

Downtown Waterbury's 42 Bank St. May be a "buried" Architectural Treasure

Published in the Republican-American newspaper 1/31/2021



A storm in August took down some stucco from 42 Bank St., revealing an Art Deco facade underneath. *Contributed by Raechel Guest*

WATERBURY — A section of stucco on the storefront at 42 Bank St. came down in a storm in October, revealing a decades-old art deco façade underneath.

But the unassuming downtown building might be hiding secrets that date back more than a century and a half.

“We just kind of dismiss it as ‘It’s just a building, just a storefront, there’s nothing special about it,’” Raechel Guest, director of the Silas Bronson Library and an architectural historian, said. “When I started digging into the history of Waterbury in the 1840s and 1850s,

things came together, and I realized that particular location had been home to jewelry stores for 150 years.”

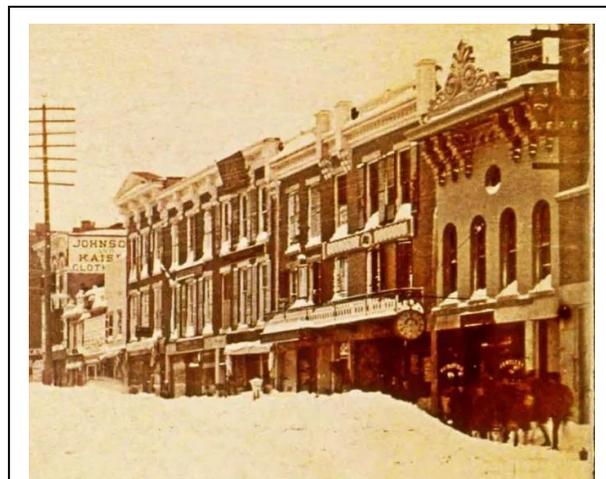
Guest said the findings of her research suggest that behind decade after decade of renovations and modifications, 42 Bank St. is actually three separate buildings, including Italianate structure a jeweler named James R. Ayers constructed in 1851.

“I realized that the very original building from the 1850s might still be buried in there under multiple layers of new design,” she said. “We kind of assume because it looks modern and up to date it’s a new building. But, in fact, it can actually be a building 170 years old and hiding behind upgrades.”

The most compelling evidence, she said, is a Google Earth satellite image that she said closely matches the original layout of the Ayers structure published in an 1890 atlas.

After Ayers, a succession of jewelers occupied the space, she said.

Guest published her research and numerous historical photos of the building on her blog, Waterbury Thoughts, shortly after the stucco façade was repaired on the building.



This 1888 photo shows, at the far right, the Italianate building where the storefront structure at 42 Bank St., now stands. *Contributed by Raechel Guest*

SHOPPING MALLS WERE a near death knell for the beautiful Victorian architecture that housed downtown businesses.

The rise of suburban malls in the 1960s and '70s drew customers away from then-thriving downtown city retail districts.

Downtown shopkeepers tried to compete by “modernizing” their properties as a way to lure customers back.

That’s all according to Carl W. Rosa, who heads Main Street Waterbury, a branch of a national organization established to restore and protect historic downtown properties.

“They thought they had to compete with malls over what they thought were old and tired buildings,” Rosa said. “Thirty, 40 years later, when you peel off the skins, you unveil the original architecture of the building, and it’s almost like you’re allowing the building to breathe again.”

Encouraging and supporting downtown property owners to restore and preserve original architecture was the intent when the National Trust for Historic Preservation established the Main Street program in the 1970s, Rosa said.

“It’s not enough to say you want to restore an old building. We have to come up with a process or plan,” he said, adding design, organization, promotion and economic vitality are the goals of the program. “We have to bring these buildings back to economic viability, and do it in a way that brings value and worth back to downtown.”

Rosa pointed to as examples the successful redevelopment projects of New York City-based developer Parag Mehta, who renovated the upper floors of the historic downtown flatiron Apothecaries Hall into apartments after doing the same with the 70 Bank St. building.

Mehta preserved as many features of as possible, including the original wooden stairwell, of the Apothecaries building, investing millions of dollars to convert the its offices into residential units. Before that, it was vacant for more than eight years except for a Dunkin’ Donuts on the first floor that has since shuttered.

The seven-story building constructed of marble, granite and Roman brick was built in 1893.

At 70 Bank St., Mehta invested \$2 million to establish 18 apartments on the upper floors.

Main Street was piloted in three Midwestern downtowns in the late 1970s and has grown since then to 2,000 municipalities, Rosa said.

GUEST ACKNOWLEDGED there is no definite proof the three original structures at what is now 42 Bank St., were not demolished. She has, however, not found any record they were razed.

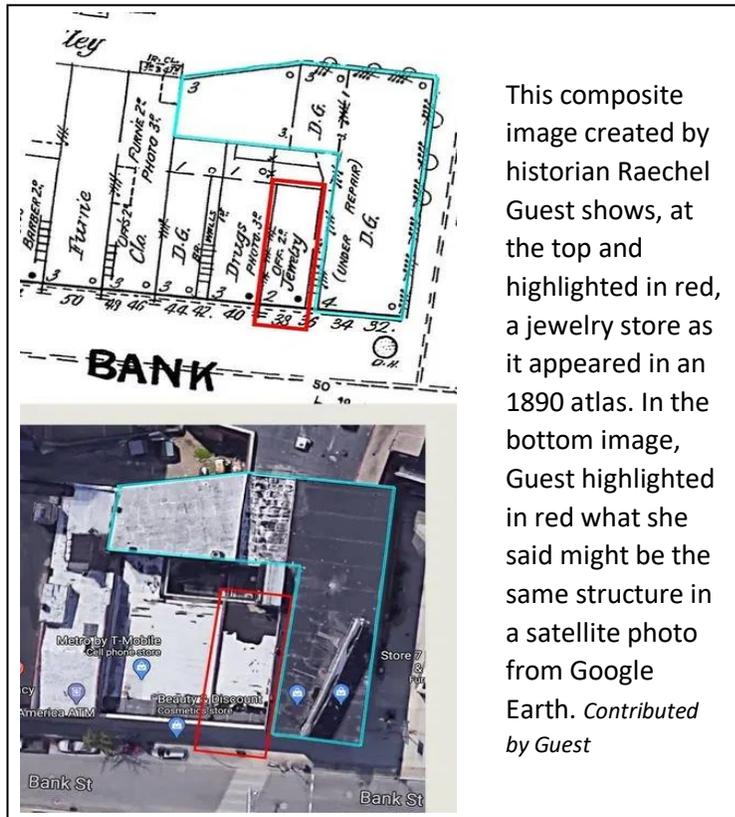
A visit to the basement might yield some clues, she said, but she and Rosa said they have not been in it.



Carl Rosa checks out the storefront building at 42 Bank Street in Waterbury Friday. Rosa wants to see if they might be hiding three much older structures underneath.
Steven Valenti Republican-American

City records indicate it has been owned since 2005 by Y & K Properties LLC.

Mark Yu, principal of that firm, expressed surprise at Guest's hypothesis.



“They’re talking about it; I believe so,” Yu said. “It’s kind of an old building, a traditional building.”

He said he would arrange for Rosa and Guest to visit the basement and do a little exploring.

Yu divides his time between his home in Nevada and his Waterbury properties. He also owns Yu Beauty Supply on South Main Street.

In 2015, 42 Bank St., was given a \$20,000 facade restoration paid for by the Waterbury Development Corp., the city’s development arm, in a bid to make the then-empty shopfront more attractive to potential tenants.

Today, it houses mobile phone stores and another beauty supply shop.

Guest said one of the elements that makes Waterbury “unique” is its historic buildings.

“The architecture creates the sense of belonging and the sense of personality,” she said. “It reveals the history. It’s what makes one town different from another town. It’s that unique character.”

And she was disappointed, she said, that the stucco was reapplied over 42 Bank St.’s art deco façade that featured a relief of Greek urn that likely dates to the 1930s.

“It is always wonderful to know that it is still there and sometime in the future someone will want to put the money in to restore it,” she said.

To read the full history of 42 Bank St., visit Guest’s blog at waterburythoughts.blogspot.com.

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