

BY DUO DICKINSON

A stately Whitney Avenue mansion gets a facelift — and a new life

The Hartford Turnpike was chartered in 1798 by one of New Haven's legendary figures, lawyer/real estate developer/Yale treasurer James Hillhouse. We know it today as Whitney Avenue — a classic, straight-shot boulevard. Hillhouse and Eli Whitney virtually owned the thoroughfare, and as a true turnpike the road generated revenue from the tolls charged to those traveling north to Hartford (hence its original name).

History has a strangely unexpected habit of repeating itself, and just as I-91 in the 1960s spawned a fertile new geography for suburbia to sprawl north of downtown New Haven, the Hartford Turnpike created access to land for non-agricultural development throughout the 19th century.

In the late 1800s century Whitney Avenue became The Place for captains of the new Industrial Revolution to call home, as the Hillhouse and Whitney families sold off acreage and became, in the words of New Haven architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown, “the patrician showplace of the city.”

One of the finest of these showplaces was a home built in 1905 by the brothers Tilton, Albert and Henry. It gains grandiosity by being, in fact, a double home — a rare creation of dead-on, bilaterally symmetric Victorian architecture, with two identical independent residences joined together at a common central demising wall.

Its very broad street-facing façade and porch is book-ended by eye-catching and unforgettable fully round turrets with classically conical roofs capping their two-story storybook presence. These flanking architectural statements have enhanced gravitas with huge curving windows that allow the radial towers to be perfect cylinders of trim, openings, and yes, the glass itself.

Just as every other Gilded Age neighborhood evolved, so did Lower

A broad, elegant, symmetrical façade is bookended by twin turrets that easily receive the extraordinary front balcony (that once had two front doors but now accommodates one in the reconfigured interior). Not only are the turret walls and trim perfectly curved, but so is the glass in their windows.

Turret Syndrome





Kitchen interior as designed by Carla O'Brien. These kitchen interiors are large, well-lit and replete with what elsewhere would be options.



Features that reflect Urbane New Haven's development marketing for a classic antique interior where all the existing trim has been restored, fireplace, mechanical equipment and lighting are all brought up to code, marrying the irresistible appeal of the old with the functional versatility of the contemporary.

Whitney Avenue. In the Roaring Twenties it became more fashionable to build homes farther from the city center, institutions and commercial establishments began to take over the huge houses and apartment buildings began to be erected further up the avenue toward Hamden.

So it was with the Tilton House, which was acquired during that decade by the New Haven Medical Association, which in 1927 added a wonderful ballroom to the rear of the structure.

And as did so many other civic organizations, the Medical Association had a hospitable home on this lovely

boulevard for almost a century. But as cities change, so do professions and their organizations. As medicine became less a fraternity and more an industry, the NHMA began to rent out some of its space, and ultimately sold the building as the real estate market began its full tanking in 2010.

But the purchaser has made all the difference. Yes, a for-profit developer bought the building, whose bones remained good but whose skin had become a bit frayed about the edges. But these developers were a new and different breed. Eric and Carla O'Brien moved to

New Haven about 20 years ago, during the last building bust, and saw the value in the antiquity only a New England post-industrial city can offer.

The couple bought the home they were renting in East Rock, and founded Urbane New Haven, LLC. They also set about to raise a family and save the urban fabric they had grown to love. "We strongly believe that historical architecture has a significant role to play within our cities," asserts Eric O'Brien.

The O'Briens do not "facelift, pump and dump" — they actually *restore* the buildings they develop. The old



Using classic Carrera marble and custom millwork, these traditional interiors take over far more space than their original counterparts within the building's interior and have all the features and amenities that prospective homeowners demand in residences at this price point.

Frank's Paint & Wallpaper building on Grand Avenue became nine lofts within a meticulously restored exterior, ditto the Long Lane Condominiums ("Long Lane" was Whitney Avenue's original name), where six apartments were surgically insinuated into two restored Victorian homes.

Single-family mansions do continue to exist one block uphill on St. Ronan Street, but amid the bustle of the institutions, law firms, churches and apartment buildings of Whitney Avenue, multi-million-dollar standalone homes simply no longer make economic sense.

But a rapacious desire to "max-out" a lovely shell's exterior with eight or ten starter condos would involve one inescapable reality: Both the guts and the virtually intact skin of this distinctive building would be savaged — new openings ripped into the gracefully composed facades, interior trim, floors and fireplaces ripped out.

Instead, the O'Briens called up Knight Architecture and asked principal George Knight to artfully reinvent a building that started out as a conjoined two-family house that became an expanded New Haven Medical Association and finally devolved into an ad hoc subdivision of offices split off from the host use.

Adhering to all the stringent fire codes and adapting to the fairly outlandish presence of the ballroom, Knight created four residential units with minimal interconnection.

The radical horizontal redefinition meant that the attic became one unit (with an artfully seamless dormer addition), the second floor was almost entirely given over to a second home, and the entire street-facing half of the ground floor became a third, with extravagant

living spaces fully capturing the use of the porch. Finally, a creative repurposing of the ballroom as an fabulous one-off living space for a two-bedroom fantasy abode completed the light subdivision.

The two units occupying the top two floors have sold, and the paint is virtually drying in the ballroom unit. But the approach with this building, as it has been for all the other Urbane New Haven projects, has worked. Detailed largely by Carla O'Brien, gleaming kitchens and baths are completely new creations, occupying whatever space is needed to make the high-six-figure price tags make sense.

Almost all the floors are restored, as are the trim and the windows. Of course the renovation brought all the infrastructure of heating, electrical and lighting up to code and beyond, and the new finishes do not compromise in living up to the standards the Tilton brothers set for the O'Briens.

There was one seminal decision, however, that speaks of the priorities of Carla and Eric O'Brien. Two of the curved turret windowpanes were lost. Rather than keeping the curving exterior trim and saving thousands of dollars by slipping in perfectly good, high quality but straight panes, the O'Briens opted to perfectly recreate the fully curving reality built over a century ago.

"We could have made faceted glass," notes Eric O'Brien, "but that's just not what we've done in the past and it's not something we'll do in the future. That is simply not what we believe in."

Sometimes beliefs can be profitable — and so far, for Urbane New Haven being true to a belief in the value of preserving the magical appeal of embodied history treasured by New Haven has worked. ❖