

Opinion

## Guide to New Haven architecture reflected tension between old and new

Sunday, February 22, 2009 3:13 AM EST

By Duo Dickinson

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ELIZABETH Mills Brown died on Dec. 27, 2008. She was responsible for a seminal event in the history of New Haven — the publication of the definitive architectural guide to this small, but richly built city, "New Haven – A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design."

The dean of Yale's school of architecture, Robert A. M. Stern calls the book "a model of its kind." Mills provided "pungent interpretations that reveal the author's 'take.'"

In the 30-plus years since the New Haven guide hit bookstores, it has served as an aesthetic spine to a city that often seems fragmented and uncontrolled in its piecemeal reinvention.

Brown's guide was exceptional in many respects. Printed in 1976, it came at the tail end of perhaps the most aggressive reinvention of any American city in the 20th century, where visionary mayor Richard C. Lee combined radical urban planning ideas with federal funding to effectively vaporize whole areas of the city.

When fertilized with the visions of built expression exploding (sometimes literally) within the walls of Yale's School of Architecture, a perfect storm of destruction and invention redefined New Haven in the 20 years that preceded the book's publication.

The guide was also fresh on the heels of a new and vital movement, historic preservation, which found its seeds in the demolition of New York's Pennsylvania Station in 1963.

Lifelong New Haven resident, Henry H. Townshend Jr., a proprietor of the Green, noted that Brown, his wife, Doris, and Peggy Flint were "the organizers of the preservation trust, which in turn led to the preservation movement in New Haven and environs. (They) even protected Yale University against its architectural self-destruction which seemed to consume it at one time."

The guide itself was extraordinarily well written and very effectively illustrated; but more importantly, it was organized around 15 walking tours grouped in three geographic areas.

In 1976, Andy Fiddler, now rector of Trinity Church on the Green for more than 30 years notes: "I actually followed a few of her 'itineraries' to get a three dimensional view of some of the lovely houses pictured in her book which I had not noticed on my previous trips around New Haven. I'm reminded once again that I'm blessed to be able to live in a small city with such a wealth of beautiful buildings... ."

These itineraries reflect an architectural perspective that has faded from favor in academic circles in the last decade or two.

Now, architecture is often presented in magazines as static art pieces, frozen thoughts from the mind of genius architects. The truth is none of us encounter buildings in this way. Buildings are always part of a larger context that we see as we move in cars or on foot.

The guide book is a wonderful mix of the chronological and the visual where those who owned, designed, or built homes are celebrated in almost equal measure, both the living and the dead.

With her death, Brown becomes part of her own legacy. Her work is now frozen in time as evidence of where our built culture was at the guide's printing — a full view of the dueling concepts of historic preservation of buildings woven into the city's fabric and the High Modernist view of a future-focused brave new world.

This combat between the familiar and the revolutionary, between distinctly New England or American sensibilities and a universal rejectionist aesthetic is fully on display within the guide's pages.

Now, fixed in print, this period of conflict and contrast can give anyone willing to take a fresh look a sense that any vital community is continually changing.

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This article represents a new direction for my writing in the New Haven Register. In upcoming months, I'll be looking at our buildings, our neighborhoods, and the way planning and architecture has shaped our city, our lives, and how we view our future.

I hope you'll feel free to give me feedback and suggest topics that both reveal and celebrate what a rich built environment our little New England city provides for us.

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