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Real Estate

Prewar Is So Last Year

By JILL KRASNY MARCH 10, 2017



Eric Streisand, 46, Elizabeth Durand Streisand, 34, and their son at home in the dining area of their renovated 1923 apartment on the Upper West Side. The couple removed vintage finishes to create a more contemporary space. Credit Linda Jaquez for The New York Times

Prewar charm in New York City is defined by original details like crown moldings, built-in bookshelves, coffered ceilings and fireplaces, some more decorative than others. But driven by design trends and the need for more space, some apartment buyers are doing what some would consider unthinkable: tearing out traditional finishes.

“Our place hadn’t been touched in nearly a hundred years, which is why we were able to get it,” said Elizabeth Durand Streisand, 34, a founder of Broadway Roulette, a show ticket company. “We wanted to make it feel as open and modern as you possibly can in a 1923 building.”

So she and her husband, Eric Streisand, 46, an investor, spent about \$200,000 last spring on renovations to their Upper West Side apartment. With the aim of “keeping everything as light and bright as possible,” the couple, new parents, didn’t hesitate to rip out the two-bedroom’s window casements, tall baseboards, worn hardwood flooring and the “thick, chunky molding” surrounding the doors. “The only things that are original at this point are the heavy brass door handles,” Mrs. Durand Streisand said.

Some buyers, millennials in particular, “come into a space and want to make it their own,” said Bronwyn Breitner, an architect with 590BC, who, with her husband, Luigi Ciaccia, oversaw construction for the couple.



A before photo of the couple’s space. The closets on the left were ripped out and replaced with sleek cabinetry. The worn hardwood floors, heavy molding, window surrounds and tall baseboards are now gone.

Kipton Cronkite, a salesman at Douglas Elliman, has also noticed this. “Clean lines are really important to millennials,” he said, “and they’re looking for an apartment that doesn’t necessarily remind them of their parents or grandparents.”

Millennials also “tend to be very conscious of the aesthetics and also the function” of finishes, said Jos Dudgeon, a principal of Tristate Sustainable, a general contractor in Manhattan. “Moldings,

profiles, traditional cabinets — they're not really interested in that. They're really interested in something more modern and definitely more linear.”

For starters, crown molding is out — “I find it tends to close in the space, especially when you're dealing with apartments,” said Mr. Dudgeon — and baseboards are becoming flatter, permitting the eyes to look up rather than being drawn downward.

“That's definitely where you see a lot of the modern detailing,” said Andrew Mikhael, an architect who has spent the past five months overhauling a co-op in Park South Tower, a 1927 building in the Kips Bay section of Manhattan, for Diego Gomez and Jeanne Haney, a couple in their 40s. Some baseboards are flush to the wall, Mr. Mikhael said, while others feature what is known as a “gap reveal,” or “separation of wall and floor” that “creates a feeling that the wall is just floating.”



The living and dining areas of the apartment renovated by Ms. Durand Streisand and Mr. Streisand. The goal was “keeping everything as light and bright as possible.” Credit Linda Jaquez for The New York Times

Fireplaces, often a showstopper in prewar apartments, are also looking more streamlined these days, thanks to the replacement of bulkier old surrounds with sleek new Carrara marble or granite. These are simpler than intricate millwork or mantels, Mr. Dudgeon said, “because the proportion of the space becomes more important,” say, for showcasing artwork.

And in an era when tidying up is a life-changing philosophy, the desire for built-in bookshelves and nooks for small items is waning. If clients request them at all, they'll be “very clean” with a lot of square edges, single-panel Shaker-style doors, and narrow edge trims, Mr. Dudgeon said.

Of course, paring down with such attention to detail comes at a price. Where baseboards and moldings can be used to hide uneven edges, the cleaner lines favored by millennials require more precision.

“The millimeters count,” said Mr. Mikhael, who spent nearly a year conceiving the design scheme for the Park South apartment. From the linear (instead of circular) shower drains to the point at which the white oak floor meets the bathroom tile, everything, he said, “has to hit certain spots and have certain alignments.” This naturally requires more time and coordination between contractors who are familiar with this level of detail.



Becky Yang Palmon, 36, and her husband, Ron Palmon, 42, completely gutted their 1920s apartment. The inset photo shows the space before renovation. The new place has an open-plan layout, larger windows and has lost yards and yards of molding. Credit Linda Jaquez for The New York Times; Ted Kane (inset)

The gap-reveal baseboards require an apartment to be made fully level, which can take several days, driving costs even higher. “When you’re doing this kind of detail, everything is exposed, it’s basically naked,” Mr. Mikhael said. “You have to do a lot of prep work to make it right, make it successful.”

Given the time and financial commitment of making such upgrades, one might wonder why these buyers don’t just purchase a new-build apartment.

For her part, Becky Yang Palmon, 36, a start-up executive, felt it was more difficult to customize brand-new apartments, given their more limited size and higher prices.

“We wanted what we wanted in a specific neighborhood,” she said, referring to Carnegie Hill on the Upper East Side, where she and her husband, Ron Palmon, 42, a physician, bought a 1920s apartment. They are now spending “a year and several hundred thousand dollars” to renovate with the help of an architect, Ted Kane of Kane Architecture and Urban Design. “Most people are surprised to see a young couple in an old apartment willing to make major upgrades,” she said, “but we’re doing so in a way that maintains the beauty of the building while adapting it to fit our modern lifestyle.”



Michael Cuneo, 32, is overhauling his 1901 Chelsea apartment. The inset photo shows the place as it looked when he bought it. The redo removed window casings and trim throughout, minimized baseboards and simplified door moldings. The recess on the old living room wall was made flush. The wall paint is a washable matte instead of the old eggshell finish. Credit Linda Jaquez for The New York Times

Michael Cuneo, 32, an investment banker who hired **Mr. Dudgeon** to ditch the molding in his 1901 Chelsea apartment, said he found the new-build layouts too “cookie cutter,” the maintenance too high and the locations unremarkable. Also, his co-op board was amenable to a gut renovation.

“If someone renovates, it really helps all the units in the building,” he said, adding that he plans to either sell or rent out his unit in the next couple of years. “Generally, they agreed this is a clean and nice look. Someone’s not going to walk in and be surprised by some wacky thing that’s up on the walls.”

Lisa Larson, an associate broker at Warburg Realty who specializes in prewar co-ops on the Upper East Side, said many East Side buyers find prewars a bargain, as they can cost up to 20 percent

less than older condos and up to 50 percent less than new condo conversions west of Lexington Avenue. Their monthly maintenance is also “notably lower,” she said.

“I have several buyers looking for the enviable locations of prewar co-ops, close to Central Park on Park or Fifth, but who also want the finishes offered by the higher-end new development condos,” Mrs. Larson said. “Finding that rare prewar co-op on Fifth or Park, which is renovated to those standards, is like discovering gold at the end of the rainbow.”



Jennifer Boardman, 45, wanted her one-bedroom 1914 apartment to retain some vintage details but to also feel “updated and modern for 2017.” The doors were raised to a contemporary eight feet. She is restoring molding and foot-high baseboards that had been removed. The inset shows the place pre-renovation. Credit Linda Jaquez for The New York Times; Karjaka Studios (inset)

Yet dramatically altering the DNA of a prewar apartment could harm its resale value, warned Jonathan J. Miller, the president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. “Because it’s not consistent, it’s an outlier,” he said, and buyers outside the millennial demographic may find the changes too unique to the seller. “The market wants an apartment that’s consistent with the building,” he added.

While some buyers strip out all prewar details, others find ways to maintain some of the original features while adding more contemporary finishes.

Jennifer Boardman, 45, a marketing executive, spent nearly \$350,000 to restore her airy one-bedroom 1914 apartment on the Upper West Side, determined to meld old with new. The previous owners had “really stripped out the prewar charm,” Ms. Boardman said. Having fallen for the

crown molding and raised wall panels of prewar apartments that she had rented in the past, Ms. Boardman, an Atlanta transplant, enlisted Kelly Giesen, an interior designer, to “transform it back.” The question was, she said, “How do we put that back there and make it feel updated and modern for 2017?”

The solid-wood doors, foot-high baseboards and detailed molding, all removed by the previous owners, were restored. Yet in keeping with design trends, the door heights were raised to eight feet — “to make the 10-foot ceiling feel even higher,” she said — and Ms. Giesen installed a plaster frieze. With its subtle scallop detail, another contemporary flourish, the molding “looks like a picture frame,” she said.

Jared Seligman, 30, an associate broker at Douglas Elliman, would prefer not to change a thing about the palatial apartment that he bought in a 1928 building on the Upper East Side. “The beauty of these old apartments and workmanship in it — I believe it’s one of the greatest art forms,” he said. With its polished herringbone floors, wall-length bookshelves and sizable fireplace, the space makes a strong case for maintaining Old World elegance.

However, redoing the electrical wiring, which will require ripping out (and replicating) the original molding and baseboards, will take at least several months, to say nothing of costs. Yet for Mr. Seligman, the headache is worth it. “It doesn’t have to be what everyone else likes,” he said. “It’s just what I do.”

After living in a prewar apartment that had been “turned into a drywall white box” in the 1970s, Laura Dupouy, 44, an interior designer, is ready to embark on a similar gut renovation to restore a prewar apartment that she purchased last spring on the Upper West Side.

“It’s dripping with turn-of-century details,” she said of the wood-paneled three-bedroom unit built in 1912. The picture rail molding, old pocket doors and heavy casement molding surrounding the doors will stay put. “To me,” she said, “it wouldn’t make sense to move into a building like this unless you came to love all of those things.”

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