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SPACES

Inspirational Spaces / Blueprint for Better Behavior
Historic Reuse / Downsizing in a Tough Economy / Illusionary Murals

Bob Diamond

Electrical Engineering Student 1978-1979

President of the Brooklyn Historic Railway Association (BHRA), which was formed to restore the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel—the world's oldest subway tunnel. BHRA received designation for the tunnel on the National Register of Historic Places. Photographed inside Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue Tunnel, which he discovered in 1980.

What prompted you to start looking for the tunnel?

It was pure luck, or fate—if you believe in that sort of thing. I was studying electrical engineering at Pratt. I was listening to the radio one day and the host referenced a new book on President Lincoln's assassination, which made the assertion that the missing pages of John Wilkes Booth's diary were hidden in a small metal box inside an abandoned railway tunnel under Atlantic Avenue near Columbia Street. The host went on to say that no one could find this tunnel.

That captured my imagination, so I called the radio station, which referred me to the book's author. He told me he heard of the tunnel many years before, but didn't know if it really existed, or precisely where it was. He said, "You're a young guy. Why don't you see if you can find it?"

What's the strangest thing you've found in the tunnel?

The tunnel itself. My first time inside the tunnel was akin to landing on the moon. I think I have a sense of how Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin must have felt setting foot on its surface.

What's your favorite story about the tunnel?

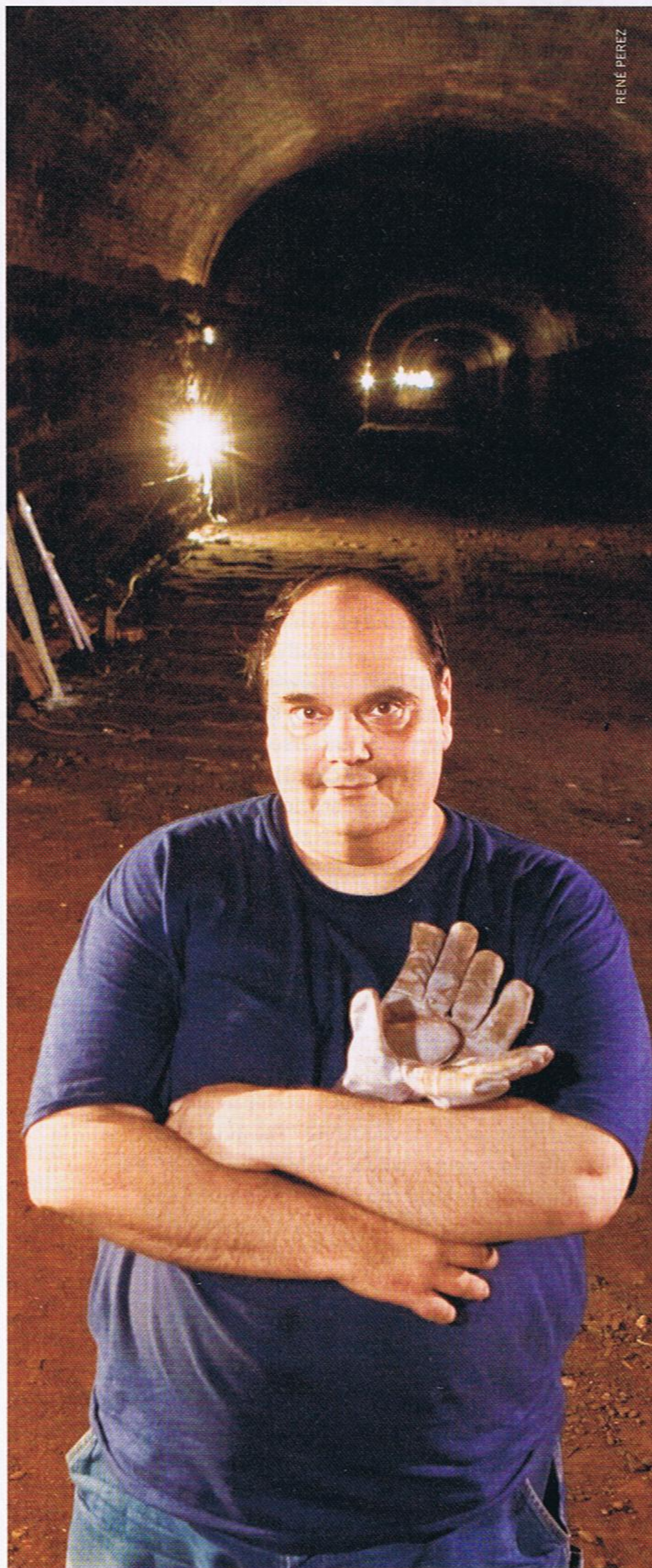
The one about the pirates. According to a *New York Times* story from 1893, a vicious gang of river pirates terrorizing New York Harbor had their clubhouse in a barroom on Atlantic Avenue near the waterfront, and all their booty was hidden inside an "Aladdin's cave"—an abandoned railway tunnel under Atlantic Avenue. Supposedly, the secret entranceway from the barroom into the tunnel "was guarded by two seven-foot Turks with scimitars." According to the story, there was so much gold and silver in the tunnel, that one didn't need a light to go inside.

Tell us about the mayor's initiative to bring trolleys back to Brooklyn.

In the 1990s, we developed and constructed an electric streetcar based on the trolleys that ran in Red Hook in the 19th century, but we were a bit ahead of our time! In August, Mayor Bloomberg proposed creating a waterfront streetcar line to connect Red Hook with downtown Brooklyn. The NYC Department of Transportation is planning to conduct a federally funded study on the project this winter, and Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez has requested an additional \$10 million in the FY 2010 federal transportation budget to begin constructing the line.

When you enrolled in Pratt's engineering school, did you ever imagine you'd be working on historic railways?

My math professor, Gershon Sparer, told me not to be surprised if I didn't become a staff engineer for a large company. He said my mind "was too creative for that." At the time, I was taken aback by the remark, but he turned out to be right. My history professor, Marie Eckhard, also played a big role in my future by sparking my interest in historical research. My work on the Atlantic Avenue tunnel project brings that together with engineering—a combination I love.



RENÉ PEREZ