RESTREPO INNOVATIONS

The Brownstone Specialist

20 Things Not To Do When You Buy a Brownstone

The mistakes we see repeatedly on brownstone projects across NJ, CT, and NY - and how to avoid every one of them

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01 • Do Not Drill Into Plaster and Lath Without a Plan

Plaster and lath is not drywall. Every penetration matters – for a low-voltage cable, conduit stub, or device box. Before you touch the walls, map what you need and route it thoughtfully as part of a coordinated plan. Ad hoc drilling through plaster creates surface runs, patchy walls, and visible repair seams through the original finish.

02 • Do Not Run Cable on the Surface of Finished Walls

Surface-mounted cable runs are the mark of a rushed job and a disrespect for what the building is. Brownstones were built with care – baseboards, crown moldings, ceiling medallions, and plaster profiles that cannot be replicated. Plan pathways before walls close, use existing cavities intelligently, and in retrofit situations, fish wire through proper access points.

03 • Do Not Ignore Landmark and Historic District Constraints

Many brownstones across Brooklyn, Manhattan, Hoboken, Jersey City, Newark, Hartford, and New Haven are in designated historic or landmark districts. Changes to the exterior – including camera placements, intercom hardware, conduit, and lighting fixtures – may require approval from a preservation review board. Owners who skip this step face stop-work orders, fines, and mandatory reversals.

04 • Do Not Oversize AV for a Narrow Parlor Floor

The parlor floor of a typical brownstone is often twelve to sixteen feet wide with connected rooms rather than an open floor plan. Dropping a 120-inch screen and a subwoofer array designed for a great room into a brownstone parlor creates a room that is painful to sit in and difficult to escape from acoustically. The scale of the system must match the scale of the room.

05 • Do Not Gut Renovate Without Planning Conduit Pathways First

A gut renovation is the only time you will ever see the studs in a brownstone. It is the one moment when running conduit – for AV, network, and low-voltage of every kind – is fast, clean, and cheap relative to what it costs later. Plan conduit before drywall. It is the cheapest infrastructure investment in the project.

06 • Do Not Ignore Party-Wall Acoustics

You share at least one wall with a neighbor. Party walls in brownstones are mass walls - brick or block - but they are not sound-isolated assemblies by modern standards. A subwoofer on the parlor floor can transfer bass energy through the party wall at levels that generate complaints within a week. Address the party wall during construction, not after the system is installed.

07 • Do Not Forget the Garden Level

The garden level of a brownstone is partially below grade - wetter than the rest of the building and more susceptible to seasonal humidity swings. Humidity in the 70–90% RH range that is common in unmanaged garden levels will degrade electronics, corrode connectors, and shorten equipment lifespans. If your rack room is in the garden level, dehumidification is not optional.

08 • Do Not Assume Your Electrical Service Is Adequate

Most brownstones built before 1960 were wired for loads that bear no resemblance to what a modern technology-equipped home demands. Many are still on 100A service - inadequate for a home that adds lighting control, multi-zone AV, EV charging, and modern appliances. Audit the electrical service before any significant technology scope is planned.

09 • Do Not Test Party-Wall Acoustics After the System Is In

Test party-wall acoustic transmission before any system is committed. A simple field measurement during the design phase - playing a test tone at the planned position and measuring at the party wall - tells you exactly what the situation is. Decoupled assemblies and mass loading are options during construction. They do not exist after the wall is finished.

10 • Do Not Plan Technology After the Renovation

This is the mistake that creates all the others. Technology should be in scope before design development is locked - not after drywall is up. The conduit pathways, the rack room location, the electrical capacity, the speaker blocking, the camera positions - all of those decisions interact with architecture and structure in ways that cannot be resolved after the fact.

11 • Do Not Use the Original Wiring as a Backbone

Brownstones have original wiring that in many cases has been in place for sixty to one hundred years. Knob-and-tube and early Romex are common findings. New low-voltage infrastructure belongs in new conduit, properly separated from electrical, on its own pathways. Using old wiring as a backbone is both a fire risk and a performance problem.

12 • Do Not Overlook Signal Attenuation Through Masonry

The masonry walls of a brownstone are excellent at blocking RF signal. Wi-Fi access points that work well in a wood-frame building may not perform well through the thick masonry floors and walls of a brownstone. Network design must account for masonry attenuation - a wired backbone first, with wireless access points deployed per floor and per zone.

13 • Do Not Put Cameras Where They Cannot Be Approved

A camera that requires drilling through the facade, attaching to a historic iron railing, or mounting on the cornice in a visible location may not be approvable by the historic review authority. Design camera systems with landmark review in mind from the start – using recessed mounting, interior-mounted cameras behind glass, and positions that achieve coverage without conflicting with preservation standards.

14 • Do Not Skip the Moisture Baseline

Before any electronics go into a brownstone, establish a humidity baseline on every floor. A simple wireless sensor deployed for two to four weeks across seasons will tell you what you are dealing with. Know the numbers before you decide where to rack equipment, where to place speakers, and whether dehumidification is needed in a given space.

15 • Do Not Let Contractors Cut Original Details for Cable

Cornices, ceiling medallions, plaster moldings, hardwood floors, and original doors are not sacrificial materials. The technology scope should be designed around the original details, not through them. If a cable pathway conflicts with original material, the pathway changes - not the detail.

16 • Do Not Forget Stoop and Exterior Tech Needs a Plan

The stoop is the most visible part of a brownstone and the entry point for camera, intercom, and lighting technology. On a landmarked property, that technology needs to be designed for the exterior before any hardware is purchased. The cost of removing a non-compliant installation and reapplying to the landmarks board is always greater than getting it right on the first submission.

17 • Do Not Assume One Floor Is Acoustically Independent

Brownstone floors are stacked, and joist construction between floors transmits impact sound, footfall, and mechanical vibration effectively. Acoustic separation between floors is a construction decision - mass, decoupling, and absorption in the joist cavity - and it must be made during framing. After finish materials are in place, the options are limited.

18 • Do Not Sign Off Without As-Built Documentation

Whatever technology is installed in a brownstone should be documented in as-built drawings before the renovation is considered complete. Brownstones change hands. Contractors change. The next technician who needs to understand what is in the walls deserves a document package that shows them where things are. As-built documentation is a project deliverable, not an optional extra.

19 • Do Not Overlook Jersey City, Hoboken, and Newark Brownstones

The brownstone conversation in NJ is as serious as it is in Brooklyn or Manhattan. Hoboken's row houses, Jersey City's Hamilton Park and Van Vorst Park neighborhoods, and Newark's James Street Commons all have significant historic brownstone stock. We work across NJ, CT, and NY because the brownstone-specific challenges are the same regardless of which side of the Hudson the building is on.

20 • Do Not Start Without a Brownstone-Experienced Integrator

The integration mistakes on brownstones are different from mistakes on new construction. Plaster walls, landmark districts, party-wall acoustics, garden-level humidity, masonry signal attenuation, and undersized electrical service are all brownstone-specific problems that require brownstone-specific solutions. A generalist who has not worked extensively in these buildings will learn on your project.

GET IN TOUCH

The Brownstone Specialist

We specialize in brownstone integration across NJ, CT, and NY - from the first 90-day consultation through long-horizon infrastructure design. Our team brings 20+ years of combined leadership experience to every project.

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