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WHO LIVES THERE

The Spaceship Down the Street

By [PENELOPE GREEN](#)

GUILFORD, Conn.

ON a high berm in this bucolic town — one known for its almost-exaggeratedly adorable Colonial, Federal and Victorian houses — sits a copper-clad, lozenge-shaped, monumental structure.

A steel H-beam juts out from the side of its prow-like front; vast concrete piers anchor it to a concrete platform, painted in a brooding matte black.

The building looks very much like a spaceship, which is what locals here have been calling it since its arrival in the late 1980s — a term that was at first derogatory and is now used with increasing affection. (It was even memorialized as such in early 2002 in Zippy the Pinhead, a comic strip.)

But the structure created by the architect Wilfred J. O. Armster is no alien craft. Nor is it an office building or a rich man's folly, as many of the tourists who still flood the driveway to gawk and take pictures believe.

It is a condo, made up of 13 lofty, light-filled apartments (mostly one-bedrooms) that slice the building crosswise, from west to east.

On balance, it is inhabited by the sort of people who view Mr. Armster, 70, as an iconoclastic artist, and his building, their home, as a piece of sculpture.

"Neither of us grew up in an architected space," said Sue Preneta, a painter and dance teacher who has lived here with her husband, Peter Sispoidis, chief technology officer of a company that puts advertisements in video games, since 2001. "We just grew up in houses. But you can feel the intention here."

Brennan, a floral designer who, like Cher, goes by her first name only and who sold the couple her apartment for \$225,000, called Mr. Armster a genius. "He built something so against the area, and so against the time." More prosaically, William Borek, a retired tugboat captain who moved in with his wife, Norma, in 2000, said the building "takes storms beautifully."

And Jim Portly, the town's engineer, will tell you the place is a "great symbol for Guilford."

But it wasn't always so beloved.

In 1984, local businessmen had bought the site of an old restaurant here named Berenice's. They wanted to develop the site into luxury condominiums, and they asked for something "really wild" from Mr. Armster,

who was quietly renowned for his expressive Modernist houses.

His response was this copper-clad structure, which was raised up on concrete stalks to capture views of Long Island Sound to the south, and wetlands to the north. Its units were loftlike, about 1,400 square feet, with open living areas and a two-car garage at street level. The businessmen were delighted by the design. But many of the town's residents were horrified.

"Monstrous," is how a few described the project in an article in The New Haven Register. In the local public school, an eighth-grade teacher held up the article, which was accompanied by a picture of the building's design, and proclaimed, "This is the kind of building that should not be built here." What the teacher didn't know was the name of the architect — perhaps she hadn't read the article carefully — so she was unaware that his daughter, Nicola, was in the classroom. "Nicola stood up and debated her," Mr. Armster said proudly.

The public hearing to approve the project has become a local legend, said Mr. Portly, the engineer, who remembered it vividly.

Guilford residents packed the town hall, and stood up one by one to announce their objections: that the structure wasn't Colonial enough, that it didn't fit into the town's heritage, that building it was a kind of heresy. One woman said it would ruin her view as she sailed on the sound. When the litany of complaints had finished, Mr. Armster began to speak.

"I said something like: 'I know you're all Republicans and businessmen and I know you think I'm a communist or a socialist. But it seems to me that you are objecting to this building because you don't like the way it looks.' "

And deciding that everything had to look a certain way, he said, was not his notion of a democracy. "Aren't we free here?" he asked.

As for the objections about the town's heritage, he said he pointed to the span of styles and periods of the houses that line the town green, ranging from early Colonial to mid-20th century. "And the 'native' Colonial houses that you think are so cute," he recalled saying, "the Indians with their tepees probably watched them being built and said, 'Who let this into the neighborhood?'"

Mr. Portly described the speech as "the most impassioned speech I had ever heard in a meeting like that — and I've been doing this a long time. It was the kind of speech Jimmy Stewart would deliver in one of those old movies. You expected applause."

Instead, the planning commission approved the design. Building began the next year, and that presented its own challenges. Local contractors were not up to the task, so Mr. Armster became the general contractor for the spaceship. He charmed the framing company by renting a helicopter and delivering cans of nails from the sky as workers blocked out the building. A copper company, eager to keep a crew intact for a year to build a skyscraper in Hartford, bid low for Mr. Armster, nearly \$150,000 less than any other company. To complete the cladding, which wraps underneath the building, the coppersmiths worked free, he said.

Mr. Armster's developers, however, were running out of money, and agitating for construction to move

more quickly. (It took two years to build and cost about \$2.5 million.) Mr. Armster borrowed money to cover the work of the subcontractors; when the building was finished, the developers were unable to pay him back. "Sarah and I were broke for about six years," he said, referring to his wife of 49 years.

MR. ARMSTER is an exacting guy — flinty and fastidious. He might make 100 models ("or many, many more," his wife will say, rolling her eyes) in his design process. Further, he has a long habit, he said, of stubbing his toes on his own firm principles. (Ms. Armster once gave her husband a copy of "The Fountainhead," [Ayn Rand's](#) portrait of an uncompromising architect. "It's just something I thought he should read," she said.)

Mr. Armster sports a ponytail that reaches halfway down his back and his husky voice still retains the timbre of the southeast Bronx, where he grew up. He recalled an exchange he had with a client who wanted to cut down trees to open up a view; "Those trees have been there longer than you have," he countered.

"It's my business," Mr. Armster recalled her saying.

"No, it's not, it's about what's right," he answered her.

"How do you know what's right?" was her frustrated reply.

"She called me a name," he said, "but she didn't cut down the trees."

"He designs everything with extreme integrity," said Duo Dickinson, a local architect and architectural writer whose essay about one of Mr. Armster's loveliest buildings — the "Cube" house here in Guilford — is in the current issue of *New Haven Magazine*.

Despite the financial conflicts over the building, the units themselves sold. Audrey and Irving Glassman moved into the choicest space, a three-level apartment of nearly 3,000 square feet on the north side, which they bought for \$435,000 in 1987. (It is now on the market for \$639,000.) Dr. Glassman, a retired radiologist, set up his ham radio operation in a spare room and said the copper roof was a terrific ground for the signals.

Anne and Vincent LiMauro moved into the southernmost apartment, which they bought for \$225,000. As successive units were sold and inhabited, and their residents began to embellish their spaces, Mrs. LiMauro and Brennan, the floral designer who sold her apartment to Ms. Preneta and Mr. Sispoidis, designated themselves the aesthetics police.

"We dressed all in black and became night marauders and Ninja warriors," said Brennan, sneaking out late at night to remove wreaths on front doors, as well as doormats and dog beds, or anything else that marred the purity of the place, in their estimation, "cleaning it up and cleaning it up until the essence of the building came back."

Didn't anyone complain?

"I think they just got tired of replacing their stuff," she said.

Last week, the spaceship glistened dully in the sun. Its copper cladding has deepened into a bronze patina and

it recalled earlier "idea" spaces, like Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion house or even the [Guggenheim Museum](#). "Like the Guggenheim, it is a response to and the antithesis of its context," Mr. Dickinson said. "It is still clearly looking to the future, surrounded by buildings that are reveling in the past."

Residents greeted Mr. Armster with obvious affection.

"How can you not once you hear him talk?" Mr. Sispoidis said.

Mr. Armster said that looking back on the building's painful birth was cathartic. He also pronounced the endeavor, despite the financial hit he took, worthwhile.

"It wasn't as good as meeting Sarah and marrying her," Mr. Armster said. "But it was pretty good."

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