

Streetscapes: The 1881 Schepp Building

The Coconut King's Beheaded Factory

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

EVEN in its truncated state, the 1881 Schepp Building dominates Duane Park and most of TriBeCa. Now this structure at the northwest corner of Duane and Hudson Streets is in the first stage of a major facade repair, a \$500,000 project to restore the slate roof and dormers and cure persistent leaks.

But the pièce de résistance, the restoration of the long-gone corner mansard tower — will have to wait indefinitely.

Leopold Schepp was born in New York City in 1841 and by the age 10 was supervising a crew of boys selling goods on Third Avenue railroad cars. Seven years later he was in the spice business and in 1873 he entered and soon concentrated on the field of dried coconut. He had a loft at 178 Duane Street, between Hudson and Greenwich Streets, in the emerging commodities district.

Schepp's successful techniques in preserving what had been a perishable item from the Tropics brought him a fortune and in 1880 he began work on a large manufacturing building at 165 Duane Street.

Present tenants have heard that the building once was New York's tallest. Kevin Bone, the architect working on the facade, said that it measures 145 feet to the base of the mansard tower, which would have added about 20 feet more.

Research by Dr. Sarah Landau, the architectural historian, indicates that both the Tribune and Western Union buildings of 1873 far exceeded this, at 260 and 230 feet, respectively. Trinity Church spire's height is generally given as 280 feet.

But the form of the Schepp Building was in the vein of both of the Tribune and Western Union buildings, with a battered-stone base, a red-brick midsection dotted with stone trim, and a mansard tower.

However, the Schepp Building tended toward a Romanesque feeling, with round-arched windows, blackened bricks and an emphasis on virtuosic brickwork rather than carved stone detailing. The little triangle of Duane Park at its base gives it a commanding presence.

It appears that the Schepp Building was used principally for coconut processing and packaging, and millions of coconuts flowed through the building yearly. Schepp himself became active in the stock market and, according to The New York Times in 1887, had "a temper that would make the North Pole melt."

What the newspaper termed "unparliamentary language" led to several fracas at the Stock Exchange and at least one suspension for Schepp.

IN 1925, at a time when Schepp's sales of preserved coconut averaged \$1 million a year, he began to give away his fortune, making gifts of \$500 to \$5,000 to his employees. In the same year he established the Leopold Schepp Foundation with a gift of \$2.5 million, to assist boys who pledged "to abstain from bad habits."

He also asked for other suggestions from the public. In the next day's mail he got 2,000 begging letters and crowds gathered outside his ground-floor office. According to The Times, Schepp had to "decamp from office to escape besiegers for help." Ultimately, Schepp expanded his philanthropy to include

girls. He died at his residence at the old San Remo Apartments in 1926.

According to The Times, the "Coconut King" had already given away \$7 million and still left over \$1 million. The Leopold Schepp Foundation awarded about 200 partial scholarships last year.

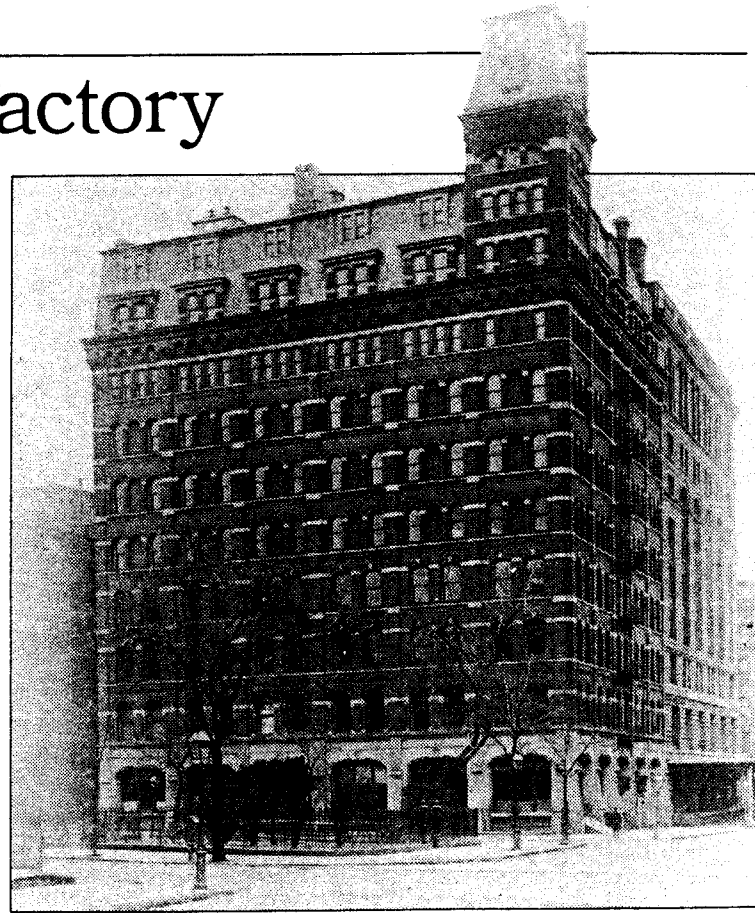
The mansard tower was removed at some point between 1915 and 1928 and some prior owner also stained the facade red, which suppressed the rather fussy stone trim. Paul Goldberger's "The City Observed: New York" calls it the best building on Duane Park, "grand and self-assured." In 1980, the building was converted to co-op apartments and last spring it was included in the TriBeCa Historic District.

Joseph Levine, the project architect with Kevin Bone Associates, said roof drains had been rerouted to the cornice at the base of the mansard and overloaded the drainage system.

Now the co-op is restoring the original drainage and repairing damaged cornices, dormers and slate, although it does not have the \$100,000 or \$200,000 to clean the facade.

Don Wiss, a computer expert who designs software for bond trading, owns the base of the tower and would like to rebuild the mansard, which would give him sweeping panoramic views to the north and west from a giant, double-height room. But it would cost about \$250,000. "Some day I'll be able to do it," Mr. Wiss said, "but for now it's just a dream."

The Schepp Building at Duane and Hudson Streets, circa 1900.



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