



Twice as Nice

A marriage of convenience on the Quinnipiac

By DUO DICKINSON

Newly opened up space slides into a new extension to the backyard (top) – light and wood, color and books dance with several levels to create a top-lit flow that ultimately connects with the newly civilized backyard.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DECARLO

ATHOME



Paved terraces, carefully detailed steps and accommodation of plantings extends the opened up interior of the renovated home into a sloped hillside.

Below: Len Suzio's original house, renovated in 1989, is seen at left. The Mallory House can be seen to the right. Both have first floors set up from street level and look across Front Street to the Quinnipiac River. A new entry is recessed between the two renovated houses.

When the first bridge was built spanning the Quinnipiac River in 1791, the little community of Dragon sprung up at its eastern terminus. That initial span has long since been replaced by the Grand Avenue Bridge, but the little settlement grew rapidly and in 1824 changed its name to Fair Haven. In 1870 the community was incorporated into the city of New Haven.

While New Haven has a palpable urban affect, Fair Haven has a distinct feeling — more like a seafaring coastal town than a mid-sized southern New England city. This unique in-town ambiance is most discernable in Fair Haven's historic district, where the 18th- and 19th-century homes along the Quinnipiac River remain largely unchanged in appearance. The fortunes of Fair Haven have risen and fallen with the ebbs and flows of the economy, but the undeniable appeal of its coastal New England ambiance just minutes from downtown New Haven has endured.

Sometimes it takes visionary people to see the promise in situations that are not picture-perfect. Len Suzio is just such a visionary. Besides his forward-thinking contributions to many Elm City civic organizations, he has put his house where his heart is — in Fair Haven.



In the 1980s Suzio purchased a classic Greek Revival house — the Edward Mallory House, built some time around 1830 — and spent a full year, 1989, restoring it. Deciding to invest money in renovating a home during a period of national economic anxiety was a gutsy

move. And Fair Haven suffered greatly as many new homeowners who had leapt at the chance to gentrify an undervalued part of a wonderful little New England city in the early and mid-1980s found their property values crashing to the point where many could no longer afford to live there.

But Len Suzio realized that riverfront residential property near an eclectic city like New Haven is not something that has an open ended supply and so when the house next door (including a fairly large lot behind it) became available in 2004, Suzio bought it.

That house had sat abandoned for three years, and Suzio realized that he needed to reach out to a design professional who could see the potential in both a marriage of convenience and opportunity between the two adjacent structures. He found architect Matthew Breisch, who had likewise seen the virtues of Fair Haven, having moved there after graduating from Yale. Both architect and homeowner saw this duet as an extraordinary opportunity to make a fully



Respecting original window locations, a bedroom had its ceiling removed, and bathroom fixtures carefully located to create a lively place of personal hygiene.



From the outside, the two homes' masses complement each other. The 18th century former shucking house presents the classic Federal/gable face to the river view. By contrast, the original Mallory House as renovated by Suzio is a classic Italianate structure not unlike a number of Wooster Square houses featuring elevated full covered porches almost a full story above the streetscape. The result is a wonderful ensemble that leaves the original character of each house intact, but the new work is filled with light and air and color as well as endless quantities of built-ins.

Not only did Breisch bring an exceptional insight to the history of this incorporated extension to the Mallory House, but he also brought along a sensibility that is now facetiously ascribed to the word "green." "Green"'s kissing cousin — "sustainability" — has become nearly a religion, whose core tenet is conceptual energy efficiency measured by a rating point system called LEED certification, complemented by an ethic of low site impact and low energy expenditure in building and occupying any structure the LEED system grades. Even though Breisch incorporated some fairly high-tech green methods such as incorporating closed-cell insulation and



Finally — a 'real' kitchen for someone who loves to cook. Homeowner Suzio at long last achieved a fully optioned kitchen in his newly expanded home.

creating an extremely airtight envelope (which necessitated subtle active and passive ventilation features), radiant floor heat and even a grass roof over the new entry piece, the greenest principle he and Suzio both adhered to was the core testament that the "greenest building is the one that already exists." When all the "embodied energy" of any given building is simply discarded like a candy wrapper, not only are landfills

fed yet more engorging waste, the effort and resources it took to erect the original building must be re-spent when a new structure is built to replace its predecessor. The irony here is that the very essence of what makes many of the coastal towns around New Haven so special is that they reflect that distinctive Yankee spirit imbued by settlers who made their living so close to the inhospitable coastal climate — often on the wrong side of the



The new truss over the bed allowed for the removal of the former low ceiling, and new windows with an expressive transom make a simple plan extremely dynamic in its fully realized space.

tracks. For these creators of places like Fair Haven, "green" was not a politically correct choice — it was the only way they could survive in a harsh climate and hand-to-mouth economic model. In previous centuries, the poorest people lived near the water. It was a place where there was the most risk and the ongoing impact of transient populations who were drawn to the mills and factories that needed to be set close to water (for power) rendered much of coastal Connecticut a less desirable place for homes compared to more inland residential communities until the 20th century. The Swamp Yankees who created communities like Fair Haven never threw anything away that might be reused, and never built something that was beyond their need or ability to pay for. In that way it could be said that the Swamp Yankee

is the very model of the New Age green sustainability crusader. Len Suzio's domestic dyad celebrates history while simultaneously venerating the essence of New England's coastal living in the brave new world of sustainable design. The hardest path for any homeowner or architect is to see the best potential elements within an existing environment, enhance those, and at the same time fully live up to a more modern sensibility of connectedness to the landscape, environmental sustainability — and in Len Suzio's case celebrating the creation of a "real kitchen." Seldom if ever do architect, homeowner the surrounding community mesh as well as they have in this project — and the results are proudly present in a reviving Fair Haven. ❖