

School's Out Forever

Single-height walls in double-height spaces are used with large new sliding doors to subdivide the open interiors, allowing social and sleeping spaces to be connected or separated as desired. Note the celebration of the salvaged school blackboards used for the kitchen countertops.

But in its place is an adaptive reuse of the former Lovell School that breathes new life into its upper State Street surroundings

By Duo Dickinson

PHOTOS: BY ANTHONY DeCARLO

 **AT HOME**

Built in 1888, the Lovell School still sits proudly at 45 Nash Street in New Haven. It's simple four-story brick shape has over its long history housed a succession of public school uses — as a local high school to the home of the Wilbur Cross High School honors program. But now the structure has had another rebirth.

Last fall the Lovell School celebrating its reopening as an 18-unit rental property. The project was privately financed but facilitated by the city to create market-rate housing in an established neighborhood. It could be seen as a profit center for some large-scale developer, but the project employed local talent as the midwife of its rebirth.

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The top floor units have double-height living spaces and lofted sleeping areas, maximizing space made available by opening up the attic truss roof to view and use.





The tall ceilings allow for lofted space above the interior kitchens and baths. Note the refinished trim (right) and repainted metal ceilings, as well as the salvaged slate countertops 'repurposed' from the original school's chalkboards.



A typical living room features enormous double-hung windows in the existing school's original openings to create a dramatic sense of space and light.

Architect Bob Frew and his wife Susan won the competition from among a number of bids and proposals to obtain this property. They have a reputation that has allowed them to provide over 100 places to live in the last 30 years with a can-do attitude that transcends hype and affect other developers throw at opportunities like the Lovell School.

Notwithstanding a year-long full rehab, the property was fully rented by the time of completion. The trio of attributes everyone desires in such projects as this — on time, on budget and well executed — are rarely achieved, but that's what happened here. Bob Frew is an immigrant. He came to America after winning a national student competition in Canada, having been educated in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Although he never attended Yale, he ended up teaching there for 30 years. Frew came to teach at Yale back in the 1960s and was in fact its first teacher of computers at the school. He also was the leader in environmental education along with Don Watson in reaction to the 1970s energy crisis.

For many, teaching is its own reward — especially in a fine arts-focused architecture graduate school like Yale's. There are many who draw a good

game but build very little. Not so Bob Frew. He has designed more than 100 housing units, with the Frews also serving as general contractor on those projects. More significantly, Bob and Susan Frew were the projects' developers — that is, they found the money to buy the site and build the design. Here loans and a little tax-credit financing combined with the Frews' resources to create a new place in an old space.

The designer/builder/developer approach is not as unusual as was the fourth overlay of the Frews' mission: Bob and Susan set about to create a community in the neighborhood where they have now lived for three decades. That abiding devotion makes them an extraordinary presence in downtown New Haven.

Explains Bob Frew: "When I helped rebuild State Street we organized the *Apple Festival* and the *Spring Festival*. The purpose [of both events] was the same: We had to make better contact with our tenants. I even went to the extreme of donning my kilt and dancing the Highland Fling at the festival. I have found that community organizing is essential for creating a successful project. Four years ago I with two others created the farmers market."

According to John Herzan, executive director of the New Haven Preservation Trust (a storefront tenant in one of the Frews' buildings), "The Lovell School rehabilitation is a continuation of the Frews' long-standing commitment to the revitalization of the upper State Street community, demonstrating the economic feasibility of adaptive reuse."

And that economic feasibility bespeaks the relative economic vitality of much of the housing stock in many New Haven neighborhoods. Without renters able to pay the \$1,500 to \$1,850 monthly rents, the building would have remained empty.



In retrospect everything seemed to a change for Bob just over 30 years ago when he met Susan and was told by a banker he could access funding for his first project. Their mutual mission accelerated into a full-time profession when he retired from teaching in 1999 after 30 years.

This latest project was their most ambitious on a number of levels. The Frews responded to an RFP from the city and overcame other competitors to present a proposal that promised to do three

things very well: 1) they would completely restore the existing building to the highest standard of historic preservation; 2) they pledged to create a project incorporating the highest level of energy-efficiency and “sustainable” design; 3) the Frews’ 30-year commitment to the neighborhood promised that beyond building 18 residential units the Lovell School renovation would create a community within the upper State Street neighborhood.

The structure itself had remarkably healthy “bones” — 18-inch brick walls, gigantic openings for huge double hung windows in high-ceilinged spaces, a long-span floor system and an open framed timber roof were given over to Bob Frew’s hands to create the kind of loft apartments that tenants love — 800- to 1,000-square-foot, mostly one-bedroom units, half-duplexes with interior lofts. There will be community space in the basement and the first-floor central hall has been given over to community functions.

The Lovell School’s brick exterior, though structurally intact, required a radical cleaning and repointing. But virtually all openings were preserved and a modest elevator addition was the only noticeable exterior change.

The project resulted in a safe, code-compliant renovation involving a new elevator, fire separations, and structural design for its newly subdivided interior. The building itself is almost cubic in volume meaning there was room to create generous central halls between the existing stairwells to invite in natural light at each end.

The interiors of the units are quite varied but all feature the presence of the gigantic double-hung windows in a sea of white sheetrock and the occasional spice of wood applied in new doorways that slide to subdivide or open up spaces or in the revelation of existing wood structure.

Standard Ikea kitchens and simple but well-finished bathrooms were installed throughout, as well as high efficiency washer/drier combos for each unit. Throughout the building the school’s slate chalkboards have been repurposed as countertops as well as the occasional wall surface. (Frew notes he has plenty of spare blackboards for reuse in the couple’s next project.) The original metal ceilings were preserved and carefully repainted, and all rainwater collected on the roofs is captured and reused for landscape watering. The HVAC systems employ high-tech heat pumps to both heat and cool the air, with the

exceptional ability to monitor every expended BTU in every unit.

In for-profit development, cost savings are a top priority. And that mindset melds perfectly with a hybrid historic preservation/sustainability ethic in which what you don’t remove maintains its embodied energy intact and what is restored stays out of landfills. Super-insulation and careful zoning of the HVAC system make this a model retrofit.

Bob Frew says he was fortunate in working with city officials: “They are incredibly easy to work with and the city turned over a clean building to us.”

Architects are often seen as the enemies of common sense. The invention imperative has sometimes rendered many buildings as ego-stroking curiosities that frustrate useful occupancy. But here the opposite is true. Only the vision of an architect could see the potential for sustainability, historic preservation and community building to turn a profit.

And the social profit of the civic devotion of Susan and Bob Frew is just the icing on a delightfully stout brick cake on Nash Street that the entire neighborhood can enjoy. ❖