

## FORUM

# New Haven lags behind other cities in connecting people to water

**I**N 1638, 500 English Puritans sailed into a harbor that was originally gouged out by the glacially redirected Connecticut River, but was now fed by the modest Quinnipiac and Mill Rivers.

Like every other Colonial settlement, for early New Haven, water was the superhighway system and Internet combined — water was the way everything got everywhere.

The fantastic harbor of 17th century New Haven led to great hopes for commerce. In that hope, a “Great Shippe” set sail for England filled with goods in 1648, but was never heard from again.

New Haven was rapidly overshadowed by New Amsterdam and Boston as a commercial hub.

Unlike the island of New Amsterdam or water facing Boston, New Haven’s centralized organization of a nine-square street grid only had a tangential relationship to its harbor. The skewed orientation off the compass coordinates of the nine squares was due to lining up their two southerly sides to two long-gone creeks.

The marshlands pushed the nine-square layout north to buildable land away from the harbor — reinforcing the inward focus upon its spiritual heart, the Green, away from the water. The original Long Wharf reached out from the south corner of the grid to deep water beyond the marshes.

The water-focused towns of Fair Haven and Oyster Point lived on the largesse of the sea’s food and ambience. Just as other New England tiny towns, clinging to coasts for survival, gave way to cities increasingly devoted to industry and commerce, New Haven grew to subsume those salty neighbors.

With Yale University and the Green forming a social, cultural and spiritual core, in the following centuries, the harbor was the engine of wealth for industry that needed water for transport. Just like so many other harbor towns, materials and immigrant labor flowed in and products flowed out to a world in need of clocks, carriages, rubber goods, locks, beer, pianos, plows, wagons, guns and clothing.

Unlike Boston and New York, New Haven’s harbor lacked the size and economic activity that would have ultimately obliterated the original character of our little New England city.

The relationship between urban cen-

ters and salt water in America has seen an extraordinary evolution. Massive dredging and filling occurred in every coastal city, creating land and deepening harbors to allow larger ships to dock.

New Haven harbor’s coastline has dramatically changed with large areas of marsh being drained and filled in.

For New Haven, the last massive effort came after World War II and virtually created Long Wharf, subsumed Oyster Point and facilitated the new factories and shipping terminals that were less feasible in the old neighborhoods where guns and clocks were built.

Most of these coastline creationist activities invented land for infrastructure away from the crowded civic center of the original nine squares — space for rail yards, oil and gas tanks, scrap metal bins, huge storage piles of salt and sand, a power plant and concrete mixing facility all belly up to the harbor for convenient access, and took the historic separation of the harbor from the urban life of New Haven’s occupants to a new level.

Interstate 95 is the quintessence of separating infrastructure. Despite a failed suggestion to bury it at Long Wharf in the 1990s, it remains, now with the doubled impact of its reconstruction pushing out the old Yale boathouse and making a star out of visual intrusion — a dramatic bridge that will span the Quinnipiac River.

There have been tentative attempts to get people and water connected. In the 1980s, development on a post-industrial site south of Interstate 95’s Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge resulted in Leon’s Restaurant, the Long Wharf Maritime Center and architect Herb Newman’s design homage to the oil drum, a building that houses Sports Haven and before that Teletrack.

In contrast to these limp and uncoordinated efforts, Providence, R.I., has cut open large roadways that covered its water’s edge. New York has removed thousands of abandoned slips to create large parks and a coastal focus for development.

Baltimore and Boston have rediscovered the fact that a harbor’s beauty can be an enormous economic resource when it comes to drawing tourists and those who want a natural counterpoint to a heavily built-up urban environment.

Although New Haven has largely missed the boat of coastal connection, it has maintained a whiff of its antiquity that larger cities’ reinventions have obliterated.

Ironically, the internal focus of found-



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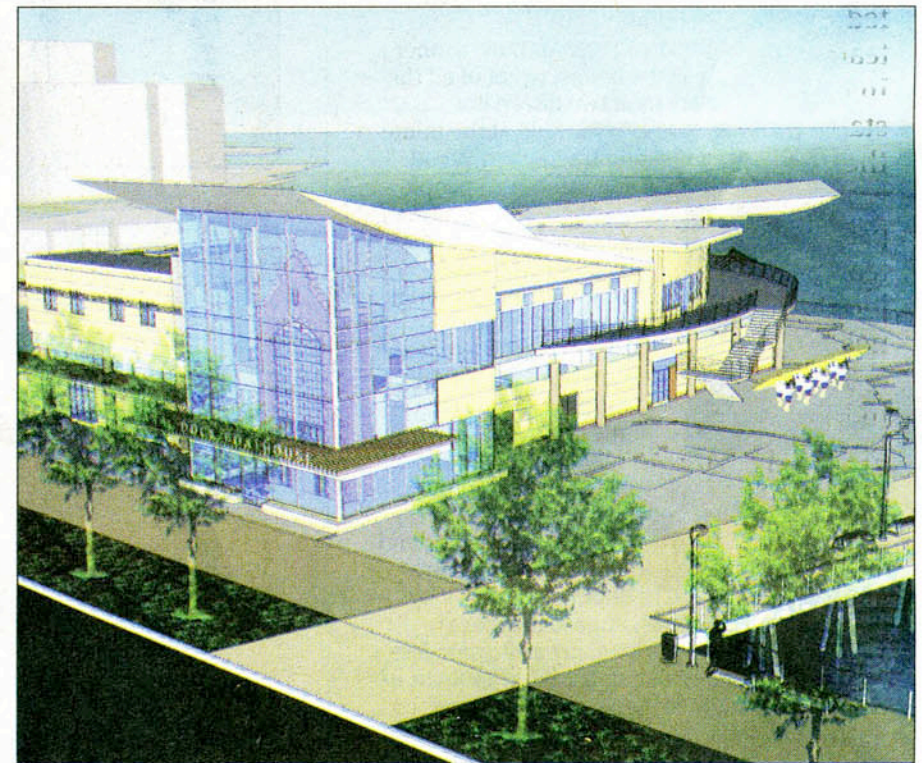
**RIGHT:** The planned construction of a new boathouse on a 55,000-square-foot platform over the harbor at Long Wharf will be New Haven’s latest effort to connect the city with its waterfront. It will join earlier development such as the Long Wharf Maritime Center office building, above.

ers Theophilus Eaton and John Davenport’s spiritual vision for New Haven has been cast in place by layer upon layer of unthinking infrastructure that subsequent generations have wrapped about their sacred core.

But just like those who gratefully discovered New Haven Harbor as a safe haven, the undeniable appeal of water has been rediscovered by those who invest in cities.

Let’s hope New Haven can dip its toe in that rediscovery.

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Artist’s rendering of the Boathouse at Canal Dock