

Finding your 'project' house

Is a 'project house' for you?

An old building 'project' is likely to be as much an emotional as a financial investment. If the project is to be a 'labour of love' rather than a heart ache, careful thought and planning are essential.

Firstly, consider whether an old building project is right for you. Many people favour a brand new property where little or no work is required. Others have a different view, but there is still a strong distinction between those interested in an old building which needs little or no work and those prepared to consider a significant project. If you're project-minded it's quite possible to see the building's problems as an interesting challenge. For the project-enthusiast the 'doing' is as interesting as the outcome. The journey allows the chance to make decisions, develop skills and rescue a house that has suffered neglect. With a precious old building, though, the fun of the 'doing' must still come second to 'doing what's right' for the building itself.



Old House Project, St Andrew's, November 2018

It is important to look at the scope of a project you're prepared to take on. For example, a first project a substantial fire-damaged ruin, like the Landmark Trust's Astley Castle, may not be the best bet. For most, something a little more manageable is prudent as an initial step. A house that has skipped a generation of change is often ideal. No building survives even a few decades without some basic care, but 'benign neglect' often results

in a greater survival of surfaces and architectural features than in buildings which have been used more actively. In the case of the SPAB Old House Project, the building was empty for 50 years before we purchased it in autumn 2018. There had been basic maintenance carried out which helped prevent the most serious decay, but there were still roof leaks, broken windows and collapsing ceilings. Also, there were no working services or electrics.

If your project is likely to take some months, or even years, consider your living conditions in the meantime. Can you stand a prolonged period in rented accommodation, a caravan or a semi-habitable building site?

Finding the right building

The SPAB was well placed to find a project building, having a good working relationship with Historic England (HE). HE publishes an online database of Grade I and II* listed buildings (and Scheduled Ancient Monuments) which are 'at risk'. These are the most nationally important historic sites and structures, often with long-term, intractable problems. Buildings on the register are only sometimes for sale, but the register may help identify a possible project and allow an opportunity for negotiation, as in the SPAB's case. Through HE we were able to contact the owner and amicably negotiate a sale following independent valuations. Other 'at risk' lists are produced by organisations such as SAVE Britain's Heritage and by some district, borough or county councils. These lists may well include Grade II listed (and sometimes locally listed) buildings as well as those of the highest grades. If there is no list in the area that interests you, a call to the council conservation officer (if one exists) may also prove fruitful.

Finding the right house may be a challenge. People sometimes come across a dream project by chance, but a considered search is more advisable. The SPAB's online Property List for members is the ideal place to start but a trawl through the many property websites may also bear fruit. 'Advanced' searches can usually be made not just by price or geographical location, but by using specific search terms, such as 'listed', 'renovation' or 'updating'. Auctions can sometimes deliver bargains. They are often the place where properties too dilapidated for the general buyer (or for many mortgage companies) are put up for sale. You will be competing against well-informed builders and developers, but good project buildings can be



Old House Project, St Andrew's, January 2019

With auctions, and with sales involving sealed bids, the buyer must be particularly aware of potential pitfalls and it is especially important to do your homework and seek specialist help, rather than making an impulse purchase. Impulse purchases may also overlook practicalities, it is essential to strike a balance between emotional and practical considerations: you may love it, but can you afford it, reach your place of work, or live with wonky floors or low ceilings?

Realistically assessing your budget in the earliest stages of a project is essential. Even if you can afford to buy it, can you afford to fix it? Two valuers – one acting for the SPAB and the other for the seller - agreed that the SPAB project building was worth around £60,000. This may seem ludicrously cheap for a detached house with large garden in the south east of England, but the figure was based on well-informed opinion. These valuers took

into consideration the SPAB's carefully prepared and costed condition survey. The purchase price equalled the end value minus the cost of necessary works. Realistically estimating all likely costs is vital (see chapters that follow).

Vital too is allowing a contingency for unexpected works. Finding decay at the foot of timber rafters or lintels embedded in walls is extremely common and will inevitably involve extra work and cost. Also consider the possibility of changes in your own circumstances or income. In the case of serious financial disaster, pre-planning a realistic exit strategy from the project is prudent. Making some guesses and taking some risks will be inevitable, but the better informed you are the lower the risks will be.

Your budget

If your initial appraisal suggests your ambitions are greater than your means, compromises may be possible to strike. For instance, if your ideal house happens to have no garden or parking, is situated above a shop, or is on a busy road, its price may be reduced. The SPAB's project building is close to a motorway – not everyone's first choice, but a compromise that is outweighed by the qualities of the house itself. Phasing work may also be possible as a means of financial management. If the roof can be fixed and basic services installed immediately, this may allow a derelict house to be habitable. The more you are prepared and capable of doing yourself, the lower the costs are likely to be. The SPAB runs courses and seminars that could give an understanding of some of the skills needed for a building project.

For a great many people purchase may not be a financial option. This doesn't necessarily rule-out a building project. The commercial rental sector general lets buildings that have been heavily updated, but estates and farms sometimes offer old buildings to rent in a more rustic state. The National Trust also offers short and long term lets or leases from its extensive building stock.