

April 3, 2005

LIVING IN

An Infusion of Energy in Yale's Backyard

By **ELEANOR CHARLES**

DOWNTOWN New Haven has been transformed over the last five years from Yale's mundane backyard into a vibrant neighborhood of shops, theaters and restaurants. In 1999, Mayor John DeStefano Jr. decided to take a chance on energizing the city's stagnant economy by capitalizing on its theaters, symphony orchestras, art galleries, ballet company, museums and the presence and participation of the university. But it needed new, attractive housing and an infusion of businesses and shops.

With \$30 million in seed money from the state, the city began restoring housing stock. Developers took notice and largely financed the more than 1,300 apartments and condominiums built downtown to date. Some are new construction, and many are reconfigured from office and industrial buildings, resulting in a preponderance of rental units. Condo conversions are beginning to take place. Yale has spawned 40 biotechnology firms and invested \$100 million in upgrading retail and commercial properties adjacent to its campus. Entrepreneurs were encouraged to do the rest.

Today, a population of more than 5,000 inhabits the roughly 50 square blocks of downtown New Haven (excluding Yale students and including the four-square-block New Haven Green). With median two-bedroom condo prices at around \$280,000 and median two-bedroom rents at \$995, the current catchphrase is, "If you can't afford New York, come to New Haven."

But the newest and best condos and apartments start in the high \$300,000 range, rents start at \$1,200, and prices are being pushed higher by a vacancy rate under 5 percent and by multiple bids.

Weekend foot traffic is heavy on Temple, Crown, Chapel, and College Streets, with shoppers, diners, theatergoers and museumgoers. It is possible to dine out downtown for 123 evenings without a repeat visit at restaurants catering to the tastes of a polyglot population.

Lauren Fikslim, an account executive for Clear Channel Radio, took a one-bedroom apartment at 65 Dwight Street last June after graduating from Quinnipiac University. "I love it," she said. "There are lots of Yale grads here. It's such a friendly community; it's a Melrose Place. The building is like a small campus, with gardens and places to sit." She pays \$950 a month for 650 square feet.

Nelly Odenwaelder, a senior vice president at H. Pearce Real Estate, said Ms. Fikslim is typical of the influx of young singles, but she noted: "We're seeing foreign populations growing by leaps and bounds. It's partly because of Yale - we have so many people from all parts of the world either attending the university or working for it. We're also seeing more professionals looking to live closer to where they work and socialize, and there's a good proportion of older people moving in."

Hank and Sharon Putsch (pronounced like Dutch) recently sold their house on the river in Old Saybrook. "It was beautiful but kind of boring," Mrs. Putsch said. "We really need the energy of the city." They are both artists and arts administrators "in our 60's and 70's," she said. "We couldn't afford New York so we came to New Haven." They bought a two-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath town house at Audubon Court on Audubon Street for \$290,000, "reduced from \$350,000 because it had been occupied previously by two Yale football players," she said.

Other attractions on Audubon Street are the Educational Center for the Arts, the Creative Arts Workshop, the New Haven Symphony Orchestra headquarters, the Arts Council of Greater New Haven, the New Haven Ballet and the Neighborhood Music School. The New Haven Symphony Orchestra and a star-studded roster of musicians from opera, the concert stage and jazz appear regularly at Yale's Woolsey Hall and Sprague Hall.

Independent of Yale, the Shubert Theater, where Irving Berlin and Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals of the 40's and 50's had their tryouts, now houses Broadway shows on tour. Foreign and independent films are shown at the York Square Cinema, and the new five-screen Criterion shows first-run movies. There are 10 bookstores to browse, 31 nonchain clothing stores and 14 grocers and specialty food stores. No one seems to miss a supermarket.

Gateway Community College will be moving downtown from Sargent Drive and North Haven, occupying two blocks on Church Street where Malley's department store once stood and where a Macy's store is slated for demolition. The Long Wharf regional theater will also be moving from Sargent Drive off Interstate 95 to Orange Street, close to the restaurant district. Completion of the two projects will take about five years.

Some 19th and early 20th century homes are being privately restored, reviving charming old mini-neighborhoods. Dr. Linda Jarvin, a research psychologist at Yale, and her husband, Marco Lubrano, both in their early 30's, lived in New Haven in 1998. "I hated it," she said. "It was different from what I was used to. There was nothing to do. We moved to New York although I was still working at Yale, but New Haven really started to change, and I realized that my quality of life would be so much better if I lived here."

Last summer they bought a four-story brownstone row house on Court Street for \$340,000, and spent \$100,000 more on renovations.

"New single-family houses are not being built and those that are left are hard to come by," said Vincent Engingro, owner-broker at Coldwell Banker. "Many of them have become two- and three-family Victorians and colonials that used to sell based on the rental income. Now buyers are paying over the asking price with multiple bids."

Mr. Engingro is marketing new 1,400-square-foot lofts in former industrial buildings with huge windows, open floor plans, hardwood floors and one or two bathrooms, renting for \$1,400 to \$1,600 a month.

A studio is available for \$1,245 at the Eli, an elegant conversion of the former Southern New England Telephone Building on Church Street, where one-bedroom apartments are \$1,495 and \$1,600, and three-bedrooms are \$3,320. Every apartment has cherry cabinets, 10-foot ceilings, cast-iron bathtubs and a washer and dryer. Other apartments at the Liberty on Temple Street rent for \$855 to \$1,265, and the Residence on the Green charges \$1,000 to \$1,750.

While downtown attracts singles and couples, there are also families with children who can choose Timothy Dwight School, a downtown neighborhood school for kindergarten to Grade 4, or one of the magnet schools. Three are downtown. Of the city's 49 public schools; 20 are magnet elementary, middle or high schools, where students enroll according to their special interests, aptitudes and ability to learn. Thirty percent of the city's 21,000 children attend magnet schools along with 1,200 students from 24 other towns, resulting in lots of busing.

Each magnet school features a particular discipline or educational philosophy, combining intensive study in the area of choice - such as technology or leadership - combined with a core curriculum. For all 12 high schools in the city, SAT scores of 415 verbal and 402 math are about 100 points below Connecticut and national scores, partly because of the 50 languages spoken.

The full-time Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School has a college preparatory academic program and advanced placement combined with a full array of performing, literary and visual arts. All magnet schools operate in partnership with Yale, Southern Connecticut State University, other colleges in the area, various arts organizations, hospitals, banks, theaters or other sources of hands-on learning.

A number of architects, including Cesar Pelli, are involved in the city's \$1.2 billion construction and renovation program for all public schools. Mr. Pelli was dean of the Yale School of Architecture from 1977 to 1985, and continues to keep offices of on the second floor of 1056 Chapel Street in downtown New Haven.

He is designing a new Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School, a magnet school, to be relocated from Orange Street to College Street downtown. He is better known for the Petronas Towers in Malaysia, Canary Wharf in London and the World Financial Center in Manhattan.