

The 84-Year-Old Visionary With One Answer for Two Real Estate Crises

While his peers were building Modernist towers, the architect Joseph Pell Lombardi devoted his life to restoring beautiful old buildings.

By William Falk

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When Liberty Tower went up for sale in Manhattan’s financial district in 1978, there was only one bidder for the 33-story skyscraper. The building was dated and dilapidated, and even though rent had plunged to \$5 a square foot, it was two-thirds vacant. New York City itself had tumbled into a downward spiral after a severe fiscal crisis and a deep recession.

But Joseph Pell Lombardi, a 38-year-old preservation architect, envisioned a future for the tower, the former headquarters of Sinclair Oil, that others could not. “The city was failing,” Mr. Lombardi recalled recently. “The financial district was failing. Nobody wanted to be here.”

He was entranced by the neo-Gothic elegance of its terra-cotta exterior, adorned with gargoyles, alligators and birds; its huge windows had an unobstructed view of New York Harbor. With just \$25,000 down, he bought the 1909 building at a bargain-basement price of \$922,000, and then — to the bafflement of the real estate industry — he converted it into 89 co-op apartments. Liberty Tower was the first major residential conversion of an office building in New York’s financial district.

It was not an obvious solution to empty office space. At the time, the area around the New York Stock Exchange and World Trade Center was largely deserted in the evening; supermarkets, restaurants, retail stores all closed by 5 p.m.

“It was an outpost,” said Mr. Lombardi, who moved his own family into the former executive suite of Harry Sinclair, the founder of the company. “We were pioneers in the urban wilderness.”

The building soon filled, and its surprising resurrection opened eyes. “Joe was way ahead of the curve on that Liberty conversion,” said Richard Gluckman, a partner at Gluckman Tang Architects who specializes in restorations. “His foresight inspired a lot of architects. He showed what was possible.”



Liberty Tower, in 1978, was dilapidated and dated, and the neighborhood was horribly neglected. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

Today, the ideas Mr. Lombardi pioneered nearly 50 years ago are serving as a template for addressing twin problems: the city's enormous office glut and its growing housing crisis. Mr. Lombardi, now 84 and still running a 16-person firm, is part of a wave of architects and developers now undertaking the mammoth work of converting financially distressed office buildings into multifamily housing.

Mayor Eric Adams's newly established Office Conversion Accelerator seeks to expedite the transformation of some of New York City's 100 million square feet of vacant office space into housing. The city has also proposed zoning changes that will make virtually all office buildings in the five boroughs eligible for conversion, with the hope of spurring the creation of 20,000 new housing units.

A preservationist at heart, Mr. Lombardi won the respect of other architects with his restorations of historic buildings. Kent Barwick, a former chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, credits Mr. Lombardi with proving to planners and architects that restoring "the built environment" can work both aesthetically and financially. "Joe's work has been groundbreaking," Mr. Barwick said. "He changed the way we see cities, the way we see the utility of old buildings. He's been widely imitated."

But when he began, Mr. Lombardi was an outlier. Modernism dominated architecture in the 1960s and '70s, and his focus on preservation and restoration put him at odds with the industry. His work has spanned an astonishing range of styles and periods, from European castles to log cabins to loft conversions: more than 650 properties in New York City and beyond, driven by what he calls "the magic of the past."

Perhaps Mr. Lombardi's most poetic work can be found in his restorations of two highly idiosyncratic properties: Château du Sailhant, a 12th-century castle in the Auvergne region in France, and the Armour-Stiner Octagon House in Irvington, N.Y. He spent decades researching these landmarks' histories and meticulously recreating every possible detail, right down to the doorknobs, paint colors and period silverware on the tables. Both properties now serve as museums.



The Armour-Stiner Octagon House, a fanciful Victorian property in Irvington, N.Y., would inspire decades of obsessive restoration from Mr. Lombardi, seen on the scaffolding with his wife, Nan, in 1987.

Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

Mr. Lombardi, a genteel man who always wears a suit and tie to business meetings, hasn't been as celebrated as some of his peers. He attributes that to his introversion and his all-consuming focus on his work: He avoids social events and civic projects where admired architects rub shoulders with wealthy power players.

"Some architects are social animals," Mr. Lombardi said. "I'm not." He also has declined to put his name on buildings he's restored, insisting instead on crediting their original owners and architects.

He says he knew he wanted to be a preservation architect since childhood, when his father, an architect who was the facility manager at the City College of New York, had given him a book, "A History of Architecture," by Sir Banister Fletcher. He was 6 years old. It became, Mr. Lombardi says now, "my Bible."

Growing up in the apartment his family owned in Harlem, Joe was a quiet boy who sought to escape the after-school fights and bullying by exploring the neighborhood's side streets with Fletcher's book in hand, comparing the details of the Italianate, Moorish and Renaissance Revival townhouses. His interest in romantic architecture was also kindled by the community of "rustic storybook" stone-and-log lodges at Lake Valhalla, a kind of fantasyland upstate in Putnam County where his family spent the summers.

But by the time Mr. Lombardi enrolled in the architecture program at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh in the 1960s, modernism dominated the field. Mr. Lombardi's interest in preserving century-old buildings was "heresy," he recalled.

"The other students made fun of me," he said. "We'd be sitting around the drafting room, and they were dreaming up glass skyscrapers and planning on working for big, established architecture firms. I told them I was going to open my own firm and do preservation and restoration, and they said, 'Joe, you're nuts.' Restoration was not architecture to them."

Mr. Lombardi's Italian American roots also set him apart. "Architecture was a blue-blood profession at that time," he said. "There was some subtle discrimination — a sense that I didn't belong."

The disdain helped fuel his ambition and his drive. "I felt I had to work harder than everybody else."

Rather than work for conventional architects, he launched his own small firm after graduating. He struggled to find clients interested in restoration, so he scraped together \$5,000 to buy a brownstone rooming house in Kips Bay, a struggling neighborhood on the east side of Manhattan, and then he bought several more. What had once been elegant single-family townhouses built in the 19th century had sunk into squalor. He and a business partner did much of the demolition and restoration themselves on nights and weekends.

Under the grime and neglect were original crown moldings, rich wooden doors and floors, and marble fireplaces that just needed to be revealed.

At the time, most architects would have gutted and completely rebuilt the interiors. “Why do that?” Mr. Lombardi asked with evident indignation. “To rip out the beautiful original work so you can put your own fingerprint on it. ... It’s like a painter touching up the Mona Lisa. It’s a desecration.”



Built in 1909 as the headquarters of Sinclair Oil, Liberty Tower had details — like gargoyles and stonework alligators — that Mr. Lombardi could not resist. *Graham Dickie/The New York Times*

He acquired townhouses in other down-at-the-heels neighborhoods such as the Upper West Side and Park Slope, restoring them and selling them at considerable profit. At the time, most architects considered it gauche to invest in the properties

they worked on. But Mr. Lombardi, already an outsider, was unconcerned with such rules of decorum. “I was very interested in acquiring money,” he said. “I was a good capitalist.”

His profitable restoration of about 150 brownstones was a turning point in the profession, said John Stubbs, a longtime professor of architecture who came to know Mr. Lombardi after both obtained master’s degrees at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture.

“Joe largely invented the specialty of converting commercial into residential,” said Mr. Stubbs, who spent a decade working as assistant director of historic preservation projects at Beyer Blinder Belle, one of the city’s largest architectural firms. “He demonstrated that it’s good business to invest in existing buildings.”

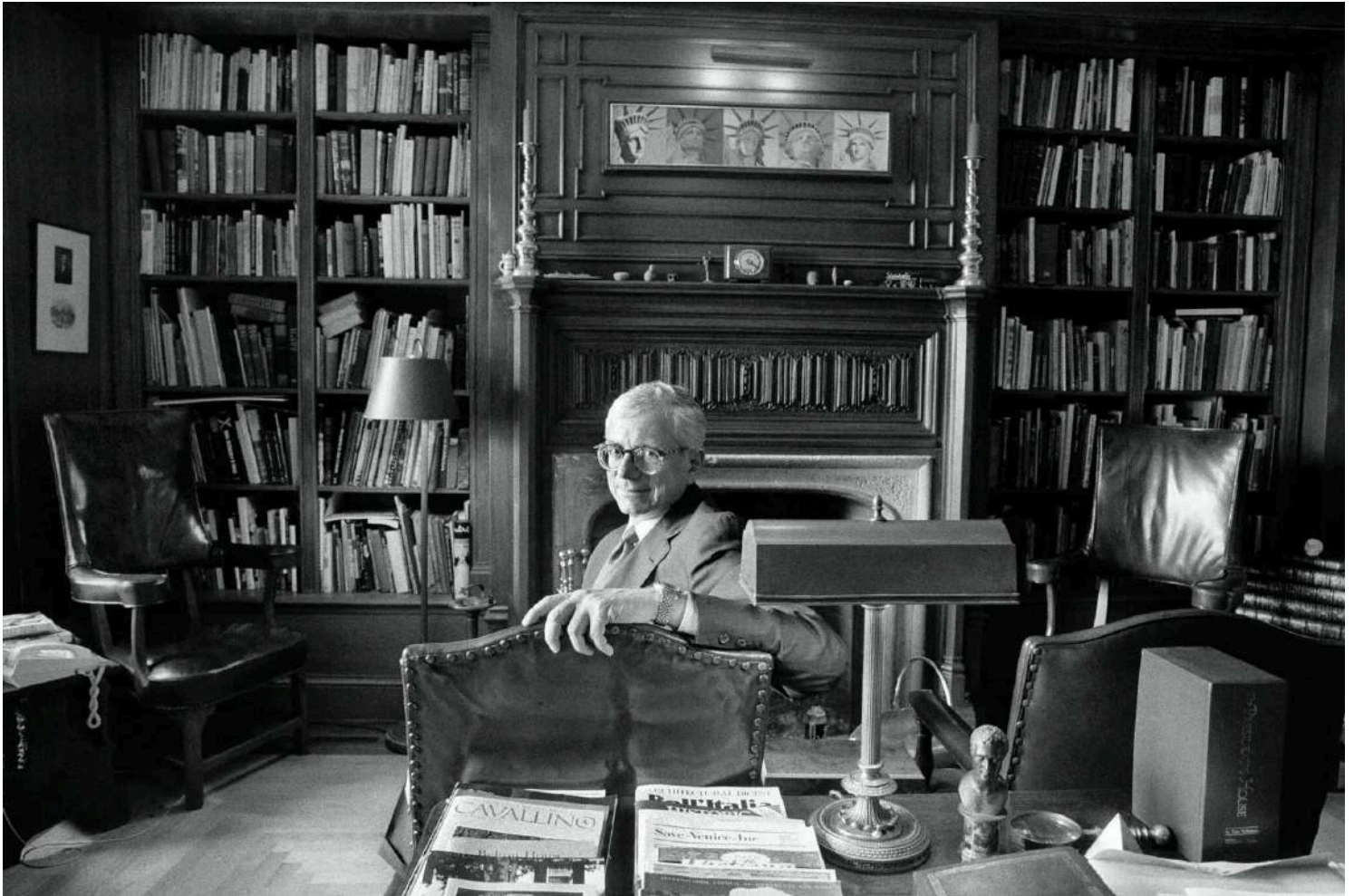
Sensing an opportunity, Mr. Lombardi soon focused on the empty commercial buildings in SoHo and TriBeCa. In the early 1970s, these former manufacturing spaces were largely vacant; a small number of artists had become illegal homesteaders, moving in with a hot plate, a refrigerator and a bed. Mr. Lombardi saw the tarnished beauty in these derelict buildings, which had elegant lobbies, high-ceilinged open spaces and giant windows and skylights. “It was a preservation architect’s dream,” he said.

He bought several empty commercial buildings and developed a lawyer’s level of expertise in zoning and building code approval to make them legal. His successful conversions helped spark the loft movement, with dozens of old downtown warehouses, factories and stores converting to residences.

He remembers attending gallery openings and loft parties in spaces he had restored, where he found himself mingling uncomfortably with the likes of Mick Jagger, Andy Warhol, Lauren Hutton and members of the bands Blondie and the Ramones.

“You’d have this string of limos on these dark side streets in SoHo,” Mr. Lombardi recalled, “with light coming from one loft and music blasting out. You’d go upstairs, and everyone was wearing black clothes, and there were all these celebrities

wandering around.” He says he stayed an hour to be polite, and then went home to bed, so he could get back to work at 4 a.m.



Though he has lived in many properties over the years, Mr. Lombardi has always maintained an apartment that occupies a floor in Liberty Towers. William E. Sauro/The New York Times

After SoHo, his next big project was the conversion of Liberty Tower, which paved the way for the residential development of the financial district. “Joe had a real tenderness for the building,” said Kenneth Miller, a screenwriter and publisher who bought one of the first apartments in Liberty Tower in 1980 — an 1,850-square-foot, four-bedroom unit with 17 huge windows. “He painted a picture of the neighborhood as a residential mecca, which no one else could see at the time.”

Liberty Tower has also remained Mr. Lombardi’s principal residence, although he owns four other restored homes in New York State, Vermont and France. His attachment to his converted skyscraper is so great that he refused to leave it on

Sept. 11, 2001, though he was just two blocks from ground zero.

He was in a business meeting that morning on a roof in TriBeCa when he saw the first plane hit the North Tower. He raced downtown toward Liberty Tower, against the tide of thousands of frantic people fleeing north.

“It was a bizarre, irrational reaction,” he said. “I was going to go back to my home to defend it against this attack by whoever the hell was flying planes into skyscrapers.”

From his windows at Liberty, he witnessed the horrors of that day; when the first tower collapsed, the shock wave threw him against a wall. He slept that night in a construction mask and woke to an apartment covered in inches of dust.

In the following months, Mr. Lombardi found it difficult to work. “I felt total emptiness, a blackness, a loss of interest in nearly everything,” he said.

A psychiatrist gave him a diagnosis of PTSD, Mr. Lombardi said, and told him his prognosis was “poor.”

The blackness took a year to lift. It was only when a developer told him the financial district was dead that he regained his motivation. “It fired me up,” he said. The challenge of completing new conversions and resurrecting downtown got him back to work. So did the lure of finishing his signature restoration, the Armour-Stiner Octagon House, which he calls — with some understatement — “one of my most obsessive projects.”



“It’s a magnificent, lyrical house, and I wanted it to be exactly as it was,” Mr. Lombardi said of Octagon House. “I risked my reputation and my career on it.” Eddie Hausner/The New York Times

When he bought Octagon House from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1979 for \$75,000, it was in shambles. A unique, eight-sided summer retreat from the Victorian era, the property was shabby and unwanted, its signature dome on the verge of collapse. But as with Liberty Tower, Mr. Lombardi could see past the neglect and felt compelled to resurrect the whimsical beauty of Octagon House — even though the renovations would consume much of the money he’d made in conversions. “It’s a magnificent, lyrical house, and I wanted it to be exactly as it was,” he said. “I risked my reputation and my career on it.”

Today, Octagon House looks like it emerged from a time machine set to 1872. The home boasts cast iron railings, detailed scrollwork, a slate roof and a colonnaded wraparound veranda, and is painted a rainbow of exotic colors, including rose,

violet, blue and red. Mr. Lombardi likes to quote a visitor's description of Octagon as "an arrested carousel."

It is unlikely that another property will captivate him like Octagon House, but he has no interest in retiring. "I can't imagine that happening," Mr. Lombardi said. He still rises at 4 a.m. and works 14-hour days, and is now focused mostly on the conversions of offices vacated by people working from home.

"The owners are not making mortgage payments," Mr. Lombardi said. "At some point, they will be worth zero. I don't think there's any other choice but to convert them."

Mr. Lombardi has a signed agreement and city approval to transform an office building at 660 Madison Avenue — where the ground floor once housed Barneys men's store — into condominiums. Over the next decade, Mr. Lombardi predicted, market forces and government policy will drive the transformation of hundreds of empty office buildings into condos, co-ops and rental apartments.

He and other architects have shown that even modern office buildings with wide floor plans can be converted — though at considerable expense — by dropping shafts through them to create courtyards and provide windows and light for interior apartments. Today, he noted with pride, his ideas are widely accepted; virtually every architectural firm has a preservation department and does commercial-to-residential conversions.

"The city has continually evolved since the Dutch settled in Lower Manhattan," he said. "We've had many other problems we had to solve. We'll get it figured out this time, too."