

N.Y. Townhouse Will Be a Steel

Unorthodox Design Shakes Up Greenwich Village Neighborhood

By NICHOLA GROOM
Reuters

NEW YORK—A British couple enamored of Manhattan's city living but eager to raise their children in a new house are building their dream home from scratch in New York's Greenwich Village.

The four-story modern building is just the second single-family home to be built in the West Village in at least the last 14 years, according to its architect, Matthew Baird.

But it is the project's contemporary design that has raised more than a few eyebrows in the neighborhood, where residents shell out millions of dollars for stately homes that were built more than 100 years ago.

"We knew that a contemporary design was going to cause a stir there," Baird said in an interview. "But it wasn't right to make something that was a fake. This isn't Disney World—we're not making phony 19th-century architecture."

Unlike other townhouses in the neighborhood, Baird's design incorporates modern tastes and conveniences such as large, open spaces and high-tech wiring.

More importantly to some neighbors, however, the house's austere facade will be made from a single 17.4-ton piece of recycled steel, a far cry from the red-and-brown brick structures sur-

rounding it.

For Baird, the use of materials like steel, concrete and plastic are in keeping with the house's most immediate surroundings—old warehouses that once functioned as the hub of New York's meatpacking industry.

In fact, the house's garage door will even look like a closed-down storefront.

Anticipating at least some neighborly grumblings, the publicity-shy couple invited their future neighbors over for an informal chat and preview of Baird's design—a tactic the wife, Sasha, said made them more receptive to the plan.

"It's not that they don't like change. They just don't like to be shocked by it," Sasha, who declined to give her last name, said in an interview. "When someone comes to your house and has a glass of wine, they are going to loathe really disagreeing with you."

Ultimately, several neighbors, including local restaurateur Florent Morellet, voiced their support of the design to the neighborhood's community board and the New York City Landmarks Commission, both of which approved the plan.

The family moved to New York from London three years ago, intending to stay just a couple of years. But Sasha and her husband, who declined to be named, soon fell in love with the Europe-



BY MATTHEW BAIRD DESIGN

This rendering shows the home, center-left, a couple is building in New York's trendy Greenwich Village. The facade will be a single piece of steel.

an feel of Greenwich Village and set about trying to buy a townhouse in which to raise their two small children.

Little did they know they would end up building one. But in late 2002, after stumbling across a dilapidated old building that was for sale in precisely the neighborhood they were looking to live in—they resolved to do just that.

"Who thinks that they will ever build?" Sasha said. "But when we saw the building, I just knew we had to get it. It was really as simple as that."

Perhaps most surprisingly, the couple is building its dream home, complete with a rooftop fireplace, 22-foot ceilings and a wine cellar, for far less than they would have paid for a fully renovated townhouse.

A search of New York real estate listings showed the cost of buying a renovated townhouse in the West Village runs as high as \$10 million.

Baird, meanwhile, put the cost of his construction at "considerably less than \$4 million." Add to that about \$1.6 million for the cost of the original building, and

the dream home appears, by some standards, to be a bargain.

"If you walk into a brownstone, you feel guilty if the bathroom has been done and it's not your taste because you've paid for it," Sasha said. "Now we can put what we want and have only ourselves to blame."

So does this mean the Britons are ready to call New York home for good?

"We don't really plan much. . . . We thought we'd come and then we'd be going," Sasha said. "But we're really happy here. . . . It's a great privilege to

be able to build in one of the great cities of the world."

Construction on the house began in December. The family hopes to move in next spring, but not before the George Washington Bridge has to be shut down temporarily during shipment of the house's massive steel facade from Pennsylvania.

Baird is expecting to attach the facade this spring, and is already planning to invite the neighbors to a block party to honor the event. "Isn't it mad?" Sasha said, laughing. "I look forward to that day."