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Adopted by a Brownstone

By **CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM**

BACK in 2007, when [Jenny Salomon](#) and her longtime boyfriend began house-hunting in Clinton Hill, [Brooklyn](#), the two seemed poised on the brink of a golden future together.

They had met during their student days at Brown University 15 years earlier. Ms. Salomon was a visual artist who was also deeply involved in the world of nonprofit foundations. And thanks to her paternal grandfather, Richard B. Salomon, who had been the chairman and chief executive of Lanvin-Charles of the Ritz, and her father, an investment adviser, she had the resources to buy and renovate a magnificent century-old brownstone on Washington Avenue, steps from Pratt Institute.

“The plan was for us to put down roots and eventually to have a family,” Ms. Salomon, 35, said. “But once I bought the house, exactly the opposite occurred. We found a home together, we worked on it together, but at a certain point it became clear that he and I were going in different directions.”

Yet the next chapter was unexpectedly happy. “There was this dying building, and the relationship was dying, too,” Ms. Salomon said. “But along the way I met Reggie, my contractor, who eventually became this new person in my life.”

Reggie was Reggie Young, whose company, [Brooklyn Lime Works](#), specializes in historic preservation and green technology. And while theirs was a professional relationship, as they worked together to rescue the brownstone, they became as close as siblings. In fact, Mr. Young grew so enamored of the block that he rented an apartment in the brownstone next door, where he lives when not at his home upstate.

Though within in the Clinton Hill Historic District, the house was hardly magnificent when Ms. Salomon bought it in April 2008 for just under \$1.7 million. Like so many of the neighborhood’s brownstones, it had fallen on hard times, its grand gestures hidden beneath layers of neglect.

Shutters framing oversized windows were buried under dozens of coats of paint. The winding mahogany staircase had caved in, and linoleum concealed its once lustrous steps. The foyer was as dark as the cellar. The fir floors had been sanded within a millimeter of their lives and were so filthy that the wood inlay around their edges was invisible.

“There were lots of surprises,” said Ms. Salomon, who sank a considerable amount of sweat equity into the renovation, “some great, some not so great.”

Yet the house’s assets were considerable, among them pocket doors, soaring arched doorways, original brick walls rosy with age, marble fireplaces topped with ornate mirrors, and embossed neo-Classical detailing on 10.5-foot ceilings.

Mr. Young sought to rescue the house’s once-glorious past using environmentally gentle ingredients and going as green as possible. The inside of the roof was sprayed with soy-based foam insulation, and a green product called Big Wally’s Plaster Magic was injected into the sagging walls and ceiling of Ms. Salomon’s bedroom to keep them from buckling. Vast quantities of lead paint were removed.

Thanks to these efforts, which cost \$700,000, the house looks in many respects much as it must have when the first residents swept in.

The carved wood mirror above the fireplace in the living room, in place for a hundred years, has been finished with graphite to give it the look and feel of pewter. “When that got done,” Ms. Salomon said, “the whole room came to life.”

The foyer, once a windowless nook painted a muddy brown, was opened up via skylights and a fresh coat of nontoxic paint. More light streams in through the frosted glass panels in the pocket doors that lead to the dining area, exposed after decades’ worth of grime and gunk were scrubbed off.

The ceilings, Ms. Salomon’s pride, got extra love. The one in the living room was painted the palest of pinks, and the one in the bedroom is the silver of a foggy Brooklyn morning.

The chandeliers, while not original, look as if they had been in place forever, among them the antique Russian fixture hung with loops of crystal and bronze that belonged to Ms. Salomon’s father. Two other chandeliers, a Moorish cast-iron creation in the front hallway and a blue glass wedding cake in Ms. Salomon’s bedroom, were found by Mr. Young upstate, “just screaming to be here,” he said.

Partly because the architecture is such a showstopper, the furniture is relatively subdued. It includes pieces like a chestnut Shaker table, made without nails, and a blanket chest in which Ms. Salomon stores photographs.

But the house is filled with art and often functions as a de facto exhibition space. For the Clinton Hill House Tour, it featured such standouts as Ms. Salomon's grave rubbings and [Rachel Owens's](#) scary and seductive sculpture "Closer," a pair of cow skulls studded with shards of glass.

The rounded cutout in the staircase known as the coffin niche is home to [Gisela Insuaste's](#) assemblage of chips of painted wood, although Ms. Salomon was saddened to learn from Mr. Young that the niche was not, in fact, intended to make it easier to carry coffins up and down the stairs.

Nor was the house tour the brownstone's only moment in the limelight. Last June it was the site of an event called "Single Lady," with proceeds going to help Afghan women learn embroidery through an organization called [Afghan Women Leaders Connect](#). A few months later, an organization called [Metropolis Ensemble](#) transformed the house into a concert hall. A string quartet and a harpist were stationed in the parlor, percussion and vibraphone could be heard on the second floor, and a violin and a woodwind trio occupied the third floor.

"You could feel the walls vibrating," Ms. Salomon said. "Each room had a different voice. It was as if the house was singing."

E-mail: habitats@nytimes.com