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Real Estate

Owning a historic home

Even on LI, historic-house ownership isn't necessarily a blast from the past

BY ANN GIVENS
Newsday Staff Writer

September 29, 2006

The house is stunning: a majestic Italianate dwelling built in 1855 overlooking the Roslyn duck pond.

But after six months on the market, it still hasn't been sold. Why? Because along with its obvious draws, like the twin verandas lining the front of the house and the original oak plank floors, the house - like most historic homes - also has its quirks. Recently, its asking price dropped from \$950,000 to \$849,000.

"I had some buyers, but the husband was 6 feet 2 inches, and he had to duck to get through some of the doorways," says Derek Koonin, who is showing the home for Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate. "It takes a special kind of person to buy a home like this."

In an area as steeped in history as Long Island, there is ample opportunity for prospective buyers to find historic homes listed on the real estate pages - some dating back as far as the 1600s.

But as romantic as it sounds to buy a piece of the past, such an endeavor is not for everyone, real estate experts say.

While historic homes offer fine craftsmanship and a tie to a community's heritage, they tend to come with eccentricities as well: low ceilings, slanted floors, small rooms and, in some cases, a host of maintenance concerns.

And homeowners often find that fixing the things that bug them isn't easy: Before they can do the work on some houses, they must wrestle with a local historic review board, whose job it is to ensure that the historic integrity of the building isn't compromised. (Another potential downside to the Roslyn house - the local preservation board has to approve the owner's choice of color before deciding to paint, Koonin says.)

Recently, Huntington's historic Peace and Plenty Inn made news when, after sitting on the market for several months at a price of \$1.25 million, real estate brokers approached Suffolk County, asking leaders to consider buying it with historic preservation funds. The four-bedroom, five-bathroom house at 107 Chichester Rd. in West Hills, built about 1680, boasts a taproom, four working fireplaces and an interior chimney. Real estate agents, who would not comment for this article, have said it is a tough sell.

Popularity fluxuates

Paul Brennan, the Hamptons regional manager for Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate, says the popularity of historic homes seems to ebb and flow. Right now, he says, people are more interested in sprawling newer homes. But he says the tide is bound to turn. "Years ago, everyone wanted to come out and buy a little farmhouse," says Brennan. "Now they want to come out, find a little farmhouse, knock it down and build some huge number on the property."

But there are people who pine for historic homes no matter what the trends. They tend to be history buffs or craftsmen, or both. Many of them grew up in historic homes or districts, and they find the pains of dealing with old house frames and antiquated plumbing and wiring systems well worth the trouble.

Gary Laube, 53, of Southold, says friends thought he should take a bulldozer to his 1690 house when he bought it for \$75,000 in 1999. But he's a history buff, a Revolutionary War re-enactor, and he cherishes the idea of bringing back the house's beehive oven and four fireplaces - even if that means lifting the whole house seven feet to shore up its foundation. To date, Laube says he has spent \$400,000.

"I always ask people why they're buying an historic home," says Peter Wilson, a Patchogue-based home inspector specializing in older properties. "They have to have a real desire and

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really enjoy historic things." He says it's important to know how a home is put together, basic plumbing and electrical skills. And if the homeowner can't do work himself, he should at least know where to go to find someone who can do it properly.

Contractor Andy Clifford, 55, who owns Clifford Renovations and has spent the past four years renovating a 1680 Colonial for himself in Cold Spring Harbor, says there were some things that were difficult about working on a home protected by the local landmark preservation board. Every municipality has its own set of rules, but the goal is always the same: to preserve the historic integrity of the building.

Barn rule applies to garage

In Clifford's case, the board didn't want him to build a garage that opened in the same direction as the house, since historically, that was not how most barns were built. Clifford and his wife, Katrina, a real estate agent, who wanted to avoid cutting into a hill to build their driveway, had to present the board with numerous examples of historic houses with barn doors located on the same exposure as the home's front doors before they could build as they pleased.

There are cases on Long Island when an appropriate owner for a historic home cannot be found, and in those cases, the public sector is trying to become more involved, says state Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), who has taken part in saving some history-rich residences in danger of demolition. The key is intervening before a home is so dilapidated that the public agency can't afford to restore it, and finding a new use for the building that won't put it at risk, Englebright says.

Although owning a piece of history isn't for everyone, for those who choose to do it, the rewards can be priceless, says Margaret Mateyaschuk, a broker for Daniel Gale Sotheby's International Realty in Locust Valley.

"It's very romantic," she says. "It gives you a very nostalgic kind of fairy tale feeling. There's no other way to describe it."

Checklist for safety

Any historic home is likely to come with its own set of quirks and repairs. Once you connect a home to the era in which it was built, it's easier to flag problems you might expect to encounter. Here are some prime examples from Peter Wilson, a Patchogue-based inspector who specializes in old homes:

1600s and 1700s In homes this old, it is important to see if a house is structurally sound. See if it's leaning, or if there is a sag in the roof. Check what the foundation is made of, and if it's still solid.

Early 1800s to the Civil War These homes were constructed largely before wood was treated to make it resistant to wood-boring insects. To see if you have a problem, look for fine powder on the attic floor, or pin-size holes in wooden beams.

The Civil War to 1930 Many of these homes were built with something called balloon framing, in which the studs extend from the foundation to the roofline. That means there are vertical vents in the walls, a possible fire hazard.

1930 to World War II Look for lead paint on windows or asbestos on old steam-heating pipes. These homes often need plumbing and electrical upgrades.

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