

HOMEFRONT



A view of the Armour-Stiner House not long before Joseph Lombardi bought it.

## Owner finds many sides to restoring Victorian jewel

By Allen Freeman

When in 1977 the National Trust purchased a 19th-century octagon house in Irvington-On-Hudson, N.Y., the building's most distinguishing architectural feature, its wood-framed, slate-covered dome, had literally come apart at the seams. Because during construction in 1872 no tension ring had been installed around the base of the dome, the roof structure over the years had settled and spread open, leaving gaps large enough for raccoons to get through. Another result of that structural deficiency: The cupola had sunk two feet.

"It is curious that there was never a tension ring," says the current owner, architect Joseph Pell Lombardi. "All domes require some kind of continuous band around the base. St. Peter's and [Christopher] Wren's churches have chains." Moreover, says Lombardi, wooden dome construction was not unfamiliar to builders in the late 19th century.

In 1978 the Trust sold the house to Lombardi for \$75,000, the first instance of an individual purchasing a building from the Trust through its Endangered Properties Fund. Written into the purchase agreement was an easement that protects the exterior and the grounds from significant changes. Lombardi, a council member for Lyndhurst, the Trust's historic house museum in nearby Tarrytown, lives in Manhattan where he also heads an international preservation-oriented architectural firm. He has invested countless hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars restoring the house

(see *Historic Preservation*, January/February 1988).

Lombardi will host a tour of the house June 10 for participants in the Trust's "Homes Along the Hudson" conference during which he will explain the restoration process. His experience is a model of arduous and authentic restoration.

To correct the dome's structural failure, Lombardi jacked up the roof while cinching the structure tight. He positioned jacks within a system of vertical shoring inside the house that extended from floor to ceiling through successive stories—from the foundation to the observatory. At the same time he stretched airplane cable from opposing corners within the dome and around its base. Over a period of two years, he slowly raised the jacks while tightening turnbuckles on the cables.

Lombardi had predicted that the structure might never return to its exact original configuration, because debris would have accumulated in the joints and some of the members would be permanently warped. But he was pleasantly surprised. "A day came when everything fell into position," he says. "The beveled baseboard and wainscotting [on the third floor] came tight butting against each other." Then Lombardi installed a steel tension ring within the sheathing at the base of the dome and removed the cables, jacks, and shoring.

Such structural rudiments as the absence of a tension ring and nonalignment of interior partitions on successive floors without beams to compensate for additional loads suggest to Lombardi that the house was built by someone without ex-

tensive building experience. Lombardi has uncovered no record of an architect being involved when the house was constructed.

At the same time, he finds numerous indications of the hand of an artist or someone with "a great eye toward color and the use of carved details." For example, exterior colors juxtapose rose, light blue, light gray, cocoa brown, and touches of purple and bright red. The polychromed roof combines black, red, and light green slates in a jewel pattern. The verandah's would-be Corinthian column capitals depict in wood some of the flowers planted on the grounds. The capitals and the cast-iron verandah railings and cresting are painted in shades of pink, gray, and red.

The interior is similarly exuberant. Ceilings are stenciled, ornamental plaster is embellished with gold, silver, and bronze leaf, glass is etched, woodwork is made of longleaf yellow pine, floors are inset with walnut, and extravagant brass hardware distinguishes the doors.

Restoration, begun 11 years ago and extended to the landscape, continues. The five-story house commands a hill overlooking the Hudson, and the four-acre grounds include an eight-sided Victorian garden. Lombardi has furnished the interior with authentic period pieces in the spirit of some of the original furnishings—a bedroom suite, a desk, several chairs, and part of the dining room suite—that have stayed with the house.

The social history of the house is better known than are its architectural origins. Paul J. Armour, a New York City banker and broker, built an octagonal house on the Westchester County site in the early 1860s. Joseph Stiner, a New York City tea merchant, greatly enlarged and altered the house in 1872, adding the dome and verandah and repartitioning the lower floors. Modifications were so extensive that the Armour-Stiner House, as it is now called, is considered an 1872 construction.

The house has no recorded connection to Orson Squire Fowler, although the famous 19th-century proponent of octagonal architecture built his own octagon house just 40 miles up the Hudson in Fishkill, N.Y. "Since this is on the way to Fishkill [from New York City, where Fowler practiced phrenology and published books], and this is surely the most extravagant octagon house that was built, one can't help but think that Fowler had some contact with the house," says Lombardi.

Although Stiner had six children, his lineage has not continued, and firsthand accounts of him and the construction of the house have eluded Lombardi. The

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Joseph P. Lombardi, owner of the Armour-Stiner House.