

Such nice manors

Your home was once your castle; now castles can become your home.

Squatting on the highest knoll in Point Piper is an enormous house the size of 12 large three-bedroom homes. It has about 50 rooms, panoramic views over Sydney Harbour, a sweeping circular driveway and is set in gardens the size of 10 quarter-acre blocks. Kilmory is a mansion in anyone's language.

Despite its location and size, or maybe because of it, Kilmory lay empty until recently, slowly falling into disrepair.

Former owner Rodney Adler had the house on the market for two or three years before eventually it selling to a developer earlier this year.

Now, after months of consultation between Woollahra Council, the developer, the State Heritage Office, architects and countless other interested parties, the property will be converted into 11 luxury homes – seven apartments within the actual house and four new residences in the grounds.

Once converted, Kilmory will join a series of palatial harbourside mansions, including Ardenbraught across the road, Gladswood House in Double Bay and, the most recent and high profile of mansion conversions, the 112-room, State Heritage-listed Babworth House in Darling Point, the former family home of Sir Samuel Hordern, as grand old homes which have been given a new lease of life.

The Byrne Lewis Group, the developer behind both Kilmory and Babworth House, is now putting the finishing touches on Babworth's conversion into five luxury apartments, with another developer, Kimberley Securities, working on 10 luxury homes in the grounds.

"The best way we can preserve homes like this is to find some extremely wealthy person who can take up and maintain the whole lot," says heritage and design architect Judith Rintoul, of Coneybear Morrison & Partners. But such buyers are rare.

"Houses like this are mostly too big for today's market. Buildings like Kilmory can fall into disrepair quite badly and rapidly while waiting for an owner." Therefore, she argues that the next best way to preserve them is by their sensitive conversion into apartments.

And they have proved popular with buyers. Babworth House sold off-the-plan in 2001 for between \$2.7 million and \$8.5 million – and five of Kilmory's seven apartments and two of its houses have already sold, although completion is not due until June 2005. Prices for Kilmory have so far ranged from \$3.5 million to \$5.5 million, with the largest apartment still available.

THE ADVANTAGES

The grand size and scale of the buildings and the apartments are a big drawcard for buyers. Kilmory apartments range from 280-400sqm and Babworth House's from about 300-550sqm.



Kilmory ... from disrepair to designs for the discerning. Photo: Stephen Baccon

And unlike the mansion conversions in the 1960s and '70s, the emphasis is now on preserving and restoring important heritage features.

Apartments in the Babworth and Kilmory developments feature high ornate ceilings, extensive oak panelling, slate roofs and copper guttering. Contemporary lifestyles are incorporated in the heated swimming pools, private lifts, and three-car garages.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects' NSW president, Caroline Pidcock, says conversions present a viable option for increasing the density of a suburb without changing its character, and offer another housing option for people who want to downsize within their local area.

"A lot of these mansions have rooms with fantastic proportions that feel fabulous to be in," she says. "Owners can enjoy all of that without having a vast house to maintain and afford. It allows people to remain in their community."

THE DISADVANTAGES

In earlier conversions, modern conveniences often came at the expense of the building. False ceilings were constructed to conceal air-conditioning units, with the original high ornamental ceilings and decorative features instantly lost.

The different scale of rooms between floors was also an issue, according to heritage architect Robert Moore.

"In the past, mansions were often modified and mutilated in the process," he says. "The scale is often very different between top and bottom floors in these houses. Someone buying a ground-floor former ballroom [or] drawing room could get a very funny layout of rooms."

On a more positive note, Moore says mansion conversions have now gone from "brutalism to a heritage-conscious process."

"Buildings can't sit around indefinitely if no one is living in them. They deteriorate. It's better to have multiple occupancy than no one and to have the building lost."

HOME SWEET HOME

Phil and Ann-Maree Kerry, below, bought the largest apartment in Babworth House off-the-plan in 2001, moving in two months ago with their four children and dog. With six bedrooms, five bathrooms, an indoor pool, private lift and five living areas spread over three floors, "apartment" isn't quite the right word.

"I don't know how you'd describe it," says Phil, "but for us it's a home."

He says the main advantage is the scale of the home, and that "from a heritage point of view all of the best original features had to stay".

The use of the mansion's huge intact gardens was also a major benefit.

Photo: Wade Laube

