



RESTORING A RESIDENCE

926 Fifth Avenue

*New York City*

## The Building

The townhouse at 926 Fifth Avenue is currently one of the ten largest single-family residences in Manhattan at over 16,000 square feet. However, according to the AIA Guide to New York City, it would be considered representative of only “modest” Fifth Avenue houses built at the turn of the century. This townhouse is also noteworthy as one of only a few single-family residences that still survive on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Of the original “monumental” residences, only those that are museums or institutions (such as the Frick, Vanderbilt & Carnegie Mansions) remain.

926 Fifth Avenue was built between 1898 and 1899. It was commissioned along with the neighboring townhouse located at 925 Fifth Avenue together as a pair of single-family residences. The owner, John Woodruff Simpson (1850–1920), was a prominent lawyer of his time, and a founding member of the law firm Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, then titled Simpson, Thacher, & Barnum. The two buildings are completely distinct, but complimentary designs, and it may be noted that their floor elevations don't even align. 926 Fifth Avenue remained in the ownership of the Simpson family until 1944, shortly after the death of his wife, Kate Simpson in 1943. Although it may have been the original intention to keep 925 Fifth Avenue in the family, as well, it was sold shortly after completion at the turn of the century to Mary E. W. Terrell.



# The Architect

## *An Historical Figure*

Charles Pierpont Henry Gilbert (August 29, 1861 to October 25, 1952) was born in New York City, and became a well-known American architect of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. He is best known for designing townhouses and mansions. Most often referred to as C. P. H. Gilbert, he received a careful Architectural education, studying both in America and in Europe, including at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He also took special courses in civil engineering, and later studied painting, sculpture and the fine arts in general.

In 1886, at the age of twenty-five, Gilbert began practicing as an architect in New York City, and received commission to design buildings of all kinds. One of Gilbert's first important buildings was the 1888 Richardsonian Romanesque mansion at Eighth Avenue and Carroll Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn for Thomas Adams Jr., a chewing gum magnate. From 1893 on, Gilbert had a very large business, which grew steadily. In addition, he was a director or a stockholder in a number of large manufacturing companies outside of New York. By 1900 Gilbert had a reputation as a specialist in designing opulent townhouses and mansions. Through the 1920s he designed more than 100 New York City mansions in various styles. Most of them along Fifth Avenue have now been re-purposed for institutional and commercial use. Besides 926 Fifth Avenue, his works included:

*Harry F. Sinclair House* (1898), 79th Street and Fifth Avenue, now housing the Ukrainian Institute.

*Cushman Building* (1898), Broadway and Maiden Lane.

*Franklin Winfield Woolworth Mansion* (circa 1900), 80th Street and Fifth Avenue, now demolished.

*Meudon*, a massive 80 room Louis XVI-style revival estate of William Dameron Guthrie in Lattingtown.

*Joseph Raphael De Lamar House* (1905), Madison Avenue and 37th Street. Now the Polish Consulate General, 1905.

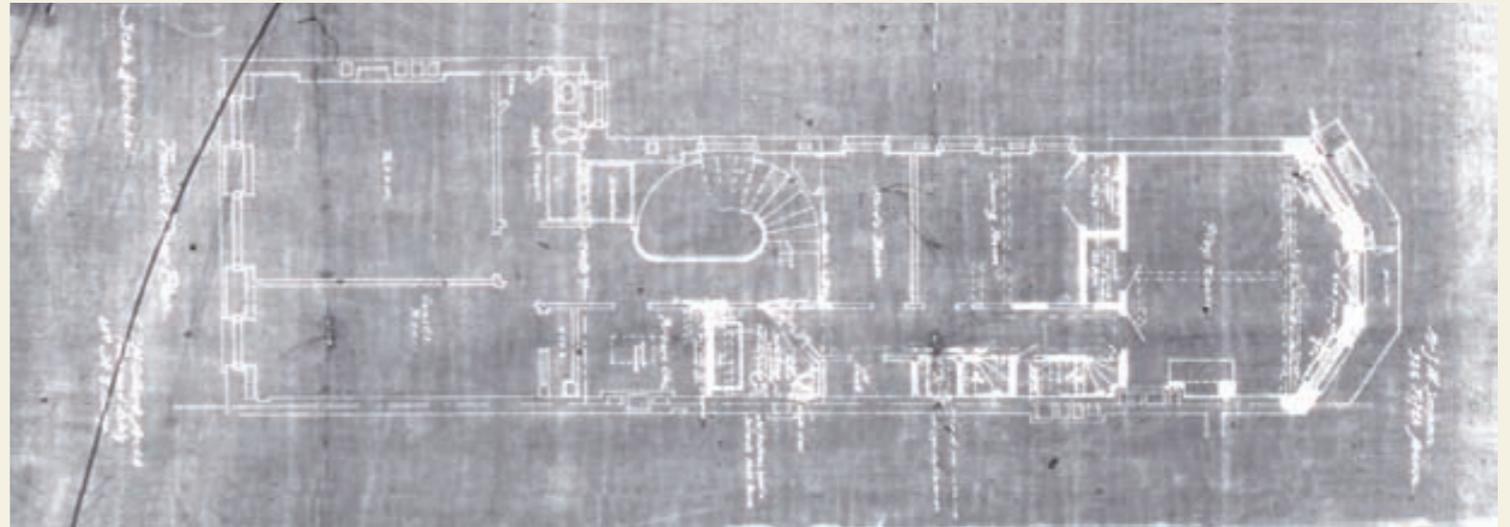
*Morton E. Plant House* (1905), 52nd Street and Fifth Avenue, with architect Robert W. Gibson, now Cartier.

*Felix M. Warburg House* (1908), 92nd Street and Fifth Avenue, now the Jewish Museum.

*Otto H. Kahn House* (1918), 91st Street and Fifth Avenue, with architect J. Armstrong Stenhouse, now the Convent of the Sacred Heart.



Harry F. Sinclair House



926 Fifth Avenue, Archival Microfilm



Arthur Sachs House



Austrian Consulate, NYC



Joseph Raphael De Lamar House

# Alterations

## *Past & Present*

Originally built as a five story building (including the Cellar/Garden Level), a sixth floor with Mansard roof was added in 1902, shortly after its initial completion. This may have housed additional or alternate living quarters for the housekeeping staff. In 1950 the building was converted to a multiple family dwelling, and it is known to have been used in a professional capacity on many of the floors starting sometime in the 1960's. In 1982 it received Landmarks Designation. It appears to have been occupied as a mixed use (professional/residential) dwelling until 2005 when an investor obtained the leasehold rights, subsequently gutted it, and was planning to convert it back to a single family dwelling, but sold it to its current resident instead.

The current renovation added a finished roof deck to the sixth floor roof, adjoined by enclosed living space, each of which takes up approximately half of the floor plan of the newly created seventh floor. In addition, the unfinished Basement was completely converted to conditioned utilitarian space, except for the large mechanical room, and there was also a modest expansion into the rear yard on the Cellar, and next two floors above.



Front & Rear Facades of Finished Renovation



# The Preservation

The preservation of the landmarked building was carefully controlled by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). Numerous filings with the LPC were sought and received to cover each area of restoration. Rigorous attention was paid to historical photographs and material testing, such as an in-depth analysis of the many painted copper elements. Certain things, such as the original Cellar entry door and entry ironwork, as well as the metal balustrade down to the Areaway, have been permanently lost and required careful interpretation to produce elements that were acceptable to the LPC as historically correct or complimentary. In the rear yard, the modest lower extension required careful matching of the existing brick size and coursing, as well as the use of historically appropriate roof and window detailing. Further up on the rear façade, an entire copper bay window with leaded glass was completely rebuilt to carefully match the character of the original.



THE NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION  
1 CENTRE STREET 9TH FLOOR NORTH NEW YORK, NY 10007  
TEL: 212 669-7700 FAX: 212 669-7180



## PERMIT CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

<b>ISSUE DATE:</b> 03/23/07	<b>EXPIRATION DATE:</b> 02/27/2013	<b>DOCKET #:</b> 075005	<b>COFA #:</b> COFA 07-7049
<b>ADDRESS</b> 926 FIFTH AVENUE <b>HISTORIC DISTRICT</b> UPPER EAST SIDE		<b>BOROUGH:</b> MANHATTAN	<b>BLOCK/LOT:</b> 1388 / 72

**Display This Permit While Work Is In Progress**



# The Restoration

Designed in a Beaux-Arts style, the building features a rusticated limestone Cellar Floor, with decorative light brick above, and limestone surrounds, lintels, quoins, & banding throughout. The entry is covered by a limestone portico with fluted ionic columns, and a balcony above with a limestone balustrade. It also has an elaborate modillioned copper cornice (painted the color of limestone), dormers with a copper roof and highly decorative adornment, and a slate Mansard roof. All of these elements were important components of the program of restoration.

The specific tasks of exterior preservation & restoration included:

- Cleaning and pointing of all brick and limestone work
- Scattered replacement of limestone and bluestone elements
- Removal of the existing red asphalt shingled roof and replacement with an historically correct red slate roof
- New copper flashings and gutters
- Repair of existing decorative copper dormers
- Repair of the existing modillioned copper cornice
- New wood double-hung windows
- New wood French doors at all balconies
- New wood Main Entry French doors with restored ironwork
- New wood Cellar Entry doors with ironwork matching the existing elements
- Restored Areaway window ironwork
- New bluestone steps and areaway pavers
- Restored Areaway iron railings
- Re-tooling of Main Entry limestone steps
- New Sidewalk
- Recreation of Copper Bay Window on Rear Facade

The specific tasks of interior restoration included:

- Traditional wood paneled walls and doors
- Decorative and finished plaster ornamentation and surfaces throughout
- Recreation of a traditional elliptical wooden stair with an ornamental metal balustrade
- Selection of historically appropriate stone fireplace mantle pieces throughout
- Recreation of coffered barrel-vaulted Entry Foyer

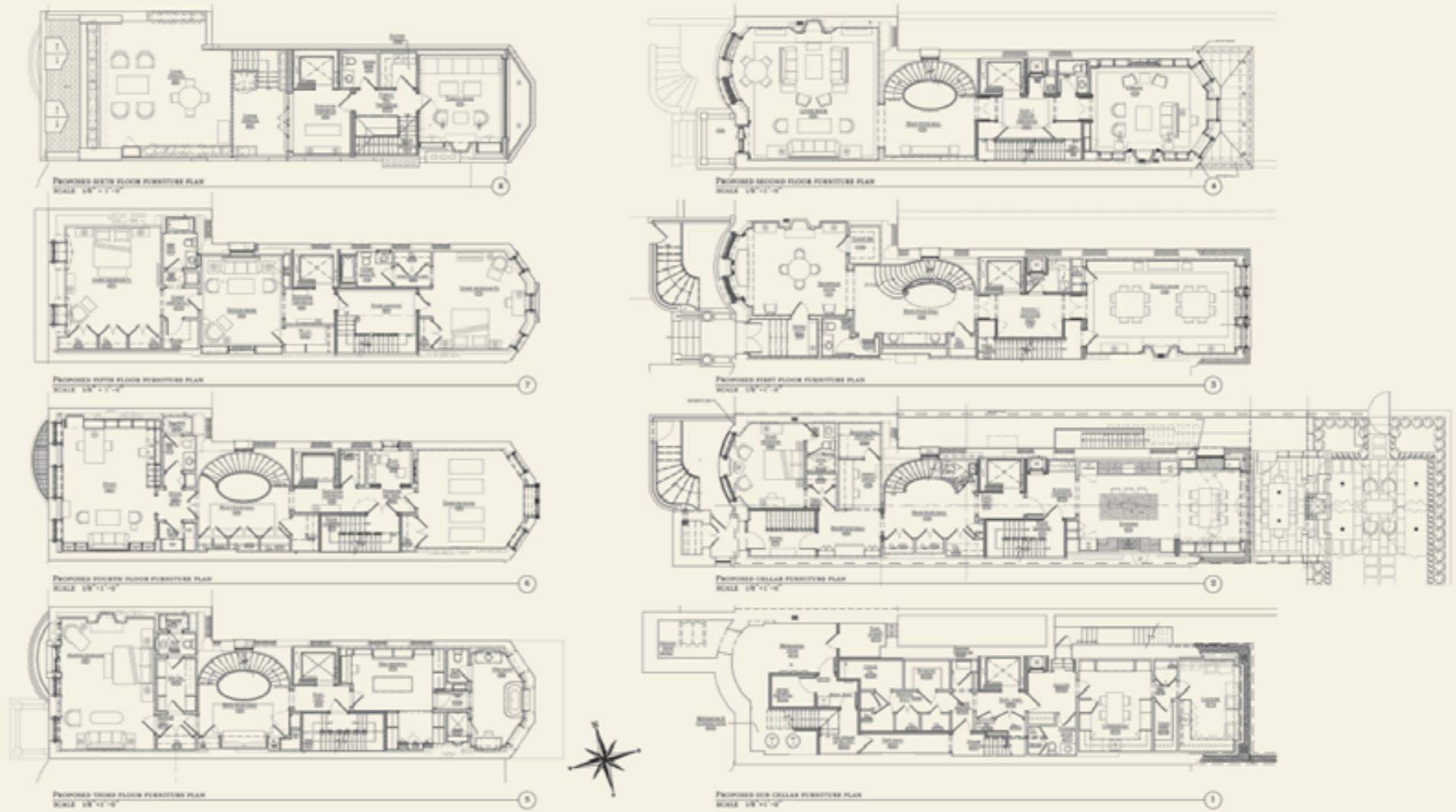


# The Renovation

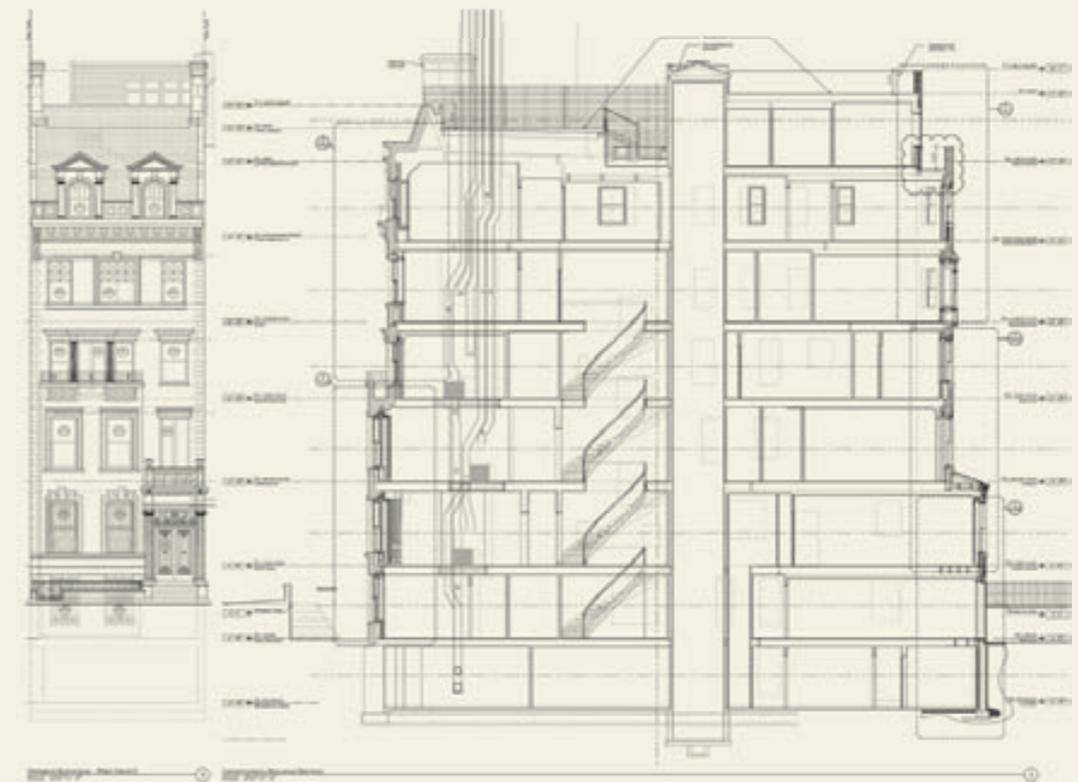
The townhouse last changed ownership in early 2008. At the time of its acquisition, the previous owner had been in the process of completely renovating the building and returning it to its original use as a single-family residence. It had not been used in this capacity in many years. The previous owner had gone so far as to have a completed architectural design by a prominent architect and started construction, but they abandoned the project for undisclosed reasons just after the interior of the building had been completely demolished, except for the existing structural wood floor of each level. In this way, the townhouse was acquired with all of its finishes, and vertical circulation removed, so that the brick party walls and foundation were completely visible from the inside, as was the bottom of all the original floor joists. There was even a valid open building permit in place.

As with the previous owner, the new owner also wanted to use the building as a single-family residence, so this was an ideal condition in which to take possession of the property. The approach to layout and structure was completely different for the new design. Whereas the previous design went so far as to call for the removal of all of the original structural wood floor and replacement with steel and concrete, the new design sought to retain the original floor structure and its datums as a given starting point. The new design was created from scratch, but the space planning that was developed is typical of single-family townhouse living.

Much of the original wood floor framing was maintained, however the creation of a fully protected non-flammable fire stair required the use of concrete and/or steel structure for the egress stair & its landings. In many cases the landings seamlessly extended into seemingly main circulation space, that in reality were protected extensions of the protected egress path. The modest extension of the Cellar and First Floor required a special structural design to support the existing five stories of brick façade above that were to remain. A specific program of shoring to install the structure was developed and monitored by a specialist in this field.

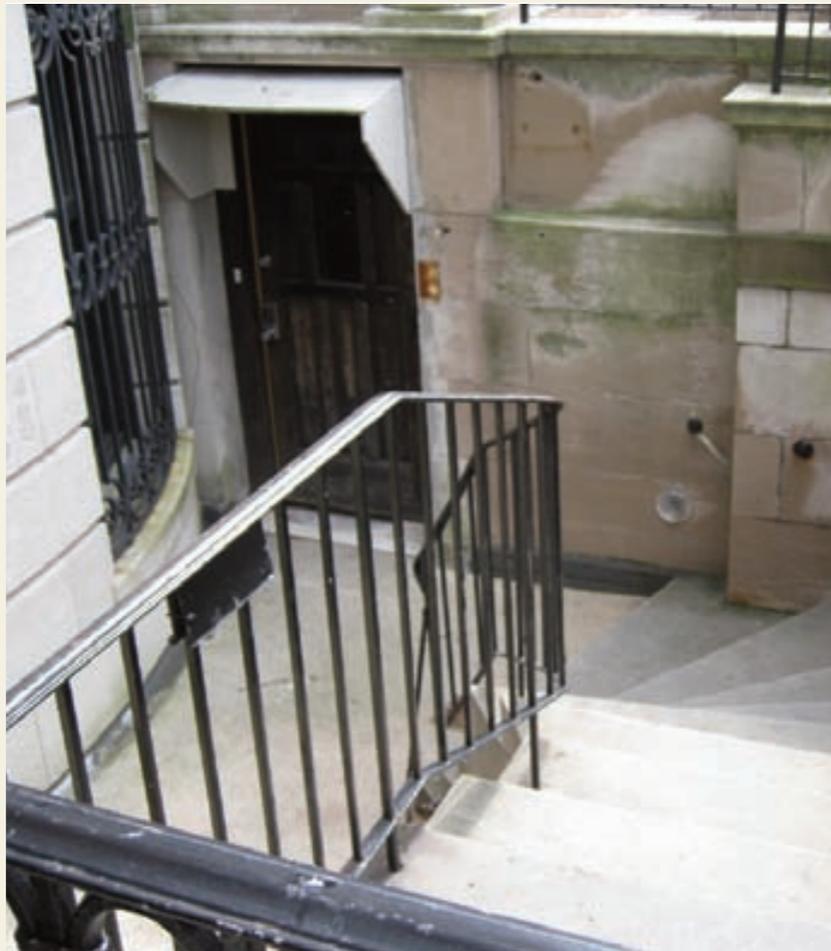


- BASEMENT**  
Laundry, storage space and the mechanical room
- GARDEN LEVEL**  
Lower Entry, Kitchen, Powder Rm, Office & Storage, Landscaped Rear Yard
- FIRST FLOOR**  
Main Entry, Reception Hall, Powder Rm, Pantry, Dining Rm
- SECOND FLOOR**  
Living Room, Powder Rm, Pantry, Library
- THIRD FLOOR**  
Master Suite
- FOURTH FLOOR**  
Office, Salon, Powder Rm, Gym
- FIFTH FLOOR**  
Bedrooms, Baths, Sitting Room
- SIXTH FLOOR**  
Rooftop Terrace, Powder Rm, Pantry, Family Room



## Entrances

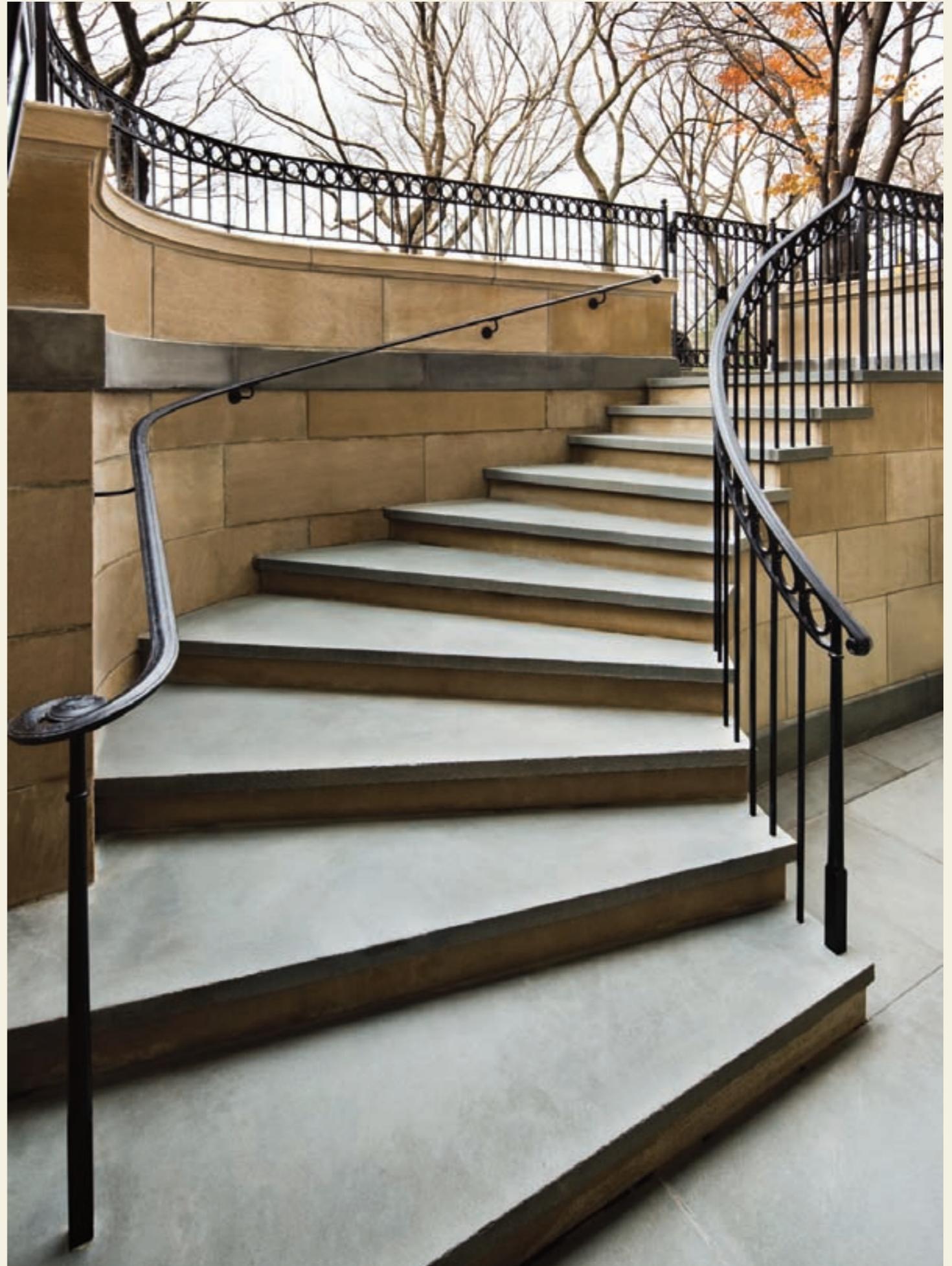
The main entrances required a substantial amount of cleaning and masonry patching. There was no available information about the original lower entrance, so the Architect worked closely with the LPC to design something that was in keeping with the existing elements of the house, as well as the fabric of the neighborhood. Fortunately, everyone agreed that the removal of the “belly” gates on the windows of the Main Floor was historically relevant.



## The Areaway

Repair of the existing masonry stairway revealed that the original stone steps had been replaced some time in the past. In addition, the existing steps had been patched with a cement stucco that was deteriorating and was a poor match to the existing limestone retaining walls, which were themselves structurally un-sound. There was striking evidence of significant frost heave along the entire top band of limestone. Much of the original limestone was cleaned and patched, but where that was impossible, matching Indiana limestone was installed.

The LPC agreed to allow the re-paving of the Areaway floor with bluestone, instead of concrete, so that it was natural to re-surface the repaired steps with matching bluestone, as well. This new bluestone was carefully selected so that it matched the existing bluestone base of the building and the enclosing low walls.



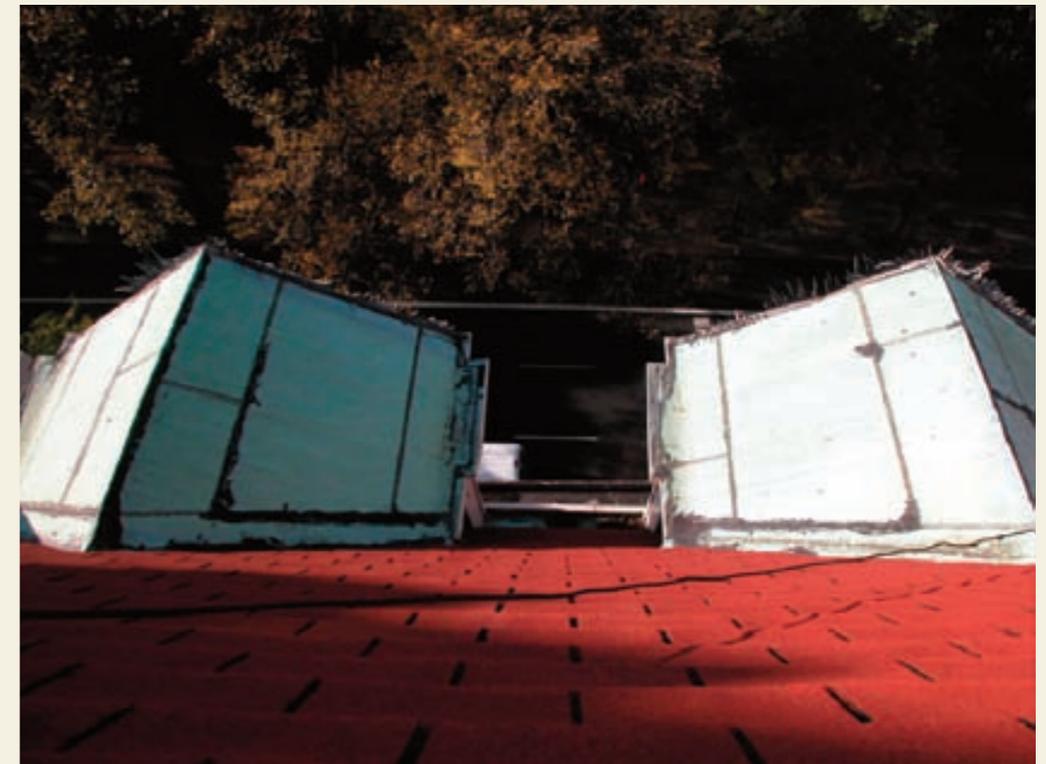
## Mansard Roof

Sometime in the past, the original slate tile shingles of the mansard roof had been replaced, and the building was purchased with failing asphalt shingles. The color of the new slate tiles was carefully chosen and the roof was completely re-shingled and re-flashed. Also, the existing limestone parapet walls were cleaned and re-pointed with a specially selected grout, since this decorative limestone needed to match the existing building façade. The restoration work for the roof, the dormers and the cornice required erecting full-height scaffolding to properly do the work.



## Cornice & Dormers

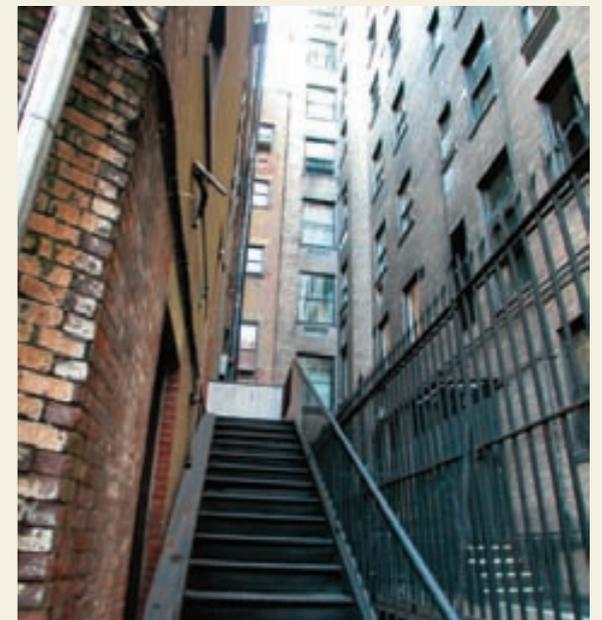
The existing metal roofs of the dormers had been repaired at various times in the past and needed to be replaced. The dormers were also completely re-flashed. All of the original decorative copper details of the dormers and the cornice had been painted many times over the years and they needed to be scraped and re-finished. Many discrete portions of the metal modillions, pilasters and dentils needed to be repaired or replaced. A specialist in paint analysis was engaged to determine the color of the original paint that was used on this decorative metal work, and the new paint color was carefully chosen to match the results.



## Rear Yard

The building was purchased with the landscaping already completely removed, and the masonry of the lower portion of the building in disrepair. The LPC had previously approved the replacement of the entire rear façade with a ten foot extension. In spite of this, the new owner choose to leave most of the existing rear façade and only extend the lower two floors with a modest addition. Since the garden level was completely invisible from all public venues, the LPC felt that it was appropriate to allow a more contemporary treatment of the fenestration in this one area of the rear yard. However, the cornice of the new metal roof over the addition was designed with a traditional and historically relevant metal frieze and crown.

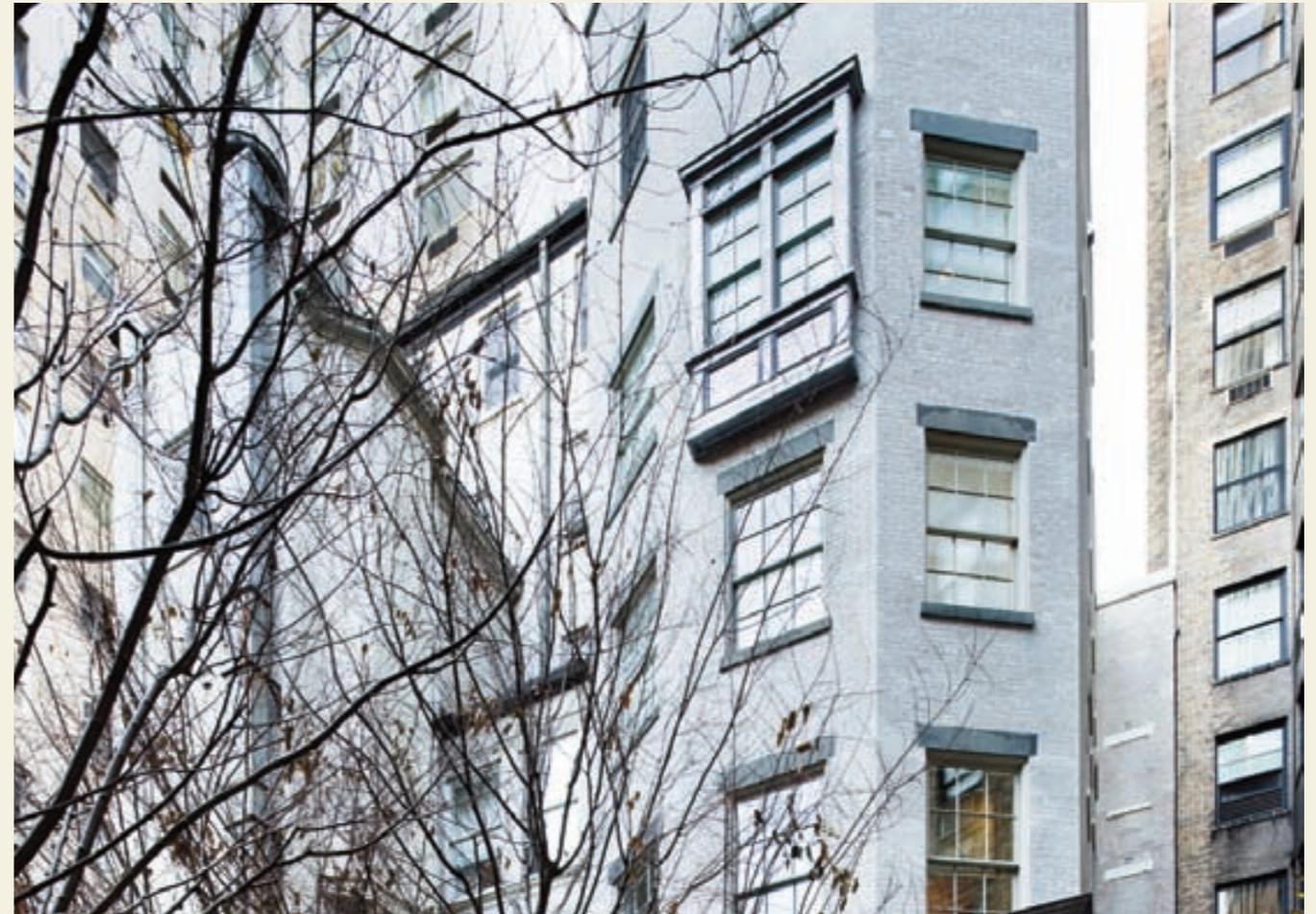
The new brick of the addition was chosen to match the existing brick in terms of size and coursing. An existing private covenant with the neighbors required that the brick on the rear of the building be painted white or off-white. Therefore, the existing brick was scraped and all of the brickwork was painted. The existing bluestone lintels were scraped and left unpainted along with all of the new bluestone lintels.



## Bay Window

Research into the original building drawings revealed that this bay window was designed as part of a two-level metal balcony or “cat walk” on this floor and the one above. There was inconclusive evidence as to whether the rest of this metal structure had ever been installed, but without the balcony, the bay window looked particularly awkward, and tenuous.

The existing copper bay window was leaking and structurally un-sound. In addition, it was extremely uncomfortable to actually be in it. Because of this, the new Owner was hoping to have it renovated or removed. The LPC had previously approved its replacement with a “flattened” version that matched it in elevation. The metal elements were carefully examined, and matching or complimentary details were designed and fabricated. In addition, most of the original decorative glass was re-used in new transoms that related to the original transoms.



## Plaster Work

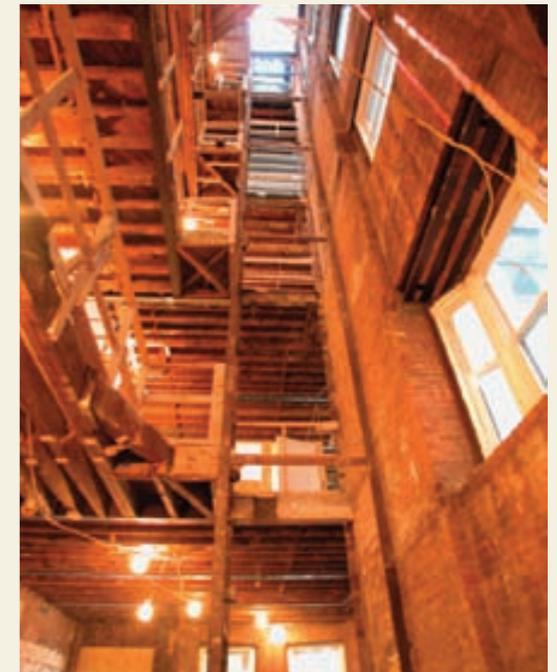
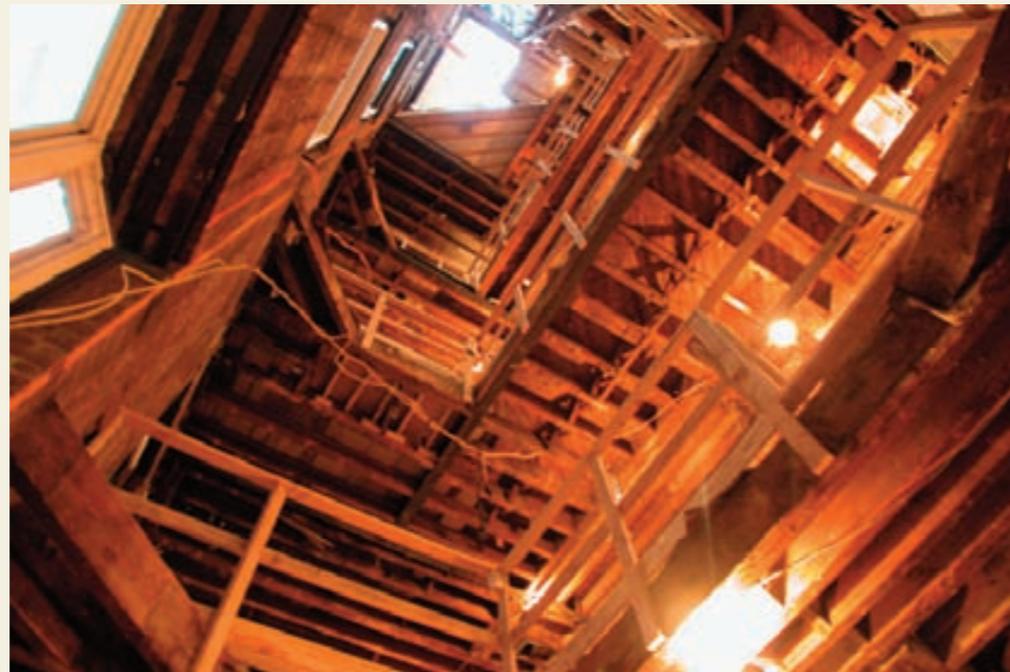
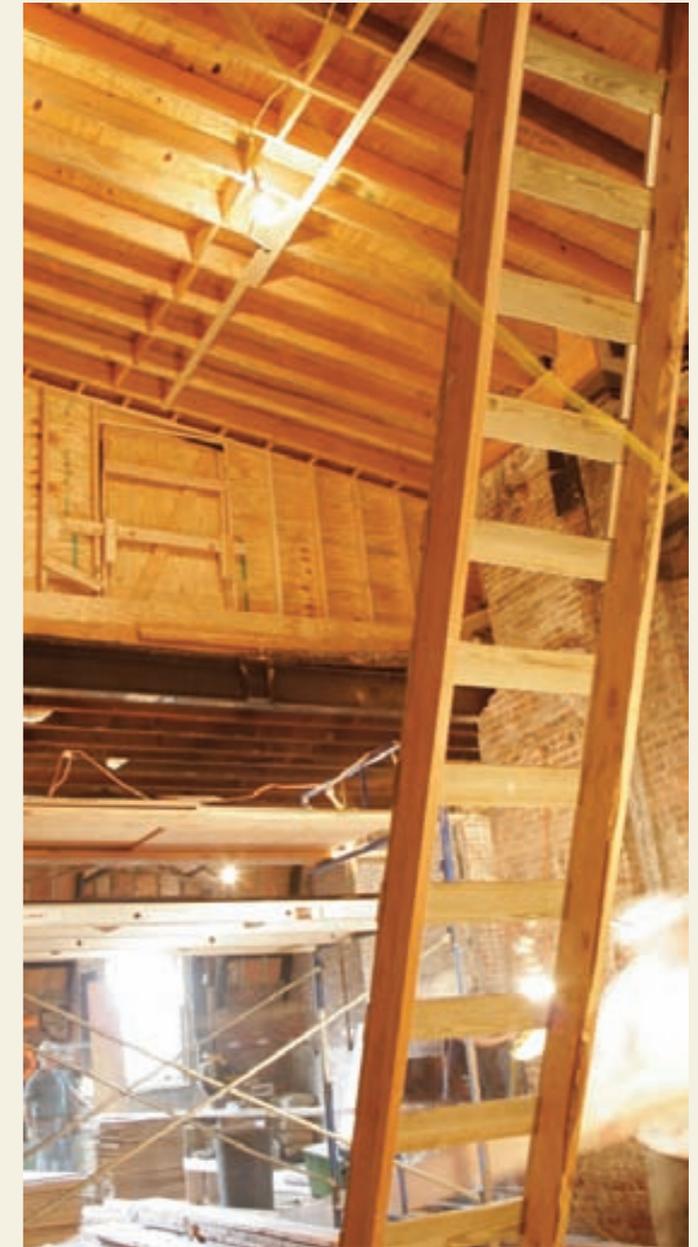
A specialist in traditional decorative and flat plaster work painstakingly fabricated and installed a significant collection of carefully researched crowns, casings, astragals and other elements throughout the residence. All of the decorative plaster work was produced from custom artwork and moulds that were carefully researched, designed and created.



## The Grand Stair

With its sweeping plaster surfaces and decorative stringer brackets, the new stair incorporated a very traditional geometry and many historically relevant details. The design of the balusters and the handrail were carefully researched and artfully employed. This custom bronze balustrade was designed and fabricated by a master metal worker.

The recreation of the main elliptical stair required additional fire-safety precautions because of today's building standards, even in this single family residence. The DoB allowed the use of a five-story grand stair by requiring a fully-sprinklered building with standpipe connections, as well as a fully protected non-flammable fire stair connecting all eight floors to a fire-protected egress corridor. Custom decorative fire doors were required and special fire safety hardware was used extensively. In addition, fire department standpipe connections were required on every floor.





## Entry Foyer

The building was purchased with the original Entry Foyer completely removed. Very little was known about the original Entry Foyer at the beginning of the project, except for what appeared to be the remaining original stone steps and the location of the original landing. From the beginning, the design intention had been to re-capture the feeling of what might have been created originally. Later into the project, an old photograph was discovered that showed a previous version of the Entry Foyer, but it was unknown if it was original. As it turned out the quality of the space created by the new decorative stone casings, stone wainscot and the coffered barrel-vault plaster ceiling was very much in keeping with this photograph.

