

Brownstoning— The How-To

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

IN THE EARLY '60s the "brownstoners" were called New York's modern pioneers, long on guts but short on sanity. Later they were seen as the most hopeful sign that the city would not lose all of its middle class to the sprawling suburbs and as—maybe, just maybe—the ones with the best idea of how to live in a city of vacancy decontrol and spiraling rents.

There is no precise way to count them—the city doesn't keep such figures—but one measure of their growing numbers and durability is the proliferation of articles, lectures and books. At least half a dozen books out now are specifically aimed at the New York brownstone renovator. Five years ago, any publisher who had considered the audience too limited.

Three books of particular interest offer historical perspectives and practical advice: "You Don't Have to Be Rich to Own a Brownstone" (Quadrangle), by Joy and Paul Wilkes; "Bricks and Brownstone—The New York Row House, 1783-1929" (McGraw-Hill), by Charles Lockwood; and "Buying and Renovating a House in the City—A Practical Guide" (Knopf), by Deirdre Stanforth and Martha Stamm.

Lockwood's "Bricks and Brownstone" is perhaps of greatest historical and visual appeal. A lucid examination of the architectural styles—from Federal to Romanesque—of the New York row house and the lifestyle of its residents, Lockwood's book is richly illustrated with old photographs and engravings.

The book's sales, despite its \$18 price tag, also reflect a growing interest in the city's rapidly disappearing past.

Lockwood, at 24 already a widely published writer on architectural history, is a New Yorker by choice. Born in Washington, D. C., and a 1970 Princeton graduate, he is now a brownstoner in Brooklyn's Fort Greene. Actually, "row house" is the more accurate term but the brownstone was so prevalent in the 19th Century—because of handy New Jersey and Connecticut quarries—that almost any row house, even one with a brick or limestone facade, is called a brownstone. (Lockwood's, however, has a real brownstone facade.)

"The grandeur of the houses reflected the social competition in New York in the 19th Century," Lockwood says. "They were a status symbol and the architecture was obviously intended to impress." With proper care and preservation, brownstones still can be mighty impressive.

Anyone who has renovated a brownstone can testify that disaster lurks at every turn:

Unlicensed contractors who disappear with the money while the wires are still hanging and the bathtub is in the front hallway. Building codes and inspectors that make preservation of elaborately carved wooden staircases or working fireplaces near impossibilities because they don't easily conform to 20th Century standards. Craftsmen who have lost all pride of craft. Workmen who mix cement in the middle of the parquet floors, painters who abuse the well-preserved woodwork and bankers who have no faith in buildings smaller than Co-op City.

The other two books are thus important for aspiring brownstone renovators. Stanforth and Stamm's "Buying and Renovating a House in the City," gives advice—from wiring to plastering—useful to any homeowner or even apartment dweller.

Mrs. Stanforth decided on the book after she was



Post Photo

No more running away?

"really taken by a bona fide crooked contractor."

A brownstoner on Manhattan's W. 83d St., she set out with a more knowledgeable friend, Martha Stamm, "to warn people about getting professional inspections ahead of time, learning about zoning laws, plumbing, wiring, heating and to tell them how to decide if an architect was needed and how they to choose one."

Joy and Paul Wilkes are in their early 30s and partners with another couple in a Park Slope brownstone that required a \$6000 down payment from each couple. They, too, didn't consider writing their "You Don't Have to Be Rich to Own a Brownstone" until their own renovation was completed in August 1970.

"Neither of us," Paul Wilkes recalled, "had done more than drive a nail into the wall to hang a picture. We bought two handyman books and wound up doing most of the work ourselves—except for plumbing and heating—because every time we had someone else do it, it was just terrible.

"We felt there should be a book telling people about what they would have to go through. That's what we did, covering everything one needs to know—from scouting different areas for a house, to where to get money, what banks are good in each area, phone numbers, all the specifics." The Wilkes' book is the newest around and is just now reaching the book stores. It is completely up to date even with property and renovation price ranges in specific neighborhoods.

Potential or present brownstoners should also be aware of the Brownstone Revival Committee at 230 Park Av., whose bimonthly newsletter (\$5 a year) is an information-filled bulletin.

The Brownstoner carries up-to-date articles on building code changes, financing forecasts and new renovation techniques. It lists house tours, practical courses offered, latest publications and newest useful products.