

Glory of concrete confirmed in New Haven structures

NEW Haven, a small New England city, has an outsized reputation for buildings of import. Sometimes this import is clearly chest thumping (the departed Coliseum) or historic (Trinity Church on the Green, built in 1815 by architect Ithiel Town and the first Gothic Revival building in America.)

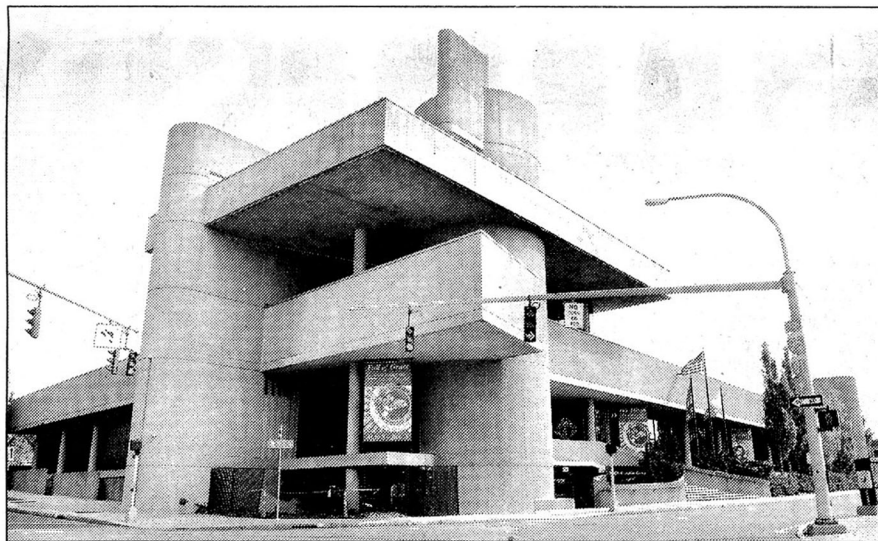
Most often, for aesthetes and architecture buffs, the city embodies the Modernist mentality of mid-20th century America. Great architects, now called “starchitects,” used it as a canvas for their vision — often with little regard for

context, or even with contempt for it.

New Haven has another interesting claim, as one of the great galleries in America for concrete in construction.

That tradition is being fulfilled in the new version of Interstate 95’s Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge, where 12 oval towers will collect loads from cables. The towers are being built now, employing the highest-level precision use of concrete, both as a structural and finish material.

The “mono-material” concrete is unique. Its core is its surface, its essence is its skin. That surface is durable and needs no coating, unlike wood that needs paint, tiles that lose glaze,



Arnold Gold/Register

The Knights of Columbus Museum on State Street.

metal panels that lose their finish or glass that scratches. As an exterior product, concrete takes a licking and keeps ticking.

In New Haven, there are obvious iconic buildings that show off what concrete can do on a variety of levels. The remaining bits of Marcel Breuer’s Armstrong/Perelli building display the precision of pre-cast concrete panels. The expressive, poured concrete designs of Paul Rudolph are evidenced in the Crawford Manor housing tower, the Yale University School of Art and Architecture and, perhaps most exquisitely, the Temple Street parking garage. They set a standard for concrete combining structural, formal and decorative integrity.

But, there are equally notable uses of concrete as integral parts of other buildings: Louis Kahn’s Center for British Art has perhaps the most perfectly cast concrete anywhere. Silky smooth, flush and soft, the concrete skeleton and central stair tower are marvels of care and craft for a material that when

initially formed is as soupy as oatmeal eaten for breakfast.

Eero Saarinen’s Ingalls Rink has a similarly luscious spine of concrete that shows the material’s plasticity, the ability to effortlessly evolve its shape.

Breuer’s Becton Hall at Yale shows the harsher side of concrete, where mass is both celebrated and controlled. Architect Kevin Roche used concrete similarly for Lee High School, now the Yale School of Nursing.

Charles Moore put concrete and concrete block on display at the Church Street South Housing Project. Orr, deCossy, Winder & Associates in 1965 created the Community Service Building, now the Knights of Columbus Museum, with similar precision and concrete clarity.

Earl Carlin, Peter Millard and Paul Pozzi collaborated to create Central Fire Headquarters in 1961, another inhabited concrete sculpture. John Johansen built the United Church of Christ on Dixwell Avenue and, next to it, Herbert Newman

and Edward Cherry created the Dixwell Community Center as examples of concrete strutting its stuff.

Concrete can be used in pieces and parts, too. In 1968, Victor Christ-Janer created a housing project near Yale-New Haven Hospital using concrete block with an outside face cast to the profile of shingles. The building used to be the perfect example of concrete’s “integrity,” its inner core

being the same as its outer skin, but it has been painted over and lost some luster.

As with any essential tool in the architect’s toolbox, concrete and its derivative cast materials are evolving. The exquisite, precisely cast ornamentation of 360 State’s commercial plinth, designed by Kent Bloomer, relies on new techniques and uses of pre-cast materials to express an homage to the great early 20th century master Louis Sullivan. It shows the full flower of Bloomer’s own lifelong exploration of the organic, the decorative and the undeniable lure of craft rendered by the human hand.

Our little city has many cultural and social sidebars, but none more wonderfully present than concrete, a material that architects love for its simplicity, malleability and ability to be seamlessly shaped in a way that is unique in building design.

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Duo Dickinson, an architect, writes about architecture and urban design for the Register. His book, “Staying Put,” will be published by Taunton Press this fall. Write to him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison 06443. Email: duo.dickinson@snet.net.



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