

South End Historic Restoration Awarded

By Kate King

STAMFORD -- As the South End rises under the construction cranes of Building & Land Technology, the Atlantic Park Apartments remain one of the few vestiges of the neighborhood's historic past -- albeit with a fresh coat of paint.

The two three-story buildings at 658-688 Atlantic St. were built as tenement houses in 1890, said Renee Kahn, founder of the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program. They housed mainly immigrants working at Yale & Towne and other nearby factories.



"It was working-class housing," Kahn said. "Polish, Greek -- you had a real ethnic diversity."

Inspirica, the homeless services provider on Franklin Street, formerly known as Saint Luke's Lifeworks, now owns the buildings and uses them for supportive housing. The nonprofit recently completed a major renovation of the apartments' porches and exterior facades, which were restored, in keeping with their historical design.

"When I arrived here three years ago, the porches were already condemned," said Jason Shaplen, Inspirica's chief executive officer. "You couldn't enter or exit from the front. They had literally rotted away."

Inspirica partnered with Kahn's organization and Stamford's Community Development Office to complete the historic preservation project. A \$200,000 grant from the Federal Home Investment Partnership Program and \$120,000 in capital funds from the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority financed the restoration effort.

"It's a really good example of public, private and not-for-profit working together," Shaplen said. "It was a true collaboration."

The project netted Inspirica two awards, including a Connecticut Preservation Award from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation and an honor from the Connecticut Community Development Association for best use of federal funds. Inspirica and Stamford officials will travel to Hartford Thursday to accept the accolades.

Continued on next page . . .

"When you look at the South End and the challenges to it, this project stands out as 'There's history here, don't forget us,' " said Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation Executive Director Helen Higgins. "It's just a great example of affordable housing that's being rehabilitated to really the highest preservation standards."

The trust will also award Kahn the Janet G. Jainschigg Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation, given to preservationists who go "way above standard," Higgins said. Kahn has lived in Stamford for more than four decades and is a longtime advocate for recording and preserving the city's past.

The Atlantic Park Apartments are unique because they combine a double-decker complex with mansard roofs and Victorian porches, Kahn said. The buildings' restoration was challenging because the porches needed to meet modern safety codes while retaining their historical design, she said.

The apartments are part of the South End Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Maintaining the neighborhood's identity is a delicate balancing act as the area sprouts new businesses, high-rise hotels and luxury condominiums under BLT's multi-billion redevelopment project, Kahn said.

"You've got to maintain this mixture of housing you have -- that's what makes the South End so interesting," she said. "You want to have both the old and the new. Diversity is what makes the South End so wonderful and it's a constant battle to keep it from getting obliterated."

Stamford architect Elena Kalman oversaw the Atlantic Park Apartments' color scheme, which uses rich green, yellow and red hues popular in late-19th century tenement architecture. Charles Connor of A. Emerson Construction completed the buildings' porch and façade restoration.

"I like bringing a house back to life," Connor said. "All of the steps that go into it; it's just like raising a baby."

CCDA Program Development Director Kathy Hunter said the restoration demonstrates the power of well-coordinated efforts between governmental, nonprofit and private agencies.

"The project is particularly important as it involved the rehabilitation of two of the few intact Victorian tenement houses that remain in the South End," Hunter wrote in an email. "And illustrates that proper preservation techniques can be successfully applied to social service projects that enhance the neighborhood both physically and socially."

Continued on next page . . .

CCDA will also recognize state Rep. Patricia Billie Miller, D-145, as "Legislator of the Year" at Thursday's ceremony for her work with affordable housing, education reform and domestic violence prevention.

To view the article online, please visit: <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/South-End-historic-restoration-awarded-4407604.php>