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## *Urban Homesteading*

Reclaiming a piece of history on a 'secret' Elm City street

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# Row House Renaissance

Reclaiming a piece of history on a 'secret' Elm City street

A removed wall between the kitchen and the rear side parlor allows for an open space where those eating and cooking can enjoy a view of the Buicks' backyard.

 **ATHOME**

BY DUO DICKINSON

If you know New Haven, you know Wooster Square. It is the more intimate counterpart to the very public New Haven Green. Whereas the Green is surrounded by civic buildings, Wooster Square is surrounded by homes, most dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of which represent the most beautiful architecture New Haven has to offer — most either row houses or freestanding Italianate “villas,” most of which have been restored to a fare-thee-well. It is a place that embodies some of the nicest ambience any New England city has to offer.

But there is a less well-known but equally compelling part of the Wooster Square neighborhood that is, on some levels, exquisitely “perfect” — Court Street. Court Street is a classic narrow urban street flanked by row houses. The street has undergone a series of changes that mirror the ebbs and flows of changing economies, visions of what houses should be, and finally how urban centers like New Haven can find a future in which people of means begin to reoccupy our urban centers.

The vast majority of Court Street was built by the Home Insurance Co. in 1870. The project was a spectacular failure and the buildings were taken over for liquidation and sold for \$7,500 each by the probate court — a disposition from which, ironically, the street derived its name.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DeCARLO

A classic interior, whose only element original to the 1870 home is the fireplace front, sports new trim and windows that fully reflect the ambience of the antique.



Among the qualities that make row houses so compelling is their repetitively residential nature with stair-accessed stoops and small-scale detailing. This effect is even more pronounced on Court Street where, because one developer created the vast majority of homes, there is a consistency that lend the landscaping, individual front door entry details and other appurtenances and appointments enhanced meaning.

The prototype Court Street row house has four storeys plus basement. The lowest floor, accessed by walking down a half-level, houses a kitchen and servants' quarters. The floor above that includes a parlor and dining areas, with bedrooms on top two floors above that.

All of the Court Street townhouses are quite small — just 20 feet wide and 30 feet deep. At the time of their construction, not only were they economically unfeasible, but also they were already behind the curve for spec-built upscale housing, as home-buyers who could afford the asking price for these well-built residences were moving elsewhere to live in freestanding homes.

As a result, the vast majority of these row houses soon became sub-divided into rooming houses through the 1920s. Even worse, during the Depression these typically well-kept rooming houses devolved into a virtual "skid row" for the down-and-out until 1960, when New Haven's aggressive program of urban renewal under then-Mayor Richard C. Lee came face-to-face with this little

neighborhood's deteriorated state.

Unlike Oak Street — a similarly distressed neighborhood that was essentially leveled to create the Route 34 Connector — Court Street survived New Haven's mid-20th-century scorched-earth philosophy of urban renewal, but in a way that segued serendipitously into another burgeoning movement, historic preservation, that was sweeping American consciousness in part as a reaction to the mindless demolition of so much history.

The city opted to encourage private redevelopment of these row houses into single-family or, at worst, floor-by-floor apartment conversions. The street was narrowed to a single lane, with access limited to those who lived on it, and the classic 1960s/'70s tree planters, benches, etc. soon created a vision of urban re-habitation and gentrification that elevated and then stabilized the sad state of this block.

The rescue of Court Street from the wrecker's ball was so successful that the original diverse group of landlord and tenants has transformed into a new generation of homeowners who are rehabbing the rehabs done in the 1960s. And there is no finer rehabilitation that executed by homeowners Bill and Katie Buick, and built by John Bianchi of Residential Renaissance. Bill Buick is a psychology professor at Quinnipiac University, while is fully engaged in a variety of volunteer interests.

The Buicks hired Marc Houston to draft plans for a type of renovation and restoration that not only rises to the level of a true historic



Trim and accoutrements make a completely renovated bedroom (including high velocity HVAC system visible in the port in the ceiling at top right) feel timeless.



With children either in college or out on their own, the Buicks' dogs now have full reign over the home.

preservation project for which existing detailing is saved and/or mimicked, but also adheres to the best standards of new technologies that enable greater levels of energy efficiency and comfort to make living easier and, in the present parlance, more “sustainable.”



The Buicks bought their Court Street home in 2004 almost on a whim, as they had settled for suburbia following graduate school years in the nation’s capital. But they always remembered with fondness an earlier, pre-parenthood era, as Bill recalls. “We would often spend our weekends wandering around Georgetown and Old Town Alexandria [Va.] admiring the old town- and row houses.”

Buying a townhouse that had the classic 1960s rehab of covering up everything original, the Buicks knew they were in for a full gut-renovation and had the good sense to stay out of it until it was fully re-rehabbed, occupying in 2006. Virtually all interior walls

and surfaces were removed. The only material that does not replicate the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ambience is the strip oak flooring, carried over from the 1960 renovation that saved the Court Street townhouses.

Bill Buick recounts how the design/build process engaged the home’s original bones: “It was almost like the old house was guiding us in our decisions,” he explains. “As we uncovered the old walls, we found curved arches and left them. We uncovered a beautiful curved wall by the central staircase.”

John Bianchi recounts that the demolition included “hauling almost 40 tons of demo debris off the site, with little more than a few upset neighbors and weekly visits from New Haven’s finest. We discovered the main-floor ceiling had been lowered approximately one foot. We believe [the previous owners] did this because it was easier to cover up the old damaged plaster moldings than to restore them.”

At the time the rehab was completed, the Buicks had two teenagers and another

son in college, so the newly reinvented 2,400-square-foot home was filled to brimming with humans. The four-bedroom original plan was effectively reduced to three bedrooms to create more storage space. And as is typical in row houses, the floor levels perfectly split up into discrete uses.

The lower floor, a few steps down from the street, which has direct on-grade access to an extraordinary backyard, was their boys’ “playroom” — a place where television, games, and the normal messy roughhousing of youths could be accommodated. The open space was refitted with a powder room and a strip kitchenette, allowing it to serve as a guest bedroom suite as well. The floor above that reclaimed its role as a place for social gatherings and dining, with a new kitchen and living area. The space is bathed in light from both ends of flowing through the open plan, with spaces defined by arches and trimmed-out openings. The third floor became a master suite with an office. The top floor was given over to the boys’ living accommodations.



A tightly designed custom kitchen features all the beels and whistles of a modern place to cook in a traditional house. Note the bared brick wall at the fully restored stairs (right).

All sorts of major and minor moves allowed the home to be completely rehabbed, involving new trim to match existing, recycling the existing stairwell and opening up the previously subdivided interior to allow light to flow throughout the house, supplemented by the insertion of a strategic skylight directly above the stairway that connects all four levels.

Throughout, the new bathrooms evidence the kind of antique-friendly fixtures and surfaces, and the trim and molding work, although almost universally new, directly respects and often completely mimics the original home's 19<sup>th</sup>-century heritage. The stairs had to be completely rehabbed, in fact pulled back onto the bearing wall (where they had almost lost their grip). For the set of stairs going down to the lower level, the original brick wall was revealed and stabilized, not only adding an inch or two in width to that part of the house, but also providing a classic glimpse into the dominant building technology of the day.

The heating and air conditioning for this project employs a high-velocity tube system that was fine-tuned to the point of silent performance with a minimum of imposition into such a tightly contained three-dimensional space. One lone soffit was dropped at the lowest level to accommodate all the airflow, and the size of the heating unit in the row house's basement is smaller than most dishwashers.

The brick exterior was fully restored after chemical poultices removed layer after layer of paint, with all the brownstone sills surgically replaced. Bianchi's skill is best appreciated by what is not visible after five-plus years of occupancy — no cracks, no slumps, no sagging doors. The home is "plumb, level and square" yet the original restored surfaces have the patina that only age affords.

Like all good design projects, this house has sustained the change in occupancy from house full with parents and children to the empty-nester

Buicks. "Our dogs now have their own rooms," notes Katie.

The colors chosen throughout the entire interior are both subtle yet visually vibrant, and complemented by the expressive, colorful art provided by one of the Buick's children, who has gone on to art school.

An economic failure 140 years ago precipitated the evolution of this one block of New Haven to the point where it has come full circle. Today the extraordinary central location and private sensibility of Court Street's contained and coordinated block shows that history does repeat itself.

The good intentions of the Home Insurance Co. are now fully (if belatedly) realized. The result here is both timeless and topical. As Bill Buick notes: "We ended up with a very livable, 'smart' space and have enjoyed low heating bills. We have also enjoyed becoming part of a very vibrant community. There is always something happening on Court Street."

