MANSION GLOBAL

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Classic Homes Go Green

With smart investment, older properties can meet and even exceed modern energy standards

The former St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School building in Manhattan's Nolita neighborhood: energy efficient and historically charming.

The luxury residences being built in what used to be St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School in New York City will be modern, energy-efficient homes on the inside—but retain historic landmark status on the outside. The property, to be known as The Residences at Prince, is just one of hundreds of old buildings around the world being transformed into luxurious yet ecologically responsible homes.

As sustainable, green living becomes more desirable in the luxury residential segment, architects and builders are finding ways to bring energy-efficient elements into old homes—even castles. London's Windsor Castle harnesses hydroelectric power; Buckingham Palace taps its own borehole to cool the wine cellars and irrigate the gardens.

In New York, sustainable building methods and energy efficiency are top-of-mind for The Residences at Prince, said Jonathan Marvel, principal at Marvel Architects, the project's architect. New materials needed for the renovation are being locally sourced to keep the carbon footprint low, he said.

"Materials have lifecycle costs," Marvel said. "The mere act of reusing what's there is the biggest energy-saving green thing you can do in any kind of construction."

Walls have been super-insulated and the new, thermal-paned windows are landmark-approved, hitting modern standards without interfering with the building's historic character. For even greater energy efficiency, smaller multizone heating-and-cooling units will be installed instead of larger, centralized equipment.

Some older luxury homes are being transformed into energy misers via passive building standards. In the New York metro area, for example, aging brownstones can be upgraded with continuous insulation and higher-performance windows and doors to create a net-zero or net-positive home that actually produces more energy than it consumes.

Other methods of going green may not reach the net-zero level, but they are nonetheless attractive to today's luxury homeowners.

RENOVATING WITH GREEN FEATURES

Maribeth Messineo Peters, executive vice president and realtor at luxury brokerage Allie Beth Allman & Associates in Dallas, is a long-time advocate of preserving old homes via energy-efficient renovation techniques.

Peters represented Dallas architect Adrienne Hennessey, who bought a 1953 architecturally significant home in Dallas in 2013.

The home was at risk of being torn down for its desirable location before Hennessey swooped in to save it. Its original owner was a member of the Caruth family—land barons who amassed thousands of acres in Dallas starting in the late 1840s.

"It was a fantastic mid-century modern with excellent bones, but it needed a lot of updating," Peters said. "My client recognized the potential of the home and saw the provenance of the Caruth family as something she wanted to preserve and protect. When it became available, she knew she had to save it." Hennessey gutted the inside and renovated with a variety of "green" elements including insulation, a standing seam metal roof and energy-efficient appliances and windows.

"When you open up walls, you don't know what you will find," Hennessey said. "There can be additional structural requirements and hidden issues, plus everything must meet current city code," she said. "You can spend a considerable sum of money on high-end finish-outs as well as green and sustainable materials."

In this case, the renovation paid off. Peters was listing agent a year later when the property received multiple offers and resold in one day for $1.1 million—double its value from a year earlier.

THINKING ABOUT GOING GREEN?

The National Trust for Historic Preservation says old homes were built differently in the way they regulate temperature and moisture—something to be aware of when adding "green" elements that may affect air circulation.

The trust provides some recommendations:

1. Get an energy audit. Some utility companies and city governments provide them or hire a Residential Energy Services Network certified evaluator or use a U.S. Department of Energy Home Energy Score assessor. The auditor/assessor will recommend the most efficient upgrades.

2. Restore energy-efficient historic features. Take advantage of the sustainable features often present in historic homes that make them passively energy efficient. Transom windows above doors promote air circulation, for example.

3. Consider what efficiencies makes sense. Some possibilities include tankless water heating, solar power and new insulation.

4. Don't lose your home's character with your green upgrade. The preservation trust suggests asking, "If I do this, will the person living in my home in 15, 25, or 50 years be able to undo it, if necessary, without harming the building or a part that contributes to its character?"