



PHOTO: OLGA L. VALLE

Neil Tetkowski in his New York City studio, where installing a combustion kiln in compliance with strict regulations proved to be costly and time consuming.

## Lessons from a City Kiln

by Marc Leuthold with Sarah G. Wilkins

**W**hen I came to New York about five years ago, I knew life would be hard for a ceramics artist in The City. Just getting work done while eking out a living there is a daily challenge—not to mention the limited studio space and availability of kilns. I resigned myself to multiple part-time jobs while making sculpture in my spare time, and resolved to apply to residency programs elsewhere in the country for more productive and intensive work phases. I also learned how to stretch a penny.

Though I shudder to think of it now, I actually worked as a “penny stretcher” for \$6 an hour on the 86th floor observatory of the Empire State Building. For a dollar, I would take a tourist’s penny, drop it into a machine and, by hand-cranking vigorously, squeeze the soft copper into an oval stamped with the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the New York skyline or the generic “Good Luck Penny.” It was possible to turn about \$100 into stretched pennies per day. Or 1000 pennies into dollars, depending on your perspective. That’s a lot of cranking.

That was absolutely my worst part-

time job to date. One of the best was working as an assistant for ceramics sculptor Neil Tetkowski.

Neil and I both taught ceramics classes at Parsons School of Design, but I had had little contact with him before calling about the job. I identified myself as “a part-time teacher at Parsons.” As I expected, Neil didn’t want to hire a “colleague,” and I had a hard time persuading him to give me a chance. Then, when he finally agreed, I actually dreaded the first day of work. I’d heard horror stories about how some artists treat their assistants, and I steeled myself for the worst.

Neil had just moved into a new workspace, a block away from his apartment in Chelsea. The studio is spacious—1800 square feet with windows on opposite sides. It is on the second floor, with parking on the ground level. I could only dream of such a wonderful setup for a ceramist in New York City. I was envious.

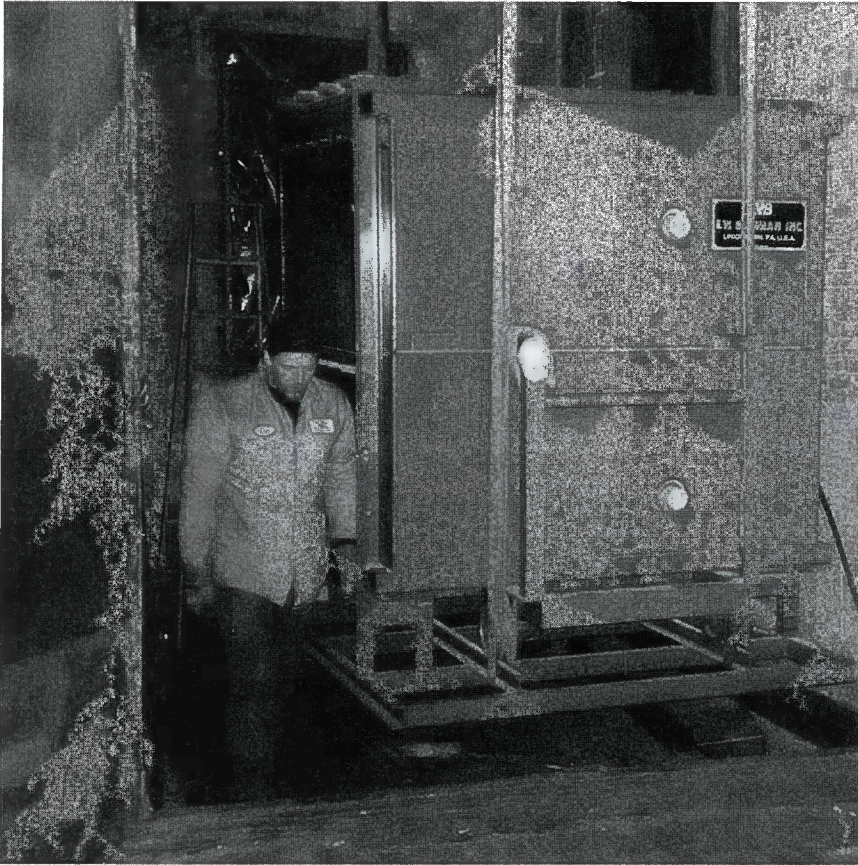
Neil immediately set me to work painting shelves in the studio. Then together we arranged the equipment. He often asked for suggestions and seemed

to really value the input—hardly the arrogant prima donna I had dreaded.

In planning to install a gas kiln, Neil knew it would be a challenge to comply with the city’s complicated and strict combustion regulations. New York requires that all combustion equipment be certified for use within the five boroughs. Commercial producers of boilers, stoves and water heaters go through an expensive procedure to have their equipment certified. Afterward, identical equipment can be sold without question. However, for one-of-a-kind industrial equipment, such as a kiln, certification can cost upwards of \$6000 for independent laboratory testing.

Regulations dictate that one must hire an engineer to assure that plans are filed and codes are properly carried out. The engineer Neil hired determined that the floor of the 100-year-old building would not collapse when the 6800-pound kiln was delivered to the second floor. The engineer’s fee was \$2500, and the filing fees an additional \$300.

A certain kind of chimney was specified as well. It was required to extend beyond the roof line of the top



Because the weight of the kiln was too much for the old freight elevator, professional riggers suspended it from two I-beams and hoisted it up by hand.



Hoisting the kiln—1 centimeter per pull.

story. Fortunately, the building is small by New York standards and only goes up four floors.

For the combustion system, a \$600 filing fee was submitted to the Department of Buildings, Materials and Equipment Acceptance Division. In order to avoid testing fees, the kiln manufacturer went to great lengths to help us, assembling laboratory reports for each component of the burner system to prove safety claims. Combinations of components are used in the design of burner systems, from gas valves to computer controls, and since the manufacturer purchases parts for burner systems from several other manufacturers, the compilation was a complex task.

Once the plans were approved by the city for a total of \$4900, a licensed plumber was hired to install a 2-inch gas line from the street to the kiln, approximately 180 feet away. Because Manhattan has very low gas pressure, no one could guarantee that the kiln would reach temperature. Anxiety was somewhat alleviated by the news that

boosters could be added later—for thousands of dollars more, of course.

Delivery of the new equipment had to be thought out very carefully. Although the width of the kiln was determined by the width of the freight elevator door, the actual weight was just too heavy for the old elevator. Professional riggers were hired for \$3000 to deliver the kiln to a specific location on the second floor.

It proved to be a day's work for four expert movers. Two I-beams were suspended from the third floor inside the elevator shaft. The kiln hung from them in a sling of massive chains, then hand-powered winches moved the kiln upward at a snail's pace—1 centimeter for each pull. Once in place, the kiln was made fully functional, and has worked well ever since.

It took us a whole year to complete the renovation of the studio, which includes a large workspace near the kiln site, a spray room for the application of terra sigillata, and a clean room for office work and visitors. With assistance from Boyd Johnson and myself, Neil removed dropped ceilings, plywood paneling and crumbling linoleum—peeling away layers of ugliness to reveal the building's structural elements. During all these Herculean labors and the endless details of kiln installation, Neil's eternal optimism and focus on "the big picture" never failed to impress me. He kept telling me, "Now that I have the kiln, things are going to happen...just wait."

Two weeks later, Neil called to say that he was going to have a solo show at the Myung Sook Gallery on Broadway in SoHo. The show was a turning point for him. He had set out to become a working and exhibiting New York artist, and managed to do so about a year and a half after moving to the city.

Neil's show was also a turning point for me. While he was setting up his exhibition at Myung Sook, I left to prepare for a residency at the Kohler Company in Wisconsin. During my time with Neil, I had learned how an artist must have complete faith in the practice of art and in his own creativity, and must be flexible when facing obstacles, calmly nurturing his vision into reality. One must be prepared to reason with an irate contractor on the same day that one sells three large pieces. ▲