

Tradition of 'demolition by neglect' continues in city

WITH the recent death of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the concept of assisted suicide was in the news briefly. It may come as a surprise to many people that assisted suicide for buildings is promoted by owners who have deemed them less than optimal for their plans.

These are buildings that are vacant and are either so unusable or undesirable that their owners would rather see them degrade to the point of danger than invest time or money bringing them into usefulness.



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"Demolition by neglect" is a development strategy. It promotes a positive regard for a potential project by creating such a negative connotation for the existing building that the public welcomes anything new.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Davies Mansion on Prospect Street in New Haven, designed by Henry Austin in 1868, was allowed by Yale University to decay to the point where it could be seen to be irretrievable, despite its history. However, the historic preservation community in New Haven protested so loud and long that, after several proposals were entertained, Yale investe to save the building by using it as the core for the Betts House, which accommodates the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, the Yale Office of International Affairs and the Yale World Fellows Program.

While Malley's and then Macy's department stores on Church Street went under, their vacant carcasses sat at one of the most strategic corners in New Haven for the better part of a decade, making any re-use of those sites a welcomed relief from the pall of neglect those twin bereft boxes cast on the rest of downtown. Thus, when Gateway Community College was proposed for the site, there was added fervor to make a bad situation better.

There may be a prime example of "demolition by neglect" occurring now.

When Ikea came to Connecticut in 2004, it initially proposed razing the so-called Pirelli building, which was



Mara Lavitt/Register

The vacant Pirelli building is being used to display Ikea advertising banners .

designed by Marcel Breuer in 1969 for the Armstrong tire company. In response to controversy, the baby was cut in half: The one-story tail, once used for manufacturing, was bobbed to provide parking; the frontice piece of executive offices facing busy Interstate 95 remaining, floating above a one-story void.

In the last decade, that abandoned hulk has become progressively less and less attractive, and has been the host for any number of huge signs for various civic events or Ikea promotional efforts.

To what end does the building remain standing? It is a perfectly viable structure. Clearly, the prominent degrading of a once proud and even sexily zesty building responding to high-speed traffic has become a symbol of sad uselessness.

It would seem that the condition of a building that grows shabbier by the moment — sitting at the crossroads of two interstate highways that soon will be accented by an exceptional gateway bridge — makes change inevitable. Either the remnant of the building should be brought back or it will be removed. It seems that each passing day makes "demolition by neglect" increasingly probable.

Contrasting the full frontal prominence of the Pirelli building, Yale's 30-year-old Seeley-Mudd Library is inching toward uselessness largely unseen. It is in the middle of a site

for two new residential colleges for undergrads.

There are many architects and preservationists who have noted that the building could be recycled and integrated into the project. But, the library's quietly modern design, by local architects Roth & Moore, would be a fairly intense buzz-kill to the retro ambiance of Robert A.M. Stern's designs for the two colleges.

So, like Malley's and Macy's, the Seeley-Mudd Library probably has become a dead building as it has neither the history nor the antiquity of the Davies Mansion to inspire public outrage over its destruction. Like the Pirelli building, it has gone fallow and left in the architectural equivalent of a zombie state without the heartbeat of use.

"Demolition by neglect" is a far easier sell when the economy has hit the skids. There are few economic engines to revive buildings that have lapsed into a state of suspended animation. As the Pirelli building becomes more and more of an eyesore at a transportation nexus for the entire region, it's more likely that its perceived cultural and historic value will be eclipsed by the value of its absence.

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