The Park Avenue office of Roy Stillman looks more like a room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art than one inside an office building. On one wall, eight vases and globes by Louis Comfort Tiffany rest on teak shelves, a fraction of an expansive personal collection. Mr. Stillman, a developer, sits behind a monolithic desk made by Jacques Adnet, where two nickel blocks support a slab of leather, across the room from a beloved, one-of-a-kind Jean Royere couch. Behind that is a tapestry by Henri Rousseau of a lively jungle scene.

Yet, at the moment, the most precious antique in Mr. Stillman’s collection might just be the one he is restoring himself: 36 Bleecker Street in NoHo. And the most
important piece is one that has been long gone, a refrain common to many of the city's old buildings — the decorative pediment crowning the sixth floor.

Older than most of his heirlooms, the property dates to 1885, when it was built as the Schumacher and Ettlinger lithography studio, helping establish the neighborhood as one of the city’s foremost printing districts. But when Mr. Stillman came across it in 2012, it had been reduced to a document-storage warehouse covered in grimy white paint and aluminum siding. Now he has stripped all that away, revealing red brick and cast iron, barrel-vaulted ceilings and a light-filled courtyard.

Nothing has made him prouder, though, than that pediment, unearthed in archives and rebuilt by hand.

“The building just wouldn’t have looked right without it,” Mr. Stillman said. “It’s like leaving one arm off a chair you’re restoring. You can still sit in it, but it just won’t feel right.”

Many buildings are missing their decorative tops through decades of decay and neglect, followed by wanton destruction after a cornice fell from a Harlem townhouse in 1979 and killed a Barnard student. This led to a pair of city laws with tough inspections on such accoutrements, which caused many property owners to simply remove their architectural details rather than maintaining them.
They are the bald spots of New York, politely ignored and embarrassingly endured. What used to crown the top of roofs is no longer there.

When they return, the neighbors and real estate blogs rejoice, chronicling the affairs as “cornice porn.” For some time, no townhouse renovation has been complete without a rebuilt cornice, and now the same goes for larger projects.

Developers claim that their rooftop restoration work is a gift to the neighborhood, as important as good doorknobs, which are typically the first thing anyone notices about their building. “Most of our residents can’t even see the roofs,” said Michael Stern, principal of JDS Development Group, which has added architectural touches to the tops of two recent projects, Walker Tower in Chelsea and the Stella Tower in Hell’s Kitchen.

But these enhancements can also help win over persnickety public officials and choosy buyers, especially if a property had been relatively anonymous. Putting a little panache on the parapet can lend an identity to these impressive yet overlooked properties.

The Walker Tower, named for its designer, Ralph Walker, and built in 1929 for the New York Telephone Company, had long been one of the tallest buildings in Chelsea even if it was hiding in plain sight on 18th Street. When JDS and its development partner, Property Markets Group, bought the top 13 floors of the 22-story building for a condominium conversion, they turned to Walker’s substantial archives for inspiration.

There, they uncovered early sketches for four shimmering spires, the ultimate in Art Deco expression, though they were never built (see: Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Walker’s own 1 Wall Street). “Apparently they had been value-engineered out,” Mr. Stern said. “Even in those visionary days, you couldn’t escape the budgets.”

Turning to their current design team at Cetra Ruddy, an architectural firm, the developers came up with four bronze shafts set three stories above the deck, each weighing half a ton. They further accentuate the Gotham dimensions of the buildings.

At the Stella on West 50th Street (named for Walker’s wife and also being developed by JDS and Property Markets Group), the team had an actual cornice to work with, albeit one that had been dismantled decades ago for reasons that remain unclear. Using a few remnants still cemented onto the roof and more sketches from the Walker archive, Cetra Ruddy crafted a crown for the caesars of Manhattan, a cornice of four giant stone leaves capping the tower.

Unlike at Walker Tower, where the spires are visible from the penthouse units (one of which sold for $50.9 million in January, a record for downtown), at the Stella the leaves are tucked into the roof. The cornice sits alongside a filigreed enclosure for the heating and cooling systems inspired by Walker’s detailed Deco
work in the lobby. The filigreed enclosure replaced a rusting hulk that had been
the former capstone to the building.

“Back in the 1920s and ’30s, it was a time of passion, when everyone was striving
for something better, with their life and their work,” Mr. Stern said. “For a long
time, developers forgot those values, and we’re trying to recapture that.” And it
does certainly seem a valuable investment, given that few of the 51 apartments,
selling for $1 million to $10 million, remain on the market.

Mr. Stillman did not have it this easy. When he began inspecting 36 Bleecker, he
discovered that there had been some kind of ornament on the roof — the evidence
was sheared-off bricks and broken iron anchors on the roof. Not even tax photos
from the 1920s showed what had been there.

But digging through old archives at the New York City Transit Museum,
preservationists from Higgins and Quaysbarth found a 1904 photo when the
Bleecker Street subway station opened, showing a glancing view of the original
pediment — not enough to create a design, but enough to confirm something was
there. They then discovered a proposal from the building’s original architect for
an almost identical pediment at the Union Club in Midtown, which was never
built. Morris Adjmi, the architect hired for the project, used the proposal to
recreate the pediment at 36 Bleecker Street, along with four lintel posts at the
corners of the building.

The work won over the Landmarks Preservation Commission — which had to
approve the work because the building sits in the NoHo Historic District — in
part by helping to disguise one of two duplex penthouses, which is on the market
for $25 million.

“Without it, probably no one would be able to tell you what was wrong with the
building, but everyone would know something was missing,” Mr. Stillman said.
“It’s the focal point for the essence of the entire place.”