

The meticulous makeovers behind NYC's historic buildings

By Lois Weiss
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Alchemy Properties restored the Woolworth Building's terra cotta facade.

Evan Joseph Images

Renovating New York's historic buildings is no cakewalk. Wires can resemble balls of spaghetti, mechanicals are cranky, interiors are mazes, exteriors are detailed and complying with the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is time-consuming and costly.

But for those who take on the challenge of preserving, protecting and repositioning the city's architectural gems — from 195 Broadway to the iconic Woolworth Building — the rewards can be financially as well as viscerally satisfying.

The processes take patience, but result in buildings that enhance the entire streetscape.

Take the transformation of 195 Broadway's landmarked lobby, at the corner of Fulton Street in the Financial District. "We went through a long process, almost 10 years," says David Levinson, chairman and CEO of L&L Holding Company. The ornate neoclassical lobby, with 43 Doric marble columns and coffered ceilings, now includes retail stores separated by glass walls.

The company worked closely with the LPC to create a master plan for the former AT&T headquarters, which is still an office building with about 1 million square feet and tenants that include marketing firm Omnicom and publisher HarperCollins.

In conjunction with the LPC, the developer and architects created a book that described exactly how the workers had to install new lighting and other attachments to the original marble. They even mandated the preservation of each floor tile.

“Everywhere we had to drill into the floor, that core piece is numbered, identified and stored,” Levinson says. “If we ever want to take it out and put back all the original pieces, they are available.”

For every historic building, developers also go to the ends of the Earth to seek out the original factories and skilled craftsmen to ensure all new details perfectly match to the old.



David Levinson
L&L Holding Company



Brooklyn's 70 Henry St. is another mixed-use overhaul of a historic structure.
Mettle Property Group

That's been the case for the architects and consultants hired by developer Gerard Longo, principal of Mettle Property Group, who is building a five-unit apartment building with a retail space at 70 Henry St., where the Brooklyn Heights Cinema used to be. Designed by Morris Adjmi, 70 Henry actually restores the brick facade of the old cinema, which dates back to 1896; because it's in a historic district, Adjmi's design was approved by the LPC in 2015.

When seeking replacement bricks for such a project, architects must match them by size, shape and color.

When installing them on-site, the size, color and placement of existing mortar lines are also imitated. Meanwhile, at the Woolworth Building, Kenneth Horn of Alchemy Properties has created 33 condos on the top floors of the storied office building, once the tallest in the world. Designed by Cass Gilbert in a Gothic Revival style with reams of terra cotta ornamentation, it debuted in 1913 as the headquarters for the then-giant retail company.

The lower office portion is owned separately, with tenants that include NYU's Center for Global Affairs and its American Language Institute, and SHoP Architects.

To ensure the building was treated with the respect it deserved, Horn sought out the successor to the original terra cotta factory. That company reproduced both the dominant beige portions as well as the colorful pastel medallions that surround some windows.

It cost Alchemy a remarkable \$22 million to create and install the 3,500 one-foot squares — about the same as the asking price for a few of the conversion’s larger units.

The decorative flowers on the ceiling of five-and-dime mogul Frank Woolworth’s former office, made of white plaster and horsehair, were also gingerly removed, bathed in a surprising combination of Johnson’s baby shampoo, sea kelp and salt, and then laid out to dry in wooden boxes piled with hay. (Woolworth’s old office is now a part of unit 40A.)

“When you took them down, you ran the risk of them crumbling, so maybe we lost one or two,” Horn says of these delicate elements.

You can find them repurposed on the ceiling of the newly built residential lobby at 2 Park Place.

[Historic building projects] are treasure hunts, because you do find things . . . Behind a wall, you will find a newspaper talking about an invasion — during World War 1.

- David Levinson, chairman and CEO of L&L Holding Company

In the Woolworth condos’ kitchens, silver replicas of the original “W” detail over the elevators have been installed above the cooktops.

“We tried to make them contemporary yet respectful of history,” Horn says.

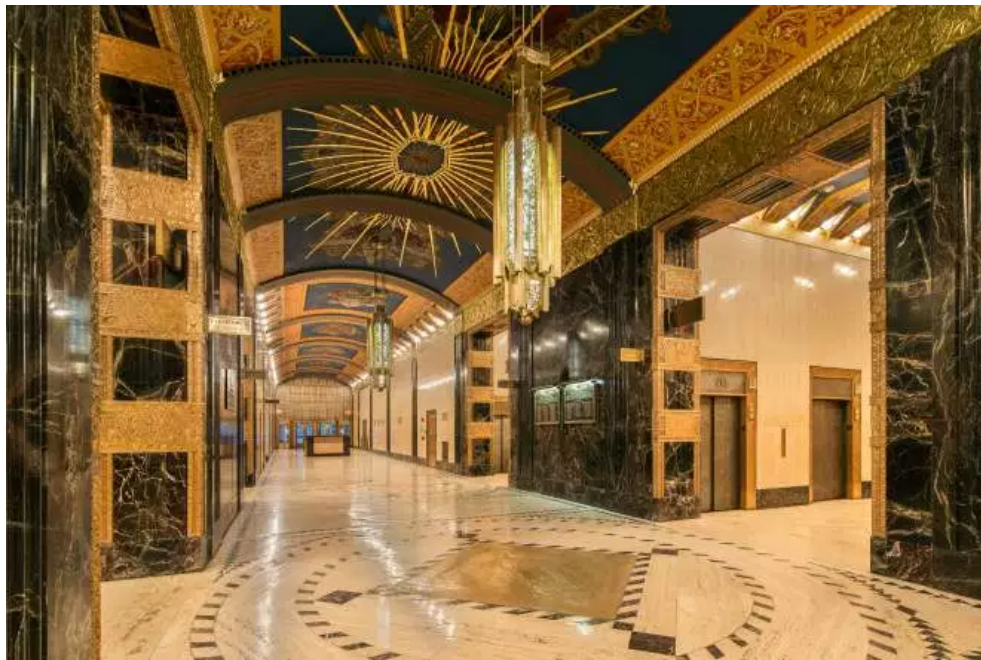
A few blocks across Lower Manhattan, at 100 Barclay St., Ben Shaoul of Magnum Real Estate Group had to copy many historic elements on the façade of the Ralph Walker-designed Art Deco building as he converted its upper floors to about 160 condos. Known for being the headquarters of Verizon, the telecom giant still occupies office space there.

Magnum had to craft doors from what were once windows to make terraces accessible to residents. The company also installed an entirely new lobby that is separate from the building’s 140 West St. entrance for Verizon workers.



While most of the Woolworth Building is still office space, its upper floors now have condos. This detail in the kitchens is inspired by its original elevators.

Lois Weiss



The Verizon building in Tribeca is now a condo with a glittering lobby (above) called 100 Barclay that still houses the telecom giant’s offices.

Evan Joseph Images

At 1.1 million square feet, 100 Barclay/140 West St. is one of the city’s largest landmarked properties. Walker’s 1927 design includes numerous gargoyles and animal imagery such as elephants and birds.

“We had to source stone and match details from different quarries in order to maintain the original elements,” Shaoul says.

Climbing around quarries is de rigueur for Roy Kim, now the chief creative officer for Douglas Elliman Development Marketing. He earlier spent eight years working for Gary Barnett's Extell Development on numerous historically sensitive renovations as well as the entirely new One57.

"All stone is not the same," warns Kim, who is currently hard at work on Peebles' and Elad's current renovation in Tribeca of a former city courthouse at 108 Leonard St., which has both a landmarked Beaux-Arts exterior and some interior portions the developer is preserving. Kim says his team is trying to ensure the stones' background colors are consistent.

Kim has traveled as far as Italy and China to find the perfect slabs of marble. But even at home in New York, these projects lead to astonishing discoveries.

"They are treasure hunts, because you do find things," says Levinson of L&L, which has also worked on office building restorations at 114 Broadway and 150 Broadway, among others.

At 195 Broadway, built specifically for AT&T between 1912 and 1916, L&L uncovered 100-year-old photographs, plaques and correspondence going back and forth between the telephone company and the original architect.

"Behind a wall, you will find a newspaper talking about an invasion — during World War 1," Levinson adds.

In one of L&L's Flatiron projects, at 150 Fifth Ave., the work crew found secret passages and spiral staircases. But despite "looking and looking," they never found a time capsule that was supposed to have been buried there in 1898.

In Brooklyn Heights — which Longo calls "one of the most historically significant neighborhoods in New York" — the developer uncovered trinkets of his own.



Roy Kim
Roy Kim



L&L carefully renovated neoclassical 195 Broadway to include glass-walled stores.
Alan Schindler

During excavation work, his crew found a glass cream bottle, labeled Sheffield Farms, some 70 feet below the surface. It was a major dairy and milk supplier to the city during the first half of the 20th century.

"The bottle was blackened and filthy, probably 100 years old," recalls Longo. "When I brought it home, my wife said, 'I don't think I've ever seen you smile like that.'"

Real estate pros who are also history buffs may adore the labor-intensive construction work and meticulous excavations, but they're still gunning for a beautiful, profitable finished product.

One thing that can get in the way: digging up some bones. "You can stumble into a gravesite of significance," Longo warns. "It will absolutely shut your job down."