently under construction. He said that although at one point recently he had put the house up for sale, it is off the market and he is planning to keep it in the family.