

From the New York Times

## MY JOB

## The Approach Is Holistic; The Sites, Holy

My grandfather was a master builder in Italy. My father trained under him. I was trained in the Old World sense of how buildings stand up, how materials interact. From the time I was 5, I was learning how to read and understand blueprints, how to appreciate the inherent characteristics of natural materials. Wood and stone need to breathe, almost like living things.

I help religious institutions restore what's already there; I don't design anything new. Contractors do the actual physical work, but I'm on-site to help monitor the quality of work.

I work primarily in New York City at places like the Friends Meeting House, the Trinity Baptist Church and the Judson Memorial Church. I did some consulting for the Central Synagogue some years ago, before it was badly damaged in a fire in 1998. Often I'm in parts of buildings, like bell towers, where nobody's been for 25 years or more.

In many religious institutions, everything is done by committee. The people who serve on these boards with the clergy are volunteers. I have to educate them about budgeting, accounting strategy and planning. They could be sitting in a building that's falling down around them and not be able to make a decision. My job is to get them organized internally and help them get started.

Sometimes people call me in for one problem and I find out it's something else. Generally I insist on looking at the whole building. If I find a problem with the tower, for instance, and the stained-glass window needs restoration, too, I might suggest putting up the scaffolding around the window first so the parishioners will get excited about the most visible work. It helps with fund-raising.

Many of my projects can take 10 years. Some of them are multimillion-dollar programs. We'll do top-priority projects and then the religious institution may run out of money. They'll call back in a couple of years, and we'll do the next step.



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

**WILLIAM STIVALE**

Building conservator

I've been working on St. Michael's Episcopal Church since 1991. They had no idea what the problems were when they called me in. They needed extensive masonry and roofing replacement, and the carillon, the set of bells in the tower, had to be reinforced and rehung. At the First Presbyterian Church of New York, on 12th Street and Fifth Avenue, we had the entire top of the tower disassembled and spread out on the front lawn during the restoration. That work took four years.

The most useful service I provide is a master plan. I tell church committees, "Let's look at the next 5, 7 and 10 years — what you have to do now to avoid further problems." I take a holistic approach. It's like preventive medicine.

When you do this type of work, people become very close because they have a common goal. On my current project, there's a woman who brings homemade baked goods to all our planning meetings.

Architecturally, I find religious institutions the most interesting and the most challenging. But also, they provide social services. This has a great deal to do with why I focused on them.

Written with Patricia R. Olsen