

Take A Good Look At New York's Older Commercial Building Stock

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While we're waiting for the recession to turn the corner, all eyes are on New York's aging stock of buildings. Are these still-viable buildings — let's say, from the late 1800's to the mid-20th century — worth renovating or developing? Will the return on investment from refreshing or from rebuilding/rebranding an older property be sufficient?

I've provided key questions in evaluating an older building, so you can calculate how much needs to be invested to achieve your goal.

Zoning And Landmark District Requirements

- *Is the building currently occupied as of right?* No one should move forward on a building without knowing if the Certificate of Occupancy is currently "as of right" — that is, allowed by the New York City Zoning Resolution — and if the proposed use is as of right. If the proposed use is not as of right, the only way to obtain permission is through a public hearing process.
- *Is the bulk of the building allowed by law?* If you want to add to the building, you'll need to know if it is in compliance, that is, if it occupies less than what's allowed by the Zoning Resolution, you could add square footage up to the maximum allowed for the site. [Purchasing air rights is also possible, but that's for another article.] If the structure is already overbuilt and you anticipate changing the C of O, however, the city could force you to reduce its size.
- *Is the building in one of New York City's 95 historic districts or 13 expansions?* If you make interior alterations but don't change the façade, you'll need a Certificate of No Effect; to make any alterations to the façade, you'll need a Certificate of Appropriateness, which requires going through the city's Landmark Preservation Commission public hearing process.

Exterior And Structure

- *What do the building's features suggest about its use?* How much will the aesthetics — the grace or vigor of the materials and decorative elements, once restored — add to the building's potential for attracting tenants?
- *What is its condition?* Although Local Laws 10 and 11 require that the façade of a building be inspected and repaired every five years, prior owners may have undertaken short-term fixes that are inadequate for the long term. You'll need to know what extent of work will be needed to rehabilitate the walls, windows and roof. An older masonry building will likely have a tighter envelope than an older, all-glass structure.
- *Then what about a glass curtain wall?* The early curtain walls of the 50s and 60s are not easily repaired. Just as for the extraordinary Lever House, they will probably have to be replaced. The new wall will be more energy-efficient and weather tight, yet also heavier to accommodate the thicker insulated glass.
- *Is the building's live load suitable for its new use?* For example, a commercial structure must be able to support 50 to 75 pounds of live load per square foot on a typical floor. The city's current requirements for seismic and wind loading will also need

to be met.

- *How well does the building handle its storm-water runoff?* The City mandates that buildings retain and slowly release water from a rainfall; its sewer and storm water systems, likely older than these buildings, need to receive overflow gradually.
- *How accessible is the building?* How will handicapped people move through the building? You may need to alter the façade to achieve an accessible entryway. The size of bathrooms and their stalls is another consideration.
- *How well insulated is the building?* Older masonry-clad structures are typically not well insulated, but it is simple to add insulation. By the way, it's quite possible to achieve the various levels of US Green Building Council certification.

Interior

- *Are the core elements of the building adequate?* Are the elevators large enough, for example, or will you have to combine elevator shafts and add another? What is the condition of the egress stairways, and are they legally configured? Are vertical paths available for today's mechanical, electrical, and telecommunications requirements?
- *Do the column spacing and floor-to-floor heights permit your intended use?* The larger the column bays, the more flexibility you'll have. If your floor-to-floor height is high enough, you might consider an under-floor air distribution system, which could help reduce your energy loads and add flexibility for cabling.
- *What about life safety systems?* Are there early-warning devices and a code-compliant fire alarm system?

Funding

Government encourages redeveloping an existing structure through incentives — not a lot, but not small change either. If the structure was built before 1936, it's eligible for a 10-percent tax break for a major renovation. If the building is on the National Register of Buildings, it's eligible for up to a 20-percent credit. If the building is suitable, getting onto the Register carries a cost, and you will need a special consultant to set up the filing, but the value of the credit more than offsets this cost. And finally, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority [NYSERDA] will also contribute to the cost of developing and installing technologies that will reduce the energy load of the building.

These assessments, of course, require a battery of people trained and/or licensed to do them. If you do a good job understanding and documenting existing conditions, you minimize surprises and maximize what you can do with the built or buildable area you have identified. In today's economy it could be not just cost-effective, but also inspiring to rejuvenate the building stock that has already contributed to New York's viability.

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