

# Asylum Hill's Resurgence

**H**ere's a man-bites-dog news flash: There was a camera crew in Asylum Hill the other day and it wasn't filming a crime scene. Instead, the crew from Home & Garden Television was shooting a historic home called The Victorian Lady for its "Restore America" program.



TOM CONDON

The Lady is the house that was going to be demolished for a parking lot on Sigourney Street, but was saved in 2004 and moved to an empty lot on Ashley Street. It looks fabulous, and has become part of an effort to restore and rebuild the historic Asylum Hill neighborhood.

A group headed by the Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance is restoring six 19th-century homes on Sargeant, Garden and Ashley streets. The hope is to sell these and push out to neighboring streets, strengthening the neighborhood with new homeowners.

This presents a certain sense of déjà vu. A bunch of us moved to the Hill in the 1970s—I lived on Willard Street—in the hope of finding great urban living in cool, historic buildings. For a time, it worked. It was great. But when the neighborhood stopped getting

better, crime increased and it slowly began to slide.

The trick this time will be to avoid the same mistakes. I walked the neighborhood the other day with Ken Johnson, executive director of the alliance. I'm optimistic.

Johnson's office is in Veeder Place, the former Veeder-Root factory. We walked down to Garden Street, where a fellow named Lawrence Faust was painting his house. Faust, a Hartford firefighter, bought the house for \$1 from the city in 1997 and has extensively renovated it. Now he's doing a dazzling five-color paint job. He and his wife raised two daughters there; one just graduated from Penn and the other is at North Carolina A&T.

The two houses next to Faust's are being rehabbed, one by the Corporation for Independent Living and the other by the Northside Institutions-led group, which includes Broad-Park Development and Mercy Housing. These were blighted. Johnson wonders if starting at this mess was a factor in Mass Mutual—just up the hill—deciding to leave the neighborhood. If it was, the view will be much better in about six months.

The Ashley Cafe, a seriously undistinguished gin mill, is still there, but with some middle-class homeowners coming to the neighborhood, one can hope for improvement.

The houses the neighborhood alliance is renovating on Ashley Street are remarkable. The 1870 Italianate building at 18 Ashley St. will offer 2,867 square feet, three bedrooms, 2½ baths, a big kitchen, a sunken living room with a

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10-foot ceiling and a large first-floor den.

The Victorian Lady across the street is equally spectacular. It's further along, and has a buyer. Dulcie Giadone, a neighborhood activist in the South End, and her husband, Valerio, an architect, are buying it and will do the extensive interior renovations themselves. "It's gorgeous," said Dulcie, who works as an aide to city Councilman James Boucher.

Fixing the properties on the east end of Ashley Street made sense because the rest of the street is in good shape; an intact set of mostly Queen Anne-style homes from the late 1800s. The street managed to avoid the scourge of drab brick boxes that infested much of Asylum Hill in the early postwar years. Perhaps because the houses are so nice, many owners have been there for a long time. The street is also quite clean—Gloria Robidas, known as the Angel of Ashley Street, comes out twice a week and picks up the litter.

The key is to keep moving ahead. Former city Councilman Mike McGarry lived on Ashley Street in the 1970s and '80s. He wrote an outstanding Northeast Magazine article about it titled "Seduced and Abandoned." He said the city lured middle-class homebuyers to Asylum

Hill, then stopped paying attention to their needs. The neighborhood became overloaded with social service agencies and absentee landlords, and lost its momentum.

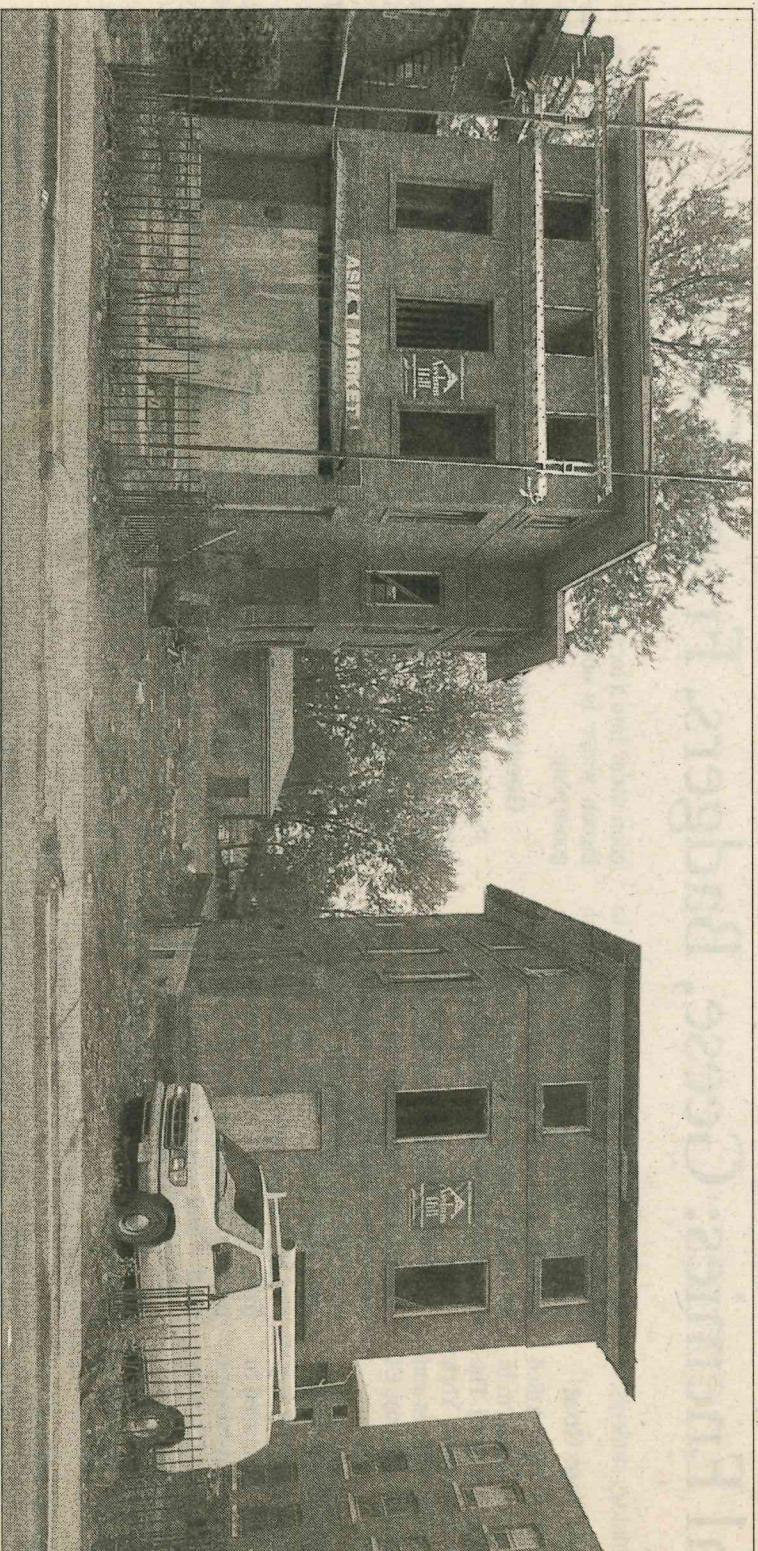
Thus far, the Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance and the city aren't making the same mistakes. The focus is on homeownership, and inquiries are coming from the suburbs as well as the city. The Victorian Lady is on a lot that used to have a seedy,

drug-infested apartment building. Johnson is paying attention to the details; more street trees, decorative lighting. What it looks like on the outside creates the impression and reputation for the neighborhood. He's also paying attention to security, as he must.

The advantages to city living are great spaces, interesting people and proximity—from Ashley Street, it's a short walk to downtown, The Hartford, Aetna and St. Francis. The downside of being in Asylum Hill is crime. Though the numbers are coming down, there's still too much crime in the neighborhood.

The Ashley Street renovation follows the premise of the mayor's Pride Block program: it builds from strength. It's protected on three sides by railroad tracks and corporate buildings. If Johnson can get the neighborhood and the police to work together—which they are starting to do—it has a chance to be a great urban neighborhood.

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THE RUNDOWN BUILDINGS at 8 and 18 Ashley St. are being renovated into single-family homes as the Asylum Hill neighborhood bounces back.



# PLACE

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PHOTOS BY SHANA SURECK / THE HARTFORD COURANT

**THE VICTORIAN LADY**, saved last year from demolition on Sigourney Street, was moved to 21 Ashley St., replacing a dilapidated apartment house.