

# Manhattan Townhouse Renovations: Classic Architecture, Contemporary Design

By: Darren China, R.A.

Manhattan townhouses exude a charm that other dwellings just cannot compare with. These four to six story structures built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century afford privacy hard to come by in New York City. They typically include an eat-in kitchen, private back yard often with a garden, large living spaces and a classic décor inclusive of a beautiful stairway, inlaid wood floors, crown moldings and multiple marble mantled fire places. Unfortunately time has often taken its toll on these beautiful buildings. Given the time period in which they were built, amenities lack with respect to the life style of its modern day owners. The following are four design strategies that can help rejuvenate these classic buildings while implementing contemporary design aesthetic and functionality:

## 1) **Restore main stair and add an elevator:**

The main stairway of the townhouse is often an eloquent focal point of the building's interior. By restoring the stair with ornate iron hand rails and perhaps inlaid marble stair treads new life can be given to the spine of the building. Also in an effort to improve the vertical circulation of the house, the removal of the dumb waiter which is generally not used by the modern day family can be explored thereby potentially making room for an elevator. The new elevator can eliminate having to navigate the multistory home by foot.

## 2) **Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning:**

By replacing the existing outdated boiler typically still found in the Manhattan townhouse with a new higher efficiency unit, the building can be made far more environmentally friendly while producing cost savings over the lifetime of its use. Also with the newer system space savings can be realized through the installation of less bulky radiators than those affiliated with the older boiler. For the summer months a zoned central air conditioning system can potentially be implemented bringing the building into the new millennium.

## 3) **Day Lighting:**

Bringing natural daylight into the townhouse not only assists in saving on electric bills since lights do not need to be used as often, but it also lends to the quality of life for the building's inhabitants. By creating or restoring an existing skylight above the main stair, daylight can filter through the entire vertical length of the building and any space adjacent to the stairway. At the garden level the rear of the house could be opened up to the backyard by installing French doors and additional windows. This alteration would provide a greater connection between the interior and outdoor space while allowing daylight to flood this area of the house.

## 4) **Modern Kitchen**

The kitchen is the most used space of any home, whether by the family or staff, so modernizing it to fit the needs of the modern family only makes sense. First step would be to rethink how to better utilize the space from the stand points of work flow, storage and even as

a gathering space for meals. New high end appliances, finishes and cabinetry can be designed to fit the needs of family and/or staff.

The creation of a modern living space while maintaining the classic appearance of these historic buildings allows for an improved quality of life for its inhabitants while leaving in tact the fabric of the city and its neighborhoods. Such alterations and rejuvenation will also bring a high level of living experience, which leads to a better investment whether one plans to live in the new space or sell to a buyer who dreams of living in a modern classic.

**Darren China, R.A.** is the principal of Studio China Architecture + Design.  
Contact him at [darren@studio-china.com](mailto:darren@studio-china.com) or 201-575-5180  
Visit Studio China Architecture + Design's website at: [www.studio-china.com](http://www.studio-china.com)

© Copyright 2011 Darren China. All rights reserved