

The Look of New Haven

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Drive around downtown New Haven and you will find architectural gems of every period from the Gothic-influenced structures at Yale University to the "brutalist" pieces of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Home to the Yale School of Architecture, the local telephone directory lists more than 100 architectural firms in the area, many of them clustered around the Green, not far from their alma mater.

It's a city that cares about its buildings.

And there is a definite "buzz," as one firm put it, around the construction of the \$140 million Gateway Community College on Church Street, the most important project for downtown since the heyday of redevelopment in the 1960s.

The question is how it can achieve architectural excellence, while fitting into an urban setting that was once at the heart of the city's business district.

At the same time, the fact that the project will be under the purview of the state Department of Public Works, currently undergoing its own turmoil because of recent contract scandals, has some nervous that bureaucratic red tape will discourage participation by top-notch architects.

This is all happening at a time when the style of architecture in New Haven appears to have shifted back to more neo-classical lines with brick facades and less adventurous modernist elements.

Many of the so-called "brutalist" buildings — hailed as progressive in the late 1960s and among the city's most famous structures — are now considered architectural dinosaurs. The Veterans Memorial Coliseum is slated for demolition and the vacant Pirelli building on Long Wharf was partially dismantled to make way for Ikea.

The Central Services Building, across from the Coliseum, was rescued from oblivion by the Knights of Columbus and serves as its museum.

The common denominator for all of these buildings — massive concrete slabs devoid of fussy adornment — is now completely out of fashion.

THE 'RIGHT' DESIGN

The plan to locate Gateway on the former Malley's and Macy's sites on Church Street is working its way through the local approval process, with the state set to advertise Wednesday for design and construction services for the 368,168-square-foot facility.

Turning the city-owned land over to the state is up to the Board of Aldermen, which has a second public hearing on the project Nov. 29 with final action on the proposal not

expected until the end of December.

The debate is how to meet the needs of the college, but at the same time ensure street traffic and a vitality that will enhance the area.

As for design options, don't talk to architect Robert Orr, a member of the Town Green Downtown Special District, about "signature" buildings as the only way to go.

"My own take is, I'm sick of signature buildings. I don't think they ever help. They are a fad from the beginning, generating a lot of press ... ten years later they look as old as the hills and who wants them anymore?" Orr said.

He said this approach focuses more on marketing than quality and usually ends up with a building that looks like it has been "plunked down from outer space."

Orr favors a dense development, preferably putting the college on one block, but if that is not feasible, across two blocks, with the major portion of the building inside the site with multiple retail facilities around the perimeter.

"I think it's really important that we bring back the fabric of urbanity," Orr said of the heavy commercial emphasis that would bring people to the area and boost the city's tax base.

Architect Alan Dehar of New Haven developed the facilities master plan for the college and plans to submit a proposed four-story, two-block design for Gateway with a day-care center, bookstore, cyber-cafe and possibly a library on the first floor with an atrium running the height of the structure.

He said he has been in discussions with famed local architect Cesar Pelli's office as a possible partner in the venture. Dehar also designed the biology-physics building at the University of Connecticut.

Gateway President Dorsey Kendrick is adamant that a high-rise is not the way to go.

Spreading the college over two blocks, Kendrick said, would allow for more places to congregate. "The students don't get the same homey feeling that you get when you are on three or four floors, rather than seven or eight. It takes away from creating a sense of community," Kendrick said.

Yale Architecture Dean Robert M. Stern weighed in that there is also a matter of costs, that you would need considerably more elevators to empty classrooms in a high-rise.

"A vertical college is a tricky issue. There is no question about it," Stern said. He said he is considering looking into possibly designing the facility with some other architects.

The much more important design element, in his mind, "is how the building meets the ground," and Stern said he is not put off by college-related commerce, such as a bookstore, rather than outside retail.

Alan J. Plattus, a professor of architecture at Yale who is associated with its Urban

Design Workshop, agrees with Orr that a focus on a signature building would be wrong.

"There are very talented innovative young architects who do buildings that are just good — challenging — but not all about being signature works," he said.

His biggest concern is that the building be "sustainable," so that decades down the road if the college moves, the structure could be reused.

"We don't want to distinguish ourselves as the age of expendable buildings," he said.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The college will come on line as the city and Yale University become more engaged in new construction after a decade of renovation work of its respective school buildings.

Prior to this in the 1960s and 1970s, New Haven found itself on the cutting edge of the modernist movement.

There are easily 40 structures by famous architects from this era in the city, including the Yale Art Gallery by Louis I. Kahn, as well as his British Art Center; the Yale School of Art and Architecture and Temple Street Garage by Paul Rudolph; the epidemiology building by Philip Johnson and the Becton engineering building by Marcel Breuer, among others.

Those that represent the hard-edged "brutalist" movement have actually fared better than many around the country, which are being razed as leaking, energy inefficient unloved works.

Plattus agrees that the most recent buildings in the city "have been less ambitious," but once the projects are finished, "I think there will be some that will hold their own with things of an earlier era."

"I think it's a mistake to assume that to be ambitious architecturally means to go to one end of the spectrum and find ourselves back in the same situation that we were in the 1960s when Paul Rudolph and others were doing their signature buildings, which many people now find problematic," he said.

Pamela Delphenich, Yale's facilities planner, said the university has an extensive review process before it decides on an architect and for some projects, the context of a building will mean it's likely to have more classical elements, rather than a modern structure.

"There are a lot of people who are interested in the historic context of the campus and in doing new buildings that complement that," said Delphenich, who pointed to the new chemistry research building on Prospect Street by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, as an example.

Slicing through a block from Hillhouse to Prospect streets next to Breuer's Becton Engineering building is the modern engineering building designed by Pelli.

Both currently under construction, Delphenich predicted they will be "extremely

handsome" when finished.

Stern, who gets to review all the Yale work as it comes through, pointed to the new medical building on Howard Avenue designed by Pritzker Prize winner Robert Venturi, as an interesting work.

"I don't think we are exactly hiding in the dark ages here, but there is not a lot of new construction," he said. Still, there are a number that are in the design stages that "hold out the promise of a rebirth ... so stay tuned."