

Taking the hassle out of heritage homes

Making changes to listed properties is not as hard as it might seem, says **Donata Huggins**

TO those with the cash (or the ability to fantasize), the character and history of a listed property wins out over the hassle-free simplicity of a new build any day. It's also reassuring that they've already survived a couple of hundred years and so will probably survive a few more. Yet however tempting heritage buildings sound, the "listed" tag comes with special rules and regulations which can be a big turn-off. It doesn't need to be that way, though. Here are four ways to make the purchase and ownership of your listed property smoother and (almost) hassle-free.

1 BEFRIEND THE COUNCIL

You must ask permission from your local council for any extension or alterations to a listed property. Changes made without this are illegal. The application forms can be a little vague so befriending your local conservation officer, or at least, taking the time to understand what he or she wants from your application might not be a bad idea. Every change must be in keeping

with the character and style of the building so if you have entertained the idea of PVC plastic-framed windows you can forget about it now.

2 INSURANCE

Probably the biggest concern prospective buyers have about listed properties is being held liable for the previous owner's illegal changes. The law says that the current owner is compelled to repair or restore the property's original features regardless of whether or not they were resident in the house when changes were made. But panic not, there are ways to prevent such a nightmare. It is possible to take out specialist insurance against such a discovery.

3 INDEPENDENT SURVEY

Almost all the horror stories about listed building maintenance and admin could have been avoided if the owner had simply taken a walk round the property in the company of a specialist architect or surveyor before buying. A specialist can be found on the Architects Accredited in Building Conservation (AABC) website or through the specialist conservation directory www.projectbook.co.uk. He or she will be able to warn you about potential problems and the relative difficulties you will face making changes. The typical cost of a survey is around £750 plus VAT for a three bedroom house.



Burgh House, Hampstead

Picture: ALAMY

4 SPECIALIST WORK

Pretty much everybody who buys a listed property wants or needs to make changes to it. Strangely, specialist help is not much more expensive than using modern-building equivalents. Alan Tierney who runs historic building consultancy says: "Don't worry too much when you

see wonky walls they don't have much impact on the structural integrity of the building. Older properties seem able to bend a bit without falling down. It is good however to keep an eye out for large diagonal cracks in plaster walls." They could be very bad news, indicative of subsidence. This cost of which could be very high. That said, a specialist will be able to tell you how serious a problem it might be.

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