

ISSUE 02

THE FRANKENSTEIN BUILDING



ARCHITECTS USUALLY HATE THEM. After all, they violate every spoken and unspoken rule of design. “Yeah, that house was probably pretty nice once,” they probably say. “Too bad someone had to ruin it with all those cheap additions.”

HISTORIANS USUALLY LOVE THEM. These buildings wear their pasts on their skin - each addition a tattoo revealing a different era of urban social, economic, and cultural development. No need for a trip to the dusty archives this time!

NEIGHBORS PROBABLY DON'T THINK MUCH ABOUT THEM. But they sure do use them. Maybe to get their hair done, grab a slice of pizza, stock up on their wine, meet up after work. And maybe to live in, too, in an upper floor or back apartment.

We're talking here about the 'Frankenstein Building.' And you, dear reader, have probably never heard that name before. That's okay - we just made it up.

SO WHAT DO YOU  
THINK ABOUT  
THEM???

But we're willing to bet that you know exactly what type of building we're talking about. Like Victor Frankenstein's monster, they are an assemblage of parts from different sources.

**NEW  
HAVEN  
BUILDING  
NEWSPRINT**

*Researched,  
designed, written,  
and edited by Zach  
Felder with Elihu  
Rubin.*

# HOW TO SPOT A FRANKENSTEIN BUILDING

(yes, the buildings on the left are the same as the ones on the right...)



1150 Chapel Street

2023



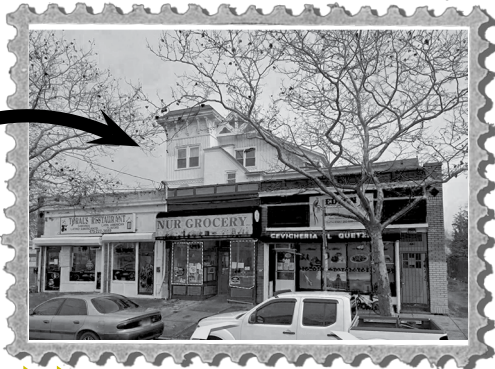
SOMETIMES IT'S EASY TO SPOT THE HOUSE BEHIND THE STOREFRONT

541 Ferry Street



OTHER TIMES IT'S A LITTLE HARDER

2022



1144 Chapel Street



AND SOMETIMES, ONLY A LITTLE SLIVER OF THE HOUSE STICKS THROUGH!

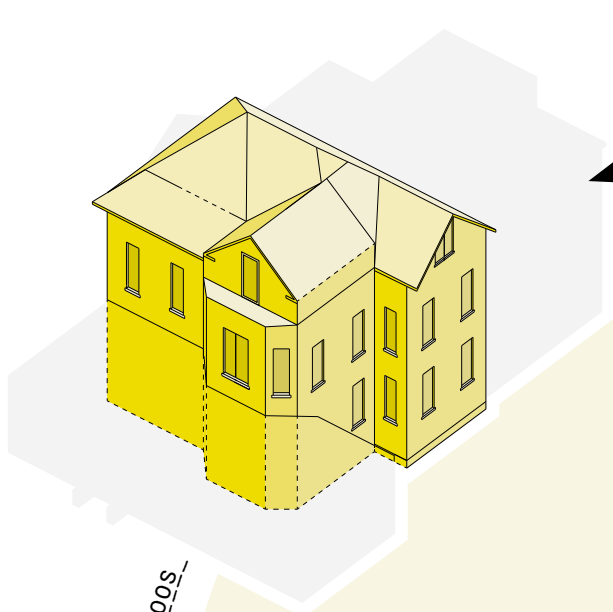
2023



1

The Frankenstein usually starts out as a **SINGLE FAMILY HOUSE** along an urban corridor. As the family gets wealthier,

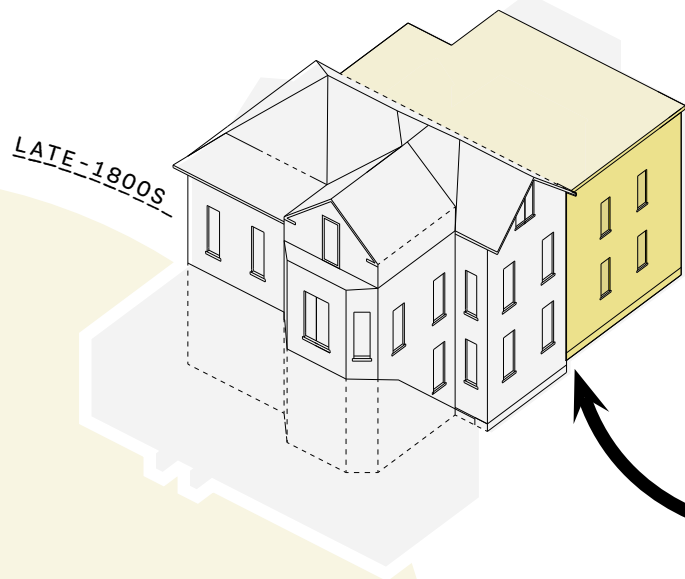
START HERE!



MID-1800S

2

they build an **ADDITION** for roomers or servants. However, if the family moves to the suburbs, soon the

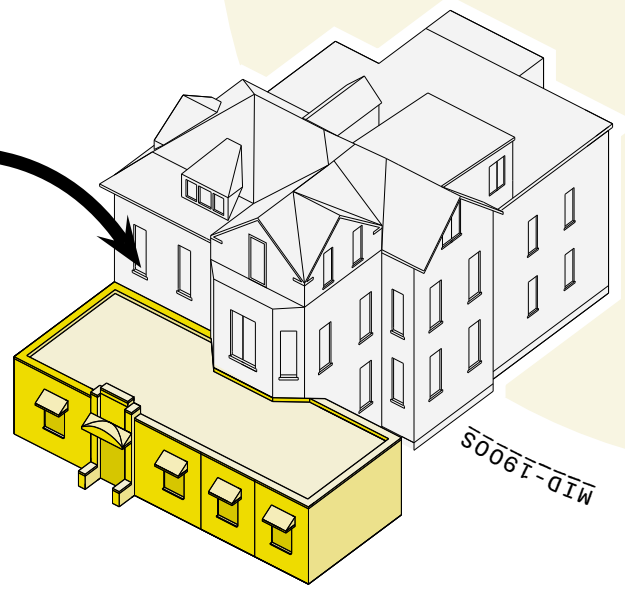


LATE-1800S

HOW THE FRANKENSTEIN BUILDING HAPPENS

EARLY 1900S

new owners tack on a **STOREFRONT**.

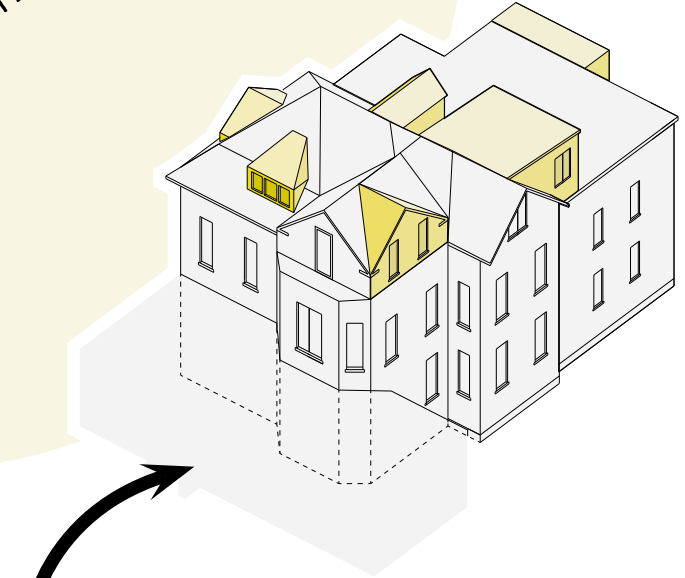


MID-1900S

3

building is split up into an **APARTMENT HOUSE**. As higher density squeezes space, and the street becomes commercial,

4



LOVE THEM? HATE THEM? KNOW OF ONE WE MISSED? EMAIL [YUMP@YALE.EDU](mailto:YUMP@YALE.EDU)



# LET THE DEBATE BEGIN

We get it. Frankensteins aren't universally beloved. We've assembled some opinions. What are yours?

## THIS HOUSE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

BY LAZO GITCHOS

The stairwell is inside out; exterior siding is exposed on the wall, painted over with interior paint when the second floor was dropped atop the first. From the basement, stairs that once led somewhere lead decidedly nowhere, ending in a sheetrocked hallway now littered with decades of tenants' refuse. The centerpiece is a wheelchair-accessible ramp which joins the entrance, a bumpout conspicuously protruding into the sidewalk, with the living room, decorated with a church pew and only a single small window. The ramp climbs less than 36 inches, and takes up half the house's common space. None of the eight bedrooms are accessible from either level joined by the ramp, nor from any of the exterior doors. The bathroom's stalls, too, are leftover from the building's short mid-life crisis as a barber shop, the rest from its adolescence or retirement as a residence. There is a feeling of commercial unease, of transactional occupation, built in.

Lazo Gitchos, an undergraduate at Yale from Twisp, Washington, is interested in how and why humans arrange ourselves. He lived in a Frankenstein building for one year.

## WHY FRANKENSTEIN?

BY ELIHU RUBIN

Why Frankenstein Buildings? Originating in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, Dr. Victor Frankenstein's "creature" comes together as an amalgam of human and animal body parts that are stitched together and re-animated. Like the buildings described in this Newsprint, Frankenstein's "monster" was an assemblage of parts. This "thing" was also disgusting and horrifying to some observers, a "being" that did not conform to conventional aesthetic standards. The same is true of the buildings discussed here: as a pastiche of additions and alterations affixed to the original house, the result can appear awkward or ungainly.

But these buildings are also very different from Dr. Frankenstein's "ogre." The "fiend" may have been constituted by objects from many different sources, but this "wretch" was the invention of a single person over a discrete period of time. Conversely, the "Frankenstein Buildings" are products of different people over a long period of time; there are many authors of these architectural creatures and small gestures invite close looking and gratify the idea of small-scale agency in the built environment. Their extended temporalities serve as compact guides to urban change, revealing the evolving qualities of major thoroughfares from domestic to commercial environments and the changing social structure of the city. In this way, the Frankenstein Buildings possess their own graceless appeal and artless beauty: they are material records of complex urban processes and merit the close attention and appreciation explored in this edition of the New Haven Building Newsprint.

Elihu Rubin is Associate Professor of Urbanism at the Yale School of Architecture and Director of the Yale Urban Media Project.

## HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: UNLIKELY GEMS OF ARCHITECTURE

(TEXT AND PHOTOS) BY TURNER BROOKS

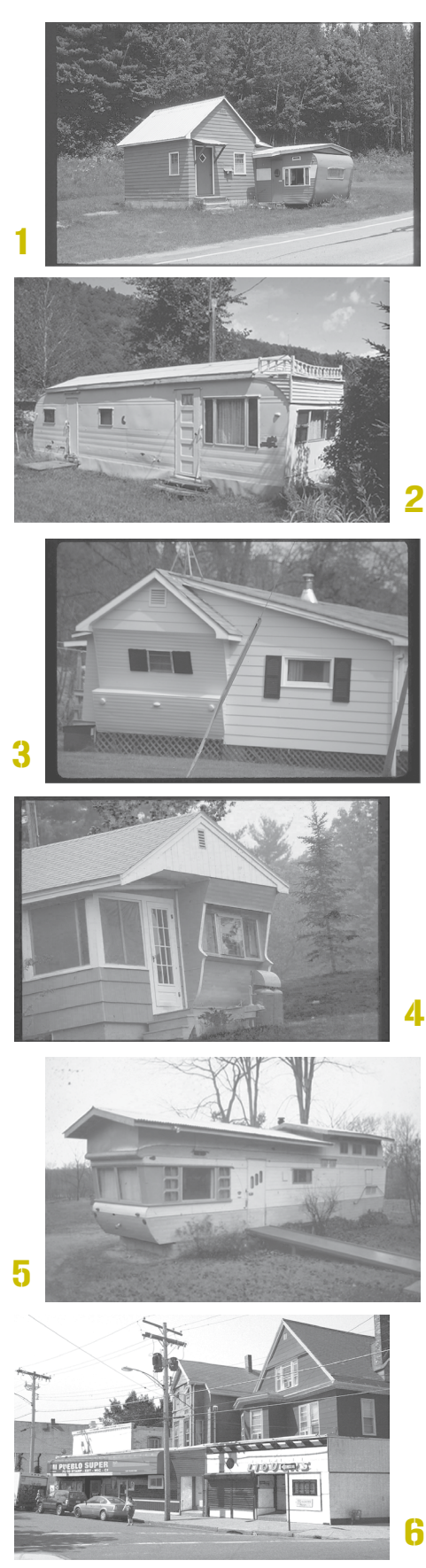
I feel some of the best most poignant architecture is often unrecognized and can be found by random chance on back rural roads and anonymous city streets.

Some of the best rural examples involve the older streamlined trailers and their additions. **Figure 1** shows a trailer which has spawned an addition, as if a mother had created a child, and the child gratefully caresses the mother with its roof. **Figure 2** shows a trailer with an added ornamental 'forehead' which becomes a kind of furrowed brow. I like to think it is nostalgically remembering its past travels. **Figure 3** shows a perfectly crafted addition constructed around the original trailer. **Figure 4** shows a newer house-like addition that has swallowed the original trailer, but respectfully exhibits it at each end. **Figure 5** shows a dynamic trailer under a new roof with a gang-plank which if removed, would release the trailer to zoom off to the left.

All these additions seem to me to celebrate rather than disguise the trailer as its origin. As an architect designing houses in left over agricultural landscapes going to seed, the early streamline trailers inspired me by their sense of movement through it. No longer having the composition of the farmhouse with its related out buildings, walls, cropland, and meadows, they were making their own more existential way across the landscape. This greatly inspired my own work with houses built in a similar type of site.

This same sort of richness can be found in urban settings. I love this image of houses (**Figure 6**) seemingly proudly metamorphosing into commercial enterprises along an urban street. Each house maintains its own individual character while joining together, with a cheerful palette of colors, to engage collectively with the commercial urban life of the city. Also these additions are exactly parallel to the street and the houses are not, which produces a nice elastic tension in the overall form.

After graduating in 1970 from Yale School of Architecture, Turner Brooks moved to rural Vermont, where he became a celebrated architect. Turner has found inspiration in the eccentricities of rural vernacular including the trailers and their 'wonderfully whacko' additions.



## EVOLVING ECONOMY; ALTERED ARCHITECTURE

BY CLAUDIA CARLE

Frankensteins call attention to a building's ability to adapt to differing requirements over time. But what differentiates a Frankenstein building from any building that has been modified? Why do we love the connected farmhouses of New England but admonish the Frankenstein?

One may argue that Frankensteins are the result of an existing architecture that was not conceptualized around organic change. Conversely, some may argue that Frankenstein's unconventional assemblage of alterations fails to consider the existing architecture as a material culture. Perhaps the aesthetic differences in such typologies are the product of our changing economic system: from agricultural, to industrial, to service-based, and subsequently to knowledge based? A New England farmhouse's growth occurred primarily within the time constraints of an agricultural economy. In contrast, the Frankenstein reveals and reflects the shift of our economy from an era of industrial success (and large urban residences) to a service-based, consumption-focused economy.

Claudia Carle is a recent graduate of the Yale School of Architecture. A native New Englander, she is currently an architectural designer in New Haven, CT.

## BAD ARCHITECTURE; GOOD URBANISM

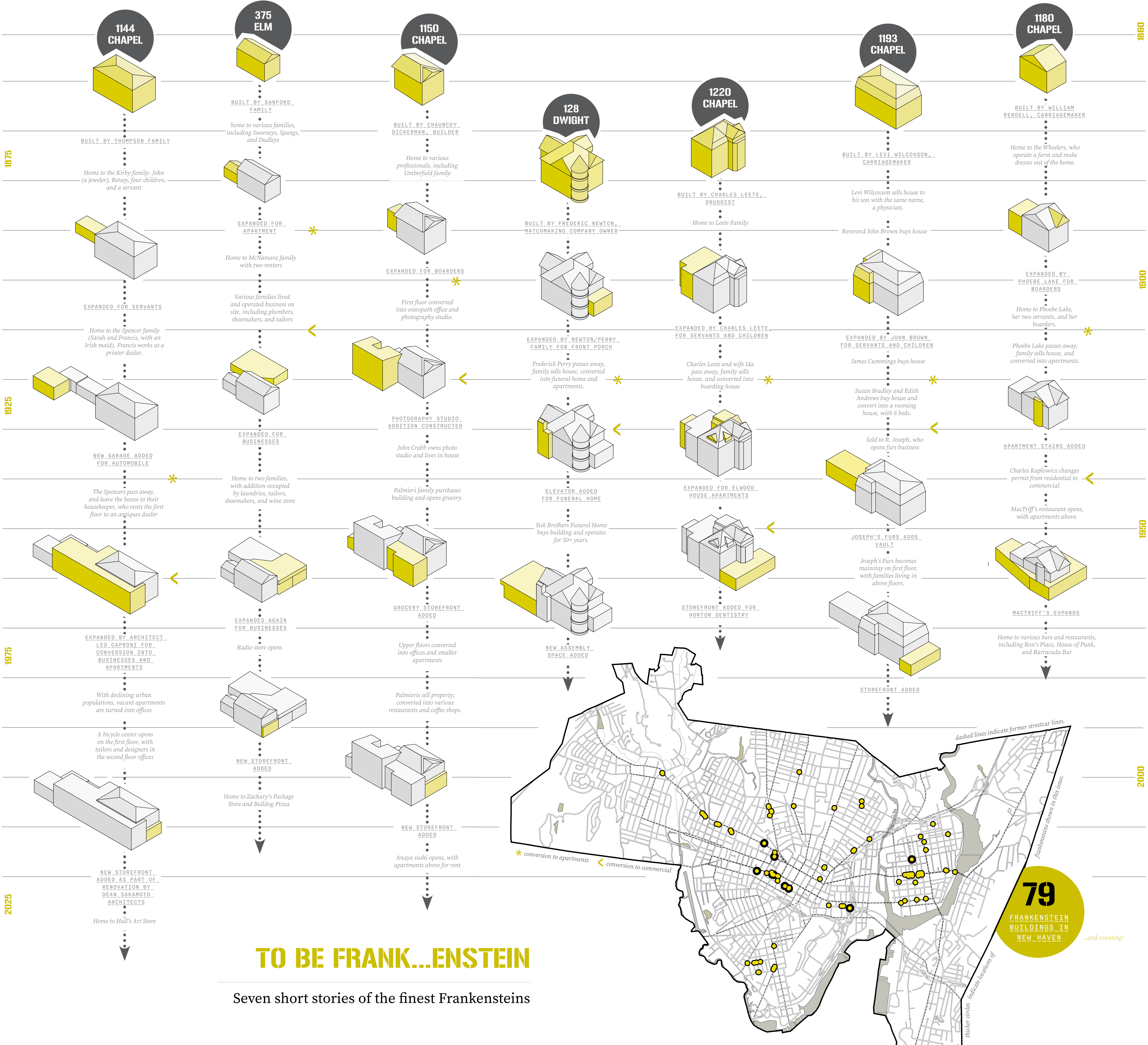
BY AARON HELFAND

When presented with 'before' and 'after' images of a typical Frankenstein building, it is hard not to wish for a thorough restoration to the original condition. Though there are many buildings that have benefitted from thoughtful additions and renovations, the cases shown on the second page in this study generally feature alterations which not only fall short of the quality of design found in the original, but which seem to be completely oblivious of the building's existing architecture.

That said, a radical restoration would sacrifice the vital contributions these buildings are now able to make to their urban streetscapes, forming neighborhoods enlivened by a mix of uses. It is arguably more important that Frankenstein buildings provide street façades compatible with their neighboring storefronts than ones harmonizing with the original building onto which they have been grafted. But why not attempt both goals simultaneously?

Aaron M. Helfand, AIA, lives in New Haven and works for Knight Architecture.

THE ANONYMOUS AUTHOR OF THE CHAPEL STREET HISTORIC REGISTER NOMINATION FORM WASN'T A FAN OF FRANKENSTEINS. THE AUTHOR WROTE ABOUT 'HOUSES WITH INCOMPATIBLE COMMERCIAL ADDITIONS' THAT HAD TO BE 'BALANCED OUT' BY 'GOOD' BUILDINGS ACROSS THE STREET.



**1144 CHAPEL**

**375 ELM**

**1150 CHAPEL**

**128 DWIGHT**

**1220 CHAPEL**

**1193 CHAPEL**

**1180 CHAPEL**

1875

1860

1925

1900

1975

1950

2025

2000

# TO BE FRANK...ENSTEIN

Seven short stories of the finest Frankensteins

**79**  
FRANKENSTEIN BUILDINGS IN NEW HAVEN  
...and counting!

