

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## HOMES

# The Opulent Second Lives of Firehouses

Home buyers are turning decommissioned firehouses into modern homes, deploying architectural creativity and cash to create one-of-a-kind living spaces.

*By Alina Dizik*

Feb. 8, 2018 10:04 a.m. ET

**These homes have** no yards. Originally constructed to house large vehicles, they boast cavernous, dark, interior spaces that often require extensive and expensive reconfiguring. Their common areas sit level with the sidewalk, making it easier for passersby to peer in.

For their ardent fans and other nostalgia buffs, though, there is nothing better than living in a firehouse.

Buyers are turning decommissioned firehouses—properties deemed by their cities as outdated or too small to accommodate current equipment—into modern homes, deploying all manner of architectural creativity, and often a lot of cash, to create one-of-a-kind living spaces. “They have character and they have history; there’s something innately civic about them,” says Boston-based architect David Hacin, who spent three years working to restore a firehouse for a client in Newport, R.I.

As of January there were 16 converted firehouses for sale across the country, according to data from Realtor.com, asking anywhere from \$199,000 to nearly \$10 million. While most firehouses don’t sell for a premium, extensively renovated conversions are often the most successful on the market and can fetch a higher price, real-estate agents say.

Real-estate agent Babs Beckwith says she sold a renovated firehouse in Alexandria, Va., twice: once for \$1.1 million in 2009, then for \$1.3 million in 2015 to Mary Lou Egan and Marc Bendick. The second time around Ms. Beckwith says she got multiple offers on the property.

Ms. Egan, 66, and Mr. Bendick, 71, both economists, say they were drawn to relics from the firehouse’s past, including rails originally intended for horse-drawn fire carriages, pine floors and a hoist that the couple used to haul some of their furniture to a third story. A historically accurate spiral staircase, purchased from a similar firehouse by the previous owner, is narrow and “not for everybody,” says Ms. Egan.

In Boston, Ramana and Jessica Lagemann, both real-estate developers, spent more than three years looking at properties like old banks, churches and firehouses that could be repurposed into a residence. They eventually bought a 3,600-square-foot condo inside a former firehouse for \$1.375 million, attracted to its oversize garage and the loft-like feel of the living areas. The couple kept the holding cell that was in the basement, and updated the facade to “bring it back to its original glory,” says Mr.

## Hot Property: Firehouses Converted Into Luxury Homes

These properties in Alexandria, Va., Boston, Brooklyn, N.Y. and Newport, R.I. made the leap from decommissioned firehouses into residential houses.



In 2015, Marc Bendick and Mary Lou Egan moved into a converted 1855 firehouse in Alexandria, Va. ELI MEIR KAPLAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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In 2015, Marc Bendick and Mary Lou Egan moved into a converted 1855 firehouse in Alexandria, Va. Their home is next to a working firehouse, which is on the right. PHOTO: ELI MEIR KAPLAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Lagemann, 38, who is also a professional motor sport driver.

Sometimes, the notion of living in a firehouse can be more compelling than the reality. On Chicago's north side, a 1907 firehouse boasted 5,000 square feet and a loft-like first floor. But it had only two bedrooms, and the kitchen and living areas are on the second floor.

Chicago real-estate agent Laura Topp estimates showing the home 150 times, as the "layout didn't speak to the general public." After three months, the home sold to Amanda Norcross and Stuart Brody on December 28, 2016 for \$1.02 million, or \$80,000 under asking price, according to Redfin, a real estate agency and listings site.



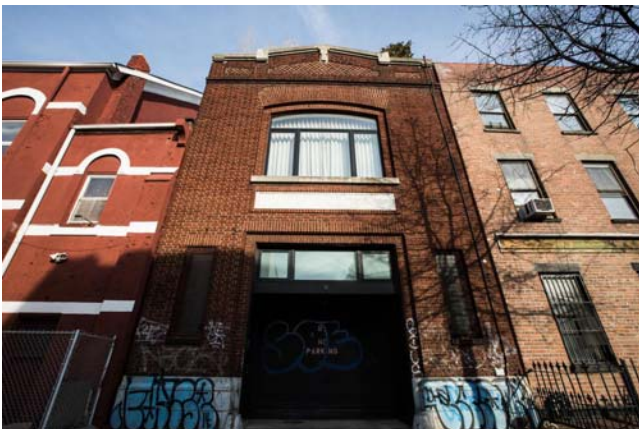
Mr. Bendick at home. PHOTO: ELI MEIR KAPLAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In their remodel, the couple says they are using a creative approach, building two bedrooms for their school-age children on the first floor along with an entertaining space. The second-floor living area now has an industrial feel.

“It’s an unusual



The converted firehouse home of Xavier Guardans in Brooklyn, N.Y. comes with this top-floor terrace. PHOTO: EMILY ASSIRAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Mr. Guardans left the graffiti on his renovated Brooklyn firehouse intact to deter attention from outsiders. PHOTO: EMILY ASSIRAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

space to create exactly what we wanted,” says Ms. Norcross. She also installed a glass-and-steel front door over the original red firehouse doors. The original doors “act as interior shutters,” says Ms. Norcross, 45, who owns an interior-design store and hopes to complete the renovation this year. She declined to discuss the cost of the redo.

In firehouses that become residential housing, privacy is a concern, says architect Sharon Sutton, visiting professor at New York’s Parsons School of Design who advised on reuse issues for Seattle’s historic firehouses. Driveways once built for fire engines mean that the homes are level with the sidewalk, making it difficult to keep passerby

from peering into what's traditionally a home's common area. "You have to find some way of creating a buffer, so that what was public becomes private," she says.



A sitting area in Ramana and Jessica Lagemann's East Boston condo, which is inside a converted firestation.  
PHOTO: BOB O'CONNOR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



The Lagemanns spent three years searching for a unique home before buying a condo in this converted firehouse in 2015. PHOTO: BOB O'CONNOR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

To detract attention from outsiders, photographer Xavier Guardans and marketing executive Lauren Starr keep the graffiti that is periodically scrawled on the garage of their Brooklyn firehouse intact. During a three-year renovation of the 1899 firehouse that he purchased for \$990,000 in 2009, Mr. Guardans added a third-floor penthouse with a master suite and a walled-in rooftop garden that can't be seen from the street.

To create a modern, light-filled interior, "we pierced a hole almost down the center" of the structure, says Joshua Weiselberg, co-founder of TBD Architecture and Design Studio in New York who spent more than two years working on Mr. Guardans' home. Cutouts in the ceiling lead to skylights that provide a tunnel of daylight; unlike other firehouses, Mr. Guardans' firehouse has no street-level windows. Mr. Guardans uses the large first floor as photography-studio space, with living areas on the top two floors.

"I just wanted light and privacy," says Mr. Guardans. He says he spent less than \$1 million on the redo and fields several inquiries a month from potential buyers.

Kelly and Clint Clemens ended up taking apart their \$1.3 million home in Newport, R.I., brick by brick. Once renovation began, contractors discovered that the mortar used to erect the 1887 building was constructed with beach sand—not excavated sand—and the salt had eroded the mortar over time. The couple, who purchased the home in 2007 and worked with Mr. Hacin, the architect, on the renovation, used a laser-scan technique to



Kelly and Clint Clemens in their converted firehouse in Newport, R.I. PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

ensure that all 2,700-plus bricks were put back into their original locations. They also installed a new foundation with geothermal wells to provide heating and cooling, and an elevator. To complete the look, they purchased a vintage fire pole on eBay, says Ms. Clemens, a photo producer; Mr. Clemens is a photographer.

Ms. Clemens says the effort was worth it. “On any kind of day, it’s a beautiful, interesting space to live in,” she says. She declined to discuss the cost of the renovation.

Corrections & Amplifications: Xavier Guardans paid \$990,000 for his firehouse and less than \$1 million on the renovation. An earlier version of this article inaccurately reported both the purchase price and the renovation cost. (2/8/2018)

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