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HABITATS | FAR WEST VILLAGE

Legacies Passed From Father to Son

By [FRED A. BERNSTEIN](#)

GUSTAVO BONEVARDI, a 46-year-old architect and artist, has a gift for commemoration.

His best-known project, the “Tribute in Light,” shines up from Lower [Manhattan](#) every Sept. 11. (Mr. Bonevardi and his design partner, John Bennett, collaborated with other artists and architects in creating the project.)

But the lights are by no means Mr. Bonevardi’s only act of remembrance. For 12 years, he has been working on a book about his father, Marcelo Bonevardi, an Argentine-born artist who died in 1994, at 64.

That volume, “Bonevardi: Chasing Shadows, Constructing Art,” is scheduled to be published by the [University of Texas](#) Press in March. Now that he has completed the book, which contains hundreds of images and two long essays, Mr. Bonevardi said, “It feels like I’m finally burying my father.”

But he will continue to experience his father’s presence. Mr. Bonevardi lives in a loft on Greenwich Street that his father turned into a studio in the 1960s. He began living in the loft, on and off, in 1968, and it has been his full-time home since 1994. (His parents separated when he was a teenager, and his mother, Elena Esther Merida, died a few years later.)

“Not many New Yorkers have had the same phone number since they were 8,” Mr. Bonevardi observed.

Surrounding Mr. Bonevardi in the loft are at least 30 of his father’s artworks. Marcelo Bonevardi began painting in Argentina in the 1940s. In the 1960s, after moving to New York, he began cutting holes in his canvases and inserting wooden constructions into the otherwise flat compositions — making him one of a group of artists who were blurring the boundary between painting and sculpture. It helped, as his work went from two to three dimensions, that he wielded hammers and saws as easily as brushes.

“My dad was an artist in the David Smith model — a rugged individualist,” his son said.

In the mid-1960s, Marcelo Bonevardi and several other artists, including Robert Smithson, bought the former headquarters of West Side Industries, billed as “specialists in securing heavy cargo.” They divided the building into 12 units, two on each of its six floors.

Gustavo Bonevardi doesn’t know how much his father paid for the second-floor space, but he believes it was far less than a car would cost today.

At the time, the front part of his father’s loft had “wood paneling, metal desks, a strange large typewriter and fluorescent tube lighting,” Mr. Bonevardi recalled. “It could have been the office of a private eye.”

Outside, the neighborhood was anything but chic. What is now a desirable enclave was cut off from the waterfront, first by the imposing buildings that fronted the Hudson River piers, then by the elevated West Side Highway and finally by the elevated train, the High Line.

“It was dark and shadowy and industrial,” Mr. Bonevardi said of the neighborhood. “It was also totally wonderful in its own way.” Though he acknowledges that the neighborhood has improved since then, he said: “I do so grudgingly. I miss what was here before, the otherworldliness.”

With trucks moving goods outside the building by day, Marcelo Bonevardi put his studio in the back of the apartment, where it was quiet, and his bedroom in the front. The middle contained a large open kitchen, where he entertained friends.

The art critic Dore Ashton remembered Mr. Bonevardi as “an exceptionally genial host” presiding, at a homemade table, over fine wine and stimulating conversation.

Nearly 40 years later, the apartment retains its key feature: a series of four huge wooden columns supporting a giant beam that runs the length of the space. To keep the beam from coming to rest atop one of the three front windows, the builders put two bends in it, an eccentricity that lends character to the loft.

Mr. Bonevardi, who lives with Sony, a Rhodesian Ridgeback, has reallocated the space beneath the beam. The kitchen remains in the center, but these days most of it is behind a wall. The bedroom is in the back (facing a leafy courtyard), and the living room in front. Its most notable feature is a white leather sofa called Flap, by Francesco Binfare, that opens and closes like the petals of a vast, asymmetrical flower.

A small office area near the kitchen is where Mr. Bonevardi and Mr. Bennett work at large computer screens. Among their activities are creating 3-D digital building models, which have been commissioned by both real estate developers and, in several instances, the Museum of Modern Art. As architects, they have designed houses in Miami and in [Dutchess County](#). And as artists, they are responsible not only for the “Tribute in Light” but also for a large sculpture outside 2 Gold Street in Lower Manhattan.

Working at home makes it difficult to know when the business day begins and ends, Mr. Bonevardi said. His father, he recalled, “was very disciplined — at the same time every day, he would put away his tools and change out of his work clothes.”

Mr. Bonevardi said he tried to ensure that, when he relaxes at night, he doesn’t feel as if he’s in his office, and that when he’s working by day, he isn’t surrounded by signs of domesticity. (It helps that the television set is not obvious — a projector hangs from the ceiling, and a blank white wall becomes the screen.)

The completion of the book will help Mr. Bonevardi make the space his own. “There were about a dozen boxes of my father’s notes and photos,” he said, “and every time I moved them, it was like I was moving my father.” The boxes are now with the publisher in Texas.

At the same time, Mr. Bonevardi is organizing a show of his father’s work, which will open at the Argentine Consulate on West 56th Street on Feb. 7. (He and Mr. Bennett have already created a computer simulation showing precisely how the artworks will look on the walls.)

When that show is over and the book is out, Mr. Bonevardi said, “I think it’ll be a lot easier for me to move on to other projects.” Those will most likely embrace architecture, computer animation, graphic design and sculpture. “We wear a lot of different hats,” he said, referring to himself and Mr. Bennett.

But, despite his surroundings, Mr. Bonevardi isn’t comfortable calling himself an artist. “There’s a reluctance,” he said, “to be treading on the same ground as my father.”

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