

In ever-changing Fair Haven, signs of another rebirth

FOR a wee city of 124,000, New Haven has neighborhoods of outsized social pungency. It's clear that Yale University is at the hub and its largely unchanging characteristics provide ballast against the ebbs and flows of the economy and social change. Westville, a lightly urban residential neighborhood, feels as stable as the houses that populate its simple grid of streets. The Hill and Newhallville were and are mostly populated by those who work for large companies (now the hospitals or Yale, in the past Industrial Age factories) and have seen 20th century urban decay and attempts at renewal.



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There are many other neighborhoods in New Haven, but Fair Haven is the spiciest community in our little New England city. Fair Haven wasn't really even a definable place until a bridge was built across the Quinnipiac River in 1785. With the New Haven Green barely two miles away, the quality of this fishing village so close to a little city was as different as its occupants, mostly oystermen.

As the population grew, Fair Haven finally became part of New Haven in 1870 after seceding for a while. Once the oyster beds began to dry up, farming and fishing became less important than support for the thousands of workers and immigrants who came to toil in New Haven's factories.

Because of its proximity to the harbor, Fair Haven became New Haven's Ellis Island where

immigrants continually flooded its housing stock. Its population reached a height of almost 25,000 in the 1930s, subsiding back to a little more than half of that number today. Wave upon wave of transient populations has rendered the streetscape and property values extraordinarily volatile.

In my 30-plus years living in Connecticut, I've seen a fairly depressed and bleak Fair Haven of the 1970s explode into an optimistic gentrification of its waterfront in the 1980s only to have the recession of the early 1990s plunge Fair Haven back into a state of economic malaise and excruciating loss in property value.

But, its undeniable appeal kept longtime residents like Len Suzio invested. As Suzio puts it, "being so close to the river gives the area an openness that a lot of historic urban areas lack."

The distinctiveness of its character was recognized in 1978 when a historic district was formed documenting the many existing buildings that a

more vital economy would see removed for new development. New Haven Independent editor and Fair Haven aficionado Paul Bass notes that the tight street grid helped give Fair Haven its unique character. "I love the alleys," says Bass. They are a secondary semi-private streetscape that allows homes within urban blocks to have functional back doors — not a common approach for the rest of New Haven.

Today, Fair Haven is a microcosm of the issues involved in the national immigration controversy in which New Haven has played a role as one of America's "sanctuary cities" — allowing local

identity cards to replace documentation for employment and access to government services.

The ongoing ebb and flow of development along Grand Avenue, Ferry Street and Lombard Street have seen bootstrapping local entrepreneurs take advantage of the extremely depressed

property values to create a bustling micro-climate within the city. Based on hard work and seat-of-the-pants economic models, a variety of businesses have popped up. Some have died, some have flourished.

As Angelo Reyes, local entrepreneur born and raised in Fair Haven puts it, Fair Haven is "the type of neighborhood that offers opportunities for anyone."

Fair Haven can be seen as the most dynamic element in an evolving city. In its kinetic waves of transformation, one can see one undeniable truth of urban design: No matter how great the talent, drive and vision that people like Mayor Richard C. Lee evidenced in completely reinventing whole sections of New Haven, in the end it is the nature of the population that finally shapes any city's built fabric.

It was the undeniable energy of human aspiration that spawned Fair Haven and created its special identity. The place is perhaps grittier, perhaps more volatile on several levels than its host town, but Fair Haven's present vitality is palpable. A quaint fishing village with a historic district mingles with this latest round of hustle and bustle, a contrast within a contrast.

It's the spice that makes the stew worth eating, no matter how big the pot.



Peter Casolino/Register

Boats and condominiums line the Quinnipiac River in New Haven's Fair Haven neighborhood.

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