

## FORUM

# City's new architecture is 'business suits among fashion models'

**W**HEN John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton came to New Haven in 1638, they tried to establish a true theocracy, and with it the utopian idea that the way a place is organized can reflect the spiritual intentions of its inhabitants. Thus, the core of our town is nine superblocks of equal size, each the same size and shape as the 16-acre Green that is set as the jewel in the crown of this utopian community.



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Truth be told, most New Haven residents had no idea that their city had this overarching organizing center until the Ninth Square project happened in the early 1990s that took its name from the city's layout. We all knew that in the center of New Haven there was a Green and on it were three spiritual icons that gave that space an even greater sense of gravitas. Beyond it are multiple points of attachment where the rest of the city's streets extend this nine square core that are points of opportunity for architectural expression.

Just think of architect Paul Rudolph's Yale Art & Architecture building at the corner of Chapel and York streets — now known as the Rudolph Building — or Woosley Hall at College and Grove streets, or the Knights of Columbus building set where Church Street encounters Route 34.

Towers live up to the promise of our city's bold core: Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall at Prospect and Grove streets, the tower created by the Ninth Square project at Orange and Crown streets and the singular spire of Saint Paul and St. James

Church at Chapel and Olive streets all take the natural focal points of a central grid of streets and give them architectural events at its edges.

But, how do the new buildings being built at the edges of this order compare to their rich environment of architectural icons?

The final design of the new Long Wharf Theatre has yet to be seen, but it cannot have the outsized presence of its predecessor, the New Haven Coliseum, and will have to live in subservience to the Knights of Columbus tower.

Across from the K of C building, the new Gateway College building by Perkins + Will Architects is a long, boxed set, split by Crown Street, with a curved corner at North Frontage Road and Church



Blake Brownstein/Special to the Register

Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School in downtown New Haven, designed by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, opened earlier this year.

mass into a building that can be comfortable with the scale of the traditional buildings that share in the streetscape.

In a similar style of enriched modernism, Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott's design for

Street. This curved corner is dropped a story from the rest of the street-facing facade making it a very passive counterpart to architect Kevin Roche's dominant tower.

The new Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School design by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects at George and College has cantilevered and glazed elements at its entries, and brick, glass and metal cladding interwoven to make a clearly modern statement. These crafty manipulations break up a potentially blank

Yale-New Haven Hospital's new Smilow Cancer Center turns vertical, but its shape is not in any way a tower — it will have the sadly appropriate inflated feel of a large institution.

The champion of new building bulk will be Becker + Becker's 360 State Street, where a plinth that follows the eave line of the existing Chapel Street facades attempts to veil the 30-plus-story tower that sits amidships upon this horizontal base.

This new spate of building clearly lacks the heroism of the pre-World War II Yale University icons like Harkness Tower or Payne Whitney Gymnasium or the adventurous risk-taking of Eero Saarinen's Morse and Stiles colleges across Tower Parkway from the gym or Gordon Bunshaft's Beinecke Library. They are, in short, accommodative and professional — sophisticated in their crisp detailing, but reticent in their shapes, in the spirit of Louis Kahn's twin art galleries on Chapel Street.

However, unlike Kahn's beauties, these new buildings are very large masses for their contexts, attempting visual palatability by their material variety and manipulations of their bulk.

These are the business suits amid the fashion models that all crowd our Ninth Square dance floor. They are too big to be bland, but fairly deferential to all the amped up competitors that surround them — a little like a well-quaffed linebacker in a carefully tailored J. Press jacket. Large enough to be noticed, conventional enough to remain unthreatening.

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