

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

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New Life for an Old Box Factory

This fall, we received demolition notices for two properties on Cedar Street, nos. 45 and 47. Given their run-down condition, we weren't surprised, but figured it was still worth a try to save them. When we called the attorney for the new owners, Joseph Capalbo, he was delighted to hear that his client was eligible to use Section 7.3 of the Zoning Regulations, the Historic Density Bonus, which would give him a number of advantages over demolition and new construction. If one or both of the buildings were restored, the "incentives" could include extra units, side and front yard allowances and relief from some parking requirements.

When we visited the site, we were pleasantly surprised to see that despite their gloomy exteriors, both buildings were structurally sound and eminently restorable. The box factory was especially appealing; with its 13' high ceilings and large windows, it lent itself to studio spaces or loft living, both of which were allowed under 7.3 zoning. The new owner, James Tooher, hired James Evans Associates, Architects, to prepare plans for restoring the box

factory into 7 units of two-story, loft-type townhouses. Under the current plan, the adjacent c.1870 Victorian Gothic cottage may be moved to a nearby empty lot and restored with the help of the Historic Density Bonus.



Bishop Box Co. in 1909



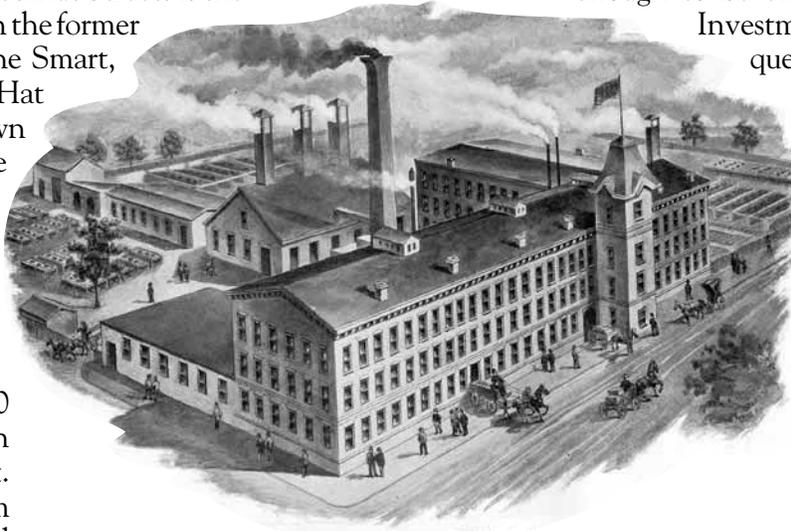
45 Cedar Street today

The Bishop Box Factory: It's History

By the beginning of the 20th century, the South End was home to more than a dozen factories, large and small. The entire area between the Canal and Atlantic Street was known as the "Factory District," producing everything from hardware, straw hats, typewriters, shirtwaists and pianos. All these products required great quantities of boxes and wrapping paper, both for shipping and sales. To satisfy this growing need, the Bishop Box and Paste Company - as it was called on the 1906 Sanborn map - was erected in that year on Cedar Street. A rather modest, utilitarian building as turn-of-the-century structures go, it still contained its fair share of ornament in the form of curvilinear brackets under the entry hoods and a row of small brackets under the roofline. Over time, the original clapboard got covered with unsightly, "no-maintenance" asphalt siding, and a loading dock was appended to the front of the building. Paired wood windows were replaced with large, factory-style metal grids providing ample light to the two-story interior. 

What Happened to the Straw Hat Factory?

The west side of Pacific Street between Crosby and Walnut Streets is the site of the oldest building in the former Pitney Bowes complex, the Smart, Patterson & Rice Straw Hat Manufactory, later known as T.B. Smart & Co., one of the largest manufacturers of straw hats in the world. At the height of its success, the company produced nearly a million hats every year and employed around 300 people - mostly women - in its Stamford plant. Straw was imported from Germany, Switzerland and China, then dyed, braided and molded into the latest styles. Picturesque



The T. B. Smart Factory as it appeared in Picturesque Stamford in 1892

Stamford, a souvenir book published in 1892, shows a drawing of the three-story brick building with an attached four-story, mansard-roofed stair tower. When Antares, the real estate investment firm recently purchased it along with the rest of the Pitney Bowes site, they decided not to demolish it, but to restore the structure for use as company

offices. But how to restore it? Was it historic enough to be eligible for the Federal 20% Investment Tax Credit? The big question they had to resolve before they did anything was whether this actually was T.B. Smart's factory and if so, why didn't it look anything like the 1892 drawing?

Mystery Solved!

Nils Kerschus, researcher the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., searched the Stamford Fire Department Records currently housed at the Stamford Historical Society and found that there had been a two-

alarm fire at the location in November 15, 1906. A front-page story in the Advocate described the spectacular blaze that destroyed the main building - no longer a straw hat factory - and resulted in a loss of \$350,000 and the jobs of 400 people. In 1919 the building we see today was erected on the site.



Is this boarded-up building on the corner of Crosby and Pacific Streets the former straw hat factory?

"In an incredibly short time the whole factory was a magazine of roaring fire. The building and its contents seemed to burn like tinder and the few sharp explosions, while not at all harmful, had in them an element of danger. Regardless of danger, the handful of men who compose the Stamford fire department attacked the flames resolutely. So intense was the heat they could not get very close to the building on the east or south sides. The attack began on the north end, and just as quickly as they could get the lines run out water was being poured on the building from the north, the east and the south sides."

*The Stamford Advocate
Thursday, November 15, 1906*

The End of Another Era

This row of six-story brick buildings along Henry Street is typical of early twentieth-century industrial structures. Long, undivided rooms with large windows on two sides were conducive to assembly line production.

In the early 20th century, Stamford was known as the Lock City, a reference to the all-important role the Yale & Towne Lock Company played in the city's economy for 75 years. When the company moved out of Stamford in the 1960s, it left a huge void which was eventually filled first by research and light-manufacturing facilities and subsequently by the giant, international corporate headquarters that now dominate the scene. The 20+ acres of the former Yale & Towne complex in the South End lay under-utilized for over 20 years, serving as low-cost space for marginal or start-up businesses. By 1985, the lure of low rent began to attract artists, sculptors, craftspeople, as well as antique and "junk" dealers. The once desolate site soon became an exciting destination. Of course, there was always a sense of impermanence. The owners, Heyman Properties of Westport, had made it clear that the artists were an "interim" use until a decision was made as to how to fully develop the property. Tenants knew that it was only a matter of time until the real world of "highest and best uses" forced them out.

This October, however, with unexpected rapidity, Heyman sold the buildings to a relatively new Greenwich-based development firm, Antares Real Estate Services LLC. In a matter of a few months, with a seemingly unlimited supply of money, Antares bought close to 80 acres in the South End - including the 22-acre former Pitney Bowes factory and the 40-acre Admiral's Wharf site owned by the late Arthur



Henry Street facade looking towards Canal Street



Interior courtyard view

Collins. But what would become of the burgeoning arts and antiques community at Yale & Towne, initially responsible for reviving the area? They certainly couldn't survive market rate rents.

Although Antares is still in the process of developing plans for the com-

plex, there is still hope for the loft artists who work there. Preliminary conversations held between their representatives and the developers have been encouraging, suggesting their continued presence on the lower floors in the form of gallery, classroom and work space. ❧

Why Preserve? What's special about older buildings?

"Americans flock in ever-increasing numbers to Europe to gaze in admiration at Paris, London and Rome. Part of what they are seeking is what we are destroying in our own environment - the variety and sense of continuity that comes from preserving links with the national past."

Constance Greiff, "Lost America," 1971



(left), former Y.M.C.A. on Atlantic St., c.1920, replaced by new Y.M.C.A. on Washington Blvd. (right)

When you ask Stamford residents to name their favorite building, the response is fairly predictable: Old Town Hall, the Ferguson Library, the Post Office, maybe the former Advocate Building. Why doesn't anyone ever chose Landmark Tower, the Government Center or UBS Warburg? Even some of the more architecturally significant Urban Renewal-era structures such as St. John's Towers or the former GTE ziggurat on Tresser Boulevard or the Champion Building designed by Ulrich Franzen rarely get mentioned. The only contemporary building that seems to have any appeal to local citizens at all is the Presbyterian (Fish) Church on Bedford Street. Why does the public seem to prefer their old buildings and why are they willing to go to such lengths to preserve them, i.e. the battle over the Palace Theater facade? Maybe the unfortunate truth is that "older" is often truly "better."

Throughout American history, buildings were constantly torn down and replaced. Our nation looked to the future and new opportunities, not the past. However, by the late 1800s, a wave of nostalgia resulted in an architectural movement known as "Colonial Revival" and the saving of significant historic sites such as Mount Vernon and Williamsburg. But old buildings still came down without protest making way for new. Even the cataclysmic urban renewal programs that began nationwide in the 1950s faced little public challenge.

By the 1970s, a widespread preservation movement had sprung up - seemingly overnight - reflecting a distinct turn-around in public opinion. Why? No one had ever protested before when buildings were torn down. Maybe it was because the public had begun to notice that what replaced demolished buildings was rarely as pleasing as the ones that were lost.



(left), Park Row Block built in 1875, replaced by present building, (right), as seen from Veteran's Park



(left), Methodist Church and Parsonage, (right), Present building at 1010 Washington Blvd.

During the late 19th and early 20th century, architects mined the best of the past: Greek and Roman temples, Gothic cathedrals and Renaissance palazzos were reworked with modern materials into new and beautiful forms. The Art Deco movement of the 20s and 30s mined different sources and invented ornament all its own. But after World War II, Modernist architecture removed all references to the past and eliminated decoration altogether. It enabled builders to use cheap materials and poor workmanship designed to last only until the tax depreciation ran out. Along with elaborate doorways and roof cornices, fancy street level entries and storefronts were eliminated in favor of ground floor parking garages or blank walls. While many of the earlier Modernist buildings were created by architects who were well- schooled in historic architecture and careful use of detail, proportion and quality materials, their mid 20th century followers received little or no aesthetic training as architectural schools now concentrated on the "new." The result is the stereotypical "box" we see everywhere without any real visual interest or human appeal.

Is the situation hopeless? Can new buildings be built which will eventually work their way into our affection the way the older ones have? They don't have to be replicas of the Parthenon to give us visual pleasure, but for us to love them, quality, both in design and materials, needs to be significantly improved.

Just a few suggestions:

- Visual interest should be encouraged in the form of decorative details, varied rooflines and pedestrian-friendly ground floors. Plain surfaces without ornament and variety are inherently boring. Modular buildings such as those now being erected by the major housing construction companies may be less expensive to produce, but result in repetitive, anti-urban streetscapes.
- Plazas and streets without people soon become dead space; city planners need to ensure activity in public places by insisting on the small shops and entrances that attract pedestrian traffic.
- The use of quality materials and craftsmanship must be encouraged! This means avoiding cheap artificial sidings, curtain walls that have to be replaced rather than repaired and windows with fake dividers that fall out after a few years. It also means more training programs to teach craftsmen the skills they need in order to do high-quality work.

If you are interested in ways to humanize architecture and make it appealing, we suggest reading "A Pattern Language" by Christopher Alexander, et al, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. 📖



(left), The Taylor-Vail house c.1910, stood on the southwest corner of Washington Blvd. and Main Street, (right) as it exists today,

The Historic Density Bonus Expands Zones

Over the past two decades, there have been over twenty successful preservation projects throughout the city made possible by the use of Section 7.3 of the Zoning Regulations, the Historic Density Bonus. This innovative regulation was developed in the 1980s by Renée Kahn and Richard Redniss to encourage preservation of historic buildings through the use of "incentives" such as a possible increase of up to 50% in density, lot setback and use variances and reduced parking

requirements. All incentives are subject to approval by the Zoning Board and are not "as of right."

Until recently, Section 7.3 could only be used in multi-family, commercial and industrial zones. However, the Zoning Board was recently asked to extend it to single family zones. In order to protect these neighborhoods from inappropriate development, the Board approved the expansion but required that at least a portion of the building be 100 years old. It also removed any increase in the allowed number of units or any change in use and required that no setback or height exceed the existing, non-conforming status. A copy of the new regulation is available on the city's web site or by calling City Planner, Norman Cole, at 977-4714.

The request for expanding the regulation to single-family zones: R-6, R-7.25, R-10, R-20, RA-1, RA-2, RA-3 came from two property owners who had both been turned down twice by the Zoning Board of Appeals. One wanted to put a wrap-around porch on a c.1910 Colonial Revival house on Leonard Street; the other wanted to expand a c1840 National Register-listed property on Old Long Ridge Road. Unfortunately, the Leonard Street property didn't quite make the 100 year cut-off set by the Zoning Board, but the owners of the house in historic Long Ridge Village will now be able to apply to the Board with their expansion plans. 🏡



The owners of this house in Long Ridge Village (c1840) hope to expand to provide for the needs of a growing family. "We love our old house," the owner told us. "If we wanted a McMansion, we would have bought one."



183 West Avenue: a recently completed Historic Density Bonus project restored what was discovered to be the third oldest house in Stamford (c.1720)



Colonial-era fireplace at 183 West Avenue, Stamford



Getting into Home Ownership With Help from the City

The HOME Downpayment Loan Program is an exciting way for new homeowners to break into Stamford's otherwise prohibitive housing market.

Homeownership is the time-honored way for low-income home buyers to build wealth and ensure an affordable place for their families to live. In September, 1997, the City of Stamford began its HOME program, offering downpayment loans of \$20,000 at zero interest with no monthly payments. To date, 110 low-income buyers with annual incomes ranging from \$15,000 to \$82,000 have been assisted. The program has also helped meet the Mayor's goal of increasing ownership by minorities as 60% of the loan recipients are African America, 19% Hispanic and 5% Asian. Since the loan must be repaid upon sale or refinancing of the property, 35 homebuyers have repaid their HOME loans, putting \$538,650 back into the fund and enabling the City to assist another 27 low-income families. Since homeownership is a time-honored way of building wealth, let us look at information we have on 18 of these repayments:

- There was a total increase in value/equity/wealth of \$1,701,000, or an average of \$94,500 each
- The average annual gain was \$30,700 or 21% in home value per year.

- This gain represented an average of 78% of each buyer's annual income at the time of purchase. In other words, these buyers had an average annual income of about \$40,000 per year and they were earning another \$31,000 per year in rising value of their property.
- Most of the properties purchased were condos but there were also a few single, two and three family homes. A total of close to two million dollars in loans were given out as the HOME program leveraged close to 17 million dollars in total home purchase investment in Stamford. Some of the figures are:
- 13.4 million in first mortgages came from private lenders
- \$542,000 in downpayment loans came from the Stamford Housing Authority
- \$512,000 in loans came from the Housing Development Fund for downpayment and closing costs
- \$495,000 cash for downpayment and closing costs came from the buyers themselves

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In presenting the Distinguished Advocate award to Margaret Bowen, Vice Chairman Cicchetti told the audience at the Bushnell that "Margaret Bowen has served for 40 years as a devoted volunteer, actively supporting the promotion of "public" history and her work with the programs and exhibits of the Stamford Historical Society."

Commenting on the awards, Mayor Dannel Malloy stated "Stamford is very proud that of eight Distinguished Advocate History Awards that were made statewide; two were given to Stamford's history heroes." 

g pictures of Stamford's wall paintings,
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