

Spring 2009

ASIB NEW YORK METRO

# View

## Historic Preservation Living in the Past Today

**Also:  
The Benefits of Restoring  
Commercial Structures  
IP Profile: Michael C. Fina**

# Saving History

## The benefits of restoring commercial structures

By Jean Feingold

New York is known for its buildings and because of the city's age, many are historic. "New York City has the greatest collection of architecture of any city in the country," noted Peg Breen, president of the nonprofit New York Landmarks Conservancy. "The most identifiable thing about New York is its skyline. That's what people think of." Commercial and institutional buildings are an important part of that.

### What is a landmark?

The New York City Landmarks Commission is the government agency that decides whether local buildings are landmarks. When buildings are proposed for landmark designation by groups like the conservancy, the commission evaluates architectural quality and whether the building represents its style well, as well as the structure's cultural and historic importance. "Here buildings only need to be 30 years old to be considered for landmark status," said Breen. Interest in listing newer commercial buildings was stimulated by the Lever House on Park Avenue, with a big push to list buildings from the '30s to the '60s in the last 10 to 15 years, she said.

**"There are soul-satisfying reasons to save all this. There are economic reasons to save all this. To me, it's just central to how we live here."**

**Peg Breen, president  
New York Landmarks Conservancy**

### Interior Designations Less Common Than Exterior

For a commercial interior to have an historic designation, it must be open to the public regularly. Since the post-9/11 increase in security, few commercial lobbies allow public access.

Windows must appear as originally designed for exteriors designated as landmarks. Since the exterior must retain its original look, through-wall air conditioning, vents and rooftop additions added after original construction must be removed.

Because historic commercial and industrial buildings are so well constructed, they can be adaptively reused for many purposes. For example, in Soho and Tribeca, historic buildings have been converted to art galleries, shops and restaurants. "They're popular because they're fabulous buildings and because you have a sense of place," Breen pointed out. "It's a wonderful combination of modern stores and modern art, but you're also walking through history because you're walking through a neighborhood built in a contained period of time."



The Northcourt Building, recognized as a building of historical significance, had been damaged by a fire in the 1950s. Restoration revived the dramatic, open lobby and the original multicolor decorative plaster ceiling.



ABOVE: The new view of the mezzanine now displays recreations of the original plaster work.

LEFT: Lighting for the Northcourt lobby includes Art Deco light fixtures, downlights and halogen uplights.

RIGHT: This mock-up for Hoffman Hall illustrates the process for repairs to the white oak structural panels.



### The Northcourt Building

Located in White Plains, the Northcourt Building is a 12-story Art Deco office building built around 1929. Its current tenants include many law firms. Considered a building of historical significance by the White Plains Historical Society, Janko Rasic Architects, PLLC of New York renovated the lobby, which had been damaged by fire in the 1950s.

Unknown to the current owners, a pre-existing mezzanine had been sealed and an

acoustical tile hung ceiling with fluorescent light fixtures installed to hide the fire damage, cutting the once dramatic open space of the lobby in half. "JRA started by investigating above the ceiling and uncovered the forgotten double height space and sealed mezzanine balcony," explained Timothy Rasic, AIA. "Many of the original decorative elements had been removed, damaged or covered." They decided to remove the lower ceiling and restore the space to its original configuration.

"JRA wanted to reopen the sealed mezzanine balcony overlooking the lobby, recreating the continuous ceiling which extends over both spaces," Rasic said. "At first the White Plains Building Department objected because of new building code requirements enacted after the building was originally built. JRA reviewed building code and safety conditions with the department and, by installing two sets of new fire doors at the stairwell and corridor entrance at the mezzanine level, permission was obtained to reopen the balcony."

Fire had blackened the original multi-color decorative plaster tile ceiling. Since many tiles were missing, damaged or loose, molds were made from the original remaining tiles to create replacement pieces. A painter who became known as "Michelangelo" worked on a scaffold for three months repainting the tiles on the

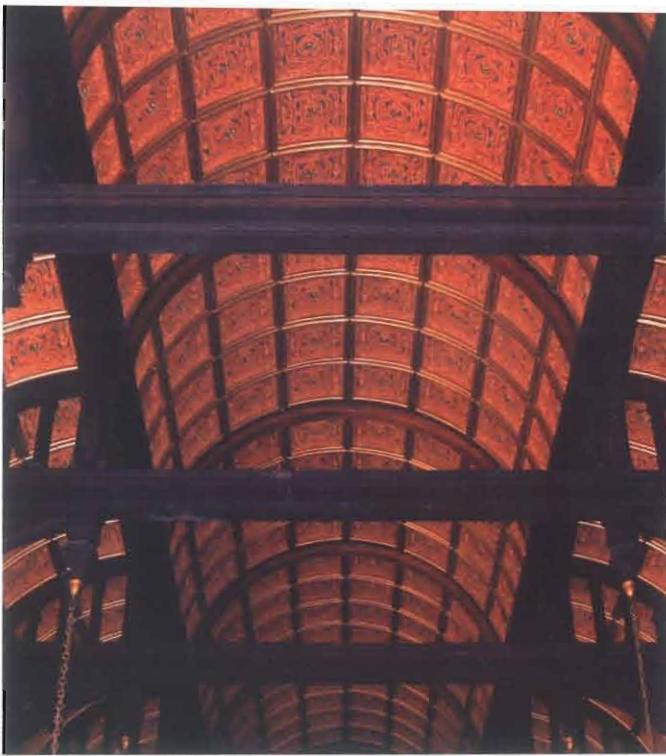
18-foot-high ceiling in their original bronze, gold, terracotta, ochre, sienna and brown.

"Lighting the 18-foot-high ceiling proved a challenge," noted Rasic. "JRA designed three custom Art Deco bronze pendant light fixtures." In addition, a series of downlights were inserted in both high and low ceilings. To illuminate the decorative ceiling, halogen uplights were placed five feet below it. The rear entrance arcade received downlights and a central row of flat, surface mounted decorative fixtures.

The project received the Award of Excellence from the Society of American Registered Architects New York Council and the building's owners and tenants are extremely happy with the lobby's improved appearance. "A project is only as good as the client," Rasic commented. "In this case the client was extremely interested and supportive throughout the project and willing to recognize the potential added to their building by the restoration."

### The Refectory of Hoffman Hall at General Theological Seminary

Built in 1900, Hoffman Hall's 5,500-square-foot Refectory is a dining hall, described by Gerald R. Wolfe in *New York: A Guide to the Metropolis* as "one of New York's most beautiful interior spaces."



The new ceiling at Hoffman Hall exhibits a successful restoration of the once dirty and oxidized metallic finish.

Although only the Gothic building's exterior is landmarked, the interior ceiling was restored to its original appearance by Brooklyn-based Ernest Neuman Studios.

The decorative coffered plaster ceiling's original metallic finish had become dirty and oxidized. Melissa Ford-Hart, principal at Ernest Neuman, said exposure windows were created to determine the original color scheme. The surface was then vacuumed and cleaned with a diluted soap solution before loose or falling paint was scraped off. Fifteen coffered panels were replaced and consolidation/repairs were done throughout the ceiling. The entire ceiling was primed and based with color before bronze powder was painted at the framing half-round and the center rosette. Next an amber colored glaze was applied at the base elements of the

repairs. The room's white oak structural panels had separated in many places. The wood had been shellacked and coated with varnish which had oxidized, darkened and become opaque. Ford-Hart said the mockup demonstrates how the wood should be stripped, allowed to dry and then coated with layers of dark dewaxed shellac applied using a pad and detail brushes.

Much vacuuming and cleaning was done to the interior brick, limestone and brownstone surfaces. Workers had to wear protective equipment while removing pigeon droppings from the work area with a bleach/water solution.

### Help is Available

The Conservancy offers technical assistance on restoring historic structures. "We

## COMMERCIAL DESIGN FEATURE



panels followed by the application of a semi-opaque bluish-green as an accent.

In addition, the firm prepared a mock-up illustrating their recommendations for wood

have experts on staff who can help with restoration questions," Breen said. "We can help designers find craftspeople and materials and help you analyze your building on both interior and exterior materials. If there are issues, we can identify what's wrong and what's needed to fix it, and we refer you to people we know who are qualified to do the work."

For example, the Institute of International Education has the only room in the city designed by Alvar Aalto. The Conservancy worked with them for several years doing research on materials, what the original design was and how to restore the space correctly.

### History Permeates NYC

"If you live in New York, you have to love buildings and you have to care about buildings because that's what we are," said Breen. "The layers of architecture and the more you know about them and understand them, the richer the experience walking down a street, the more interesting and beautiful New York becomes. It promotes tourism. It promotes a daily quality of life. There are soul-satisfying reasons to save all this. There are economic reasons to save all this. To me, it's just central to how we live here.

"We've got nothing against great new buildings, but it shouldn't come at the cost of an older great building," she continued. "A sense of place is enormously important whether you're consciously thinking of this or not. There are places that just lift you up and that's what great architecture does. Buildings have a public face and are, in a sense, a gift to the rest of us. People feel more important and better in buildings that are better buildings."



SWAN DRAFTING & SURVEYING SERVICES, INC.

### Don't waste your valuable time measuring and drafting your own plans.

Call SWAN to measure and draft up plans for your projects. We have measured and drafted every conceivable type of building structure from small apartment to large commercial buildings and everything in between. Swan Drafting and Surveying Services, Inc. has been serving the design communities for sixteen years, with a combined thirty years of architectural and surveying experiences. We offer free estimates on any project.

CALL FOR FREE BROCHURE OR FREE ESTIMATES:  
718 837 6800 x 203 [info@swandrafting.com](mailto:info@swandrafting.com) [www.swandrafting.com](http://www.swandrafting.com)

**SURVEYING & CAD DRAFTING**