

# Lower Whitney evolves

**L**IKE speaks from a wheel, the skewed arteries that extend from New Haven's central nine squares branch out in almost every direction: Chapel Street extending to the east and west, Dixwell Avenue more or less to the north, and the most storied and visually powerful, Whitney Avenue, extending to the north-north-east.



**DUO DICKINSON** Whitney Avenue has had an interesting history. Originally called the Hartford Turnpike, the road was chartered in 1798 by one of New Haven's legendary citizens, James Hillhouse.

Hillhouse and Eli Whitney virtually owned the thoroughfare, and as a true turnpike, the road generated revenue from the tolls charged to those traveling to Hartford, hence its original name.

In the late 19th century, Whitney Avenue became what New Haven's great architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown called "the patrician showplace of the city."

Streets are not just thoroughfares, they are also visual and aesthetic experiences. Until Dutch elm disease clear cut them a couple of generations ago, the major streets of New Haven were beautifully framed by mature elm trees, creating a cathedral of space from sidewalk to sidewalk. The angled, arching limbs created a botanic arch above those traveling on their path.

Whitney Avenue is set apart by its width and the nature of the buildings



Peter Casolino/Register

A pedestrian on a Whitney Avenue sidewalk passes the Yale School of Management construction site.



The finished building as envisioned by the architect.

that line it. Beyond Trumbull Street, which virtually marks the end of the commercial section of the road, Whitney Avenue has had an amazing transformation over the last century.

After Hillhouse and Whitney divided the land flanking lower Whitney to provide the sites for Gilded Age mansions, the Roaring '20s saw a changeover to churches and apartment houses and the odd civic or cultural building was dropped in, such as the Peabody Museum.

Over time, most cities tend to grow more dense with people and structures. Some of these changes signal a permanent refocus of ambience. The creation of Yale University's Gibbs

erected, a robust yet somehow serene gigantism emerges. The renderings that are presented on the security fence surrounding the site are very compelling. But the net impact of such a large and unique structure in a continuity of building forms has yet to be fully processed.

Its height is no more than nearby buildings, nor is it any closer to the street, and it presents a classical façade orientation to the overwhelming linearity of Whitney Avenue's axial focus.

But the truth is that its mass, the length of its uninterrupted cornice and regularity of its beautifully slender columns is a completely out-of-context reality.

Whether its artful, sinuous wall system of glass and panels will be a delightful transformation from abstraction to architecture, and how the building's unprecedented bulk will change the nature of an evolving street, has yet to be determined.

But despite all apologetic rationalizations to the contrary, this part of Whitney Avenue will be forever changed — this time by one signature building.

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Parking Lot opposite Humphrey Street in 1968 created a huge void, shielded by an earth berm, and made a whole new sea of space where Sachem's Wood once defined the visual flow through to Hamden.

The new Worthington Hooker School, designed by Roth and Moore, retroactively reinforced that wall of buildings, where once the forecourt to the First Church of Christ Scientist interrupted the flow.

Now Yale School of Management's Edward P. Evans Hall, designed by Sir Norman Foster, represents the kind of change by architectural fiat that will have an impact no one can accurately predict.

As its bones are being