

After Long Struggle, Crown Heights Antebellum Jewel Susan B. Elkins House Restored at Last



Photo by Susan De Vries

Architecture

Crown Heights

by Cate Corcoran

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At long last, it's back from the dead. After years of deterioration and vandalism, Crown Heights' last remaining wood frame villa, the [Susan B. Elkins House](#) at 1375 Dean Street, has been buffed and polished in preparation for new residents.



The badly deteriorated landmark in 2014. Photo by Rebecca Baird-Remba

It's been a complicated preservation saga for the circa 1850s Greek Revival-Italianate style house. Thanks to the efforts of local residents and the Crown Heights North Association, it was saved from a developer's wrecking ball at the last minute in 2006 when the city declared it an [individual landmark](#).

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The badly deteriorated landmark in 2014. Photo by Rebecca Baird-Remba

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The house in a circa 1939 tax photo. Photo via [New York Municipal Archives](#)

But its future was far from assured. As the house passed from owner to owner, water seeped in unchecked and [vandals and thieves robbed it](#) of any interior details still remaining. In 2011, a developer purchased it, promising to restore it to its original glory, but [let it fall even further into ruin](#) and was sanctioned for demolition by neglect before putting it back on the market for multiples of his purchase price.



In 2014, the house in dire condition, developer Amber Mazor [purchased the property](#) and proposed a restoration and conversion to condos to make the project financially viable.

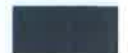
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but even this plan was not smooth sailing.



The conversion meant Mazor had to comply with modern city zoning. But modern city zoning requirements clash with Landmarks: Zoning rules say side yards must be at least eight feet wide — or there must be no side yards at all.

And because the house is wooden, it cannot have more than two units.



Finally, after a number of false starts with Landmarks and the DOB, Mazor, working with architect Richard Goodstein from Nc2 Architecture, hit on a winning plan: Turn the house into two two-unit buildings by building a party wall inside, and add recessed side extensions camouflaged from the street with slatted, moveable screens painted a dark color so they disappear into the shadows.



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deteriorated sections of the house, raised it up on stilts, and inserted a steel frame into the structure, then lowered the house back down onto the foundation.

At the same time, they raised the roof slightly (the change is not visible from the street) to turn the top partial-height floor into a full story.



A surprising amount of original material survives on the exterior, including about 70 percent of the original clapboard, which was removed, patched and reinstalled, said Mazor. Three of the front porch columns were safely stored off site and are original; a fourth column and the porch-rail spindles were re-created based on the 1940s tax photo.



The beautiful wood cornice with bead and reel moldings (which resemble links of sausage, Mazor pointed out) is original. The crew removed it, stripped it, cleaned it up and put it back on the house.

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calls “delicate cusped surrounds,” the lacy moldings around the attic windows, were re-created.



The house was built circa 1856 and was lived in by the Elkins family — including two daughters who were artists and inventors — until the early 20th century. It’s had a colorful and varied history: Eartha Kitt was a frequent visitor “before she became famous,” according to [Brownstone Detectives](#), and at one point the house was owned by Christ Church Cathedral, whose head worked with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and whose son was the first prime minister of Barbados. In the ’80s and ’90s, it was a group home and treatment center.



Mazor spent 15 years restoring landmarked brownstones in Brooklyn Heights with his design-build company Perfect Restoration. After rehabilitating the house across the street at No. 1372, where he now lives, he formed development company Komaru Enterprises to restore the Susan Elkins house.

“I love the architecture of Brooklyn, old structures — decaying structures mostly,” he said.





Photo via Amber Mazor



The attio during construction. Photo via Amber Mazor

