

Professional Archaeologists of New York City, Inc.

PANYC

NEWSLETTER

No. 133

March 2008

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Next Meeting:

May 21, 2008
Neighborhood Preservation Center
232 East 11th Street
New York, NY
6:30pm

Newsletter Editor:

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Professional Archaeologists of New York City (PANYC)
General Meeting Minutes, November 14, 2007

Secretary's Report: Minutes of the September 2007 meeting were approved.

Treasurer's Report: we currently have \$3172 and 42 members, three members have not yet paid for the 2006 membership year

President's Report:

Old business:

1. The issue of Department of City Planning (DCP) and its determination of a project area and potential impacts and the Landmarks review of environmental documents such as a DEIS continues to be a concern. A very recent example relates to the Manhattanville rezoning. Rakos, just prior to the PANYC meeting, was contacted by Mary Habstritt, who is a consultant to a private property owner in the Manhattanville redevelopment area, regarding an email she received from Landmarks. Habstritt brought the attention of Landmarks to the fact that there might be archaeological remains of the Third Avenue Railway in certain streets in Manhattanville. As per Landmarks response, "LPC only comments on the portions of the project area that the Department of City Planning has determined need such review. In the case of Manhattanville this did not include street beds." It was stressed that PANYC at this time does not know if any of the new development will affect the streets. PANYC needs to look closely at the documents to see if in fact street beds will be impacted and see how the impact areas were determined. As a reviewing agency it would seem that Landmarks should have the ability to comment on areas that DCP might not have "noted needed review" but are within their re-zoning area and contain potentially significant archeological resources. It was noted by several members that the sensitive areas should be addressed earlier rather than risk encountering a resource during construction when costs to everyone, including the resource, are significantly higher.

How Landmarks determines what is sensitive has recently become a concern. Again, Manhattanville was the example, as only two properties out of the approximately 17-acre rezoning area were considered potentially sensitive for archeological resources. While this may be true, there was nothing in the DEIS that indicates how sensitivity was determined. Concern was voiced that sensitive areas are being determined solely by overlaying relevant historic maps with proposed project footprints and known modern disturbances. While this can give a broad-brush idea of sensitivity, the membership found this approach inadequate. Rakos will schedule a meeting with Amanda to discuss.

It was decided that PANYC should meet the new Executive Director of Landmarks, Kate Daly. It was noted that Ms. Daly has a preservation background which is encouraging. Rakos and Geismar, as Chair of the Landmarks Committee, will set up a meeting.

New Business:

1. The Office of NY State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (SHPO) is coming to NYC on Nov 28th for a meeting to solicit input for updating the Sates' 5-year Historic

Preservation Plan. Rakos will attend. Geismar and Stone might as well. The SHPO sent a list of discussion questions around on email in advance which was forwarded to PANYC members.

2. At the recent CNEHA conference it was noted that there is a weekly show on the Travel Channel called “Best Places to Find Cash and Treasure.” This show essentially promotes looting, particularly of Civil War sites and urban privies. CNEHA has encouraged members to write to the program to object to the content. Rakos will write a letter on behalf of PANYC. Others are urged to write to the network.

Legislation Committee:

Will not be reactivated; will deal with any issues via Landmarks Committee.

Membership: There is a new “Outreach” component that Freeman is leasing to try to generate more interest in the professional community in PANYC. MacLean is half-way through compiling a list of schools in the NYC area to which we will send the public program flyer and canvas for memberships.

MAS: According to Geismar, they are very concerned about archaeology, and this is very encouraging because “they have clout.” So far, there is no further action on the MAS program they proposed to develop.

Newsletter: Ricciardi has recently sent out a new newsletter, and we thank him very much for his good work. If anyone has anything that they would like to be included in the next newsletter, please send it to Chris. We wish Chris a happy holiday too!

NYAC: Stone went to the meeting in Binghamton on Sept. 29th. The state is considering the ‘burial bill,’ and a new person is in charge of handling comments. Unfortunately, this person does not have any of the comments on the bill that were previously sent to the state. NYAC, therefore, has to re-send all of their comments. Linda thinks that PANYC should do the same. No one remembers exactly what PANYC said, but it might be in old minutes. Linda will forward an email about this issue to Lizzie to distribute to PANYC members. PANYC encourages people to send individual comments to the state.

Parks: The Parks’ Department’s apparent lack of an official protocol for payment of consultants remains unresolved. Rakos indicated that Parks did not respond to her most recent letter. It was suggested that we give Parks a limited amount of time (about 6 months) to reply, and if they do not then PANYC should try to get something in the-press to generate public pressure. This idea was not unanimously favored.

Public program: Stone has contacted Paula Zadigan at the Museum of the City of NY about a date for the public program. Of a few dates proposed, May 18th was selected by the members at the meeting as the best date. Linda will call and reserve this date. The theme will be the South Ferry project, pending approval from the MTA, which likely will not be a problem. Linda will find speakers.

Research and Planning:

The plan to bring London archaeologists to NYC will be reactivated. The Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) conference in Columbia in the spring might be a venue that could accommodate this (despite being a bit “touchy-feely,” the conference might be interesting and useful). The website for this conference is:

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/archaeology/conference/tag/index.htm>

Repository: A recent article-about Governor’s Is. in the NY Times looked at landscaping. Fort Totten has been suggested as a possible repository for NYC archaeological remains.

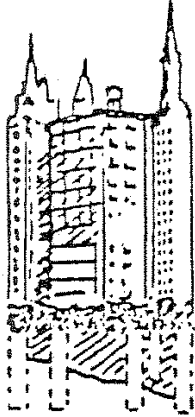
Website: No report. Anyone interested in creating or re-vamping the website?

Other:

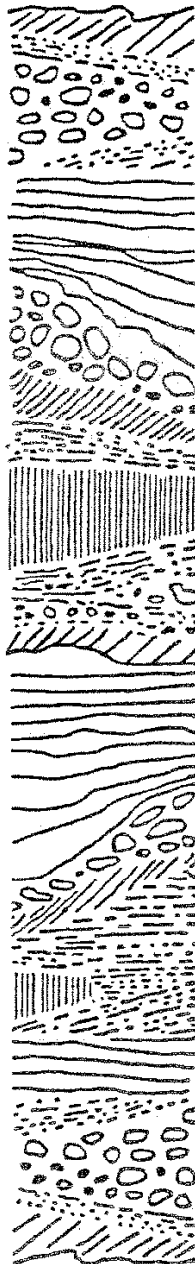
If anyone wants to join the Met Chapter, please contact Shelly.

PANyc members in attendance ask that other members *please attend future meetings*. We really need input and help regarding several problems that need to be resolved.

The next meeting will be held on January 23rd at 6:30 at the Neighborhood Preservation Center, 232 East 11th St., Manhattan (just west of 2nd Ave.).



PANYC



Professional Archaeologists of New York City, Inc.

230 6th Ave., Apt 4
Brooklyn, NY 11215
March 7, 2008

Mr. John Krawchuk
Director of Preservation
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation
Olmsted Center
Flushing Meadows-Corona Park,
Flushing, NY 11368

Dear Mr. Krawchuk:

I am writing on behalf of Professional Archaeologists of New York City (PANYC) once again regarding the Parks Department's new specifications and request for proposal (RFP) for archaeology. We have recently obtained a copy of Item 13 from the specifications/RFP for Contract R006-106MA and are pleased to see it includes language that addresses the off-site work necessary to properly complete the archaeological component of the Parks Department's obligations. This includes "...archaeological analysis and reports, ...artifact processing, approvals...necessary to complete the work ... to the satisfaction of the Engineer, including all work and materials designated by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission in their monitoring capacity". These changes acknowledge your department's understanding of the need for compliance with the regulations enforced by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. However, we are not satisfied that the new specifications/RFP can be properly implemented given they still contain a provision that the Contractor will only be paid for the archaeologist's on-site hours.

The Measurement and Payment Section of the Item for Principal Archaeologist also includes the following:

"For the services of a PRINCIPAL ARCHAEOLOGIST under these items, the Contractor shall be paid the unit prices per HOUR for the number of hours spent on the site in accordance with the plans and specifications and directions of the Engineer."

There is a conflict between this payment provision and the specifications for the archaeological work to be completed. This is due to the fact that archaeological research, analysis, reports, and usually the artifact processing, is done off site. As presently written, one section states all necessary archaeological related work must be completed (including that which takes place off-site), and in another section states that the archaeologist will be paid for the hours spent on site. We are hoping you can clarify this. We suggest that the Parks Department revise their specification/RFP standard language once again to include in the Payment Section language regarding the pre-field research and writing, post field artifact and data analysis and all necessary report writing as required by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and to remove the reference to the time spent "on site."

We understand that your agency has many project managers, each with the responsibility to incorporate appropriate details into their specifications/RFPs, and we realize that the

particular inconsistency noted in the specifications/RFP cited above could be the result of only one manager not having complete documentation. If that is the case, rather than a problem with the standard language, then we recommend you ensure all project managers are distributed the updated specifications/RFP for archaeology and that they are instructed on its proper usage.

As indicated in a previous letter, our concern is that archaeology is very project specific and "boiler plate" language can be inadequate or misleading. This specification/RFP underscores our earlier suggestion that the Parks Department retain an on-call archaeological consultant. This individual could not only determine when archaeological work is required, but also provide input on specifications/RFPs.

As always, our membership would be pleased to share its collective expertise and, if you think it appropriate, offer constructive advice on archaeological issues to the Parks Department. We thank you for your attention to this issue and encourage you to contact us.

Sincerely,



Lynn Rakos
PANYC President
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PANYC2006@yahoo.com

CC:

Honorable Michael Bloomberg, Mayor
Mr. Adrian Benepe, Commissioner, Parks
Ms. Amy Freitag, Parks, Deputy Commissioner, Capital Projects
Mr. Charles McKinney, Parks, Chief of Design
Ms. Deborah Howe, Parks, Assistant Counsel
Ms. Mary Pazan, Parks, Chief of Management Services
Honorable Robert B. Tierney, Landmarks Preservation Commission, Chairman
Ms. Amanda Sutphin, Director of Archaeology, Landmarks Preservation Commission
Dr. Arthur Bankoff, Archaeology Advisor to the Chair, Landmarks Preservation Commission

2008 PANYC Public Program (Initial Announcement)

Sunday, May 18, 2008
Museum of the City of New York
1:30pm to 3:30pm

Colonial Waterfront Development: Excavations for the New South Ferry Subway Terminal

The 28th annual conference of the Professional Archaeologists of New York City explores the Colonial Waterfront Development in and around Battery Park through the recent excavations for the New South Ferry Subway Terminal. From 2004 to 2006, archaeologists worked in conjunction with and during construction of the new subway. The project excavations covered approximately 1,800 linear feet, including nearly 750 feet within Battery Park. Preliminary results of the work are emerging and archaeologists who have been involved in the field effort, artifact analysis, and historic research will present their findings.

Free with Museum admission.

THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE:

JANUARY 7, 2008

MYSTERY ON PEARL STREET

It was one of the oldest buildings left downtown. Why not try to save it?

by Burkhard Bilger

This one begins, like a dime detective novel from the nineteen-thirties, in a dingy bar in lower Manhattan. And, like a lot of New York stories, though it may touch on history and backroom politics, sex and the supernatural, though it throws together billionaires and scrap-lumber salesmen, city councilmen and scholars of the occult, it's mostly about real estate—and the stubborn allure of old buildings and their secrets.

Ten years ago, a bar owner named David McWater took out a lease on a building at 211 Pearl Street. It was a plain brick structure in the Greek Revival style, with granite pillars along its base and a thin classical cornice. Its windows, three to a floor, once had sweeping views of New York Harbor—out across church spires and wooden piers, steam ferries and sailing ships, to the orchards and farms of Brooklyn. Now they looked out on the canyoned streets of the financial district. A family from New Jersey had owned the building for decades and had allowed it to fall into disrepair. The floors were layered with plywood and carpet, the walls with wood panelling. (The first floor had been an Irish bar called Rosie O'Grady's.) Next door, at 213, the building it leaned against was in even worse shape: a jagged crack ran down the length of one wall, it was later discovered, slowly separating the façade from the sides.

Still, it was a sweet deal. The building at 211 had five floors, the rent was only five thousand dollars a month, and the lease was for twenty years. It was strictly a commercial property, and McWater was required to fix it up, but he had planned to do so anyway. His two partners, Ray Deter and Dennis Zentek, owned a popular beer bar in the East Village. They wanted to re-create the bar on a more lavish scale, with exposed brick and antique fixtures. It would make an elegant speakeasy, they thought, for young bankers and lawyers—a ghost of the neighborhood's past.

Dave and I have known each other since our high-school days, in Oklahoma, twenty-five years ago. He was a skinny basketball player then, with feathered brown hair and a loose, cocky walk. He's bulkier now and more imposing, with ruddy cheeks and a raucous laugh and eyebrows that beetle up when he's delivering a punch line—the kind of loudmouthed operator you can imagine in a tuxedo and a bowler hat, carving up beefsteaks near Tammany Hall. As an undergraduate at New York University, Dave paid his tuition by running a sports agency from his dorm room. (One of his clients was John Starks, who went on to become a star for the New York Knicks.) Later, he was a regular at the World Series of Poker. Along the way, he managed to become the majority owner of eleven bars in downtown Manhattan, even persuading me to invest in one on the Lower East Side. Compared with most real-estate deals, he told me, 211 Pearl seemed like easy money. "It was a beautiful thing," he said.

His crew spent the next few months gutting the building. Beneath the linoleum, they found oak boards and terra-cotta pavers; above the acoustic tile, a pressed-tin ceiling. When they pulled down the wooden panelling, the bricks behind it, salvaged from earlier buildings, read like a miniature history of Manhattan: ragged courses near the bottom, from Dutch buildings of the sixteen-hundreds; larger bricks higher up, still flecked with paint, from British homes; the newest courses on top, cleanly laid in the eighteen-thirties, when the clay shores of the Hudson River were lined with kilns. Best of all was a piece of brickwork on the first floor: a cryptic arrangement of three pyramids, like the mark of some mystic order. "It was a strange thing," Dave told me. "But it made a great conversation piece: 'What the hell is that?'"

Then the money ran out. Dave had hoped that the renovation would cost about a quarter of a million dollars. But after two years he'd spent twice that much, his partners had pulled out, and the bar was only half finished. What's more, the building's easygoing owners had sold it to a shadowy corporation called Chicago 4. Dave had been hearing talk on the street of a developer snatching up property in the neighborhood. The plan, he'd heard, was to demolish the whole block and replace it with a high-rise condominium and office complex. The new owners couldn't afford to wait twenty years for Dave's lease to run out, it seemed. They needed 211 torn down.

New York demolishes more old buildings every month than most American cities have standing. In a single week last September, the list of scheduled demolitions ran to six pages; in an average year, about two thousand buildings are torn down. As you walk through neighborhoods like SoHo or Greenwich Village, it's easy to imagine Manhattan as one vast historic district, camera-ready for any period from the Civil War on. In fact, fewer than three per cent of the city's million or so buildings are protected as landmarks.

Lower Manhattan is both the city's oldest neighborhood and its most rebuilt. "It seems like they knocked everything down there fifty years ago," Simeon Bankoff, the executive director of the Historic Districts Council, told me recently. If this is where New York began, it's also where it has most had to reinvent itself. "That's the peculiar pattern of development in Manhattan," Bankoff said. "It spreads north and then it doubles back—and then it does it again and again."

A few months after 211 Pearl Street was sold to Chicago 4, Dave McWater received a legal notice from his new landlords—the first of several. By failing to make necessary repairs and by using the building as a residence, the company argued, Dave was violating his lease. The complaints grew more specific as time went on—one claimed that the elevator shaft wasn't properly sealed and that some windows had not been replaced in a "first class" manner—but the essential message stayed the same: the building had become an eyesore.

"I said to the judge, 'This is horseshit,'" Dave told me. "'They're going to make me pay forty thousand dollars to renovate a building they're tearing down.'" The real reason for the lawsuits, he said, was the demolition clause in his lease. If the building was torn down before its term ran out, he was entitled to up to a million dollars in compensation. "They were taking a shot," he said. "Maybe I'm a loser and they can just evict me. If not, maybe they can harass me so much that they can talk me down from the million dollars."

Dave managed to fend off the lawsuits for a while. But by the spring of 2000 he had spent tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees, and he still had some expensive repairs to make. He decided to fight back. No. 211 Pearl seemed to be one of the oldest buildings left in lower Manhattan. If he could dig up its history, he thought, the city might just declare it a landmark. In the meantime, the mere possibility might scare the owner into settling.

He thought he'd give Alan Solomon a call.

Al lives in the East Village, a few blocks from Dave's office on Avenue A. He has been, at various times, a real-estate agent, footwear salesman, environmental activist, T-shirt designer, candy vender, and amateur historian. He now sells reclaimed lumber and spends his days visiting demolition sites, scouring the wreckage for things to salvage. Al is small and slight, with short black hair that he combs straight back. He has pale, finely molded features, a longish nose, and green eyes capable of sudden, unnerving directness. When he's on the hunt for material—joists from a police-horse stable on Hester Street, say, or beams from an abandoned snuff warehouse in New Jersey—he walks with his shoulders squared, his baseball cap pulled down low, and weaves his way through scaffolding and plywood barriers, construction pits and chain-link fences, as content amid the city's detritus as any raccoon.

Al has spent his life among junk. He grew up north of Boston, where his father owns one of the largest scrap-metal yards in New England, Solomon Metals. As a boy, Al used to go there on weekends and rummage through piles of radiators and barrels of broken pipes. He'd fish out a few treasures—copper pots, pewter doorstops, Art Deco ashtrays, and brass molds from toymakers—and sell them at the flea market next to the local drive-in. "All this stuff you see in SoHo or Tribeca nowadays, in artifact stores," he told me. "A lot of it, thirty years ago, was just flowing into scrap."

Al's father had inherited the business from his father, and for a while Al seemed likely to do the same. He got a degree in finance from Boston University, worked for a bank in Ireland for a few months, then came home. He worked at the scrap yard for eight years, mostly processing metals and dealing with customers. Then, in 1996, he moved to New York. "I'd just turned thirty," he told me. "I wasn't married, and I was sort of thinking, If I'm ever going to try and do something, this is the time." What, exactly, that something was he didn't know: "It was into the unknown." Al arrived in January and took a job in Macy's shoe department to get him through the winter. He found a rentstabilized apartment, twelve feet square, and built a sleeping loft with old safety barricades, striped orange and white. Then he did what he'd always done: walked around the city and found pieces of it to save.

I'd known Al a little when I lived in Boston, and after I moved to New York I periodically got word of his newest ventures. Our friend Todd Wiener remembers having a beer with Al in the Village one night and talking at length about tires. They were clogging up landfills, Al said, and ought to be put to better use. Todd asked him what he meant. "You could use them to make yarmulkes, for instance," Al said. Then he reached into his backpack and pulled out a small rubber cap. It was made from scraps of old inner tubes, stitched together with heavy nylon thread. Todd turned it around in his hands for a minute, not sure what to say. It looked like something that Frankenstein's monster might wear if he were Jewish. "Of course, if it goes into production the stitching will have to be a lot nicer," Al said.

Not long afterward, Al developed an interest in manhole covers. The oldest ones in New York dated to the mid-eighteen-hundreds, he found, and were often beautifully embossed. Yet they were regularly sold for scrap. By looking up the city's scrap-metal sales through the Freedom of Information Act, Al located sixty of the covers at a yard in East New York. He bought the lot for three thousand dollars, and brought them to an ironworker in Williamsburg. Then he had them turned into coffee tables. They never sold very well, though: each table weighed more than two hundred pounds.

Al's projects always had the same quirky yet earnest quality back then—part business venture, part recycling effort, part idealistic prank. After 9/11, he spent days walking around the city collecting newspapers in foreign languages. He copied some letters, Arabic script, or ideograms from each one and silk-screened them onto T-shirts in the form of an eye chart. Along the bottom, in small print, he wrote "Peace on Earth."

Dave met him during his gumball period, when Al was installing candy machines in the East Village. (The machines were perched on recycled signposts, and part of the profits went to Amnesty International.) The guy was a little odd, Dave thought, but he seemed to have a talent for research. When Dave hired him to do some genealogical work, Al tracked down Dave's great-great-grandfather in the 1850 Illinois census. "Al was always finding out little things," Dave told me. "He'd just be hanging around the block, and people would tell him these juicy tidbits. He had that whole working-man thing going on." Digging up the history of 211 Pearl Street seemed just the job for him.

Al first tried to verify some of the rumors that Dave had been hearing. He went to the Surrogate's Court building, at 31 Chambers Street, where the city's property records were kept, and spent a few days in a musty room on the third floor, spooling through microfilm. As Dave had suspected, most of the block had changed hands recently. The names on the deeds sometimes had a similar ring—Chicago 4, Atlanta 5—but the buildings all seemed to have different owners. It was only later, when Al showed Dave photocopies he'd made of some lawsuits related to the properties, that the two began to notice a pattern: the same attorneys and staff appeared again and again. Chicago 4 and the others were just fronts. Almost the entire block belonged to a single owner: the Rockrose Development Corp.

Rockrose had made its name, ironically, by resuscitating old buildings like 211 Pearl Street. The company was founded, in 1970, by three brothers from Iran: Kamran, Henry, and Frederick Elghanayan—the first a Harvard Business School graduate, the second a lawyer, the third an engineer. They'd started out in Greenwich Village, converting warehouses and welfare hotels into condominiums, then moved on to larger projects, including an office tower on West Fifty-seventh Street by Cesar Pelli. Pearl Street was their most ambitious project yet: Rockrose hoped to build towers of up to a million square feet on the block, including a new trading floor for the New York Stock Exchange.

“I can’t think of any reason that we would need or want to let people know what’s going on,” Jon McMillan, Rockrose’s director of planning, told me recently. “Imagine that you own 213 Pearl and you read in the paper that Rockrose is assembling all of the block to build a new home for the Stock Exchange. The later you hold out, the more money you get.” In 1997, he said, when the development was first conceived, Rockrose consulted a survey of lower Manhattan by Andrew Dolkart, a professor of historic preservation at Columbia. None of the Pearl Street buildings were mentioned. “We just looked at them and saw tenement,” McMillan said.

Landmarks in New York have to be presented for public review, approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and affirmed by the City Council. The criteria are fairly vague—everything from the Woolworth Building to the Wonder Wheel has made the grade. But most landmarks have at least one of three unusual qualities: great beauty, unique architecture, or enough neighbors in a similar style to form a historic district. No. 211 had none of these. “It didn’t have the romance of South Street Seaport or the sex appeal of Wall Street,” Al told me. “It was just a place where everyday merchants bought and sold and moved goods.” The story of Pearl Street was mostly the story of people like Al.

He spent the next seven years consumed by it. At first, Dave paid him twenty dollars an hour for his research. But as Al’s interests grew more esoteric he went off the clock. He examined tax records and nineteenth-century directories, read histories of bricklaying and nail manufacturing. He plowed through archives and libraries in New York, New Haven, Rochester, and Boston. He turned himself into the foremost authority on the history of a single block.

He began with the street—the oldest in New York. It was called Pearl by the Dutch, he learned, when it ran along the East River and was paved with crushed oyster shells. It was crooked then and it’s crooked now: a cow path that became, for a while, the city’s liveliest thoroughfare. It was the first with running water, the first with natural gas, and the first with electric lights. (Thomas Edison’s first power plant was just a block north of 211.) Before the Revolution, the Sons of Liberty met at Fraunces Tavern, at No. 54, where George Washington often took his dinner. When the war was won, the Army celebrated by marching down Pearl Street.

By the eighteen-thirties, New York had begun to feel, for the first time, like the center of the universe. Its population tripled between 1825 and 1850, and the American economy flowed through its port. The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, slashed the cost of shipping goods inland, and New York was the primary gateway, via the Hudson, for ocean freight from Europe and Asia. Two-thirds of all imports came through the city.

Pearl Street was the city’s wholesale district. Goods would arrive by horse and cart from the docks along Front Street, and get hoisted by pulley into the upper floors of “counting houses,” then sold in the stores downstairs. Merchants would come in from towns throughout the Territories, the historian Paul Johnson, who has written widely on nineteenth-century New York, told Al. They would place their orders for the next twelve months—carpets and linens, corkscrews and thimbles, bone china, smelling salts, and teakettles—then head back up the river. Pearl Street was the nation’s storefront in those years, the first World Trade Center, as Al later put it, gridlocked with wagons at every working hour: a microcosm of the city to come.

In 1831, the tax records showed, a middle-aged soapmaker named William Colgate built a counting house at 211. The land had had a succession of owners by then, beginning with Cornelius van Tienhoven, a noted Dutch rogue and Indian fighter. An English alehouse had stood nearby for a while, then the home of the skipper of a ship called the Angel Gabriel. But Colgate had something grander in mind. He belonged to a group of Yankee merchants, strict Protestants, who tried to serve as the city’s conscience. They were teetotalers and abolitionists, gave great sums to charity, and campaigned to convert the city’s prostitutes to chambermaids. “While the guys on Front Street were buying mansions and racehorses, the guys on Pearl Street were rolling money into social causes and the religious press,” Johnson says.

Colgate was both an ingenious businessman and a fervent populist. His soap business made him wealthy—it would one day become the Colgate-Palmolive Company—yet he left the Presbyterian Church for the Baptist in order to be closer to ordinary people. Al could find no record of who designed Colgate’s counting house, but he suspected that it was Ithiel Town, who founded one of New York’s first architectural firms, in 1829. Town was an avid student of architectural history, and he introduced the Greek Revival to the city. (He and his partner, Alexander Jackson Davis, later designed Federal Hall, in Manhattan, and the state capitols of Indiana and North Carolina.) He was the same age as Colgate, moved in the same social circles, and had built a similar counting house down the street for the abolitionist Lewis Tappan. Both buildings had Doric columns, carved

stone lintels, and other classical details meant to reflect the country's roots in Greek democracy. Both were designed to embody the dignity of honest labor.

Leafing through old broadsheets and auction announcements, Al was able to track the tenants at 211 over time. Seth Low, one of the founders of Brooklyn, ran a Far East import shop there in the late eighteen-thirties, selling cork, coriander, Turkish opium, and Chinese gongs. Others sold chemicals, hardware, linens, and silks. At one point, Al heard that Herman Melville had written "Bartleby the Scrivener" there. The only evidence for this, however, was that Melville was born on Pearl Street, and that he had compared Bartleby to a bar of Windsor soap—a Colgate brand. ("That seems to be the only product placement in the story," Al said.) Melville also described Bartleby as staring at a brick wall for long periods, and huddling beneath some "Egyptian" masonry—passages that came to seem more telling as time went on.

A few months into his research, Al showed Dave a bar graph that he'd made with a spreadsheet program. It showed every building on Pearl Street in 1834, arranged by location and tax value. Dave's building was one of the highest bars on the page—the fifty-first-most-valuable building in New York, according to Al's examination of city records. It was also one of only a handful of buildings still standing on Pearl Street from that time. In the winter of 1835, a gas pipe burst at the corner of Pearl and Beaver Streets, triggering a fire that swept through seventeen blocks of lower Manhattan and consumed more than six hundred buildings. Nos. 211, 213, and 215 Pearl were north of the fire, and just managed to escape it.

Dave was impressed, and told Rockrose about Al's research. But he never had to apply for landmark status. In October of 2002, Rockrose agreed to pay close to the full compensation in the demolition clause. The company had gathered almost all the land it needed, and, after 9/11, the state began offering cut-rate Liberty bonds to developers. It was time to clear ground. "Part of me wanted to keep going," Dave told me. "But you can only fight billionaires for so long. I was beat. There was cash there, and I was taking it."

Al, though, had just begun. A day or two after Rockrose took possession of 211, Al hand-delivered a sheaf of documents and a "request for evaluation" to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. "It wasn't about Rockrose and me anymore," Dave told me. "Al believed—he honestly believed—that building deserved to be there. And there was no stopping him."

One afternoon not long ago, I visited the scrap lumberyard in Greenpoint where Al was working. (He has since started his own company, Solomon Wood.) I found him at his desk, inside a long, shedlike building, past a sign that read "Dog in Office!! He's cool if you're cool!" Some chunks of refinished pine were sitting in a cardboard box on an armchair, and a book on identifying woods by their cellular structure lay open on the desk. I glanced around at the mahogany furniture and the bottles of old Scotch in the bookcase. "The office isn't indicative of the pay scale," Al said. The room belonged to his boss—those were his family pictures on the shelves—but he hardly used it. Al had moved in four years earlier, an office squatter of sorts, and quietly become the company's prime scout.

The story didn't surprise me. Al has a gift for going unnoticed, then somehow taking charge. He can seem half as clever as he really is. His voice has a low, vague honk to it—an echo of Boston's North Shore—and he tends to get tongue-tied. Most of the time, he can fight his way clear with a flash of oddball wit. But he sometimes stays stuck for long stretches—eyes frozen wide, as if someone had just barked at him in Chinese. As a boy, he told me, he lost his voice a lot. When his mother mentioned this to the family doctor, the doctor said, "Tell him not to talk too much." Al seems to have taken this advice to heart.

Reclaimed lumber had become one of his passions since studying 211 Pearl. More than three trillion board feet of wood have been put into American buildings since 1900, he said. Of that, about a billion and a half board feet are torn out every year. When his boss's father founded the company, in 1933, he got the wood for free—demo crews were happy to have it hauled away. Now the yard paid up to two dollars a board foot for old pine. Weathered hardwood was in such demand that barns across the Midwest were being pulled down for scrap, and eco-conscious celebrities like Bill Gates were using reclaimed wood in their houses. One bar on the Lower East Side was panelled entirely with cypress boards from pickle barrels.

The best reclaimed wood is finer than anything freshly cut, Al said. A few years earlier, he had sold me some old joists for a bookcase I was making. The wood was Southern longleaf pine, four inches thick and heavy with resin. It had twenty growth rings to the inch—twice as many as the plantation pine at Home Depot—and felt hard as oak. When I'd sanded and oiled it, the wood glowed a deep amber and looked nearly translucent. Afterward, Al sent me a *Times* article that he'd found online, about the building that the joists had been in. It was dated December 13, 1892. "All the shining lights of the east side political world assembled at

the opening of the Comanche Club at 207 Bowery last night," it began. "Among those present were Mr. 'Silver Dollar' Smith, Mr. 'Dry Dollar' Sullivan . . . and Barney Rourke, the Napoleon of down-town politics."

The yard was full of such ghosts. Its two-acre lot was covered in piles of blackened boards and splintered beams, interspersed with stacks of new lumber. Al showed me some long, tapered joists from a schoolhouse built in the eighteen-fifties, and others from a nineteenth-century factory in Chinatown. The latter were Eastern white pine, hand-cut in Maine and hauled south by oxcart. The trunks were so long and unwieldy in those days, he said, that the logging roads didn't turn left until they got to the city's latitude. Across the yard, a forklift had deposited a stack of lumber under a hangar to dry. Al pointed to some strips of molding, delicately fluted, about twelve feet up. They came from the Marquand stable, on East Seventy-third Street (now a two-family house), which was once owned by Joseph Pulitzer. "I call it Pulitzer Prize pine," Al said.

To Al's eyes, the city was a vast boneyard. There was enough old-growth timber buried in its buildings to make a national park, he said; enough stone to fill a thousand quarries. Sing Sing marble, Onondaga limestone, brownstone from Paterson, New Jersey, and Dorchester, Canada—the latter so hard it could hold an edge for a hundred years; everything cut too thick and built too stout, for fear that it might not bear up in buildings of such dizzying height. Five full floors! Even the nails had stories to tell. They were hand-forged in the eighteenth century, slab-cut from strips of iron in the nineteenth, and snipped from rounded wires in the twentieth. Al dug them out with a crowbar and sent them to an iron yard. In the scrap business, history was just another raw material.

While we were talking, a truck clattered into the yard and pulled up next to the office. A pair of construction workers climbed out—one tall and slope-shouldered, the other short and squat. "This should be interesting," Al said. The scrap yard had recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and his boss's son had started a lumberyard, taking some of the company's employees and clients with him. "We had cops down here six months ago, breaking up a fight," Al had told me. "I'm not sure how I've managed to stay around. It's like Masada." Two weeks before, Al's boss had bought some beams of Douglas fir from the guys in the truck for two thousand dollars. But the check had bounced, and now they'd come to collect.

When the larger of the two men saw Al, he ambled over and laid a thick forearm around his shoulders. He bent his head down to Al's ear—he was a good six inches taller—and spoke to him like a teacher informing a young boy that recess was over. "Alan, I want to talk to you," he said. "What's the problem here? Seriously, what's the problem? You don't want to pay the money? Your boss don't want to pay the money?"

"Listen . . ."

"Big operation on Metropolitan Avenue—you got a fuckin' million dollars of stock over here. Explain to us what the fuckin' problem is!" He was shouting now, his nose inches from Al's. His sidekick stood behind him, slapping the back of his hand into his palm and repeating the words at a higher pitch. "We want the fuckin' money! (Give me the fuckin' money!) There's no fuckin' games with us. (No games!) I don't want to hear no bullshit. I want cash. Done. If someone's gonna rob me two thousand dollars, I'm gonna get satisfaction out of it. I'll break your face and your boss's face, too."

"That's against the law."

"I want my fuckin' money! (I want cash, now!) It's ridiculous. It's adolescent is what it is. You see my hands? You see my hands? I go to work every fuckin' day. I'm gonna fuck somebody, I'd rather tell you to your face: Go fuck yourself. Don't beat around the bush like a fuckin' squirrel, like a fuckin' rat, like a weasel. Weasels operate this way."

Al stood there quietly, eyes peering out from under his cap, and waited for the noise to subside. ("Did he call me a rabbit?" he asked me later, after his boss had come out to talk to the men. "No, he called me a squirrel. But my boss called me a little fuckin' rabbit once.") He was used to this sort of thing. When he was growing up, even some of the best junk yards operated on a kind of understanding between sellers and buyers. One side would try to skimp on material—mixing some iron in with the copper, for instance—the other on weight. "It was almost like a magic trick," Al said. "You're sliding these weights across the scale, deducting pounds, using your body motion to conceal it."

He watched his boss and the two men drive off to the bank, to get the two thousand dollars, and shook his head. He was tired of working this way. He'd read a history of the scrap industry, "Cash for Trash," that traced its swindles back to the early eighteen-hundreds. If he'd become a little obsessed with 211 Pearl Street, he said, it was because it told a different kind of story about American business.

When William Colgate built his counting house, in 1831, the city was as corrupt as it would ever be. Pickpockets and confidence men prowled the streets, and every auctioneer had a shill or two in the audience. (In 1834, a local merchant anonymously published a memoir called “The Perils of Pearl Street.”) Men like Colgate and Lewis Tappan were a deliberate counterforce to all that vice—“an outpost of evangelism in the middle of sin city,” as Paul Johnson put it.

To Al, 211 was more than a charming vestige of old New York. It was proof that you could make a buck without screwing your neighbor. “I know that’s not enough to make the building a landmark,” Al told me. “I knew that from the beginning. And certainly Rockrose had the power to demolish it. But, if I was going to try to save something, why not that?”

Less than a month after Rockrose bought out Dave McWater, in the fall of 2002, scaffolding began to rise around 211. None of the buildings on the block had yet been torn down, but Al had heard that 211 was to become an entrance to an underground parking garage. An eighteen-foot Dumpster appeared along the curb, and blaze-orange signs, warning of poison, were stuck on the walls. “When they put up the rat-baiting signs, you know the wheels of demolition are in motion,” Al told me.

In early November, the Landmarks Preservation Commission began to review Al’s documents on 211, and to survey similar buildings in the area. But such reviews usually take months, and Rockrose quickly applied for a demolition permit. Before the commission could decide whether to save the building, the Department of Buildings had granted permission to destroy it. Rockrose’s secrecy had done its work. The development, Jon McMillan said, “was under the radar.”

And then, suddenly, it wasn’t. Early in February, 2003, bright-red flyers began to appear throughout the neighborhood: “Rally to Save 211 Pearl Street.” Al had spent the previous few weeks on the phone and at his fax machine. He’d called historians and architects, preservationists and politicians, and drummed up an impressive roster of supporters. Letters had come in from Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields (“a matter of grave concern”) and Representative Jerrold Nadler (“an exceptional example of early Greek Revival architecture”), from State Senator Martin Connor (“may be of major historic importance”) and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (“worthy of individual landmark status”). The building at 211 was “a rare surviving relic of the process that made New York into America’s great city,” Paul Johnson wrote. “The notion that it should be demolished to make room for a driveway is silly. New York City has more respect for itself than that.”

On the day of the rally, a blizzard struck. Lower Manhattan was ankle-deep in slush, and Pearl Street was a wind tunnel of pelting sleet and snow. By lunchtime, only about twenty-five people had gathered at the coffee shop across from 211. “It was kind of a huddle,” Al told me. Still, among the protesters were Senator Connor and Alan J. Gerson, a city councilman, and their speeches had the desired effect.

Within a few weeks, a story on the building had appeared in the *Times*. By spring, 211 Pearl had been nominated for the National Register of Historic Places. More important, the State Historic Preservation Office had reviewed Al’s materials and come to a decision. It had no direct power to preserve the building, but it did oversee the use of Liberty bonds. Rockrose had been granted a hundred and seventy million dollars’ worth of the bonds. In order to keep them, the state office declared, the developer would have to preserve the façades of both 211 and 215 Pearl Street (213 was still privately owned). The rest of the buildings could go.

Once, this might have been victory enough. Even landmarks, like the Hearst Building on West Fifty-seventh Street, are occasionally gutted and reduced to false fronts—“façadicide,” it’s sometimes called. But all that Al could see was how much would be lost. Walking through 211 one day, he stopped in front of the strange brickwork that Dave’s crew had uncovered five years earlier. It was built into what looked like a pipe chase: a thin column that jutted from the left wall, about five yards from the entrance. There were three pyramids arranged in a column: the top and the bottom were formed of bricks laid on end; the center triangle was carved into the wall, and the cuts were filled with mortar. The design was about ten feet tall and three feet wide—too elaborate for a tradesman’s mark and too uncommon. No architect or workman that Al knew had seen anything like it. More than a century and a half earlier, it seemed, someone had stood at that spot and laid these stones just so. Why?

The first time I saw “the artifact,” as Al had taken to calling it, was in late winter of last year. Al had written to say that he was making a last push to preserve the brickwork, and asked if I would like to see it. I agreed, though a little uneasily. I’d begun to wonder if his obsession with 211 wasn’t edging into something less rational. His talk of Colgate and the Great Fire of 1835 had gradually given way to discussions of esoteric philosophy and Jungian psychology. He’d been spending a lot of time at the New York Public Library and the Masonic Grand Lodge—a hulking high-rise on West Twenty-third Street, with spooky Egyptian murals and ceremonial chambers—studying books on hermeticism and sacred geometry. When he came out, his ring binders were filled with pyramids, Fibonacci sequences, and elegant gyres that twisted in on themselves.

Early on, I knew, Al was just trying to hold on to the building a little longer—grasping for another argument that might allow him to save it. But the more he studied the symbol the more it seemed to fire his imagination. If the building was a window onto New York’s early businesses, he came to believe, the artifact offered a glimpse of its beliefs.

The city in the mid-eighteen-hundreds was as much a religious crossroads as a mercantile one. Cults and superstitions of every stripe passed through on their way up or down the Erie Canal: Mormonism, Shakerism, Seventh-Day Adventism, and the fiery revivals of the Second Great Awakening. The city was too cosmopolitan to be seized by any one movement for long—they flared brightest in the Burnt-Over District, around Rochester and Buffalo. But every heresy had its moment here. People spoke to the dead and travelled to astral planes, practiced alchemy and sought transcendence through sex. “It was the most creative period of religious invention since the seventeenth century,” Sean Wilentz, a professor of history at Princeton, told me. “And I’m persuaded we don’t know the half of it.”

The merchants of Pearl Street were more hardheaded than most, but their sobriety sometimes led to extremes. Finneyites launched temperance crusades, hoping to pave the way for a thousand years of Christian perfection. Millerites left their jobs and wandered the streets, preaching apocalypse. (Jesus, their calculations showed, would return on October 22, 1844.) Elijah Pierson, who ran a business at 211 before Colgate bought the land, declared himself the prophet Elijah the Tishbite, spoke to God on an omnibus, and tried to raise his wife from the dead. When that didn’t work, he joined a partner-swapping religious cult in Ossining. “It was just a kind of spiritual hothouse,” Paul Johnson, who co-authored a book on the Ossining cult with Sean Wilentz, told me. “There were people walking around claiming that they were Jesus, and others were getting arrested for witchcraft. And it was really tough to figure out who was crazy.” When a newly anointed prophet arrived at the Battery to preach, Johnson said, he had to fight for space.

Arcane symbols are common to most cults and fraternal orders, and pyramids were much on the public’s mind in the eighteen-thirties, when many Americans first saw pictures of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaigns. So Al’s research cast a wide net. He sent letters to the Odd Fellows, the American Bible Society, and the Carpenter’s Guild in Philadelphia. He made calls to historians at Princeton, Columbia, Hamilton College, and the University of Michigan. One scholar said that the symbol looked vaguely kabbalistic. Another tied it to the holy trinities of Egypt, Babylon, and Israel. Still another said that it might be a Biblical code—the number of bricks in each row could refer to book, chapter, and verse. Most said that it looked Masonic, but Thomas Savini, the director of the library at the Grand Lodge, was unconvinced. There was no record of Colgate’s having been a Mason, he said. Besides, the order preferred to meet in public lodges—not to carve secret symbols into walls. “That seems more Hollywood Mason than real Mason,” he added.

By the spring of 2003, demolition had begun, and Al was no closer to a final answer. Even the guys in the demo crew had a theory: the symbol was an Illuminati shrine, they said. Maybe a hunk of gold was buried behind it. “I’d had some notion that if I got enough people to comment, by some sort of mathematical process I’d come up with an answer,” Al told me. “But I just had no clue. Maybe it was a little unrealistic. You weren’t going to send them books of sacred geometry and get them to turn the bulldozers off.”

When I arrived at Pearl Street one morning last February, most of the block had been levelled. Nos. 213 and 215 were still teetering on their foundations, but 211 was an empty shell: only the sidewalls and the façade were left. The artifact was intact for now, but a crew was coming to tear down the wall that day. Al was there to salvage what he could.

I found him out front, hunched against the cold, wearing a woollen cap and oversized gloves. He had spent the past few weeks trying to tie up the last loose threads of his research, he said. On one memorable morning, he had even brought a psychic to 211 Pearl Street, on the premise that an occult symbol ought to be examined at least once on its own terms. Tall and pale, with long black tresses and wearing a fur-lined overcoat, she had floated about for a while and held conversations with the bricks. The building was filled with an “enormous sadness,” she said. Then she asked Al if one of the architects had lost a child. (He said he didn’t know, but that there had been a double homicide there in the sixties, when the building was a Chinese restaurant.) When she was done, she concluded that the artifact was a “retired portal”—a transmitter of ancient teachings, now defunct.

Al had come up with a more convincing theory. In the previous seven years, he’d gone from scrap salesman to scholar. He had exchanged hypotheses with professors at the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, at the University of Amsterdam (“Hogwarts for postgrads,” he called it), presented a paper on the symbol at the University of California, Davis, and given a talk at the Royal Library in The Hague. The key to the symbol, he said, seemed to lie in the work of Ithiel Town, the architect. Town was famous, in his time, for having the largest private library in the country—more than eleven thousand volumes. Among them, Al discovered, were works of magic, alchemy, and esoteric philosophy that dated to the Middle Ages. There was no appreciable evidence that Town’s dabbings had carried over into his work. But one day, while looking through a book on Town’s buildings, Al came across a passage that referred to some mathematical sketches Town had made. The sketches, Al later discovered, were kept at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, at Yale.

The Beinecke is a Rubik’s Cube-like structure, built without windows, to protect its collections from the sun. Natural light seeps in only through the thin-cut marble walls, suffusing the rooms with a golden glow. Town’s notebook arrived in a cardboard box, its pages bound with a red ribbon. The paper was brittle and faintly jaundiced with age, but the drawings, stippled in India ink, were perfectly clear: pyramids, gyres, and golden rectangles—just like those in Al’s ring binders.

For Al, though, the true epiphany came later, a few blocks away. The same book that had sent him to the Beinecke had contained a footnote that referred to a portrait of Town. The painting had once belonged to Yale but was now hanging in a church of Town’s design, at the center of the New Haven green. Al found the portrait in a dusty, dimly lit corner of the vestibule. It showed the architect sitting in his study, surrounded by books, blueprints, and illuminated manuscripts. Near the center, beside an open book of psalms, Al could just make out a notebook covered in geometric drawings. One of them showed a set of interlocking triangles: “a near-exact match,” Al later wrote, for the symbol at 211 Pearl Street.

Now all of Al’s esoteric reading and the months spent staring, Bartleby-like, at the bricks seemed to come together. Town was both a Christian and a student of the esoteric, he reasoned, so the symbol must have elements of both traditions. The triangle at its center might represent the Holy Trinity; those above and below it, the old alchemical symbols for earth and cosmos, fire and water—the dualities that define existence. In the Middle Ages, Christ was sometimes called the Universal Alchemist: he who transmuted water into wine, bread into flesh, leaden hearts into gold. Perhaps that’s what was meant here. Pearl Street was all about business, but Colgate and Town wanted something more. Their symbol was a kind of philosopher’s stone, Al concluded. It was a reminder, in plain brick and mortar, that mere commerce could be transformed by ethics and charity.

Or so he liked to believe. “With this thing, there’s always a sense that the more you talk about it the less you say,” he told me that morning on Pearl Street. The artifact stood a few feet away. Earlier that week, after considerable lobbying from Al and the office of Councilman Gerson, Rockrose had paid for the brickwork to be sawed free from the wall. It had been crated and injected with foam, and encircled with nylon straps. Now, as we watched, an excavator shovel bent down and lifted it gingerly from its moorings. It remained suspended for a moment, high above the construction site, as if no one knew quite what to do with it. Then the shovel swung over and deposited it on a flatbed truck, bound for a warehouse in the Bronx. “I kept telling Al, ‘This is the stupidest, most boring thing I’ve ever heard,’ ” Jon McMillan told me. “But he just kept slogging on. It was his personal mission to get this thing saved whether anyone cared or not.” He shook his head. “It was kind of charming and impressive in a way,” he said. After 211 was gutted, in 2003, Al hung around the demolition site for days, gathering all the scrap lumber. “The funny thing was, he tried to sell it right back to us later,” McMillan said. “He just never gives up.”

We were sitting in the lobby of 2 Gold Street, the first of two new high-rises on the block. McMillan, who is fifty, was lounging on a sofa, beneath a map of old New York, showing me some computer renderings of the development. He has pale-blue eyes and wispy brown hair, lightly combed over. His honeyed tan glowed nicely against his cream-colored shirt, and his slender frame had an elegant slouch to it, like the stem of a clay pipe. As he spoke, his voice rose and fell quietly, and his hand traced curves in the air.

This was the last undeveloped land in lower Manhattan, he said—“a golden opportunity.” Rockrose had managed to clear eight structures from the site, but it had been too late to get the new Stock Exchange building. (It ended up on Broad Street.) Instead, the company had decided to erect two residential towers, one of fifty-two stories, the other of twenty-eight. “I was fascinated by the idea of sky culture,” McMillan said. “There are so few social amenities down here that people have had to colonize the tops of these buildings. When you get up there, you look down at all these incredibly romantic rooftops and people sunbathing. It’s a very sexy scene.”

McMillan and I spent the next hour touring the tower—a glass-and-steel structure of “excruciating banality,” as Andrew Dolkart, the architectural historian whose survey of lower Manhattan Rockrose consulted, described it. It was designed to appeal to young professionals, McMillan said, so rents were low by Manhattan standards—a little more than three thousand dollars a month for a one-bedroom. Here and there, bits of old buildings that once stood on the site had been incorporated into the design: a classical pediment from a bank, for instance. But Rockrose’s plan to preserve three façades on Pearl Street had fallen through. Nos. 213 and 215 had since been bought by another developer, the Lam Group, which wasn’t using Liberty bonds. Rebuilding the façades was still an option, but someone else might have to pick up the tab. “Where is Al Solomon when we need him?” McMillan said.

We stepped onto a balcony on the third floor, and looked out over the remains of 211. Its sidewalls were gone now, and the back of the façade had been stiffened with girders and corrugated steel. On the first floor, the granite pillars had been knocked out like two front teeth, making way for the driveway to the underground garage. Below us, in the construction pit, a crew was preparing to lay the foundation for the second tower, next to piles of broken bricks from the counting houses. “I kind of like the idea of saving only the façade,” McMillan said. “It somehow makes it seem more important, that it was worth doing this fancy engineering to preserve it.” He paused and cocked his head. “From most angles, it’s hard to tell that it’s only a façade,” he said.

Nostalgia is a fool’s game in New York. Every building here stands on the bones of others, often more beautiful. Every generation erases a little collective memory, convinced that it has something better with which to replace it. Had the cycle stopped when Whitman groused about New York’s “pull-down-and-build-over-again spirit,” or when Wharton wrote that the city of her youth had vanished like Atlantis, no skyscraper would be standing now. Still, sometimes we lose more than we gain. Structures like 2 Gold Street have none of the giddy ambition of the Chrysler Building. They aren’t meant to reinvent the city; they’re simply “value engineered” to squeeze the most square footage from the least cost. New Yorkers used to build as if every tower were the last. Now we build as if it were only the first.

A few days after I spoke to McMillan, Al and I drove up to the Bronx to see the artifact. The warehouse in which it was stored, at Al’s expense, was near the East River, in the shadow of an overpass of the Bruckner Expressway. It was surrounded by grizzled brick lumber mills and cast-iron lofts—squint your eyes and you could see lower Manhattan fifty years ago. Inside, a grayish light filtered through a bank of grimy, wire-reinforced windows, and rows of wooden crates stretched off into the dim distance. The warehouse was used mainly for art work, the manager told us. “Chuck Barris, that guy from ‘The Gong Show,’ keeps his stuff here.” The artifact lay on the floor to the left, between a Greek mosaic and a nine-foot bronze of what looked like the Michelin Man. “We paid extra for the guard,” Al said.

He pulled a few screws from the crate and pried open the cover. The artifact had become more mysterious in the previous few months, he said. Some people had suggested that it might have been built after the counting house, by a later owner or tenant. So Al had brought in three experts to analyze its bricks and mortar. The first, from Fordham University, had found that the bricks were quite old—probably from before 1850. The second, from Columbia, had found that the mortar was “consistent with historic mortars.” But a third, more detailed study, by a private firm called Testwell Laboratories, had found that the mortar was modern: it contained a type of cement first developed in the nineteen-fifties.

So what was it? An original piece by Town, a reconstruction of one, or a modern sculpture made with salvaged stones? The symbol had become a Rorschach test, Al said, an inkblot. You could see in it any belief or time period that you wished. He reached into the crate and snapped off a piece of the mortar. “Is it sophisticated or is it crude?” he said. “Is it lead or is it gold?”

We sat in the faint light for a while and stared at the bricks, though no Egyptian mysteries unfolded for the moment. “I have no idea what the symbol means,” Sean Wilentz had told me. “And that’s another reason to keep it. Because New York, to me, is becoming less and less mysterious. Its ghosts, its revenants, they don’t have a place to walk anymore. They are being squeezed out. And this is a little place where they can gather. I don’t mean to sound like an occultist, but a little bit of strangeness is important to Manhattan. And this thing is strange.”

Al dragged the cover over the crate and screwed it back down. There’d been talk of reinstalling the artifact on Pearl Street, he said, as a historical exhibit. But if that fell through he could probably find a place for it. By now, the wood he’d salvaged from 211 was scattered across the country. He’d sold some to Calvin Klein for an apartment in Miami, some to Julian Schnabel for his place in the West Village, and some to a set designer for a music video by Madonna and Britney Spears. He was happiest, though, about the pieces he’d sold to a crew at Ground Zero. They were laying the foundation for the Freedom Tower and needed something to shore it up. He had just what they wanted, he said, and he told them the story of a little building on Pearl Street. ♦



One of the oddities at No. 211 was an arrangement of brick pyramids, ten feet high. Photograph by Robert Polidori.

EVENTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST - Compiled March 2008

EVENT	SPEAKER	TIME	DATE	LOCATION	CONTACT INFORMATION	FEE
Exhibit: Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life, North Pacific Coast			9/12/07-7/20/08	George Gustav Heye Center, NMAI	http://www.nmai.si.edu/	free
Talk: Thursday New Perspectives on the Derveni Krater and Its Ancient Macedonian	Beryl Barr-Sharrar, New York University	6:30 pm	4/3/08	645 Fifth Avenue	LROUSSIN@aol.com	free
The Illustrated Desert: the Origins of Writing in the Egyptian Desert	John Darnell, Yale University	6:30 pm	4/8/08	: 612 Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University	LROUSSIN@aol.com	free
Talking to the Troops about the Archaeology of Iraq and Afghanistan,	C. Brian Rose, University of Pennsylvania	6:30 pm	5/7/08	National Arts Club, Sculpture Court, 15 Grammercy Park So	LROUSSIN@aol.com	free
Professional Meeting: SAA 73rd Annual Meeting			3/26/08-3/30/08	Vancouver, BC		
Professional Meeting: Theoretical Archaeological Group			5/25/08-5/28/08	Columbia University		
Professional Meeting: SIA 2008 National Conference			5/29/08-6/1/08	San Jose, CA	Jay McCauley jay@knightsia.org	
Professional Meeting: World Archaeological Congress			6/29/08-7/4/08	University College, Dublin	www.ucd.ie/wac-6/	

In addition, a new permanent exhibit on human evolution has opened at the American Museum of Natural History; other permanent exhibits relevant to archaeology include those at the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums of Art on Egypt, at the AMNH's Hall of South American Peoples, and at the Metropolitan on Western Asia and the Far East; there are also permanent exhibits that might be of interest to archaeologists, including one on slavery at the New-York Historical Society and one on the history of Brooklyn at the Brooklyn Historical Society.

If anyone knows of archaeological events or exhibits which they would like listed, please contact Diana Wall either by e-mail at ddizw@aol.com or by mail at Department of Anthropology, The City College, New York, NY 10031.

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