



What 30 Years of Historic Renovation Teaches You

KA

*Katz Architecture
Project Management*

*305 7th Avenue, 20th Floor
New York, NY 10001*

*www.katzarch.com
212.353.1080*



▲
**A Gramercy Park
block famous
for its Frederick
Sterner houses.**



by DAVID KATZ
Principal / Founder

One of my first projects as a young architect was an exterior restoration of the Dakota Apartments on the Upper West Side, a co-op famous for, among other things, being the former home of John Lennon. When I began work on the structure, it was the late 80's and the building hadn't been cleaned since it was built in 1884. The exterior was covered in a thick layer of dark grime that gave it a haunted gothic look (it was used as the backdrop to the horror film, *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968).

Part of the project scope was to remove the old deteriorated mortar and replace it with one that would match the historical original color. But the original brick was so dirty the replacement looked blindingly white in comparison, which resulted in a big argument among everyone invested in the project as to whether

“

Is a building significant because it was built by a well-known architect? Because a historic event took place there? **Or is it simply because a building is old?**

or not the dirt layer was part of the building’s history and whether or not it should be removed.

Eventually, the building was cleaned and the final product looked great. But the whole ordeal piqued my curiosity about what the term “historic” means and set the course for the future of my career.

In Italy, where I studied as a graduate student, my thesis addressed the question of what is worthy of preservation and why. Is a building significant because it was built by a well-known architect? Because a historic event took place there? Or is it simply because a building is old? I think we naturally have a sentimental attachment to old places — the patina of time, the wear and tear of use through years. But interestingly enough, we also tend to have an aversion to newer things showing wear. We find romantic, the worn marble tabletops of a 150 year old café, but we would feel very different about a chip in our new stone kitchen counter.

New buildings that show age are considered unattractive. Older buildings showing age are alluring. This conundrum creates interesting challenges for the modern architect.



Before and after of landmark building storefront facade recently completed by Katz Architecture.



When my firm works on an older building façade, the questions always come up: Should we replace the brick altogether? And if so, how closely can the historic brick be matched? Should the grout blend in immediately or should it age over time to be

“

Should we restore the façade to what it was when constructed **or a particular time in its history?**

“

Our proposal included a restoration of the façade, but also the addition of an elevator which required a bulkhead on the roof, **which had the community up in arms. The LPC allowed us to continue, but not without a fight**

uniform with the rest of the building? Should we restore the façade to what it was when constructed or a particular time in its history?

The answers to these questions are never simple and are often complicated depending on the other stakeholders in the decisions. Since my firm specializes in the renovation, restoration and maintenance of older buildings, the majority of our work involves historic properties and many of them happen to be in designated landmark districts, or themselves are individual landmarks: The San Remo, The Dakota Apartments, and the Museum of the American Indian are just some of the many structures we've worked on.

Buildings like these fall under the jurisdiction of the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), the municipal agency responsible for protecting the City's landmark properties. Anytime you work on a building within a landmark district it is necessary to obtain LPC approval. Assuming the work will not impact the appearance of the building from the exterior, approval is fairly easy. But if there are any visible modifications to the exterior such as new doors, windows, visible roof or mechanical equipment, that work will need to be publicly presented to both the local community board and the LPC.

While the community board does not formally rule on any project, they do offer their opinion to LPC either endorsing or rejecting the project. LPC hearings can be contentious, and as I tell all my clients, it is not possible to guarantee an outcome. There are times when a project is accepted as presented, but very often the LPC requests changes before granting approval.

Several years ago I worked on a Frederick Sterner townhouse in Gramercy Park. Sterner was the first architect to “renovate” New York brownstones back in the early 1900's. At the time brownstones were regarded as bleak and outdated. However, Sterner's treatment to the façades, which involved the use of colored stucco and decorative elements like mosaic tile, planter boxes and shutters, eventually became emblematic of an important development in the history of New York City architecture.

The street where this project was located was notable for having several Frederick Sterner facades. Understandably, the community and LPC was protective. The building had been badly modified over the years since Sterner's renovation. Our proposal included a restoration of the façade, but also the addition of an elevator which required a bulkhead on the roof, which had the community up in arms. The LPC allowed us to continue, but not without

a fight and modifications that limited visibility from the street. The truth is, all renovations in older buildings — landmark or not — demand a certain sensitivity and knowledge from an architect, particularly buildings originally built in the 1800's.



Deteriorated steel beam found hidden in a masonry wall. Brick and mortar replacement studies.



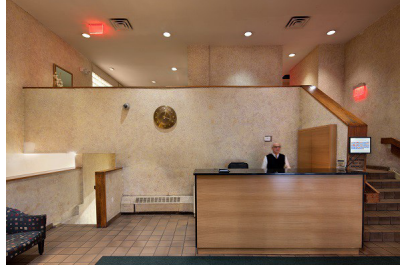
For example, a lot of the brownstones in the city were originally built as single family homes. Plumbing pipes and waste lines were often zig-zagged through these structures whenever they were retrofitted for building expansion or multiple-family use. Likewise, they were often constructed with gas lighting and it is not uncommon to find abandoned gas lines in the walls due to their age.

When I begin a project, I rarely have plans telling me where these utilities are located. The process always involves a lot of probing to try to understand what is hidden in the walls and there are almost always surprises to be found.

A lot of things can go wrong if someone is not prepared for this type of work. The approvals process could drag on endlessly, or the project might be rejected altogether. Without knowledge of materials, maintenance problems could arise such as discoloration or waterproofing issues.

However, as challenging as these projects tend to be, they are always my favorite. I love the process of conducting research on a historic property and even enjoy healthy debates with the LPC and the communities in which these structures are located.

No matter the headaches, I always finish feeling honored to have served as a steward for buildings that represent the wonderful and rich history of our great city.



▲
Before and after of a Katz Architecture project to restore Art Deco charm to a landmarked former hotel in Brooklyn. ▶



About the Author

As founder of Katz Architecture, David has more than 30 years of experience in the fields of architecture and design. Over this time, he has contributed to a wide range of residential, commercial, retail, institutional, urban design and preservation projects throughout the United States and abroad.

“

Katz Architecture works as a partner to building managers, design professionals, and city agencies to ensure the ongoing integrity of our built environment.

NEXT STEPS

info@katzarch.com

*Katz Architecture
Project Management*

*305 7th Avenue, 20th Floor
New York, NY 10001*

*www.katzarch.com
212.353.1080*