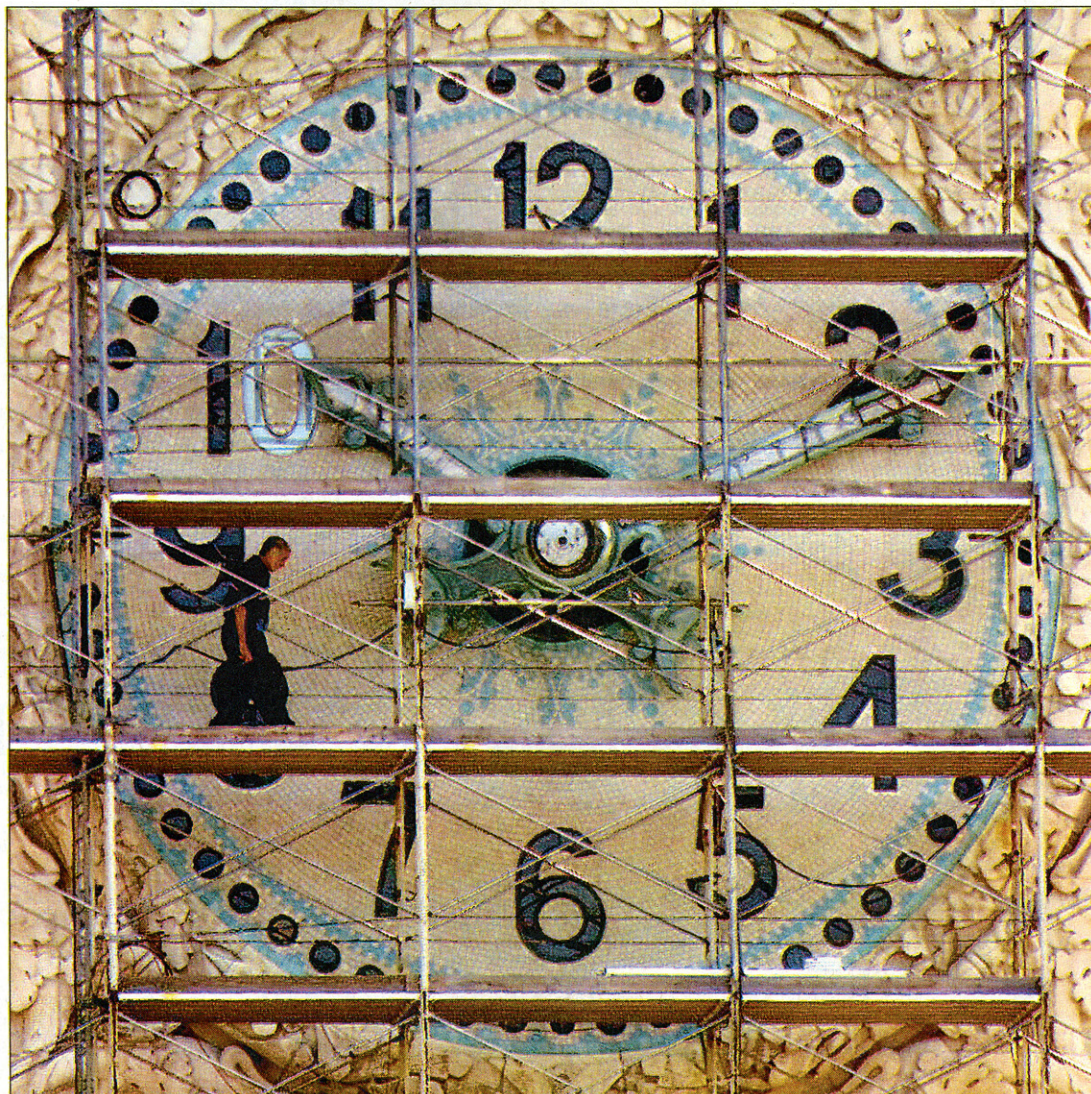


The Metro Section

The New York Times



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

A 27-foot clock face on the MetLife Tower, with a 17-foot minute hand, 4-foot numerals and thousands of mosaic tiles.

A Tower's Big-Time Restoration

MetLife's Immense Clock Gets a Detailed Overhaul

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

When you're restoring a marble-framed clock so large that the 6 is on the 25th floor and the 12 is on the 27th floor, you go to some lengths.

You send a scouting party to Westchester County in search of Tuckahoe marble. And if you're lucky, you spy a 300-cubic-foot chunk sitting behind Rocco's Service Center on Marbledale Road in Tuckahoe.

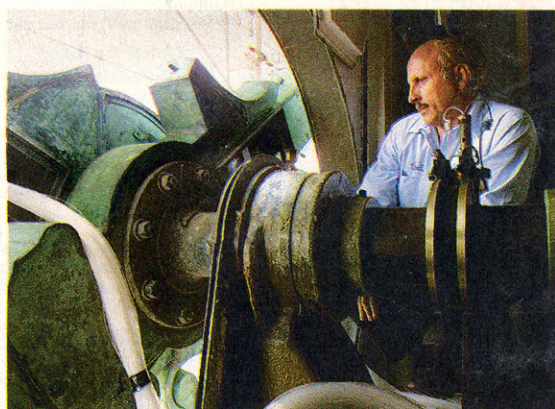
"Rocco thought I was completely pulling his leg when I asked if I could buy the boulder out in his backyard," recalled Stacy Albanese of Building Conservation Associates Inc., consultants in historic preservation.

But she was not. As project manager for the \$35 million rehabilitation of the 50-story MetLife Tower at 1 Madison Avenue and East 24th Street, a three-year project now nearing completion, Ms. Albanese needed the stone for repairs to the existing, and virtually inimitable, white Tuckahoe marble.

MetLife paid an undisclosed sum for the sedan-size boulder. It was taken to Connecticut to be sliced into slabs three inches thick and then trucked to the tower overlooking Madison Square Park, where it was carved into repair pieces, known as Dutchmen, in a makeshift rooftop stone yard.

"The building is like a cathedral," said Raymond M. Pepi, president of Building Conservation Associates, which worked with the Graciano Corporation, a masonry restoration concern. "This is an immensely manual, labor-intensive process using techniques that are centuries old. We had to recreate a lot of that ability."

For instance, the new slabs had to be drilled; that is, chiseled into a surface of fine parallel grooves, as the building's original Tuckahoe marble had been. But then the stone had to be sandblasted to match the erosion of



Paul P. Iaboni, above, chief clock-tower electrician, with the motor for the MetLife clocks. They were turned off in 1999 for the renovation. The scaffolding should be off by December.



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Commercial Real Estate

Big-Time Restoration for MetLife's Clock Tower

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the older grooves caused by 92 years of exposure to wind and weather.

That speaks to the obsessive level of detail in the rehabilitation of the MetLife Tower, which is not only the insurance company's home office but a civic cynosure, with its 26-foot-6-inch-diameter clock dials, six-foot bells and eight-sided beacon, 700 feet in the sky, atop a cupola newly regilded with 23.75-carat Italian gold leaf.

"We care a lot about the building and a lot about our presence in the city, in the neighborhood and on the skyline," said Jeanne M. Daley, the project director for MetLife. "So great care was taken to do the right thing."

Altruism was not the only motivation. MetLife will be eligible for a federal tax credit equal to 20 percent of the certified rehabilitation costs for preserving a building on the National Register of Historic Places, in a program overseen by the Interior Department and state preservation officials.

There were other reasons for a painstaking renovation. "Redoing the building on the cheap would undermine its economic viability," said Kevin Foley, a MetLife vice president. "The tower is an important piece of Manhattan real estate and an important asset of the company." It also has "intrinsic value to the brand and the corporate image," he said.

Although MetLife has leased its entire complex between 23rd and 25th Streets to Credit Suisse First Boston, it is leasing back floors 10 through 41 in the tower for continuing use as its corporate headquarters.

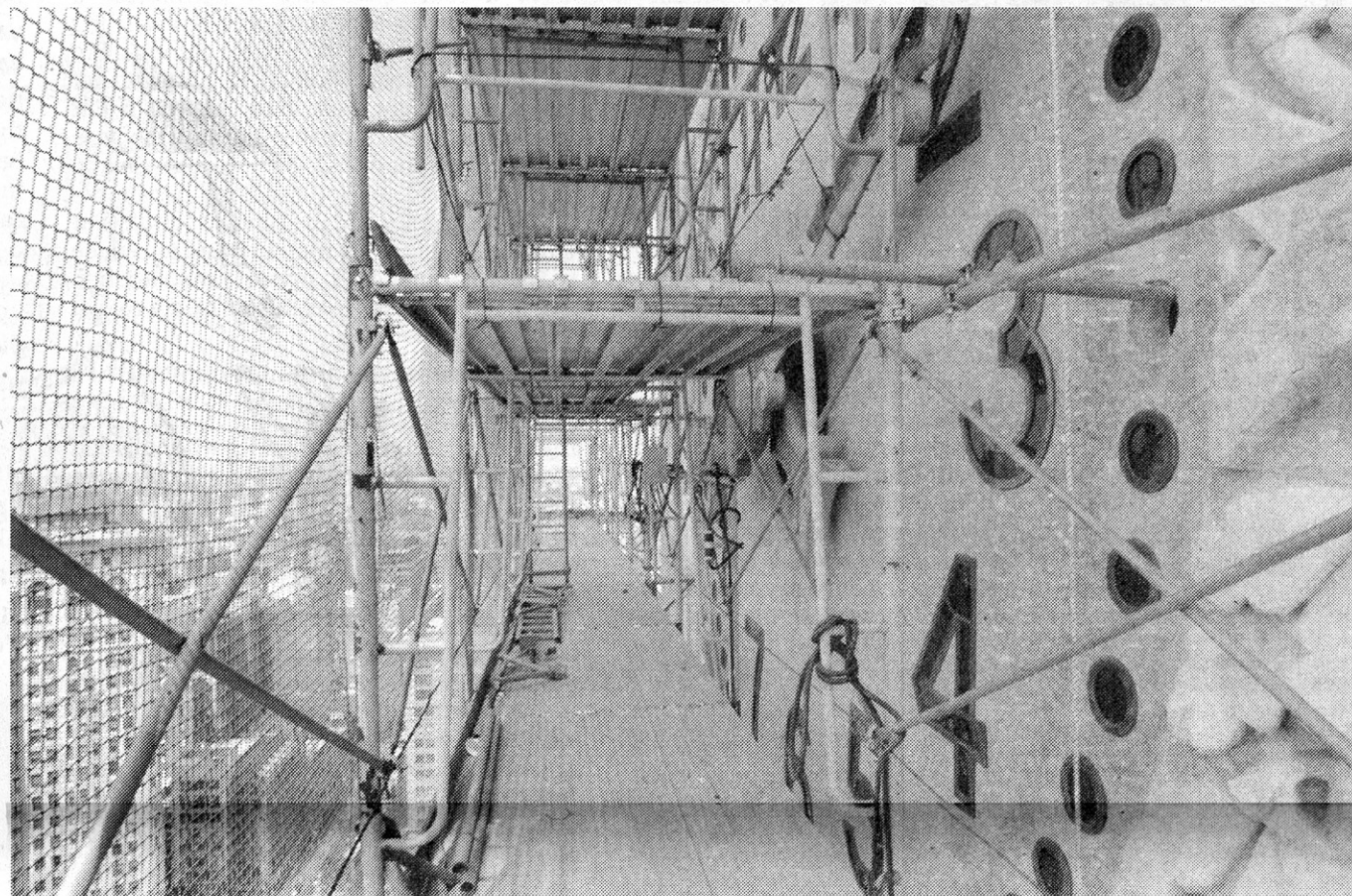
The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company has been at 1 Madison Avenue since 1893. Its tower, designed by Napoleon Le Brun & Sons and modeled on the campanile at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, opened in 1909 as the tallest building in the world. In the early 1960's, much of the marble ornamental work was stripped off and replaced by limestone in the name of modernization.

But enough Tuckahoe marble remained that the rehabilitation team, which included Structure Tone as construction manager, had to find a new source.

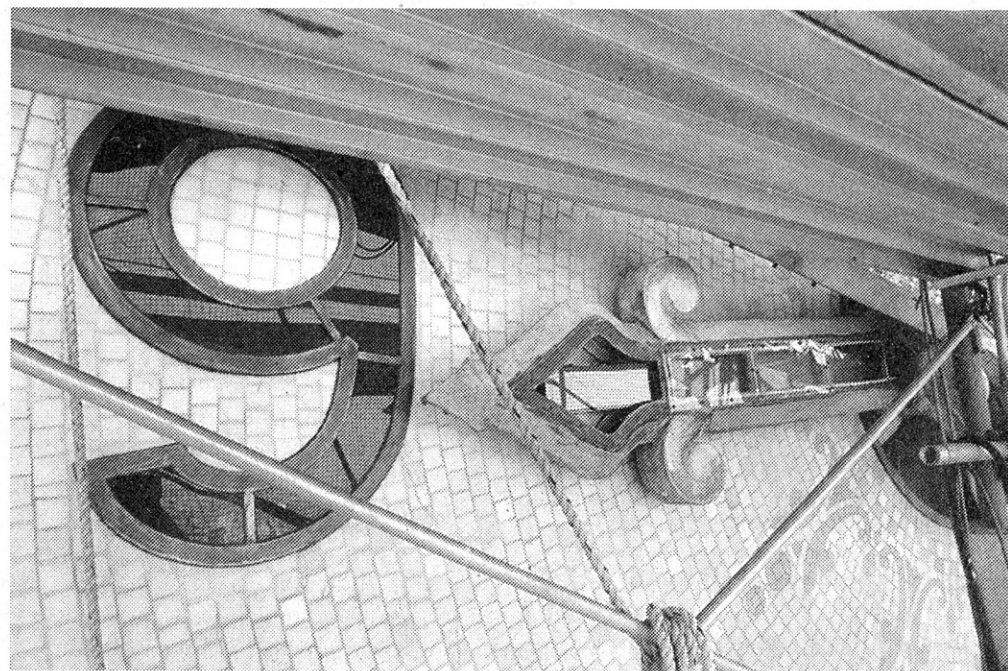
"The Tuckahoe quarries have been closed for decades," Ms. Albanese said. "And it is a stone that is notoriously hard to match."

Hence the trip to Tuckahoe and the happy discovery at Rocco's. The boulder was supplemented with cast stone in shades of white, gray and buff, and with pieces of Tuckahoe marble salvaged from the site of the new Columbia University boathouse in Inwood Hill Park and from the MetLife Tower itself.

Some of this salvaged stone was used to fashion new lips for the curvaceous marble dolphins that frame the "largest four-dial tower clock in the world," as Metropolitan Life



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



proudly described it in 1914.

Familiar as it may be after all these years, the clock turns into something else entirely when seen face to face from a scaffold 346 feet above the sidewalk, as the noise of Madison Avenue gives way to the gentle buffeting sound of the wind.

This is not a timepiece as much as a work of architecture, hugely scaled yet intricately detailed. The minute marks — mere flyspecks from below — are in fact the size of dinner plates. The numerals, framed in cast bronze, are four feet tall.

In each dial face are three delicate, concentric necklaces of cornflower blue and turquoise. These are made of countless thousands of tesserae, small mosaic tiles laid in a radial pattern. Many had to be replaced.

With scrollwork and crescents, the copper-sheathed hands are sculptures in their own right. The minute hands are 17 feet long, the hour

hands 13 feet 4 inches. (Harold Lloyd would have had a much easier time hanging on here than he did in "Safety Last.") The lighting in the hands, numerals and minute marks is being replaced with a fiber-optic system.

The chimes are 20 stories above the clock faces on an outside deck. The four bells — a 7,000-pound monster tuned to B flat and three smaller siblings in E flat, F natural and G — were cast by Meneely Bell Company in Troy, N.Y., in 1908.

They played the familiar Westminster Chimes every quarter-hour from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. The quarter hour was also signaled at night by flashing lights.

Lights, chimes and clock were all turned off in March 1999 to accommodate the rehabilitation, when an enormous scaffold began to cocoon the tower. It still extends to the 35th floor but should be down entirely by December.

And not a moment too soon for Dr.

Raymond M. Pepi, president of Building Conservation Associates, which consulted in the renovation, called the project an "immensely manual, labor-intensive process using techniques that are centuries old," partly because of its cathedral-size scope. Its numerals, for example, are four feet tall.

John K. Weiser, who lives a block away and regards the tower affectionately, even if he does not set his watch by it. "I miss the whole building desperately," he said.

So does Thomas Arbuckle, the general manager of the International Toy Center, across Madison Square Park. At night, he used to make a point of looking up as the quarter-hour approached so that he could watch the flashing lights. "The chimes speak for themselves, but there's much more," he said. "It's a very soothing, wonderful presence."

One feature that was not temporarily extinguished by the rehabilitation was the beacon, which MetLife long ago named "the light that never fails." The crossover from old to new lighting systems was made in a single day.

"We've all been cognizant," Ms. Albanese said, "of not letting that light fail."