Custom BUILDER OF THE MONTH

Lease On Life

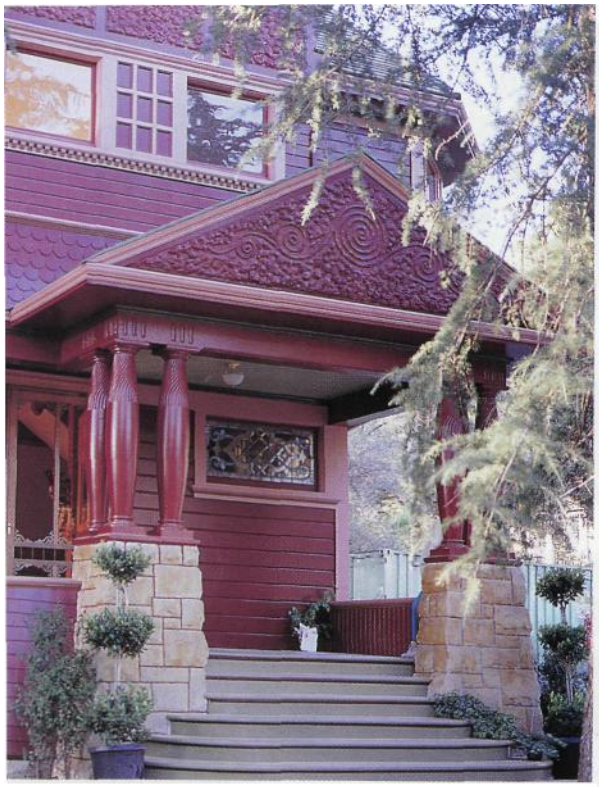
Being meticulous is not the only trait of this soft-spoken California contractor who specializes in historic restoration. He is an avid preservationist with an environmentalist conscience and a truly generous heart.

BY CHRISTINA NELSON

IN A STATE KNOWN FOR developers who churn out entire neighborhoods of look-alike houses and builders who cater only to the wealthy or famous, Tim Lantz is a rare find - a historic preservation contractor who makes it his passion and business to rehabilitate old houses affordably. Surprising, too, that Lantz concentrates his efforts not in San Francisco but in the communities in and around San Jose, an area that in its rapid growth has engulfed or eliminated countless older homes in the name of progress.

Unlike the majority of Californians, Tim Lantz is a native son. His maternal great-grandparents homesteaded the Central Coast in the 1870s, while his father's family settled San Jose at the turn of the century when there were only orchards for miles around. Now in his late 40s, Lantz began fixing up old buildings as a youngster. He entered an apprentice carpenter program while in college, then worked as a union apprentice to a group of small custom builders. He found the experience in new construction and remodeling to be invaluable, but his sustaining interest in "old things" eventually steered him towards the field of historic preservation and rehabilitation.

"There's a real distinction between re-modeling a house and rehabilitating it," he says, noting that remodeling typically aims to modernize a structure without concern for history, and the usual approach in remodeling is to demolish - or at least take portions out and throw them away. "The whole idea behind preservation is to leave everything, replace only as a last resort," he explains. "It's essential to get into the mind



MARK LAZZARINI

Lantz's careful restoration of this Queen Anne home in Los Gatos following the 1989 Lama Prieta earthquake earned him a national award. The finished front entry (above) is shown damaged (right) and after construction in 1887 (top).

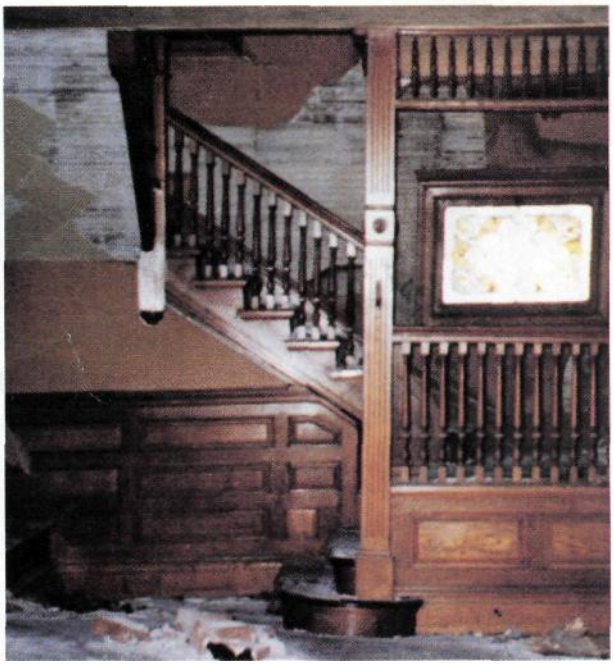
of the person who first did the job and repress the urge to want to improve upon what's there. If you make the determination to rip something out because it's of no importance to you, and it turns out that you were wrong, it's too late - a piece of history is gone."

Over the last decade, this commitment to history has earned Lantz the respect of local preservation groups, scores of satisfied clients and an even longer list of homeowners seeking his expertise. He's won several state and national awards, including the Grand Prize in 1993 in the Great American Home Awards program, sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, for the rescue and rehabilitation of an earthquake-ravaged 1887 Queen Anne Victorian in the town of Los Gatos. He's been on the Architectural Review Board for the City of Morgan Hill and served as the community's Cultural Resources Commissioner, and he is currently a consultant for the Victorian Preservation Association of Santa Clara Valley.

One reason for Lantz's community involvement is his goal to educate the public and promote awareness. He feels the building industry and government agencies in California don't place enough value on older structures. "We have a different history from the East," he says, noting that the state wasn't really settled until the 1850s. "In New England, an 1880s house is one of many old houses, but here it's an exception. The consensus seems to be that historic preservation and restorations are costly and therefore to be avoided." He observes, "Unfortunately, the public takes the lead from professionals who are not familiar with methods, techniques and materials used in preservation and unwittingly drive prices to unaffordable heights."

Lantz is concerned about the environmental implications as well. "In an era that presumes to be environmentally aware," he observes, "without much thought we allow the demolition of structures on a wholesale basis." Referring to the earthquake-damaged house, he says, "When you take down a building like this, weighing 162 tons, that's a lot of raw materials — first-growth redwood and virgin-cut Douglas fir, all heart, no sapwood; exotic woods on interior finishes; hundreds of feet of copper, cast-iron, lead and zinc. We are sorry stewards of our environment when we allow ourselves to lay waste all these natural resources." Predictably, Lantz salvages and recycles these older materials and adds that he's been thrown out of more than one dumpster.

Lantz is a "working contractor." He's on the job every day, his old truck is loaded with tools, and he tackles many of the repairs himself. He takes on only one major rehab' at a time, intent on giving it his fullest attention. His crew consists of a small group of subcontractors and craftsmen who know the way he likes things done. Sometimes he



After the Malpas-Taylor residence was placed on a new foundation, much of the exterior work consisted of reconstructing substructure walls crushed by the enormous weight of the building. "Porches suffering from both time and earthquake damage, portions of walls moldings, lattice screens and stairway were rebuilt to original configurations, said the builder. Interior damage was extensive (far left photo), but great care was taken to restore walls, floor and woodwork, including the entry hall constructed of quarter-sawn white oak paneling (left).

*Lantz's restorative work often involves creating needed new space. Two residences with additions crafted in the style of the original homes are shown on the following pages.*PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIE SUNDQUIST

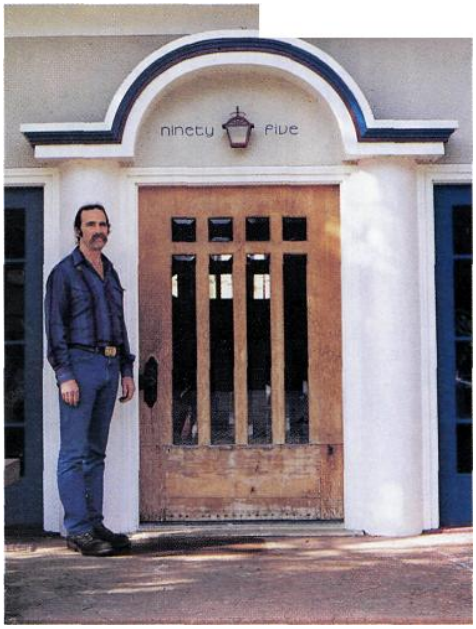
acts as craftsman, too - lie's experienced in stained glass and has in the past been a featured artist at museums and art shows.

One of Lantz's most valuable tools is an extensive library of new and old books, manuals, magazines and catalogues. Among them can be found all ten volumes of the *Cyclopedia of Architecture, Carpentry, and Building,* published in 1907; editions of Audel's *Carpenters and Builders Guide from* the 1920s through the 40s; and a Yale & Towne catalogue from 1889 that includes sketches and blow-ups of working parts for door and window hardware. "They're helpful when we're trying to figure out what had been done in the first place or when we need to order or replicate parts," Lantz says.

"I also like to keep up with what's new," he adds. "Component systems today aren't so different from those of the 1880s." He leans towards new components that will work in cramped spaces, require small amounts of labor to install and not increase his overall costs. He cites foundation ties, metal connectors and demand systems like tankless water heaters as examples.

Cramped spaces are one of the realities and challenges of rehabilitating old houses. "The biggest difference between building a new custom home and preserving an old one is that in the first case you have the benefit of a vacant lot-there's nothing in the way," Lantz observes. "We have everything in the way."

That's one reason he welcomes projects that call for additions, in essence new buildings. "You're not always bumping into things, not always in the dark. On the other hand," he adds, "there's seldom any 'down time' in an old house since the roof's already in place." The earthquake-damaged Los Gatos house provided more than its share of challenges and dark cramped spaces. In October, 1989, when the Loma Prieta earthquake sent shock waves throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, the three-story, 5,000-sq. ft. Victorian came tumbling down, literally falling 7 ft. 2 in. off its foundation into the basement. Coming to rest at a 60° angle, the structure was racked out of square, twisted, its floors, decks and walls crushed. Amazingly, the homeowner - a woman in her eighties - and her daughter were unhurt.



The response from casual observers and professionals alike was that the building was doomed, but the plucky octogenarian refused to consider demolition. A friend put them in contact with Lantz, who concedes that from the street the house looked destined for landfill. But when he examined the individual components closely, he became convinced that the damage could be repaired and the work done economically.

"It was a dramatic situation, but in many ways the house was just like many old houses needing rehabilitation," he explains. "It suffered from deferred maintenance, all the

porch posts had dry rot and the mechanical systems needed upgrading, but the structure was sound." The Malpas-Taylor house, as it is called, had been well-crafted of fine materials, an expensive custom home in its time - built and furnished for $25,000, when the average house cost $2,500.

A bigger hurdle surfaced in the form of financing. The owner's insurance did not cover the damage, and her sole source of income was Social Security. Lantz spear-headed efforts to secure funding from a variety of sources at national, state and local levels. Eventually the owner received a disaster loan for $450,000. "It took a year and a half to get any funding at all and the house had deteriorated in that time," Lantz recalls. "There was more damage from sitting than from the earthquake. The walls had started to cave in. We could have saved $200,000 if we could have begun work during that first month."

With the house having settled to the basement floor, Lantz decided the best way to lift it was by the first-floor ceiling. "The joists were structurally sound and dimensionally stable, and portions of the house had been balloon-framed, which also gave it a lot of structural integrity," he says. With the help of a structural engineer, he next determined where to place the three 60-ft. I-beams that would support the ceiling joists. LIsing a system of cribs and hydraulic jacks, the house was gradually raised to a level position, its first-floor walls and floor allowed to dangle until the correct elevation was achieved.

The house was then moved 32 inches to the north and 36 inches to the east to remove the 16-in. rack and align the building in its proper position. The new foundation required more than a mile of steel and some 67 cu. yd. of concrete. Lantz also reassembled the sandstone block walls supporting the porches with the help of a circa-1891 photograph supplied by a relative of the original owner residing in New Jersey. A computer-enhanced blow-up of the photo helped him recreate its original random ashlar pattern.

Not surprisingly, interior damage was major, extending from buckling floors and ruined plaster to ruptured gas lines and protruding studs. In most instances, repairs were accomplished using the existing materials and "co-pious amounts" of adhesives, wood consolidants and filler putty. The crushed interior stair to the basement, for example, was reassembled and reinstalled with the exception of one stringer and a couple of risers. "Reusing historical materials is the key to low-budget preservation," says Lantz, "and consolidants augment the supply of salvageable components in a remarkable fashion."

Although Lantz's other projects may not have attracted as much attention, several have required nearly as great an overhaul in their rehabilitation. One, built in 1905 by an established banker/developer, had been neglected over time, abandoned and vandalized for eight years when

Lantz was called to the rescue. Not only was the house in complete disrepair, with pigeons roosting indoors, but a questionable, out-of-level addition had been built relatively recently and was already falling apart.

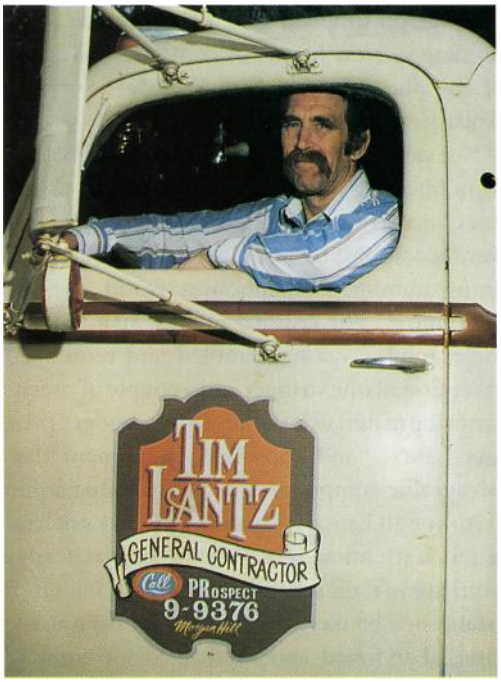
"Some contractor had literally hacked a hole in the back of the house and not even tried to make the addition fit," he remarks, "so our attitude was to demolish the new portion and create another addition that blends smoothly on the interior and matches so well on the exterior that only a trained eye could notice the difference." The first part of the rehab' was to restore the house to a "convenience" level, that is, retain its historic features and materials while making it livable for today. The next step expanded the existing kitchen and modernized it. Lastly, Lantz added a "great room" that is visually and architecturally compatible with the size, scale and features of the original structure. For this project, too, he received a restoration award.

Most of the homeowners who engage Lantz have restricted budgets, so "phasing" the work is a common solution. And since nearly all old houses are plagued with foundation problems, foundation repair is often the first phase. One project just getting under way has at its heart a whole series of foundation woes. It is the combination rehabilitation/restoration of a circa-1863 home in Sunnyvale. It is the city's oldest house and likely one of California's oldest surviving wooden buildings. Structurally, the house is quite sound, though it bears the scars of wear and tear and shows a lack of proper maintenance in recent years. The son of the original builder had re-modeled the home in 1910, modernizing it with indoor plumbing and electricity, adding a solarium, a library and a formal dining room.

When the present owners purchased the house a few years ago, they had the foundation repaired before they moved in. Then they hired a local contractor to replaster the walls and ceilings and commenced work on restoring the interior themselves. "Sadly, they became the target of a horrible mistake, a contractor who didn't know what he was doing," laments Lantz. "After they spent well over $100,000 on 'repairs,' the house is still way out of level, the floors wavy and the place unlivable. The plaster is going to have to be completely redone."

The discouraged owners brought Lantz into the picture a few months ago to rehabilitate the house and their spirits. Jointly, they've decided to restore the house to its 1910 state, rather than return to the earlier period. "In historical preservation, you have to determine what portions of the structure are pertinent," Lantz explains. "Strictly speaking, to return to the 1860s, we'd have to take out the plumbing and bring back the outhouse, take out electricity, install antiquated stoves for heating and remove the rooms added in 1910. Not only is it impractical, but it would reduce the quality of living."

Architectural and engineering plans are nearly complete for the repair job. Lantz will first get the house level, demolish the substandard foundation and pour a new one, and then jack the building up to set it on its new foundation. From that point on, he expects the renovation to proceed smoothly and the homeowners' enthusiasm to return. "I hope to be the final chapter in the story of this house," he concludes.



BUSINESS PROFILE

Tim Lantz, General Contractor

14715 Uvas Road
P.O. Box 523
Morgan Hill, CA 95038

PRINCIPAL: Tim Lantz
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: sole proprietorship
BUSINESS ACTIVITY: 90% historic preservation, 10% sympathetic additions
YEARS IN BUSINESS: 12
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 1 (self)
HOMES PER YEAR: 4 to 6
AVERAGE COST PER SQ. FT.: $100-150
DESIGN SERVICES: architectural and interior design
COMPUTERIZED OPERATIONS: none
MARKETING: word-of-mouth