

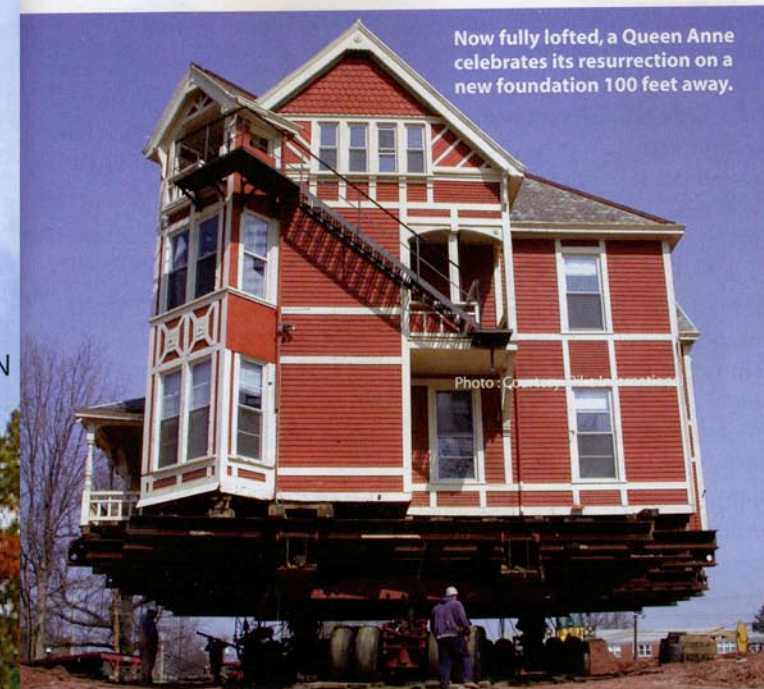
A HOUSE of HOMES

BY DUO DICKINSON



PHOTO: MICHAEL DOOLITTLE

ATHOME



Now fully lofted, a Queen Anne celebrates its resurrection on a new foundation 100 feet away.

Photo: Courtesy of the New Haven Preservation Trust

A once-stately home is re-imagined — and reborn — as rental residential

Built in 1882, the caretaker “cottage” for the Winchester Observatory on Canner Street (now known as the Yale Observatory) is **anything but a “cottage.”**

The building is a fully realized Queen Anne manse at the crest of Prospect Hill, and is formally known as the Robert W. Wilson House — the namesake of its first caretaker occupant.

As with so many of its brother and sister grand homes in New Haven, this fine three-story residence fell from grace through the 20th century, until Yale was using it to house graduate students. In 2002 Yale gave up, and donated the Wilson House to the city of New Haven.

City government had just embarked on a massive (and costly) initiative to build dozens of new public schools. The

Wilson home sat on a location that would soon become the site of the new Celentano School. Here is where the saga of this home takes a turn that makes this home’s rebirth both pragmatic, and even heroic.

Before the New Haven Preservation Trust (NHPT) created a full-throated preservation constituency in New Haven by saving the nearby Davies Mansion from Yale’s wrecking ball in the late 1970s (as a consequence of which it was ultimately reborn as the Betts House), the Wilson House would have simply been razed for the greater good of building a new school.

But to NHPT Executive Director John Herxan, the Wilson home was “an outstanding example of the neighborhood’s built environment” — the Prospect Hill Historic District.

But instead of demolishing an iconic building, the city stepped up to the plate and spent almost \$200,000 to relocate the structure to a new foundation. It did not make economic sense to use

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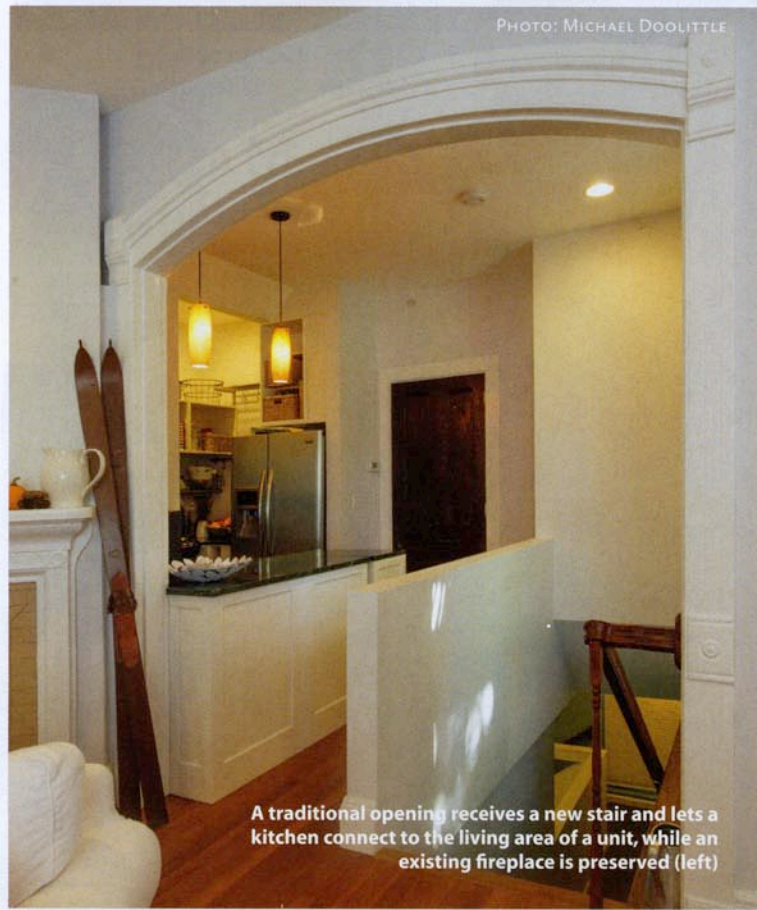


PHOTO: MICHAEL DOOLITTLE

A traditional opening receives a new stair and lets a kitchen connect to the living area of a unit, while an existing fireplace is preserved (left)

it as part of the school, or for other academic functions, so it sat fallow for the better part of a decade, awaiting private development. Around the same time as the Wilson home's stay of execution, a new entity began to take rehabbed New Haven housing stock seriously. Shmully Hecht and investors, including some Yale alums, created Pike International, whose mirrored "P" logo set to a Yale blue background has become ubiquitous in the neighborhoods around the Yale campus where once grand structures had deteriorated into shabby student housing as their primary building type. Pike has renovated homes and small commercial buildings into more than 100 apartments. But unlike other profit-driven landlords, Pike has an attitude, best evidenced by a sign seen around Prospect Hill that read

"Who Needs Greenwich?"

Pike's mission to create value through renovation while pursuing an incremental (but relentless) search-and-rehab strategy found a perfect partner to take its efforts beyond repair into design: an architect who loves creating within the context of existing structures.

Fernando Pastore is an architect who came to America from Brazil just before the Wilson House was moved and Pike International was formed. Pastore worked for Herbert Newman and then Svigals + Partners, and then opened his own firm, SEEDnh, some four years ago. Pastore has collaborated with other firms, but serves as Pike International's go-to architect, working on many of its recent projects.

When the city decided to fully market the Wilson House to prospective buyers, it was a



PHOTO: MICHAEL DOOLITTLE

Ceiling framing is revealed by selective demolition to become a lighting-diffuser. In the same space, trim and fireplace are restored.

natural focus for Pike and Pastore. The winning team then set about to marry money to the marketplace and create rental housing that could reinvent the stately structure as a small apartment building. Different models were explored, but in the end five separate one-bedroom apartments were tucked within the elaborately lovely exterior.

Explains Pastore, "With five bedrooms, five living rooms, five kitchens and nine bathrooms, the house is a Rubik's Cube of spaces and intricately woven mechanical systems, shelled by state-of-the-art sound-attenuation systems."



But Pastore has a perspective that defies the traditional description of "preservationist," and he rejects the classic architect-as-fool-to-history persona as well. Fernando Pastore revels in reuse. Not only in the shells of the structures he saves, but in the recycled building materials he employs in his redesigns.

Architect Pastore bares old wood beams, creates crisp cutouts in walls and ceilings,

PHOTO: MICHAEL DOOLITTLE



inserts strategic skylights and playfully applies bits and pieces of reused framing lumber, reapplied stairway parts as well as baring the necessary new naked pipes, ducts and light fixtures. It's a dance of obviously old and explicitly new, a dynamic in which Pastore revels.

Top floors of the units are lofted to the rafter undersides, making for some dramatic spaces. Kitchens and baths feature a high level of finish and fixtures for rental properties. Restored wood floors, fireplaces, trim and staircases keep the home's antiquity ever present.

The project, and Pike's burgeoning portfolio, are unapologetically for profit, but follow an ethos deeply rooted in the genuine attitude that the greenest building is the one that is not torn down. The 100-plus renovations, remodeling and reuse projects do make money for Pike and its investors: The firm proudly proclaims that a one-bedroom unit, at \$2,400 monthly rent, is "the highest in New Haven."

"Sustainability" and "New Urbanism" have become virtually moral imperatives for Northeastern cities, even those as small as New Haven. "Density" is part of the canon, so the 500 units of rental housing at 360 State Street justified its obvious profitability with its "New Urban" street cred — and it is today fully rented. But towers are often distinct from the communities around them, mitigating the social and local commercial benefits of density.

Down Prospect Street from the Wilson House, Robert A.M. Stern has designed two new Yale dormitories ("residential colleges" in Ivyspeak) next to Ingalls Rink (the "Yale Whale"). Their design is exquisite, and so is their price tag — several hundred million dollars. Its perfected homage to College Gothic Architecture God James Gamble Rogers is so perfect that the construction entailed a Scorched • Earth Contextualism — where raw dirt receives genius, versus weaving



PHOTO: MICHAEL DOOLITTLE

Nice cabinetry, light fixtures and sexy ceiling treatments make a living/kitchen space come to life.

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in any of the 26 structures that once set on the site into a tapestry of invention and reuse. Paying the "green" piper involves make-up call technology and "features" bike racks and bamboo.

But Pike and Pastore walk the talk of sustainability that many, if not most, simply greenwash with good intentions and LED lightbulbs. This is messy, complicated and, at times, ad hoc work. To reincarnate a tired building into a state of new usefulness, the worlds of preservation, design and the bottom line have to dance together or nothing gets saved.

Putting their money where their chutzpah is, Pike and Pastore managed to salvage the Wilson House's most beloved public feature: its Queen Anne exterior massing. A new color scheme reinvents those interweaving

shapes, lines and materials.

Shoehorning five residential units into a single-family home has more potential to destroy the guts and gist of any antique. Unlike some of the literal rooming-house rehabs done by Pastore and Pike, where unrelated occupants live together as a family, sharing kitchen, bathroom and living spaces, this subdivision could have wrecked the Wilson House in the pursuit of maxing out the rerurn on investment. But its essence was preserved.

Historic preservation, sustainability and capitalism can coexist. In fact, serving these sometimes-conflicting masters — and the results, as seen in a revived Robert W. Wilson House — can be a win-win-win.

