

At the peak of the housing bubble in 2006, nearly 70 percent of Americans owned the place where they lived. Home ownership was not only a traditional American aspiration, conventional wisdom — and the federal government's economic policies — made renting seem stupid. People thought they were creating wealth by going into debt to own their own home, and money spent on paying rent was tantamount to using your hard-earned

cash to ignite the barbecue.

How times have changed. The crash in value of millions of homes has vaporized the life savings of their occupants — at best on paper alone; at worst forcing bankruptcy. Now close to 40 percent of American households are projected to rent their accommodations, with millions of homes in foreclosure limbo.

But college towns teeming with transient and low- or no-income students have

always had a high proportion of renters. New Haven is no exception — but student rentals are often thought of as rat-trap rabbit warrens barely above tenement living.

But that perception has changed.

The Crown Tower apartments built in the 1960s and last decade's conversion of the old Taft Hotel to accommodate the thousands of Yale-affiliated residents who want a nice place for a year (or six)

illustrated that not buying did not mean people did not care where they lived.

Upping that ante is the huge investment of 360 State by Becker + Becker, an audacious effort to fulfill the potential of a new rental-based community in downtown New Haven, trail-blazed by the Ninth Square development of the 1990s.

Five hundred apartments with common spaces, parking and "green" amenities are cleanly set at the intersection of Chapel and State streets. It's the second-tallest building

in New Haven and one of its largest structures. But it is, in the end, an assemblage of little constructions — people-scaled homes set next to one another with out-scaled windows having unobstructed views of Yale's gravitas, the new Q Bridge's construction chaos, the parking lot where the Coliseum once stood and the open box of Marcel Breuer's Pirelli building emptied by Ikea.

Into these new little homes have now marched a hardy band of urban pioneers, the vanguard of 100 or so renters

Restoring Renting's Cachet

Shiny new 360 State Street changes the face of downtown New Haven living

BY DUO DICKINSON

360 State's aesthetic is modern, clean and 'semi-Ikea-esque' — just like Fontana's furnishings.



Careful color and materials choices make the bones of both the interiors and exterior facades unexpectedly expressive.



who started moving in this summer as the building was going through its last construction phase: completing the street-level commercial space facing Chapel Street.

Elevators can be pokey, the never-ending line of U-Hauls pulling up to the lobby's front door across the unfinished State Street terrace can seem a bit ad hoc, and the sounds and mess of construction all can be annoying — but it's also invigorating and redolent of hope. It mirrors the hope of a city government that awarded Becker + Becker the privilege of building this structure via a \$1 site cost.

One of these new residents is Catherine Fontana. A vital 24-year-old Yale graduate student in microbial ecology researching the effect of climate change on what lives in our soil, she is as fresh and focused as the building she chose to occupy.

Three Sixty State and Fontana walk the talk of “green.” The building has all the techno-bells and whistles (even a fuel cell) to lower energy use, but the ethic goes deeper. Bicycles, for example, occupy a privileged place — not only their storage, but the über-cool Devil's Gear bike shop will relocate there to facilitate non-carbon-powered transport. Many of the surfaces are proudly fabricated from

recycled products, and the State Street rail station directly across the street almost begs resident to use the train, and eschew fossil-fueled auto transport.

Catherine Fontana is the human face of the building's earth-friendly ethos. “I've already made several steps to lessen my impact on the planet, from becoming vegan to biking more,” she says. “Even as an environmental scientist, living in 360 State Street has significantly heightened my consciousness of every daily green decision I make.”

Fontana has the guileless intellectual clarity born of a Michigan upbringing in combined with a stellar undergrad career at local Albion College rewarded by a year on an “Irish Rhodes” Mitchell Scholarship in Dublin. “I've never considered myself a city girl until I moved from the bustling city center of Dublin, Ireland to the subdued suburbs of New Haven last August,” Fontana says. “After a year, I knew my surroundings needed to change — both visually and environmentally.”

Another illustration of her intellectual firepower was obtaining funding for her research work that made the \$1,892 monthly rent (not including utilities) for her one-bedroom unit affordable. But the net-net cost compared to her previous

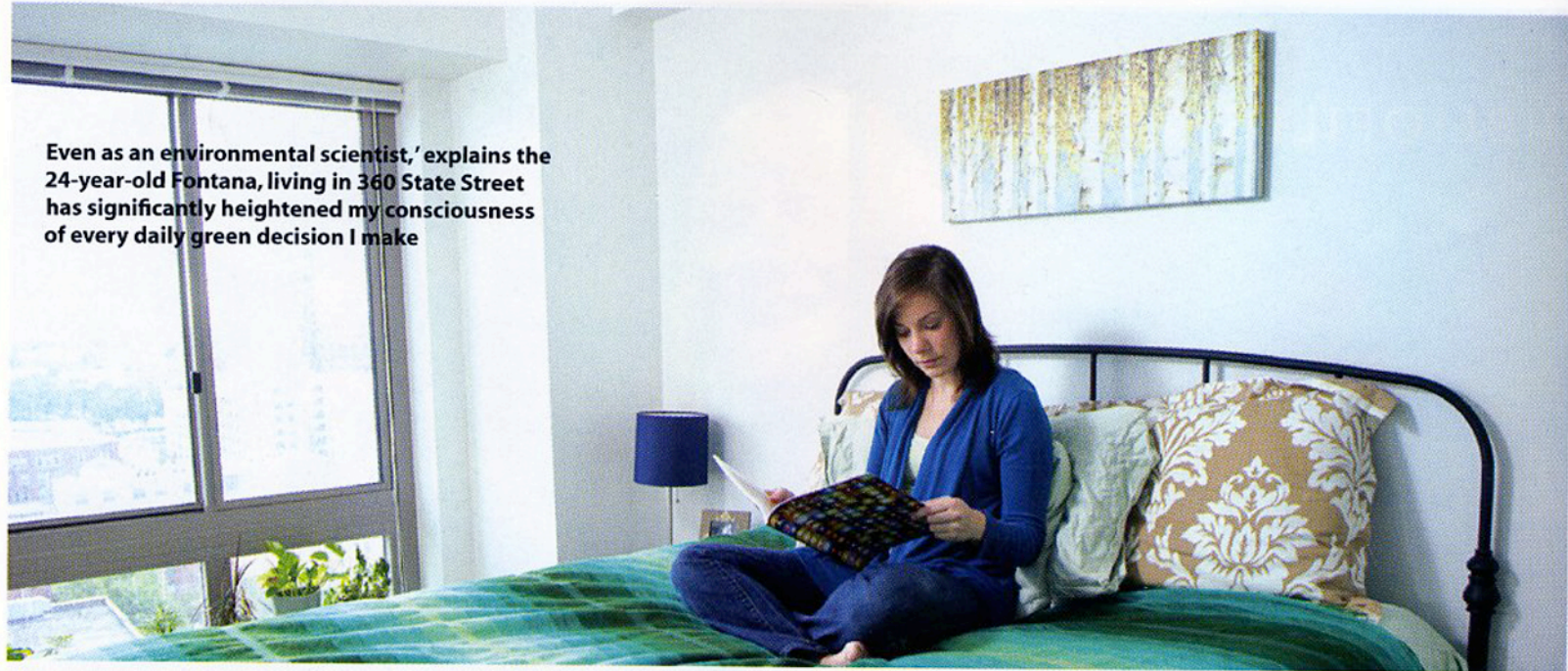
digs in New Haven's suburbs (a classic, funky mold-infested grad student rental) was not as extreme, as those utility costs (including Internet) of about \$130 per month are much lower in her new home. She pays an additional \$100 a month to house her car, but that's just about the cost of a month's parking tickets in the City of Parking Meter Time-Out Zero Tolerance.

Three Sixty State was the perfect reflection of Fontana's stage in life and outlook — she hopes to live there until she completes her graduate studies, which will take at least five years. Her life is quite full beyond academic pursuits — she is vegan and a local food critic with her omnivore boyfriend, as well as producing a website (veganvore.wordpress.com). She volunteers at the Yale Peabody Museum and is a McDougal Fellow working to engage New Haven students in scientific public outreach.

Three Sixty State has similarly ambitious pretensions: opening a “localvore” natural-foods market, common amenities such as gathering rooms, an exercise facility, rooftop pool and integration with New Haven's cultural and civic efforts. The building is even pet-friendly.

The units range from studios, one- and two-bedroom apartments, to three-

Even as an environmental scientist,' explains the 24-year-old Fontana, living in 360 State Street has significantly heightened my consciousness of every daily green decision I make



bedroom penthouses, a few with oversized terraces. The aesthetic is modern, clean and semi-Ikea-esque — just like Fontana's furnishings. Huge glass openings force attention beyond the tight interior dimensions. Careful color and materials choices make the bones of both the interiors and exterior facades unexpectedly expressive.

For someone embarking on such a rich

and rewarding life's voyage, Fontana has a sense of context of her surroundings: "Don't let their clean lines deceive you," she cautions. "These apartments are teeming with the past use of all the different materials in each carpet square and every inch of the countertops." It may be hip to be green — but it's also more interesting.

It costs less money to rent a student

hovel, for sure. But rude, environmentally brain-dead accommodations cost their residents more than money — they drain pride and energy in their buzz-killing thoughtlessness. As those who spent money to make money in the now-popped housing bubble discovered, it's not always about the cash. It's also about value — and, ultimately, values. ❖