

The New York Times

October 28, 2014

THE NEW YORK TIMES NEW YORK TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2014

□N

A29

THE APPRAISAL

New York's Bald Spots, Missing Rooftop Decorations, Are Being Restored

By MATT A. V. CHABAN

The Park Avenue office of Roy Stillman, a developer, looks more like a room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art than one inside an office building. On one wall, eight vases and globes by Louis Comfort Tiffany rest on teak shelves, a fraction of an expansive personal collection.

Yet, at the moment, the most precious antique in Mr. Stillman's collection might just be the one he is restoring himself: 36 Bleeker Street in NoHo. And the most important piece is one that has been long gone, a refrain common to many of the city's old buildings — the decorative pediment crowning the sixth floor. Older than most of his heirlooms, the property dates to 1885, when it was built as the Schumacher and Ettlinger lithography studio, helping establish the neighborhood as one of the city's foremost printing districts. But when Mr. Stillman came across it in 2012, it had been reduced to a document-storage warehouse covered in grimy white paint and aluminum siding. Now he has stripped all that away, revealing red brick and cast iron, barrel-vaulted ceilings and a light-filled courtyard.

Nothing has made him prouder, though, than that pediment, unearthed in archives and rebuilt by hand.

"The building just wouldn't have looked right without it," Mr. Stillman said. "It's like leaving one arm off a chair you're restoring. You can still sit in it, but it just won't feel right."

Many buildings are missing their decorative tops through decades of decay and neglect, followed by wanton destruction after a cornice fell from a Harlem townhouse in 1979 and killed a Barnard student. This led to a pair of city laws with tough inspections on such accouterments, which caused many property owners to simply remove their architectural details rather than maintaining them.

They are the bald spots of New York, politely ignored and embarrassingly endured. What used to crown the top of roofs is no longer there.

When they return, the neighbors and real estate blogs rejoice. For some time, no townhouse



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Roy Stillman, above, and the pediment at 36 Bleeker Street. Left, the rebuilt crown on the Stella Tower, on 50th Street.



renovation has been complete without a rebuilt cornice, and now the same goes for larger projects.

Developers claim that their rooftop restoration work is a gift to the neighborhood, as impor-

tant as good doorknobs, which are typically the first thing anyone notices about their building. "Most of our residents can't even see the roofs," said Michael Stern, principal of JDS Development Group, which has added ar-

chitectural touches to the tops of two recent projects, Walker Tower in Chelsea and the Stella Tower in Hell's Kitchen.

But these enhancements can also help win over persnickety public officials and choosy buyers, especially if a property had been relatively anonymous. Putting a little panache on the parapet can lend an identity to these impressive yet overlooked properties.

The Walker Tower, named for its designer, Ralph Walker, and built in 1929 for the New York Telephone Company, had long been one of the tallest buildings in Chelsea even if it was hiding in plain sight on 18th Street. When JDS and its development partner, Property Markets Group, bought the top 13 floors of the 22-story

building for a condominium conversion, they turned to Walker's archives for inspiration.

There, they uncovered early sketches for four shimmering spires, the ultimate in Art Deco expression, though they were never built (see: Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Walker's own 1 Wall Street). "Apparently they had been value-engineered out," Mr. Stern said. "Even in those visionary days, you couldn't escape the budgets."

Turning to their current design team at Cetra Ruddy, an architectural firm, the developers came up with four bronze shafts set three stories above the deck, each weighing half a ton. They further accentuate the Gotham dimensions of the buildings.

At the Stella on West 50th

Street (named for Walker's wife and also being developed by JDS and Property Markets Group), the team had an actual cornice to work with, albeit one that had been dismantled decades ago for reasons that remain unclear. Using a few remnants still cemented onto the roof and more sketches from the Walker archive, Cetra Ruddy crafted a cornice of four giant stone leaves capping the tower.

Unlike Walker Tower, where the spires are visible from the penthouse units (one of which sold for \$50.9 million in January, a record for downtown), at the Stella the leaves are tucked into the roof. The cornice sits alongside a filigreed enclosure for the heating and cooling systems inspired by Walker's detailed Deco work in the lobby. The filigreed enclosure replaced a rusting hulk that had been the former capstone to the building.

"Back in the 1920s and '30s, it was a time of passion, when everyone was striving for something better, with their life and their work," Mr. Stern said. "For a long time, developers forgot those values, and we're trying to recapture that." And it does seem a valuable investment, given that few of the 51 apartments, selling for \$1 million to \$10 million, remain on the market.

Mr. Stillman did not have it this easy. When he began inspecting 36 Bleeker, he discovered that there had been some kind of roof ornament — the evidence was sheared-off bricks and broken iron anchors on the roof. Not even tax photos from the 1920s showed what had been there.

But digging through old archives at the New York City Transit Museum, preservationists from Higgins and Quaysbarth found a 1904 photo when the Bleeker Street subway station opened, showing a glancing view of the original pediment. They then found a proposal from the building's original architect for an almost identical pediment at the Union Club in Midtown, which was never built. Morris Adjmi, the architect hired for the project, used the proposal to recreate the pediment at 36 Bleeker Street, along with four lintel posts at the corners.