

FORUM

The fuzzy math of New Haven's architectural subtraction

THE aligned rows of trees that cross the green space created by demolition of streets and buildings to prepare for a grand boulevard extension of Route 34 beyond Yale-New Haven Hospital are, to me, poignant.

I have nearly collided with my fellow drivers as I glimpse the cars' alignment with the trees that maintain their role as part of the flanking streetscapes on both sides of this urban void. The Oak Street neighborhood that was demolished in 1955 was merely part of a larger scale dismantling of entire sections of New Haven to create housing projects, widen streets and create civic amenities such as the Veterans Memorial Coliseum. These trees serve to memorialize the ethic of removal itself. This midstream interruption of "progress" has an abiding and pungent sense of midlife crisis as the best laid plans are made ridiculous by their "non-event" status.

The removal of a neighborhood to simultaneously create the Route 34 connector and elements of New Haven Police Department headquarters and surrounding housing was seen by most as the tragic elimination of a traditional urban neighborhood. The cause of the demolition — the creation of a Brasilia-like vision for a New England city is generally viewed as a failure. However, about 10 years ago I had lunch with a now-deceased nonagenarian life-long New Haven resident, Cliff Smith, who told me: "That neighborhood was simply

horrible. There were rats as big as cats running around the streets and a bar on every corner. Once you got away from the Green, it was a truly scary place, and most of us were glad that it was torn down."

There are many who feel the same way about our

Its recent removal had a precursor in Ikea's takeover of the old Pirelli building designed by Marcel Breuer. Architects protested that icon's potential elimination. Ikea kept the floating administrative block as a compromise and removed the long one-story tail to create space for parking. The remain-

for retail. Its sustained disappearance serves as a silent monument to unresolved urban change. The collapse of Macy's next door was finally recognized by its demolition in 2006 and fulfilled the promissory note of its long-term abandonment.

As with all things that are in process, there are often more questions than answers when it comes to reinventing a city. Is it better to worship our buildings simply because they exist? When buildings don't work anymore on any level, do they simply exist for inertia's sake? Is the cleansing removal of something that is virtually toxic by its presence throwing the baby out with the bath water?

When we excise icons of economic failure, (Macy's and Malley's), or remove architectural and functional misfits, (the Coliseum), or correct a social failure (the Oak Street neighborhood), do we do more harm than good? It really depends on what ends up replacing what has been taken from us.

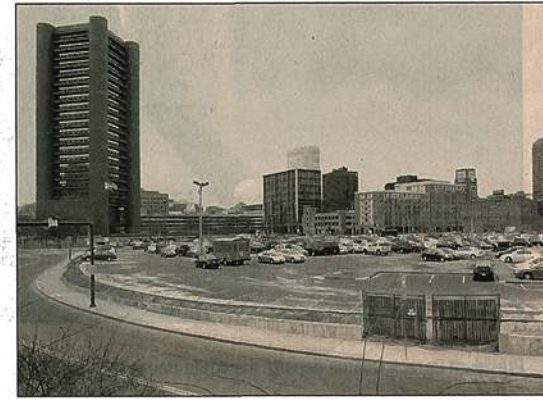
Gateway Community College's savowed purpose is to help people "Learn More/Live Better." Its planned new building where Malley's and Macy's once stood seems vitally important in these uncharted economic times. Presence does trump absence when we are trying to find some solid ground to build upon.

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Register file photo

The New Haven Veterans Memorial Coliseum — built in 1972 and closed in 2002 — was demolished on Jan. 20, 2007.



Arnold Gold/Register

Today, the Coliseum site is a parking lot. The Long Wharf Theatre is considering relocating to the property.

latest addition by subtraction — the removal of the Coliseum. But generally, architects are not counted among those who were in favor of the Coliseum's removal. It was viewed as a true gateway by most architects, who thought of the Coliseum as a heroic urban gesture. The vast majority of people who are not architects thought of its demolition as a long overdue excision of an in-your-face, oversized ugliness rammed up against an existing neighborhood.

ing, empty office building now serves as, perhaps, the largest and most expensive billboard superstructure in America.

When the long, empty faux stucco box that had once been the elegant Malley's department store was finally removed in 1997 at the end of our last economic slump, no one missed it architecturally. However its absence did speak of the loss of downtown New Haven as a vital center