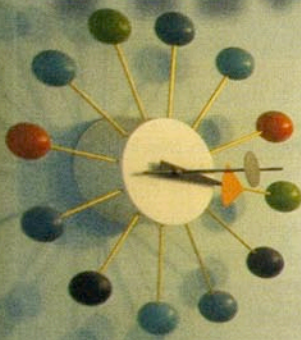


# A VERY FAIR HAVEN

*A power couple roost richly in the 'Brooklyn of New Haven'*



By Duo DCKINSON

**Y**ou can look at homes in any number of ways. Houses are often thought of as art objects, sitting on a lot. Other houses can be seen as symbolic icons of a style: Colonial, Modern, "green."

When a wall or two came down inside, it made sense to completely open up the river-view wall (left) and give a perch for the cherry, soapstone and stainless steel kitchen, creating a social hub and a view of the thrill of Fair Haven's flow for the most oft-used room in the house.

PHOTOS: BY ANTHONY DECARLO



The venerable 170-year-old Ames House as seen from Quinnipiac Avenue as a tidy Federal shape (left) and as a cascade of porches and a wing or two as seen from the Quinnipiac River, opening up its entire backside to the maritime world that still makes living in Fair Haven special.



They can also become a tapestry knit by streetscapes. In just such a woven community, Fair Haven, there is an abiding presence of the old fusion of hearth and workplace that defined much of America's urban landscape before the post-World War II explosion of federal highway-goosed suburbia. Fair Haven is as distinctive a neighborhood as can be found in New England.

While Fair Haven wasn't really even a geographically definable place until a bridge was built across the Quinnipiac River in 1785, it quickly became a bustling fishing village where oystermen and others who made their living on and from the river and sea created a hometown along the river.

As the population grew, Fair Haven finally became part of New Haven in 1870 after seceding for a time. 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.

As New Haven was whipsawn by Mayor Richard Lee's "urban renewal" in the mid-20th century, the distinctiveness of Fair Haven's character was recognized in 1978 when a historic district was created, documenting the many existing buildings that a more vital economy would see removed for new development. In these years Fair Haven experienced the ebbs and flows of disparate populations and wildly volatile real estate values

as white flight created blight and alternatively gentrification pumped up hope for renewal, crashing back down to earth in the early 1990s.

But a new generation of urban colonists have nurtured a renewed appreciation for the essential vitality of this fishing village and are investing time and sweat equity to homestead in a place that has as much potential as history. Donna Curran and Patrick McCaughey are just such homesteaders.

Often the term "power couple" comes off as sound-bite stupid, but Curran's and McCaughey's careers have had a high profile in Connecticut for decades. Curran and chef Denise Appel co-founded one of New Haven's ziestest and most attractive restaurants, Zinc, and its offspring, Kitchen Zinc. Both eateries marry localvore innovation with rare value and gastronomic delight. They have become one of the Elm City's few go-to places to eat that never disappoint.

Similarly, Patrick McCaughey has headed two Connecticut cultural meccas that never disappoint their visitors: Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum, and the Yale Center for British Art. He is an extraordinary writer as well, having earned worldwide renown with both memoir and art-focused tracts. Of a man who emigrated from Down Under to take the Wadsworth job in 1988, a Brisbane newspaper once referred to McCaughey as "the bowtie-wearing libertine of the arts."

Committed in their careers to urban amenity, it's hardly surprising that this couple sought an exciting venue from which to write and cook. And the Ames House — built around 1840 on the east bank of the river, nestled close to Quinnipiac Avenue, safely lofted above the riverbanks close to Quinnipiac Avenue, with a lovely full yard dropping down to the water — fully fit the bill of a urban setting with undeniable natural and historic amenities.

Not surprisingly, McCaughey had performed ample due diligence on the property.

"An 1868 plan of Fair Haven shows the house to be standing in its present block, designated as the J. Ames House," he explained in an e-mail. "We found his tombstone in the shrubbery with the touching if unmetrical epitaph: *And though the past I never can forget/Through God's kind love formed me/I am not of all bereft.* The present house, however, dates from much later.

"It's in the vernacular Greek Revival style which prevails throughout Fair Haven with a pedimented front gable and a doorway of modest pilasters and lintel," McCaughey added. "Nothing fancy: it was an oysterman's house and the remnant of his jetty [is] still apparent in the river at the end of the garden. The basement of the house would almost certainly have been his working area now converted into a study."

A dropped beam replaces a wall, and allows enough space for art and furniture to express themselves



Also not surprising was that this classic Fair Haven home had been partially restored by the previous generations of Fair Haven homesteaders. A double-decker porch — added on at least 20 years ago across the river-facing rear of the structure, complete with river-accessing stairs — was in relatively good shape. The previous homeowners had performed the full mechanical Monty — fixing the dug-into-the-riverbank leaks of the lower level and doing the electric, plumbing and HVAC work that made the investment less risky for Curran and McCaughey.

But the interior had just been whitewashed, and several small rooms (perfect for 19<sup>th</sup>-century coal stove heating but utterly undesirable for 21<sup>st</sup>-century living) separated the main living space from the reason McCaughey and Curran bought the house in the first place: the river. With design help from Ed Bottomley of the New Haven interior-design firm of Cama Inc. and the resolute work of William Hesbach, a contractor who specializes in historic renovations, the first floor was opened up — preserving the stairwell and adding built-ins to the street-side walls.

But the jewel in the crown of all this effort is an exceptional kitchen, crafted by woodworker Anthony Errichetti. Cherry, stone and stainless steel commend a corner of the home, fully bathed in a window wall that captures the panoramic view and infuses the entire interior with a filtered natural light. That light flows because of the surgically removed interior walls, so carefully executed that the flow seems natural and timeless, as trim and flooring are continuous and unbroken

unifying the combined spaces.

While the kitchen is the oculus of light and view through the porch, the light it lets into the first floor fully loves the home's other star attraction: the artwork the couple has collected over their lifetimes, curated (of course) by McCaughey. Large, small, painted, printed and drawn, the walls are alive with agreeably illuminated art that both complements the spaces and surprises the visitor who meanders through.

The landscape and driveway access has been reconfigured under the careful hand of Fair Haven entrepreneur Chris Ozick, a neighbor from across the street who has put his own home where civic values are. Patrick recounts that Ozick used "river grasses and the ubiquitous local varieties of flowers and shrubs — hydrangea, shasta daisies, trumpet and day lilies and so forth. We have retained an aged and lavishly spreading mulberry tree at the end of the garden which provides some welcome shade from the western sun, which descends on the rear of the house."

As is true for all owners of antique houses, the work of revivification and renewal never ends. Although previous owners had already opened up the upstairs master bedroom above the now open river-facing first floor, it has yet to be finished to the ground floor's level of polish. New siding will soon replace the 1920s-era cast "shingles" that groan under the overcoating of scores of paint jobs.

But in the end, Fair Haven's unique characteristics are the starting and ending point for Donna

Curran and Patrick McCaughey. As the latter puts it: "The wide view of the river and the pleasantly active river scene as Norman Bloom's oyster boats pull out from a dock neighboring the property or the Fair Haven lobster fleet ply their way down to the Sound" can now be appreciated by everyone cooking and eating — a sensibility doubtless enhanced by Curran's efforts to make the ambiance of Zinc's interior visually distinctive.

As you might guess, McCaughey's words encapsulate why anyone would want to inhabit this rebuilding fishing village:

"The location of the house took us by storm," he writes. "Except in summer when the foliage is too dense, you can see 180 degrees up and down the Quinnipiac River from the Grand Avenue Bridge to the Ferry Street Bridge. We love the romanticism of the oysterman's boats wheeling and turning at the end of our garden. When they return like a boat parade in the evening, it's like living in a Newlyn School painting. Yet we are just ten minutes from downtown New Haven by car and 20 minutes if you catch the regular bus service down Grand Avenue."

As one prominent Realtor remarked to us recently: "Fair Haven could be the Brooklyn of New Haven." If so, where are all the novelists? We walk freely around the neighborhood on both sides of the river and find it safe, secure and friendly.

What can be better than having a well-stocked wine merchant, Grand Vin, 60 yards from your door where you can buy a good Sancerre for less than \$20! ✨





When walls come down, existing features like the original stairway (right) can be fully appreciated and light and space can be shared between floors. Built-ins provide storage and art and furniture share the interior focus with the staircase.



The simple removal of walls and extension of wooden floors allows space and light to flow throughout the ground floor of the house, giving full reign to the home's unmatched collection of art and classic furniture.