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## NEIGHBORHOODS

## Looking Up

Notable Progress Made In Revitalization Of Sigourney Square



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**T**he building at 87-89 Atwood St. was constructed in 1911 as a "perfect six," Hartford's signature apartment-building style, with two railroad-style flats on each of three floors. And, indeed, six families lived there for decades. But in recent years, it became a rooming house, more of a flop house, with, remarkably, 33 rooms.

Eventually it fell into complete disuse, was foreclosed on and looked like it would become another casualty of urban blight, maybe another parking lot.

But, no. Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance, founded in 2003 to revive the city's Asylum Hill neighborhood, and known by its acronym NINA, acquired the decaying structure at a tax lien sale. The NINA folks, with help from the city and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, are saving the facade and rebuilding the rest of the building as two side-by-side townhouses, a "perfect two," if you will.

The (remarkably spacious) Atwood Street building is one of a dozen that NINA either has renovated, or is in the process of doing so, in just the past four years. If this continues, an historic neighborhood that was in rough shape not long ago could flower again.

I speak of Sigourney Square, the northern quadrant of Asylum Hill, the area north of Asylum Avenue and east of St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center. The neighborhood was created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries around a city-block-sized square or park, a classic urban form that produced some of the world's most elegant neighborhoods.

And if not exactly Grosvenor Square, this is nonetheless a well-apportioned neighborhood of turreted late Victorians and boxy Queen Anne-style homes, with the occasional "perfect six" and just a few of the bland,



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**THE NORTHSIDE** Institutions Neighborhood Alliance is renovating this "perfect six" apartment building on Atwood Street in Hartford, re-using some of the bricks and facade of the original building.

1960s-era brick box apartment buildings that add so little to the look of other parts of Asylum Hill.

Despite all of the horrors visited upon Hartford in the postwar era, the buildings in Sigourney Square have held up, pretty much. Some were badly renovated or painted with no thought to color, but there hasn't been the mass destruction visited on some other neighborhoods. There are more than 150 houses there, making it one of the city's best concentrations of historical structures.

But it's still an inner-city neighborhood, afflicted by poverty and its attendant problems, and the last decades of the 20th century were not kind. A handful of houses were abandoned, some taken over by drug dealers. Sigourney Square Park became a hangout for drinking and drug-ging.

But over the past decade or so, some good things have begun to happen. The Boys & Girls Clubs,

churches and other organizations have had a positive impact. Community policing has taken hold.

Aetna, the Hartford, ING and Webster Bank joined with St. Francis to form NINA, which got right to work. The group financed its dozen buildings with historic tax credits and the city's innovative gap financing program championed by former housing director Bruno Mazzulla, plus the proceeds of sales. NINA's work has inspired improvements by private owners.

The area has one of the most attractive apartment buildings in the city, a four-story, 30-unit, blond-brick structure at the corner of Ashley and Sigourney streets with broad, multitiered porches that offer a view of the park. It has been a target for speculators and was boarded up five years ago. A new owner has almost completed a renovation.

I walked through the neighborhood one day last week with

Ken Johnson, executive director of NINA, and Laura Knott Twine, who holds the same position with the Hartford Preservation Alliance. The two groups are conducting a walking tour of the Sigourney Square Historic District on April 24 at 10 a.m. (see: info@hartfordpreservation.org).

One of their challenges is zoning, which dates to a time when the city had a housing shortage. These lovely old homes can be turned into rooming houses as a matter of right, and many were, Johnson said. Some, such as the building at 87-89 Atwood St., had way too many people. And as Johnson said, get one bad apple and the place gets trashed. He and others are working with city officials to change the zoning rules.

Nonetheless, there are some stunning century-old houses in the neighborhood. We walked past the former home of Thomas Honiss, owner of the famed down-

town seafood restaurant of yore, and the former residence of Yung Wing, the first Chinese to graduate from an American university. Johnson said his organization has just scratched the surface of historical research in the area. (If it's of any help, a hard-bitten newspaper columnist once lived at 54 Willard Street.)

The park itself looks better than it did two decades ago, but there is still some drinking from paper bags, still room for improvement. Interestingly, some of the homeowners have formed a public safety committee and want to make those improvements.

Let's find ways to keep the progress going (mortgage grants, as Yale does in New Haven?). If Sigourney Square were again a safe, middle-class, stylish neighborhood, Hartford will have made real progress.

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