

By Colleen Michele Jones

IRVINGTON — People love the chance to peek into their neighbors' homes.

That's why the Rivertowns Art Council (RAC) has always picked a unique house in the region, often one with beautifully manicured grounds, as the venue for its annual membership party.

But tomorrow (Sept. 16), RAC members new and old will get to gawk at one of the area's most iconoclastic architectural structures: the Octagon House in Irvington.

Built in the early 1860s by Wall Street banker Paul Armour, altered significantly by Manhattan tea merchant Joseph Stiner a decade later, and, since 1978, restored lovingly by Joseph Pell Lombardi, a renowned preservationist architect, the eight-sided historic home is one of only 280 others in the world, none "as grand as this one," according to Lombardi.

So it seems quite fitting that the Octagon House will be the site of this year's RAC membership party as the home is such a masterpiece in itself, according to Maxine Sherman, RAC co-president.

When the RAC approached Lombardi about the possibility of using the Octagon House, his weekend home, for this purpose, he graciously agreed, Sherman said, adding, "We asked if we could get up-close and personal with a house that almost no one gets to see."

The annual cocktail party, traditionally held in September, usually draws between 200 and 250 people. Founded more than 40 years ago, the volunteer organization begun in Hastings promotes arts events, classes, and organizations in Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings, and Irvington.

An at-the-door sign-up for a new RAC membership or a renewal serves as admission to the party, which includes appetizers, a cash bar, and live entertainment by a local jazz quartet that includes Suzanne Pittson (Dobbs Ferry) on vocals; her husband Jeff on piano; Harvey S (Hastings) on bass; and Ron Vincent (Dobbs Ferry) on drums.

Attendees of tomorrow's RAC party will get to look at only a couple of the 20 rooms in the Romanesque mansion. RAC festivities will be contained to the home's porch, lawn, and gardens.



A photo of the Octagon House from 1885.

Inside the Octagon

On eve of party, owner allows peek at architectural landmark

But the grounds don't disappoint. The tree-shrouded driveway off West Clinton Avenue opens to a landscaped wonderland with a formal bedded garden; rolling lawns dotted with Chinese cherry trees, magnolias, and other original plantings; as well as a carriage house/barn added to the property in 1945.

Lombardi allowed the Enterprise a look inside the house, which has consumed much of his time and effort over the last few decades.

It is a home Lombardi, who spent his teens in the village [Irvington High School Class of 1958] fell in love with years ago.

Even the approach to the Octagon House is one of fanciful excess, with Gothic gargoyles on the pedestals of two curved staircases that gracefully ascend to the veranda, from which a white lace hammock and sitting swing hang. Looking closely, a visitor will notice the bust of a dog's head within the swirling patterns of the porch railing, a tribute to Stiner's dog, named Prince. It is these kinds of whimsical details that first attracted Lombardi to the unusual home.

"It is a house of curiosity," he says, "a house built for amusement and folly."

Lombardi, who heads up a large architectural firm in New York City, has built a career out of renovating old properties, and in many cases, finding new uses for them, including the Lower Manhattan building in which he lives, which former office building occupied by Standard Oil Company. Lombardi has been written up in *The New York Times*, *Hudson Valley* magazine, and *Country Life* magazine, and his work has won numerous preservation awards.

According to Lombardi, the Octagon House is the only known residence built in the Roman temple dome form. This Roman theme is continued in the ornate wood carvings and etched glass featuring images of soldiers and charioteers.

The dining room features floor-to-ceiling windows which, at the time, would have gazed out onto the Hudson River with no obstructed view.

The original Octagon House, though eight-sided, was two stories high and had a flat roof. The reasoning behind a home that spirals out from the center in eight directions is simple, Lombardi says.

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Octagon

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“You get a better view, the rooms better connect with each other, and you get better circulation in them,” he explains.

In 1872, the home was purchased by Stiner, whose influence is seen in the inclusion of triangular tea room, so shaped because it is couched inside one of the areas in which the sharp angles of the house’s eight sides come to a sharp peak.

His additions to the structure made it even more visually striking — for example, the wraparound porch and cast-iron cresting and railing. Stiner’s choice of colors for the exterior — shades of pink, gray, and red — has been faithfully continued by Lombardi.

After successive owners, Lombardi acquired the Octagon House in 1978 for a mere \$75,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation with the promise that he would restore the Victorian jewel to its original grandeur.

He also had to compete against other would-be buyers for the house by demonstrating how he would repair and stabilize the top dome, which was by then caving in.

Restoration of the deteriorating structure has been an extensive project, to say the least, involving detailed historic research and specialized painters, carpenters, and other tradesmen. The entry hall and salon were most recently restored.

But the most painstaking process was to replicate and match to scale whole pieces of the house’s exterior that were missing. A photo retrieved from the files of the New-York Historical Society, which dates to about 1885, helped guide the project and achieve authenticity.

But it is ongoing, it seems, with workmen in and out of the home nearly all the time that Lombardi is in Irvington.

When Lombardi bought the home, just a few pieces of original furniture remained; the rest of the 1872-period furnishings he has collected during years of travel. The Octagon House, by the way, is one of five homes that Lombardi has restored and owns across the globe. Others include a French chateau and a Hungarian castle.

Among the stories the Octagon House can no doubt tell about its many occupants through the years is a ghost tale that Lombardi admits he thinks is true. According to the legend, a young girl who lived in the home fell in love with a gentleman who was then her next-door neighbor. The relationship was discouraged by at least one of the couple’s families, so they eloped by steamship from Tarrytown, only to die in a disaster at sea.

“It is said the daughter comes back to the house and West Clinton and there is the smell of lilacs,” Lombardi explains, adding that he has detected the floral scent, even out of season.

Lombardi is passionate about the home’s rich history and the need for it to be preserved.

“I think of myself really as a steward, passing it on to future generations,” he says.

RAC organizers hope the unique Octagon House will lure those who are also interested in supporting local arts.

“We’re trying to bring out a lot of new members, especially those from some of the other Rivertowns,” said Sandra de Novellis, RAC co-president. “Perhaps this Irvington historic location and its architecture will be a draw.”

The RAC membership party will be held Saturday from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Octagon House, 45 W. Clinton Avenue, Irvington. For more information, including membership pricing, call 476-2321 or go to: www.riverarts.org.

