

Similar buildings, big divide in design

URBAN architecture is a two way street. Buildings built in the civic fishbowl are undeniably present to a large audience who can't avoid forming opinions about them, but they also talk back to those critics with the cultural values their designs reflect.

There are two buildings under construction in New Haven that offer starkly different visions to their users and neighbors. Both are being built to epitomize higher education's noble intents, both are designed by architectural offices of worldwide renown, and each has a clear point of view for all to behold.

Gateway Community College, designed by architects Perkin + Will, is set tight to the sidewalks of the gridded streetscape that defines its shape. In fact, its two main building blocks directly echo the buildings removed from its site — the old Malley's and Macy's department stores.

Yale School of Management's Edward P. Evans building, designed by Sir Norman Foster, reposes distinctively on a true boulevard, Whitney Avenue, across from the Peabody Museum. Its formal front facade has an undeniable presence because of its

size, materials and kinetic design. Its needle columns and billowing walls have no kith or kin on this stately avenue.

Both buildings are unfinished but offer clearly expressed lessons that display how approaches to an urban landscape can be problematic, even with high intentions of good citizenship.



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In the Gateway building, there is one attempt to distinguish itself from the tight registration to the street grid: the building's end at the corner of Frontage Road and Church Street. The architects describe this focal feature as "a curved three-story glass volume that houses the college library and makes a dramatic urban gesture as a 'gateway' to the city."

When compared to the undulating walls of the Evans building at Yale, this "gesture" seems quite restrained. Beyond this geometric coincidence, these two buildings have dramatically different architectural means and methods.

As it addresses Whitney Avenue, Yale's new building could be seen as being "all-hat and no cowboy." Its scale-free High Modern elegance uses an extreme linear cornice line and column grid to contrast the kinetic tracery of glass and color panel membranes. The entire façade frames a huge central, diaphanous and backlit visual portal to a magical world beyond all the curved glazing.

In contrast, the Gateway building follows a "Mottled Modern" approach to its skin where many layers of colored and bare metal,

glass, tile and brick are rendered in grids, panels, patterns and lines, variously aligned and interwoven, intentionally elaborating the simple massing: two boxes punctuated by a glass bridge and curved-glass end.

But, these buildings project large order sensibilities that are as radically distinctive as the aesthetics they employ. Effectively, for good or for ill, each creates its own brand — each offers a clear image of its take on its context — physical and demographic.

Foster's design for Yale has the symmetrical frontality and self possessed gravitas of a temple, which to me borders on the ironic, given it was built during our greatest recession since World War II, and this temple serves and celebrates all things economic.

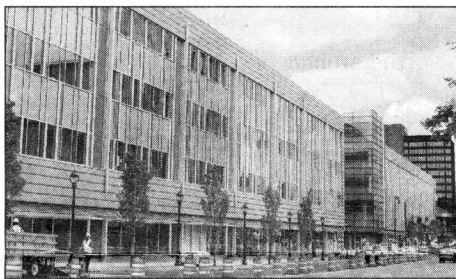
Contrasting the overtly heroic modernism of Foster's design, Perkins + Will's interweaving materials and predictable shapes present a buttoned down presence hard by downtown hustle and bustle. Its diffuse small scale storefront-style entries scattered across the two blocks — very much in the spirit of a commercial retail development — ironically in the space that was occupied by local retail icons.

In Foster's design, the gigantic portico façade allows hundreds of entrants to come and go, while offering Whitney Avenue a vision of capital "A" Architecture. The visual focus of Gateway — its curvilinear glass library — draws attention, but offers no pedestrian access from a cityscape that, in theory, will be aggressively reactivated to pedestrians when the Downtown Crossing urban redevelopment project heals over the Route 34 connector's rending urban gorge.

One building will be a privately funded, glistening temple in ecstatic reverence of academic economics for a thousand or so "masters of the universe." The other design is publicly funded on a tight budget and will be a streetwise purveyor of retail education for people getting the skills needed to survive.

Built simultaneously, within half a mile of each other, of similar total bulk and same fundamental purpose, these fraternal twins evidence the extreme diversity architecture can offer up. We can only hope their distinctions complement their intentions.

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TOP AND ABOVE: Gateway Community College's new campus downtown.

Jen Fengler photos/for the Register

RIGHT: Architect's rendering of Yale University's Edward P. Evans building.

