



# BROOKLYN MODERN

ARCHITECTURE, INTERIORS & DESIGN  
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RIZZOLI  
NEW YORK



# SUSAN BOYLE & BENTON BROWN

## CROWN HEIGHTS

It was November 2001 when Susan Boyle and Benton Brown bought a plot of six buildings in Crown Heights. The couple, who had been living near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, had been looking to buy a vacant building—and had found more than they could handle. They kept the two buildings with the most architectural integrity and sold off the neighboring ones to finance a massive renovation. Their first project: Develop one of the buildings as five rental units, with an enormous duplex on the top floor for themselves.

The first building they renovated was once known as the Nassau Brewery Ice House. The building, which had its enormous ceiling heights bisected by additional floors, was in shambles. The gut renovation was made slightly less daunting because both Susan and Benton have backgrounds in construction and planning. As a welder, Benton had some previous experience in construction and renovation. Susan's former job concerned sustainable transportation and architecture; her expertise helped her make informed choices regarding the building's sustainable elements.

The major elements of the renovation included creating four floors from seven, fixing the sinking foundation, pouring new concrete and adding new utilities. Making the process as sustainable and environment-friendly as possible provided an added challenge. But the couple, who used their other building as a storage and staging area, salvaged more than 400 wood beams. All the wood used in the project is recycled—including beams in the ceiling, wood planks on the floors, even the furniture. Because their plans for the buildings are very long term—"we have a 30-year plan," Susan says—their environmentally keen choices will pay off in spades. Rather than install air-conditioning, for instance, large windows allow for plenty of air circulation and cross ventilation. Radiant heat from the fly-ash concrete floors, Energy Star-rated appliances, and boilers and hot water thermostats installed in each apartment save energy. Lastly, many fixtures such as tubs and sinks were salvaged, and furniture is made from recycled materials.

With one building's renovation completed in 2004, they began the renovation of the other building; it will provide the community with small commercial spaces. Susan and Benton continue to consult for other Brooklynites interested in green roof installations and environmental renovations. Publicity surrounding the project has garnered the couple attention, and they've become known for their knowledge of green architecture and construction. "We try to help anyone who calls with suppliers and ideas," says Susan, who acknowledges that while challenging and risky, the rewards of green projects are infinitely greater than those reaped by standard renovations.

opposite: Susan and Benton bought a swath of Crown Heights buildings and kept two of them to create environmentally friendly rental units and commercial space. On top of the residential building, they created a stunning duplex, complete with terraces and green roof, for their own family.







left and right: The couple's top priority for this project was to make it as environmentally sustainable as possible. The view from the backyard shows how even rainwater is collected from the gutters. On top of the shed lies yet

another green roof. Inside, almost all the furnishings are vintage.



above: Before renovation, the previous owners had stuffed extra levels into each floor. Susan and Benton restored the building to double-height stories. The living areas of the duplex are open plan. The floors

are fly-ash concrete with radiant heat.









previous spread:  
Hundreds of wooden  
beams were salvaged  
from the renovation  
and repurposed.  
Here, they constructed  
a bookcase, which  
cleverly serves as a  
room divider as well.

above and right: *The  
apartment also serves  
as the couple's office.*



left: *As the couple  
added an extra floor  
to the building, they  
also added a green roof,  
which was still  
in bloom by late fall.*

right: *Luckily, the  
view from Crown  
Heights is still  
panoramic from  
a few stories up.*





left and right: *The light-filled master bath features repurposed wooden beams and vintage fixtures.*



above: *The bedroom features closets made from old ambulance doors.*

next spread: *A look at the kitchen from the grand staircase that leads to the upstairs bedrooms. The kitchen island, cabinets, and shelves were made from salvaged wood.*



