



Boston Valley Terra Cotta

Replacement gargoyles for 90 West Street, a 1907 building designed by Cass Gilbert that was damaged on Sept. 11, 2001, depict some of the building's current owners and some of the principals involved in its continuing reconstruction.

Faces at Least a City Can Love

Gargoyles Add Whimsy to \$148 Million Project Near Ground Zero

By GLENN COLLINS

It is the season, at last, for the gargoyles to return to 90 West Street.

Many assumed they went missing when its towering neighbor, 2 World Trade Center, collapsed on Sept. 11, 2001. Though wounded, 90 West Street was celebrated as a miracle building, thanks to its triumph of survival. But after the fires cooled and the smoke lifted, an architectural inventory of the 1907 neo-Gothic building showed that the landmark had lost its gargoyles.

The truth is, some of the gargoyles may have succumbed long before: victims of age, neglect and entropy. No one knows for sure. But now it can definitively be said that as part of the \$148 million rebirth of the former office building created by the architect Cass Gilbert, all those owls, goat heads, griffins, baby dragons, monkey heads, bats and other assorted creatures are coming back.

Nearing completion are a new \$4 million, 45-foot mansard roof, a \$5 million, three-story granite base, and \$11 million worth of new terra cotta tile and decorations.

Indeed, nearly 7,000 new pieces of exterior terra cotta had to be recreated for the restoration, "since so much of the terra cotta at 90 West Street was destroyed in the attack," said Gretchen E. Krouse, a vice president at Boston Valley Terra Cotta in Orchard Park, N.Y., south of Buffalo.

The clay was shaped by computer-assisted design, but many of the new terra cotta pieces were pressed into molds, and then glazed, by hand, just as they had been in the early 1900's. "You can see workers' handprints inside, just as you could on the originals," Ms. Krouse said.

Many of the more than 100 replacement gargoyles were also made at the Boston Valley factory. And in an homage to the playful exuberance of Gilbert's 1913 Woolworth Building at 233 Broadway, the gargoyle reproductions are being augmented with seven contemporary faces.

The appropriately grotesque new caricatures include Peter Levenson, a principal of the Kibel Companies and one of the building's owners; Henry Kibel, another of the owners; Michael Y. Ahearn, president of Seaboard Weatherproofing Co., the exterior contractor; and Jeff Smith, Seaboard's on-site project manager.

"It's as if I've been living here for a year," Mr. Smith said, "so I might as well stay here as a gar-



Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Peter Levenson, one of 90 West Street's owners, and a gargoyle likeness of him on the facade of the building.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Adding Whimsy to a Restoration: Faces a City Can Love

Continued From Page B1

goyle."

He noted that 90 West Street was a prelude to Gilbert's Woolworth Building, where the lobby sculptures famously depict F. W. Woolworth adding up nickels and Gilbert himself grasping a rendering of the building, and even celebrate the skyscraper's structural engineer, Gustav Aus.

"Our hope," said Mr. Levenson, who is spearheading the construction for the owners, "is that Cass Gilbert would understand."

Helen Curry, one of Mr. Gilbert's great-grandchildren, who speaks for the architect's legacy before preservation groups, said "what fun," when apprised of the new gargoyles, adding: "I love it."

To Ms. Curry, the 90 West Street restoration is important nationally, because many of the classic Gilbert

buildings, like the 1895 Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul, "are in need of extensive repairs."

For more than two years, 90 West Street was shrouded in a 23-story construction veil and braced in scaffolding, a grim reminder to both passers-by and construction workers of the flaming steel debris that rained on its north facade, made great gaps in its exterior, and turned its interior into a hell of fire.

A year ago, 90 West Street's developers were granted \$106.5 million in tax-exempt Liberty Bonds and other financing from the city's Housing Development Corporation for the project. The rest will come from the reconstruction partners, which include Brack Capital Real Estate, the Kibel Companies and the hoteliers Richard Born and Ira Druker. Stone by stone and tile by tile, the skyscraper is approaching its future as a rental building with 410 apartments. A turning point in the recon-

struction was reached on a recent morning, as a rigging crew toiled to install a 10-ton capstone assembly atop the arch that, 35 feet above Cedar Street, guards the north entrance of 90 West Street.

"This is a landmark day for us," said Mr. Levenson as he stood at the muddy spot where a tower once fell, carefully observing the assembly. One wrong move could have shattered \$300,000 worth of crafted stone and steel.

Standing next to him was Mr. Ahearn. He watched as the capstone was fastidiously dangled into its exact spot, to a tolerance that amounted to an eighth of an inch. "It's as if the heart has started beating again," Mr. Ahearn said, suddenly smiling.

The arch is an emblem of the entire effort. As much as possible of the original heavy "cubic stone" was used to recreate the arch, but it, and many of the original building's damaged granite blocks, have been replaced by new, lightweight stone facades. In these stone "sandwiches," thick granite veneers that have been cut with computer guidance are attached to hand-welded steel armatures that precisely reproduce the shape of the original facade. From the outside, Mr. Levenson said, the panels are indistinguishable from the originals.

The depleted quarries that supplied the original granite could not furnish enough stone of the right color to permit complete replacements of the originals, said Christopher J. McConnell, president of Continental Marble Inc., who is the project's stone wrangler. There was, however, enough quarry granite to carve stone veneers.

Initially, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which declared the building's exterior a landmark in 1998 and has closely monitored the construction, had

questions about the appropriateness of panelization. "But you have to be realistic, and do the best you can," said Robert B. Tierney, the preservation commission's president, "and this is more than that. It's an excellent restoration."

The reconstructors have constantly melded the old with the technologically forward. While the blasted copper sheets of the skyscraper's sloping mansard roof have been replaced with new copper, the old decorative metal balustrade at the top, which melted and twisted, is being replaced with 400 linear feet of fiberglass pieces approved by the landmarks commission.

The work at 90 West Street has been not only a task of restoration, but also of memorialization. Some of the blasted carved stone window heads are being left as they are, to bear witness to the building's grievous wounds. Even a memento from the earliest disaster days is still visible, on the west side of the north facade: the ghostly, grayish remnant of the "90 WEST" tag that had been spray-painted in orange on the building facade by the rescue workers during the early chaos at ground zero.

Now, incongruously, a suite of model apartments has taken root on the sixth floor. It is an oasis in the construction flurry-burly, with its nine-foot-high loft-style ceilings and trendy bamboo-plank floors. The builders' rental office will open in March, and, as early as May, tenants could occupy apartments that range from \$1,550 a month for small studios to \$5,500 for three-bedroom apartments.

But to Ms. Curry, Mr. Gilbert's descendant, "the most important thing about all of this is that 90 West Street is still standing."

"That's because," she added, "he designed this to endure."