

20 Things To Do When You Buy a Brownstone

The first 90 days set up the next 30 years - the checklist we run through with every new brownstone owner across NJ, CT, and NY

01 • **Survey and Document Every Original Detail Before Anyone Touches Anything**

Before a contractor enters, before a painter is booked, before a single fixture is removed – walk every floor with a camera and document the original details. Photograph the plaster molding profiles, measure and document ceiling medallions, note baseboard heights, and catalog original door hardware. Brownstone details cannot be replaced easily; what you photograph on day one has value for the life of the building.

02 • **Establish a Humidity Baseline on Every Floor**

Deploy wireless humidity and temperature sensors on every floor – including the garden level, the basement mechanical room, and any below-grade closet. Log the data for at least two to four weeks before making decisions about equipment placement, finishes, or dehumidification scope. Garden levels regularly run 70–90% RH in summer without intervention.

03 • **Audit the Electrical Service Capacity Immediately**

Call a licensed electrician in the first week. Have them assess the service entrance, panel capacity, available circuits, wire gauges, and the condition of any original wiring still in place. Many brownstones across NJ, CT, and NY are on 100A or 200A service – inadequate for a home that adds modern AV, lighting control, EV charging, and contemporary appliances.

04 • **Verify Landmark and Historic District Status Before Planning Exterior Work**

Before any exterior scope is designed – cameras, intercoms, lighting, conduit, or facade penetrations of any kind – confirm whether your property is individually landmarked or within a historic or preservation district. The review process is straightforward if you enter it early. It is expensive and disruptive if you discover it after work is already done.

05 • **Test Party-Wall Acoustic Transmission**

In the first week of ownership, before furniture is in place and before any system is installed, test what transmits through the party walls. Play a bass-heavy audio track at moderate volume from several positions on the parlor floor and listen in the adjacent building – or at minimum in the stairwell adjacent to the party wall. This information shapes every acoustic decision that follows.

06 • **Map Potential Conduit Pathways Before the Renovation Starts**

If a renovation is in scope, bring the integration team in before the general contractor starts. Walk every floor, identify the logical cable pathways, and determine where conduit can run. The goal is to have conduit stubs in place at every room where technology is anticipated, connected to a central chase that reaches the rack room. This mapping exercise is free. The conduit, during a renovation, is cheap.

07 • **Designate and Properly Condition the Rack Room**

The rack room or equipment closet should be designated early – ideally in the first 90 days if a renovation is planned. The criteria: adequate square footage to work in safely, a location that makes cable routing practical, proper ventilation or active cooling, a dedicated electrical circuit, and a humidity level compatible with sensitive electronics.

08 • **Photograph the Plaster Profiles and Send Them to a Plaster Contractor**

Original plaster molding profiles are unique to each brownstone. If any of those profiles need repair during a renovation, you need a plaster contractor who can match them – which means you need the profiles documented. Photograph each profile type from a perpendicular angle with a ruler in frame and confirm that matching is feasible before the renovation starts.

09 • **Plan Network Infrastructure From the Basement Up**

A brownstone is a masonry building. Wi-Fi does not travel freely through foot-thick masonry floors and brick party walls. Network design starts with a wired Ethernet backbone – ideally fiber between floors, with a managed switch on each level. From that backbone, wireless access points are deployed per floor. Plan the backbone during the renovation. Do not try to retrofit it.

10 • **Have the Dehumidification Conversation Early**

Dehumidification on the garden level is not a comfort item – it is an infrastructure protection measure. The right solution depends on the space: a whole-house dehumidifier integrated with the HVAC, a standalone unit with a drain line, or a combination approach. This decision should be made before any electronics are placed in the garden level.

11 • Plan Landmark Approval Coordination Before Designing Exterior Technology

If your property is in a historic district, the exterior technology scope needs to be planned with approval in mind. That means understanding what is permitted as-of-right versus what requires a certificate of appropriateness, and selecting intercom hardware, camera housings, and lighting fixtures that are appropriate to a historic facade.

12 • Test and Document the Original Windows Before Any Work Begins

Brownstone windows are often original and in varying states of repair. They matter for the technology scope in two ways: they are the primary acoustic weak point in the building envelope, and the decision to restore versus replace them affects what exterior camera and sensor positions are available. Document the condition of every window on every floor.

13 • Coordinate the Plaster Wall Plan With the Low-Voltage Plan

If any walls are being opened – even partially – that is the moment to plan what goes in them. Every room that might receive a speaker, a network drop, a keypad, or a camera should be identified before a single stud bay is closed. In-wall speaker blocking, rough-in boxes at the right heights, conduit stubs to the floor cavity – all are simple to execute when the wall is open.

14 • Identify and Protect All Load-Bearing Elements Before Drilling Anything

Brownstones have masonry bearing walls, wood joist floors, and in some cases original cast-iron columns. Before any drilling, any chasing of walls for conduit, or any cutting of joists for cable pathways, understand the structural system. A joist cut without engineering review can compromise floor performance; a masonry wall penetration in the wrong location can affect lateral stability.

15 • Set Up a Dedicated IoT and Security Network Segment From Day One

Before any smart devices are connected – cameras, intercoms, smart locks, thermostats, voice assistants – set up a properly segmented network. Smart devices should not live on the same network segment as computers and phones. In a properly designed brownstone network, the main LAN, the IoT segment, the camera segment, and the guest network are all separate VLANs.

16 • **Get a Structural Assessment of the Top-Floor Roof and Cornices**

The cornice at the top of a brownstone facade is an architectural element that also has structural implications for what can be attached to it. Camera positions, lighting, and any antenna hardware that might be considered for the roof or upper facade need to be evaluated in the context of the cornice condition before any hardware is attached.

17 • **Plan the Stoop Technology in Concert With the Landmark and Security Teams**

The stoop is the technology-richest exterior element of a brownstone. Camera coverage, intercom and access control, exterior lighting, and in some cases a video doorbell or keypad all need to be at the stoop. In a historic district, all of that needs to be approved. Plan it early; do not improvise hardware after the fact.

18 • **Document the Mechanical Systems Before Any Work Begins**

Photograph and document every mechanical system in the building – HVAC, plumbing distribution, electrical panels and circuits, any existing low-voltage infrastructure, and any prior renovation work that is visible. In a building this old, surprises are common. Documentation reduces their cost.

19 • **Build the Documentation Packet That the Next Owner Will Thank You For**

Even if you never sell this brownstone, build the documentation packet now. It should contain: as-built drawings of all low-voltage infrastructure, network diagrams, equipment schedules, programming archives for any control systems, warranty documentation for all major equipment, the original detail photographs taken at purchase, the structural assessment, and the landmark district approval records.

20 • **Retain a Brownstone-Experienced Integrator Before the Renovation Starts**

The integration mistakes on brownstone renovations follow predictable patterns: conduit not planned before drywall, rack rooms placed without humidity consideration, party-wall acoustics ignored until the subwoofer is installed, landmark constraints discovered after exterior hardware is purchased. The way to avoid those patterns is to work with a team that has already learned them on other projects.

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.

PHONE	201.405.2022
EMAIL	office@restrepoinnovations.com
ADDRESS	599 Franklin Ave, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417
WEB	restrepoinnovations.com
SERVING	NJ, CT, and NY

Elite Pro Crestron Dealer | HTA Luxury Certified | OSHA Certified | Ubiquiti UISP / Pro Partner

Divisions: Residential | Commercial | Hospitality | Military / Government