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In New York, the Suddenly Buff Prewar Building

By Constance Rosenblum

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SOUPED UP The new gym in the basement of 815 Park Avenue, a 1916 co-op.

Guy Calaf for The New York Times

THE apartment house at 815 Park Avenue, built in 1916, features classical swags on its facade, large arched windows and a softly lighted lobby hung with museum-quality oils in elaborate frames. Converted to a co-op some 30 years ago, 815 Park seems like the ultimate prewar apartment building, little touched by the passage of time.



815 Park's recreation area includes table games.

Guy Calaf for The New York Times

In the basement, however, a livelier and more contemporary ambience prevails. Some 1,500 square feet of raw space has been overhauled to accommodate a mirrored gym and fitness room and a recreation area where residents can play pool, table tennis, air hockey and foosball, with a lending library to come.

"We did research," said Peter Phillips, the president of the co-op board, "and we found that 40 percent of residents use co-op fitness rooms. The real benefit is that it provides amenities for residents, even those who already belong to health clubs, because they can go downstairs and find nearly everything they want to get a quick workout. We also wanted more than just a fitness amenity, so we added the recreation game space. New residents expect fitness space, but the recreation space is something few other prewar co-ops have."

For decades, prewar provenance was enough to satisfy residents and attract new buyers. Features like high ceilings, gracefully arranged spaces, rock-solid construction and arched doorways were sufficient draws.



The rooftop terrace at 771 West End Avenue, a building that dates to 1908.

Guy Calaf for The New York Times

But today, some old buildings are embracing the future — often enthusiastically, occasionally kicking and screaming. Spurred by residents eager to pursue a more active lifestyle and the explosion of luxury condos, dowager prewars are layering on the amenities, reclaiming and transforming unused space to satisfy a more demanding population and in the process, increase the value of apartments.

“The trend started simply because current residents wanted these things,” said Deanna Kory, a Corcoran broker who has handled many prewar apartments. “But then residents realized that the improvements had a positive economic impact for both buyers and sellers. Buildings felt compelled to add amenities, partly to accommodate today’s lifestyles but partly to be competitive with new development and to benefit shareholders by increasing the value of their apartments.”

Initially, not everyone at 815 Park supported the idea.



Neale Albert, a former board president of 815 Park, right, was opposed to the idea of a gym, but changed his mind. Now he’s often to be found there.

Guy Calaf for The New York Times

“I was totally opposed,” said Neale Albert, a retired lawyer who has lived in 815 Park since 1986 and is a former board president. “I thought it was a waste of money and space, and that no one would use the facility. But the more Peter worked on the plan, the more I liked the idea.”

As a member of the committee that interviews prospective buyers of apartments, he also sees how improvements affect sales. “People said to me, ‘I hear you’re going to have a gym.’ Some residents still think we went overboard and would have been happy with a stair climber in a closet. But this is one of the factors people name when they decide to buy an apartment in the building. Everyone asks about it.”

The fitness and recreation area at 815 Park Avenue, which cost in the mid \$200,000’s, opened in February with a ribbon-cutting and Champagne reception. The gleaming space is one of the newest examples of a trend that began in the late ’80s — the retrofitting of prewar apartment buildings with amenities ranging from gyms and basketball courts to rooftop gardens and children’s playrooms.



Guy Calaf for The New York Times

1120 Park Avenue is another prewar that has a gym.

Don Herrema, a longtime New Yorker who works in financial services and is moving back to the city after a year in California, is the kind of buyer who seeks old-world charm combined with 21st-century convenience.

“I lived in two prewars on Park Avenue, and I’m now looking for a prewar, but I wouldn’t consider a building without a gym,” said Mr. Herrema, who is returning to New York with his wife and their 9-year-old daughter. “I want the tradition, service and beauty of a prewar, but really, I want the best of both worlds.

“It’s a lifestyle thing,” he said. “I’m in my late 50s and I want to stay active. If there’s a gym in the basement, I can go down there in rain, in winter, at 5 a.m. or late at night. It’s inconvenient to have to walk to a gym, even one close by.”

Mr. Herrema has checked out a dozen apartments so far. “I recently saw one prewar that fit our needs in terms of space,” he said. “But when I learned it didn’t have a gym, I told the broker, we don’t even need to look at it.”



Guy Calaf for The New York Times

771 West End Avenue and its rooftop terrace, was discussed for years and added five years ago.

Holly Merrin, who with her husband just bought two apartments in a prewar building at 845 West End Avenue, shares these sentiments. Early next year, the condominium will open a basement playroom with a window facing a new fitness room, “so you can watch your children when you’re in the gym,” said Ms. Merrin, who has three children, 4, 5 and 7.

The Merrins, currently renters, had been apartment hunting for five years. “We wanted a prewar but one with great amenities,” Ms. Merrin said. “We wanted a combination of old and new — my husband, Sam, who’s an art dealer, especially cared about the old — and this was the perfect combination.”

One of the earliest examples of the retrofit can be seen at 1125 Park Avenue, where a 4,000-square-foot basement space with 27-foot ceilings was redone two decades ago to allow for a playroom, a gym and, most impressively, a basketball court. The space had been a coal storage bin, a relic of the days when the building was heated by a coal furnace.

"We had this coal room, and all these new co-ops and condos were going up, and we thought, 'Why shouldn't we compete?'" said Michele Kleier, who moved into the building in 1978, a few years after it went co-op. "I thought we were losing people because new buildings have all these amenities."



Guy Calaf for The New York Times

The granddaddy of retrofits may be at 1125 Park Avenue, where two decades ago the basement's high ceilings allowed the construction of a basketball court. There's also a gym and a playground.

As president of Gumley Haft Kleier, a real estate firm, Ms. Kleier has seen the financial implications of the improvements firsthand. "Both buyer and seller benefit," she said. "People will say to me, I only want a prewar building, but I also want a fitness center."

"It's hard to put a dollar value on what an amenity like this adds," Ms. Kleier said. "But if there are two apartments that the buyer likes equally, and one is in a building with a fitness center and the other isn't, the buyer will almost always choose the apartment in the building with the fitness center."

Valerie Feigen, who runs a boutique called Edit New York, had since 1996 lived with her husband in 1125 Park. But in November, needing more space for their three children, the couple moved across the street to 1120 Park, a building that also offers the mix of amenities Ms. Feigen sought. "I'm the kind of person who really appreciates classic buildings and their history," she said. "I grew up in a prewar, and I wanted a building with one foot in old New York and one foot in the new New York."

On the other side of town, major changes are in the works at the Aphthorp, the 1908 apartment house on Broadway and 78th Street, where some 8,300 square feet of space are being transformed by Stephen Sills Associates, a design firm.

When completed in December, the condominium's basement will be home not only to a gym and playroom, but also to an entertainment center with a 60-inch television. Mr. Sills enthusiastically displays samples of the opulent material that will be used here — the gold plaster that will sheathe structural columns, the toasty brown cork and sand-blasted oak to be used for the floors, the marble for the vanity tables. Total price tag: \$3 million.

As at the Aphthorp, many upgrades are found in basements. But sometimes, the improvements are much higher up. Five years ago, a roof garden was built atop the co-op at 771 West End Avenue. The garden is outfitted with oversized pavers, tall hardy grasses, comfortable outdoor furniture and a small pergola, and offers sweeping views of the Hudson. Going up to the roof at sunset quickly became a ritual for residents.

The project, which cost \$180,000 and had been discussed for decades, was made possible by available money in the building's reserve fund and was especially prized in a building that at least from the outside appeared to have fallen on hard times.

"Our apartments were some of the lower-priced apartments on West End Avenue," said Beth Pickens, who has lived at 771 West End Avenue since the building went co-op in 1980 and was chairman of the board when the roof garden was installed. "And when we installed the roof garden and did other renovations, the prices we got for our apartments went up. The change was noticeable."

Of course, ideas for retrofits don't always fly. Some prewar buildings are unwilling to change their tone or to invest large amounts of money in improvements that some residents find unnecessary.

At 610 West End Avenue, which turns 100 this year, residents investigated a suggestion to build a fitness room and children's playroom in the basement.

"We evaluated how much room we had, and we realized that a lot of the basement was already allocated to shareholder storage, a staff apartment, a laundry area and a professional office," said Amy Newman, a former board member. "People said it would be nice to have a gym or a playroom, but the project became impractical."

Sticking points included ventilation, exits and insurance. "Ultimately, it wasn't worth the expense and effort," Ms. Newman said. "We wouldn't have had a space big enough to make the idea compelling. Also, we're a block from a big gym. So we decided to backburner the idea."

As to whether 610 West End Avenue is suffering financially from the lack of such amenities, Ms. Newman said: "Have you seen our building? It's very beautiful, and the apartments are extraordinary. We have a wonderful line of duplexes and an exquisitely restored facade. We've come to understand that our building sells itself."

Meanwhile, back at 815 Park, the new features in the basement are getting a vigorous workout. Even Mr. Albert, the onetime skeptic, comes here. "Lots of people use the space, even me," he said. "It's one of the best things we ever did."

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