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A historic home on the brink of destruction is rescued and restored to life.

BY CAROL LATTER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA BRISSON

“WHEN THE ROOF imploded on a frozen February day in 2009, it hardly seemed likely that 87-89 Atwood Street, a landmark 1911 Perfect Six structure located next to Saint Francis Hospital in Hartford’s Asylum Hill neighborhood, would ever witness its 100th birthday,” read a press release issued this fall by the Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (NINA).

“Yet thanks to the decisive action of the Development Services Department of the City of Hartford with the assistance of the State Historic Preservation Office and the Hartford Preservation Alliance, the building was saved and is now reborn as two elegant townhomes in the best urban tradition.”

However, it was NINA – an organization that has been saving homes and reinventing blocks and streetscapes on Asylum Hill since 2003 – that was the primary hero of that rescue mission. The upshot? A historic home in a historic neighborhood of Hartford is about to have a historic year.

As the calendar flips over to 2011, a building that nearly didn’t survive to see its 100th anniversary has come back from the literal brink of destruction to once again become a private dwelling. In October, it was one of four “architecturally significant” properties featured in an open house weekend designed to attract their newest owners. All were meticulously restored by NINA.

Ken Johnson, the association’s executive director, said 87-89 Atwood Street was built by a pair of Russian immigrants. Louis and Morris Schoolnik constructed the building in “the classic Hartford style of the Perfect Six” – an

offshoot of the Colonial Revival style that was very much in favor at that time. The building style took its name from the fact that the two units on each floor of the three-story structure perfectly mirrored each other.

A wave of these brick apartment houses, each with a double bow front, was built throughout Hartford beginning in the early 1900s. “In Frog Hollow, it was primarily factory worker housing; this would be middle to lower middle class housing,” said Johnson.

In Asylum Hill, however, Perfect Sixes had an added caché. “This was the premier residential neighborhood in Hartford between the Civil War and World War 1. It was a very stylish place to live. In fact, this was *the* place to live in Hartford.”

J.P. Morgan’s boyhood home was on Asylum Hill. Other well-known residents included governors and senators, including Senator James Dixon, whose political career nosedived after he became one of seven “radical Republicans” who did not support the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson.

“This was also the period of real industrial prominence for Hartford,” Johnson said. In addition to Colt revolvers, Royal



Ken Johnson and David Corrigan, NINA's program manager, review plans for the project.

typewriters and Pope bicycles, "Hartford factories were churning out automobiles. In 1899, half of the automobiles sold in America were being produced in Hartford. The city's population was exploding, so folks like the Schoolniks were

Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance has been revitalizing Asylum Hill since 2003. Originally formed by six major Hartford institutions to improve the neighborhood, the nonprofit community development association engages residents, addresses quality of life issues and develops home ownership opportunities to make Asylum Hill a desirable place to live, work and play.

NINA's current member institutions are Aetna, The Hartford Financial Services Group, ING, Saint Francis Hospital, and Webster Bank.

NINA's project homes were restored with financial support from the City of Hartford, CL&P, and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. Construction financing was provided by the Connecticut Housing Investment Fund (CHIF) and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).

putting up these six-unit apartment buildings all over the city."

Constructed of yellow brick with decorative banding running up the sides, precast lintels over the windows and an ornamental front porch, 87-89 Atwood Street "represented the second generation of Perfect Sixes, and was more stylish than most."

For decades, it was operated as a Perfect Six, but ran into problems when it was converted into a 33-unit rooming house in the late 1970s. In fact, said Johnson, "it was kind of notorious. It became known as the Trumbull Hotel, and it had prostitution and drug dealing. It was a real source of problems for the area. It was finally shut down by the city in 1997 and declared unfit for human occupancy."

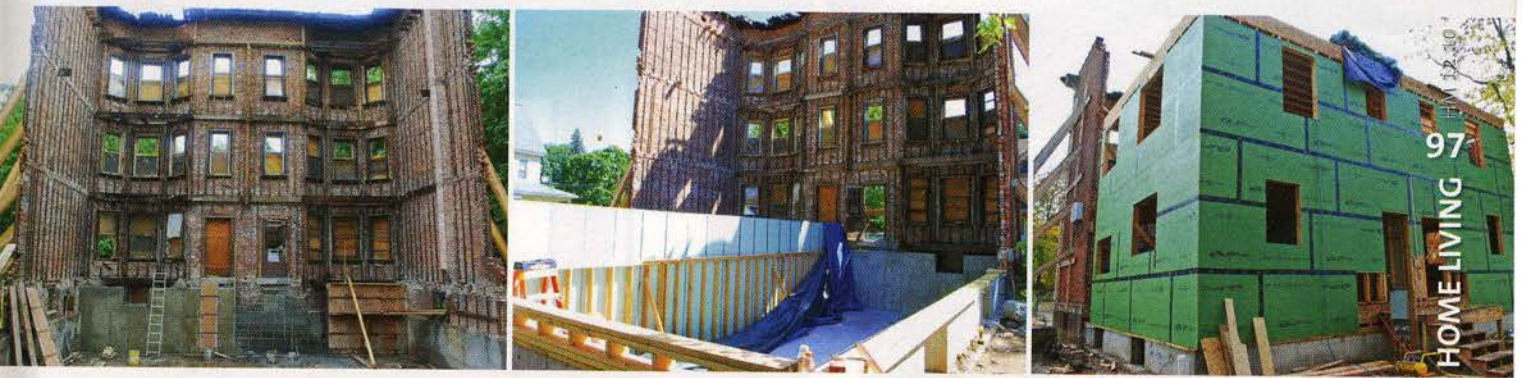
But despite the fact that it was boarded up and remained unoccupied for years, residents and visitors to the neighborhood "could see the potential of the building. Its historic facade was still apparent."

When the owner lost the property to the bank in 1997, it was

transferred to a holding company whose address was listed only as a post office box. NINA began to investigate its ownership in the hope of purchasing the structure and restoring it to its former beauty, but foreclosure attempts proved far from simple. Years went by, and the unpaid taxes piled up as the process dragged on.

The building became part of NINA's larger strategy for the street, the block and the neighborhood. "We've been working to create new homeownership possibilities on Asylum Hill," Johnson explained. "We've also been working on several other properties in the neighborhood, so this [the Atwood Street building] was a way of building on the momentum we'd already started. Our approach is to concentrate on a specific area to build the impact. One building is great, but when you see five done in the immediate area, it starts to change your perception of the block and turns things around."

Eventually, NINA was able to acquire the property by purchasing



The Atwood Street house was demolished except for the historic facade, then carefully rebuilt.

and foreclosing on city tax liens. "But in the intervening years, from 1997 until we were able to complete the foreclosure process, holes had formed in the roof, and water had been getting in for 10 or more years, affecting the structural integrity of the building."

In February 2009, "the roof literally collapsed," Johnson recalled. "The chief building official said it was a public safety issue and we'd have to take it down. That's when the city and NINA collaborated on a plan: to retain the façade,

demolish [the rest], and build new behind that façade to create a building that fits very nicely with the historic neighborhood."

The reclamation project began in winter of 2009. Once demolition was complete, only the front façade remained, with big wooden buttresses holding it upright.

"It turned out to be a giant recycling project, because we kept the bricks that were taken down from the rest of the building and used them [to rebuild] the two sides. So from the street, it looks like it's

always looked for the last 99 years."

It took about a year to reconstruct the building, which is now set up as two side-by-side, three-story townhomes, each with three bedrooms and 2.5 baths. At press time, each 2,145-square-foot unit was for sale for \$199,000.

While the outside of the house looks almost exactly as it did 100 years ago, the inside is stunningly different. "What makes it really interesting is that you come through the front door and enter a two-story atrium that has seven windows

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streaming light into the space, and a balcony overlook. So it's a pretty spectacular effect. For the atrium, we basically carved out a portion of what would have been the second floor to create this great living room."

The balance of the main floor includes a central dining room and an adjacent kitchen. Behind that is a half bath "and plenty of closet space."

The second floor – only half the size of the first and third floors, includes a master bedroom suite and a study overlooking the great living room from the balcony. "Both sides have this set-up," said Johnson. "We've reconfigured the Perfect Six into the Perfect Two."

On the third floor are two more bedrooms and a full bath. "The nicest bedroom is the one with the bow front – you have a view of downtown after the leaves fall." A skylight in the roof admits additional light into the third floor and stairwell.

Throughout the house, attention was paid to recreating original details. "The trim is all as it might have been – we had some samples

of the original," Johnson said. "And for the backsplash in the kitchen, we used subway tile, which was in vogue during that period."

He added, "We've been very fussy about colors, particularly on the exteriors, on our restored homes. We take a lot of pains to put back the original style of trim and use historical colors." On the Perfect Six, "It's very British. Soft vanilla colors and black doors, which are classic in the British style of architecture. Think 10 Downing Street."

NINA's commitment to recreating the home went far beyond details and appearances, however. The association worked with ServCorps – an Asylum Hill organization that provides volunteer opportunities for skilled craftsmen to rebuild communities. "They started going down to Mississippi to help out after Hurricane Katrina a few years back. Afterwards, we said, 'How would you like to work on something closer to home?' They have been involved in the last five homes we have been working on. These are retired gentlemen who have been working

with their hands for decades," said Johnson. "We had one volunteer in his 80s making old doors and windows work again [in another of our houses,] and they were our primary carpenters for this project."

NINA also brought in young people from YouthBuild, a Co-Opportunity project targeting young people who have dropped out of high school but want to get back on track. Through YouthBuild, they are paid a stipend, gain work experience and earn a high school equivalency diploma. "They learn lessons about getting to work on time, and learn basic construction skills. It turns kids back in the right direction." On Asylum Hill, YouthBuild students have done everything from scraping mortar off of recycled brick to putting up drywall.

The Perfect Six is the third structure that NINA has restored on Atwood Street; it has also done two nearby two-family homes on Sergeant Street. These improvement projects, Johnson said, have transformed Asylum

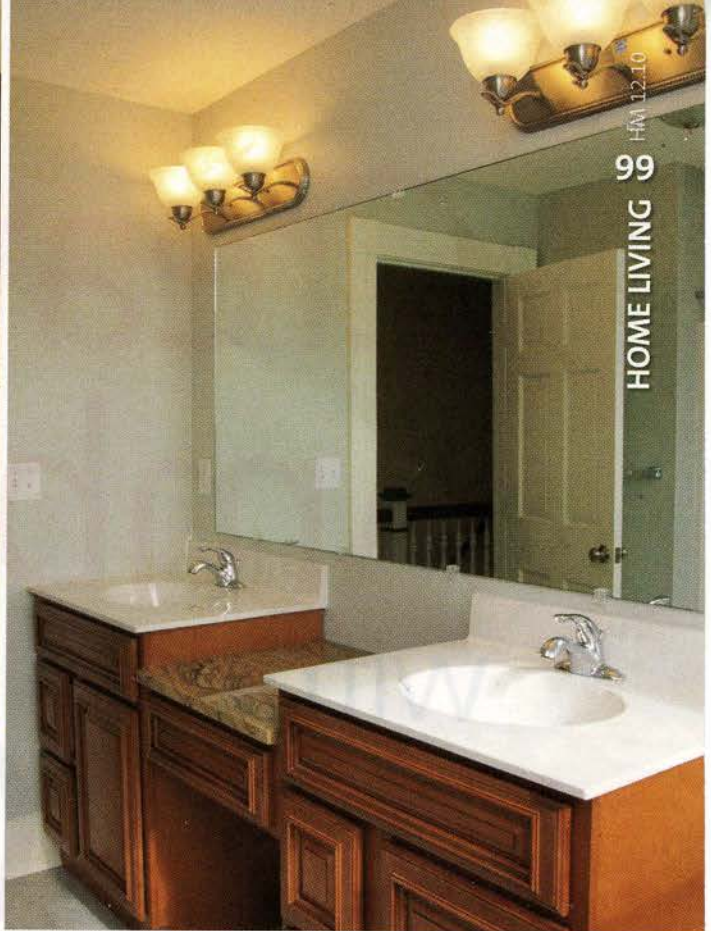


Far left: The rebuilt building features many period details.

Left: A two-story atrium living room was created in each townhouse by knocking out a portion of the second story floor and adding a balcony overlook.

Above: The kitchen features a backsplash of subway tile, popular in the era when the original Perfect Six was built.

Right: The bathroom offers modern conveniences, like double vanities.



Hill in a number of ways. “We can demonstrate by a change in real estate values here,” he said. “By doing it in a clustered approach, you not only turn around those buildings but improve the neighborhood.”

NINA’s work on Asylum Hill began in 2004, when the alliance targeted Ashley Street, installing ornamental streetlights, brick pavers and new sidewalks in front of existing homes in an effort to begin cleaning up the neighborhood. “On pieces of slate in front of the homes, we etched in the date the building was built, the original owner, what they did for a living and the style of the house.” NINA also provided paint for owners who wanted to paint their houses.

Its first signature project was a Queen Anne Victorian located on Sigourney Street, across from Aetna. The insurance company, which owned the property, “needed more parking and was going to tear it down. We were working on Ashley Street and there was one

vacant lot,” Johnson recalls. “We said to Aetna, ‘Instead of tearing it down, why don’t we just move it over to Ashley Street?’ So Aetna gave NINA the money to move the building. That was the centerpiece for the half-dozen homes we renovated in that area.”

At the time, he said, “the street was notorious for prostitution. That is essentially gone, thanks to all the work that has been done; it’s no longer an area that they frequent. We’ve been reclaiming the neighborhood, block by block.”

He said NINA is working hard to achieve the original mission of the community revitalization organization, set up as a way of breathing new life into an area that had slipped far from its original status as a desirable residential neighborhood. And it plans to continue to work with its member organizations, the city, historical and government agencies, and owners, in an effort to do so. “We’re building on work that’s already going on in the area and changing perceptions about this part of the city.”

He said many people who tour the properties are surprised by how spacious and affordable they are, noting that the restorations added plenty of modern conveniences, including Energy Star certification, while preserving interesting architectural details.

In addition to being beautiful in their own right, the homes are conveniently located within walking distance of work, restaurants, theaters, nightclubs and parks. *This Old House* magazine called the neighborhood “one of the best places in the U.S. to buy an historic house... home to a diverse mix of singles and couples, many of them first-time buyers, as well as empty-nesters looking for an urban lifestyle.”

Johnson added, “The buyers of the homes we’ve restored are a diverse group that includes architects, theater people, librarians, educators, videographers, social workers and employees of our corporate partners. They love the energy of an urban neighborhood and the sense of community here on Asylum Hill.”