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## Brooklyn Design Challenge: The Brownstone



A bright front door makes a brownstone stand out on a block.

A few months ago we started the **Brooklyn Design Challenge series**, wherein we ask local designers to give us tips on how to make the most of apartment types commonly found in Brooklyn. **First we tackled the railroad apartment**, walkthrough rooms, lack of closets and all. Next, we advised on how to improve your **loft-style living**, by breaking up all that glorious space and finding smart storage solutions to avoid clutter. Now, we're on to the brownstone—the most symbolic style of Brooklyn living.

While brownstones are full of charm, with their high ceilings, pocket doors, plaster walls and ornamental moldings, they can also be dark—the windows are only in the front and back of the building, unless you have a corner lot—and present some awkward spaces, like tiny bathrooms and cramped stairwells and entryways. Brownstones also have an inherently vintage feeling about them, which can lead to an apartment that feels more like a Victorian-themed museum than a modern living space. We talked to Julia Aulenbacher of **Julia Aulenbacher Interiors** in Brooklyn Heights and Dionne Rivera of **Dionne Rivera Interior Design and Consulting** in Park Slope for tips on how to keep your brownstone space bright, modern and functional.

**Lighting:** Gloom is the enemy of brownstone living. The long, skinny shape of traditional brownstones means light does not penetrate to the mid-part of any floor. Aulenbacher and Rivera both suggest keeping your paint jobs light and bright, going for shades of white on the walls, so that light is reflected back into the room (**read our blog for Aulenbacher's notes** on choosing a shade of white). Rivera also underscored the importance of lighting. If you have some money to spend, she recommends hiring an electrician to install new overhead fixtures where needed. Plentiful floor lamps can also illuminate the space; she suggests IKEA and West Elm on

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needed. Pendant pool lamps can also illuminate the space, she suggests. **IKEA** and **West Elm**, or **Lamps Plus** online ("A lot are quite ugly but the basics are great," she notes) as good resources with lots of affordable choices. She uses full spectrum light bulbs for a healthy glow—especially in winter.

**Adding Color:** Aulenbacher maintains that white walls in your large rooms are the best way to go, and that color should be added with furniture and art. The exception to this rule is the garden level, which tends to have low ceilings and be very dark, no matter what you do. If you own, she recommends opening the entire space up into one large room and choosing a bright color to paint—she favors sunflower yellow. "Choose a light, white modern kitchen and fun colors for the walls and turn it into a live-in kitchen, especially if you have a family," she says.

Rivera likes one bright accent wall in larger rooms, if you're looking for color. "If you paint an accent wall and then put your artwork on the wall, it will serve as a backdrop for the art," she says. She also likes covering one wall with wallpaper, but notes that it's a more expensive endeavor. "You have to have a professional hang it to get it right," she says.

And, in kids' rooms, Aulenbacher suggests keeping with white walls, and painting the floor a bright color with high-gloss floor paint. She also loves a brightly painted front door to distinguish your home from the others on the block. "Aubergine or fire red are my favorites," she says.

**Keep it Simple:** There's a temptation with brownstones to go all vintage, all the time. We've seen more than our share of rooms painted dark red with gold accents and they always feel overdone and bordello-themed. Aulenbacher emphasized that part of her white walls policy has to do with simplicity, not just lighting. "With a brownstone, the most important thing is to keep the character of the house and not to do too much," she counsels. "Let the architecture speak for itself and keep it smart and simple."

Bright modern furniture with clean lines look fantastic against a white backdrop, she says. For high-end options she likes couches from **Living Divani** or custom-made couches, which can run around \$4,000-5,000, depending on fabrics. **Crate & Barrel**, **West Elm** and **IKEA** all make budget versions of high-end designs for the same look for less money.



Custom bookshelves can be taken along when you move.

**For Renters:** Rivera has a few tricks for renters who may want to improve the look and feel of their brownstone apartment, but want to take their work with them when they leave. If you need

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2 hrs, 43 mins ago

more storage, she suggests having detachable bookshelves made, with storage drawers on the bottom shelves. "If you're renting and you're putting something up, you're going to want to take it down and take it with you," she says. She highly recommends contractor Junior Christie (718-791-5398) for custom jobs. "He's very good at working within budgets," she says.

Adding color with drapes, rather than paint accomplishes several tasks at once, says Rivera. Heavy drapes, she likes the color-rich, velvet curtains available at IKEA, can insulate the often drafty windows in many brownstones, and add vibrancy to a room. If you need even more privacy—say your bedroom is on the front of the parlor level and visible from the street—she likes going to Jackson Heights and buying colorful saris to hang in the window, in front of the heavier drapes. "It's a fun field trip anyway," she notes.

And, if your brownstone rental is in need of repair, she has a couple inexpensive tricks to give it an update. The wood floors in brownstones are often scuffed or damaged, and sea grass area rugs offer an inexpensive, but neutral and natural-looking way to cover up the scratches. And, she counsels, "If your plaster is cracked and the landlord won't replace it, hang artwork over it."

*Got tips of your own for brownstone living? Tell us in the **comments**. And if you're curious about which shade of white you should choose, **we've got ideas on the blog**.*

Posted on 03/24/11 | Text by Annaliese Griffin, photos **Urbanreporter** via Flickr and courtesy of Dionne Rivera.

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**Inquisigal** 45 minutes ago

I have to disagree with a lot of these tips. Having only lived in north-south-facing brownstones, every floor I've ever occupied - including the garden level - gets filled from front to back with light from the south side of the building. I find the all-white scheme to be a bit conservative and blah, and doesn't make brownstone details - which are often painted white - stand out. I really think design is personal, and there is no "right" or "wrong" - if you like bordello red and it makes you happy, go for it. These tips seem better suited for someone trying to sell a house and de-clutter or de-personalize their spaces.

**J\_marali** 1 hour ago

Totally disagree with opening up the entire garden floor. You need some walls to bounce light off and removing them produces a cave-like effect as the light disappears. In addition, removing all walls causes the ceilings to appear/feel lower.

**jzlandau** 3 hours ago

One of the best parts of Brownstones, that nobody really talks about, is the cellar. Most people throw their junk down there, or turn them into moldy dry-walled man-caves. We took another approach, leaving the natural elements intact, and keeping it raw.... <http://bit.ly/dKEImd>

I'd be curious though to see other examples of great brownstone cellars. Any one?

Like Reply



**RobertSand** 3 hours ago

Re: Blue Doors on Brownstones

As you suggest, a blue door would certainly make a brownstone stand out from its neighbors. Why not pink or purple. Maybe stripes. But first I'd chat with a tasteful architect and the Landmarks Commission.

Like Reply



**cobitiomkin** 4 hours ago

Well if you're struggling with design dilemma's you can also purchase a "Designer's Plans in-a-Box" from [Lilyzdesign.com](http://Lilyzdesign.com)

Its a DIY GUIDE to all your decor ambitions. Very easy to follow and extremely affordable!

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