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GUILFORD PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

Newsletter

Summer 2006

TOWN CENTER SOUTH ~ *A voyage of discovery*

As they say in Hollywood, concept is everything, and judging from the response to the Town Center South Committee's June 7 public forum on the future of the village proper, transport-oriented redevelopment – most emphatically around the new train station – is a concept whose time has come.

The idea of focusing town planning and zoning on the neighborhood between the West and East Rivers and from the Town Green to the Town Dock goes back at least to 1999 (and probably much earlier). At that time, at the request of the Guilford Preservation Alliance and in anticipation of the impending construction of a new commuter train station by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConDOT), the New Haven firm of architects Gray Organschi developed an alternative design for Guilford's new depot.

The Gray Organschi design envisioned incorporating the historic structures left over from the age of steam locomotion, when Guilford had a Victorian passenger waiting room, a formidable brick locomotive repair shop and an elegant octagonal water tower, also of brick, to replenish the source of thirsty locomotives' power.

Several important ideas that informed the Gray Organschi design were presented by Alan Organschi at the GPA's annual meeting in May 2002. As the firm reported in a handout to the public, these ideas included: "the desire to knit the infrastructure of public transportation into the fabric of the town and reintegrate its regular use into the lives of Guilford residents; the attempt to reuse, whenever possible, existing building stock and abandoned brownfields as sites for development; [and] the commitment to employ sustainable construction techniques and renewable materials, i.e. building systems that reduce energy use and minimize the exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of natural habitats."

Unfortunately, this best laid plan collapsed through no fault of its own in the wee hours of February 23, 2003, when AMTRAK, unannounced, demolished the 125-year old waiting room/depot to make way for a construction shed to use in erecting ConDOT's proposed up-and-over railroad station.

The Gray Organschi concept appeared to be finished, but the underlying ideas presented at the GPA annual meeting had evidently acquired a life of their own, and the GPA Board rededicated itself to focusing preservation efforts on the Town Center South area.



TRANSPORT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT ENVISIONS COMBINING THE OLD AND THE NEW. THE VIEW FROM GUILFORD'S UP-AND-OVER TRAIN STATION.

Meanwhile, in January 2003, under concerted urging from the GPA and like-minded groups, the Town agreed at a town meeting to buy the 9.5-acre Rollwood Farm on Stonehouse Lane opposite the historic Whitfield Museum to save it from subdivision and unplanned development. This victory breathed new life into the transit-oriented concept proposed by Gray Organschi and the GPA Board shortly voted to expend \$10,000 from its recently-received \$60,000 Marjorie Schmitt Memorial Fund to hire the Yale Urban Design Workshop (YUDW) and its founding director, Alan Plattus, to conduct a three-part public charrette – or brain-storming session – as the centerpiece of its next annual meeting, in May 2004.

Preston Maynard had recently succeeded Debbie Tobin as board president and he shortly renewed the GPA's campaign to secure the historic train station buildings—the two that remained, that is – for adaptive reuse. Negotiations were resumed with AMTRAK and a further \$10,000, this time from general funds, was committed from a projected Capital Fund campaign, was committed to stabilizing the historic water tower as soon as title or a long-term lease could be obtained.

A vision of a scenic, historic, pedestrian-friendly, mostly green transit hub was just coming into view when, in August 2003, the *New Haven Register* published details of ConDOT's proposed design for a new commuter parking lot on the north side of the tracks. First Selectman Carl Balestracci had shepherded the purchase of the Rollwood Farm through a minefield of opposition on the understanding that part of the property would be offered to ConDOT for station parking, as required by the terms of the Town's agreement with ConDOT for a new up-and-over train station.

continued on page 2

GPA RECEIVES \$25,000 GRANT FROM HISTORIC PRESERVATION TRUST

The Guilford Preservation Alliance is pleased to announce the award of a \$25,000 technical assistance grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. The grant is the first in the Trust's new Preservation Advancement Program. The award, which will be matched by the Alliance for other purposes, is for salary funding for a part-time Executive Director for the GPA. The new administrator will focus on assisting the GPA Board on specific projects, like the historic railroad station depot and historic-survey up-date, as well as with organizational growth, capacity building and membership development. We would like to express our gratitude to the Connecticut Trust for providing us the opportunity to take this step forward.

GPA annual meeting celebrates success

Deferring to the Town Center South Committee, whose long-awaited report was scheduled for presentation at a public forum on June 7, the GPA Board, with its annual meeting scheduled for June 6, shelved plans for another brain-storming charrette in favor of an invitation-only evening of street culture on Fair Street followed by al fresco refreshments and dessert in a cloistered Broad Street garden.

The peripatetic early going was hosted by various Board members stationed at both ends of Fair Street and bearing photocopied facsimiles of the relevant pages of Sarah McCulloch's modern classic, *Guilford: A Walking Guide*. Meanwhile, residents of the street, many of them GPA members, perched on doorsteps or verandahs greeting passersby and answering questions about the provenance and architectural characteristics of their homes. It was a lovely early-summer evening replete

with mosquitoes, and guests from outlying parts of town enjoyed a rare opportunity to stop and mingle on actual sidewalks.

Patrick Smith, who wears GPA hats as both chair of the Capital Fund-Raising Campaign Committee and co-chair of the Traffic-Calming Subcommittee of the Village Center Committee, provided – through the good offices of his wife, Susanna – the setting for the concluding gala. There, business was kept to a minimum while all of the participants rather exulted in what appeared to be a very successful year.

Ellen Ebert, chair of the Nominating Committee, had previously announced election of the following new members of the Board: Judy Fisher, Beth Conerly, Ted Culotta and Howard Brown. GPA officers will stay the same, except that Penny Colby will replace John Cox as a vice president. – J.C.





WARNING to resident preservationists

When Fred and Sandy first bought the house, they discovered that because of broken cellar windows beneath their kitchen (an addition to the house and not historically significant), had collected various forms of wildlife. On arriving home from their day jobs they donned their "rat clothes" (sweatsuits, socks, shoes, gloves, head coverings and respirators) and got to work. That work involved not only the restoration of their house, but the removal of bodies. Because of those wide-open windows, much of Guilford's rat population once found security and a safe home at the Kingsnorth-Starr house. The Flatows are now not just expert restorers (Sandy says Fred is the carpenter, she does the heavy labor), but also experts at vermin control. Sandy doesn't count the snake she once found on her bed as vermin, just a stray houseguest needing a nap. Except for the occasional mouse, the Flatows have won the battle. — P. C.

LIFE IN THE KINGSNORTH-STARR HOUSE ~ A TALE OF TWO PRESERVATIONISTS ~

The Kingsnorth-Starr house at 138 State Street may have been built between 1640 and 1649 by Henry Kingsnorth, who originally owned the lot. On the other hand, it could have been built about 1695 by Comfort Starr, who bought the property from Kingsnorth heirs in 1694. Some restoration experts believe the earlier date more likely. Professor Abbott Cummings, an authority on American art and architecture at Yale, is persuaded the later date is the correct one. But living in such an old house, whether built in 1640 or 1695, with conservation easements written into the deed, is a challenge that Fred and Sandra Flatow confront with mixed feelings every day.

In 1988 the Guilford Preservation Alliance established a trust fund in order to purchase the Kingsnorth-Starr house, because that historically important building was for sale in a zoned-commercial district and the Alliance feared for its future. The GPA then sold the building with the deed restrictions to run in perpetuity. Accordingly, the house must remain a private, single-family dwelling and be properly maintained and the view of it from the street (photo 1) may not be changed, nor the historic features inside.

Those features include two original cupboards in the keeping room (one with original butterfly hinges), the original paint and carving on the summer beams and mantle, dentil molding in the south chamber on the second floor and two Guilford cupboards (photo 2). Each of the rooms, even including those in a 1720 addition, has at least one



1

feature that must be preserved. The couple who bought the house from the Alliance genuinely cared about historic buildings but, in order to reveal the construction of the house, removed ceilings from the first and second floors so that the roof beams were visible from the keeping room. Those ceilings have since been inconspicuously reinstated by the Flatows, who bought the house in 1991 and have beautifully restored it.

Each corner post in the old rooms is a gunstock post, so named because it replicates the shape of a gunstock, and no two are alike. Posts and beams can be hard to see, as are some other notable features, because the house is dark. That characteristic is the hardest to live with, Sandy says, and, of course, one cannot rewire a 17th-century house the way one can a 20th-century house, but the Flatows have done some very clever hiding of wires.

Fortunately, the generations of residents who followed the Starrs treated the house with respect, and although renovations were made, they were usually done by covering up and not destroying or replacing. The original floorboards from



2

the 17th century for the most part remain. The widest boards are in the dining room, once the north (and best) parlor, and are painted red – not the original paint but probably the original color. Some boards in the keeping room were unusable and were replaced with boards salvaged from other old buildings.

In a second-floor room, the decoration of a plaster wall (photo 3, with gunstock post), in this case incised intersecting diagonal lines with single, sometimes vertical, sometimes horizontal marks in the resulting diamonds, was discovered and layers of plaster were removed to display it. A sample of the same antique decorative plastering, called pargeting, also survives in the dining room and it may be that more remains hidden under undecorated plaster. The very oldest plaster is made of mud, straw and oyster shells, and in the aforementioned second-floor room a sample has been preserved. (The rest of the pargeting has been painted over in the same color to protect it from soiling or crumbling when touched.) The Flatows have considered removing the plaster in the dining room to see what lies underneath, but as Sandy protested, "Do you know what living in a house where plaster is being removed is like?" The Flatows will think twice before starting further plaster removal.



3

The house has four massive fireplaces. The present living room, once the room in which the cooking and most of the living were done, has a beehive oven and a wood-storage box. The long

keeping room at the back (photo 4), which replaced the earlier kitchen, has the largest fireplace, also with a beehive oven, and now displays a wonderful collection of early cooking utensils. Oddly, there is no fireplace in the north bedroom, nor is there evidence that there ever was one in that chamber.

A photograph from the 1940s, when clapboards were being replaced, shows the original daub and wattle walls and traces of the earliest leaded-glass window casements, presumably with diamond-shaped panes. During remodeling in the early-18th century those windows were replaced with "modern" eight-over-twelve and eight-over-eight sash windows. At a very early date the north parlor might have boasted diamond-paned windows and diamond pargeting on the walls to match.

One general problem with old houses is a lack of closets, and this ancient dwelling had only two tiny ones. The Flatows have constructed a large walk-in closet in the attic, entirely free-standing and with special supports so it is completely independent of the fabric of the house itself. The door (photo 5), on the second floor at the top of the front hall stairs, has a wooden Guilford latch and hangs on original hinges with leather washers. One marvels at the dedication of both present inhabitants when one considers that he or she must race up two flights of narrow, steep stairs to retrieve a forgotten jacket or scarf. This may be one reason those inhabitants are so slim. — Penny Colby



4



5

ALL PHOTOS ARE BY ELLEN EBERT.

TOWN CENTER SOUTH *continued from page 1*

The State's design, however, envisioned blacktopping more than half of the Rollwood property, a disaster in the making, and some 1,500 townspeople shortly signed a petition opposing the plan. In the meantime, after reconnoitering the neighborhood, a GPA Board member presented himself at the First Selectman's Office with a copy of ConDOT's design and a Town map of the surrounding area. Shown on the latter was a narrow tract of landfill – an erstwhile town dump, as it turned out – opposite the Public Works Department and town garage, the so-called Thain property, which appeared to embrace enough space to accommodate perhaps 100 cars. This was half the number ConDOT sought for parking on the north side of the tracks.

After an hour's discussion, Balestracci agreed that the Thain property might, indeed, be used to take the burden off the Rollwood tract, thereby saving the latter for open space, as originally intended. He observed that the Thain property could

not be built on because of environmental problems and he ventured to say that the property could probably be acquired by the Town for parking at a non-controversial price. He and others, notably the initiators of the petition and their lawyer, subsequently reopened discussions with ConDOT, which agreed to the proposed rearrangement, and the Thain property was duly acquired and Rollwood's greenery thereby spared.

Another crisis had been surmounted and planning for the next, bigger charrette got underway. Alan Plattus at the time was shuttling back and forth between the U.S. and China, but he and his associates, working in collaboration with the GPA's Maynard and two other Board members, eventually thrashed out a compelling plan for submission to public scrutiny.

The YUDW proposal was unveiled in broad outline at the GPA annual meeting in May 2004, which was attended by more than 100 members of the public. Plattus fleshed out the proposal with PowerPoint illustrations of successful town centers and redesigned downtowns in Connecticut and elsewhere, most notably in

Europe. Throughout, he kept the focus on the transit-oriented design of these hub communities, emphasizing such features as combined parking and town-square facilities, auto-free zones, walkways and other pedestrian-friendly means of access, human scale and purely visual amenities.

This was followed in due course by a day-long June workshop open to the public. Once again Plattus was on deck to steer the course, but members of the public, split into eight- to ten-member discussion groups, forged their own solutions. What most distinguished their powers of invention, however, was the striking unanimity of their conclusions. Once given the task of designing an ideal commuter gateway to the town of Guilford, they evinced an extraordinary consensus. Then-First Selectman Gene Bishop, Planning and Zoning Commissioner Shirley Girioni and other Town notables who attended the event were impressed and they assured the planners of their support.

Plattus then summed up in a concluding, third part of the charrette in late-June, likewise open to the public, and YUDW delivered a

handsome booklet reflecting workshop ideas and containing specific proposals, although avowedly only to stimulate further discussion.

The entire process yielded a glimpse of the future both visionary and pragmatic, and two years later the Town itself, through the agency of a Town Center South Committee operating under the aegis of the Planning and Zoning Commission, embraced the general concepts and many of the specific proposals put forward by Gray Organschi in 2002 and the Yale Workshop in 2004 and embellished by others. Moreover, the center still held. For, notwithstanding individual objections raised at the forum on June 7, the preliminary report of the TCS Committee appeared to enjoy broad community support.

As Committee member Bernard Lombardi, the former chair of the Economic Development Commission, observed, "On the whole, we should view the plan thus far as a successful endeavor and continue to refine it into a supported reality." Or, as GPA president Maynard said, "Good planning requires lots of public process and time. But in the end, with incremental changes, we might get a better neighborhood and community." — John Cox