

FORUM

Wind turbine is symbol of us tilting toward finding efficient energy

THE word "icon" is both overused and misunderstood. The American flag is obviously iconic as the visual essence of the United States. One could argue that Harkness Tower at Yale University is iconic as the quintessence of college Gothic architecture, and perhaps Yale itself.



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Icons crystallize history, think Colonial Williamsburg; a unique cultural perspective, (the Vietnam Wall; or the distillation of a design movement, the Chrysler Building and Art Deco).

A newly built icon in New Haven is just as pungent as these classics, and is so prominently positioned, that its presence is undeniable. I refer to the 150-foot-tall wind turbine at the mouth of the Quinnipiac River built by Phoenix Press this year.

It is inherently sculptural, abstractly white and overtly kinetic. Its function is integral to its iconic status: generating electricity in its spinning with a stoic stance against a rough and tumble backdrop.

In this time of economic confusion and panic over the practical and ethical sourcing of energy, this bold statement not only dominates its immediate environment and the attention of commuters on the Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge, but also can be seen as a precise line in the sand as to what our culture fears and believes in.

Its \$500,000 cost would have been a tough investment for the project's builder, Phoenix Press, without one-half of its budget being picked up by the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund, for which every electric ratepayer in the state ponies up.

This source of funds dovetails nicely with a national mindset that supports alternative energy with a vigor that has not been seen since the Carter administration.

So in its bright and shining

countenance, this icon embodies a new way in stark contrast to the ragged industrial buildings and lumpy mounds of plastic swaddled gravel and salt surrounding it.

The old technologies near its setting seem to resonate more with the Peabody Museum's dinosaur mural on one of the neighboring giant oil tanks.

The Phoenix Press turbine gains luster with this distinction.

Most people would think that a wind turbine would have no aesthetic component. You would assume the aesthetics of a generating device should be practical, like an eggbeater.

But, the truth is the most distilled and efficient engineering has its own latent visual power and presence.

When the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" debuted in 1968, its art directors were hailed as embodying a design world that had previously been the domain of engineering nerds — those who created the efficient, durable and safe equipment for an extraordinarily dangerous effort — sending man into space.

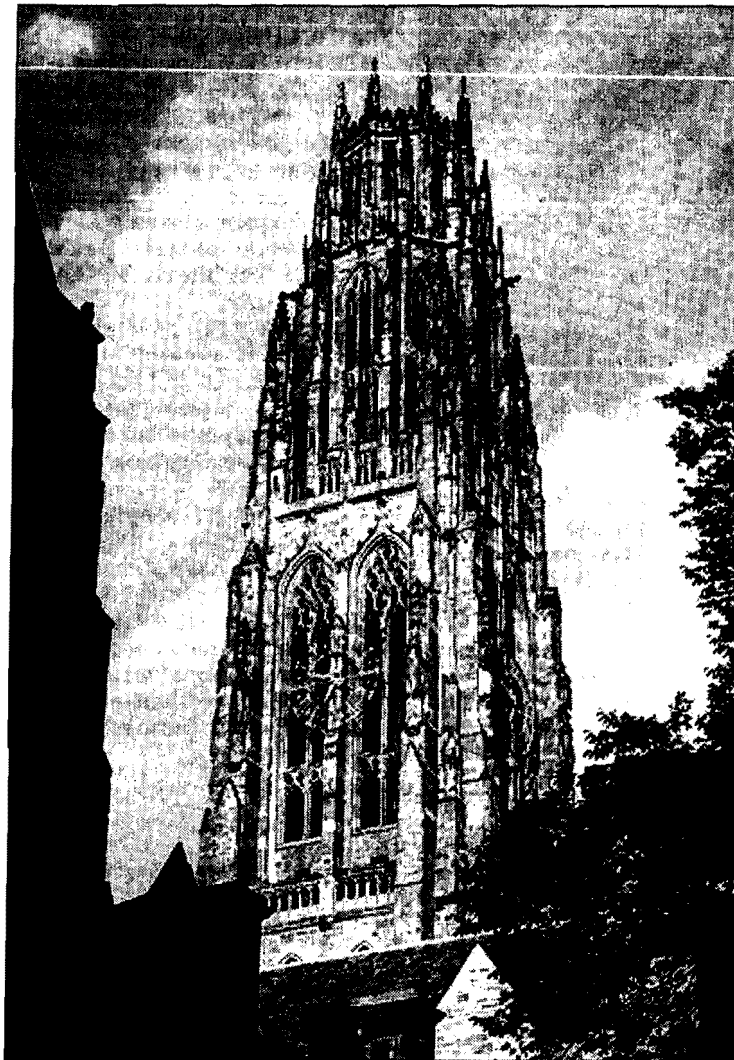
The Phoenix Press turbine embodies that same unselfconscious clarified aesthetic.

Modernist architects of the early 20th century venerated naval architecture and aerodynamic designs for airplanes as "honest" in the unification of form and function.

Many designers freely imitated and simulated that stripped-down aesthetic in the buildings they created. But this icon is the real deal — it is what it does.

Whether seen in seas of photovoltaic electric panels blanketing Southwest deserts or parades of wind generators like this tiptoeing across ridges all over the world, there is overt veneration of natural forces in the visual presence of renewable energy technology as applied to our landscape.

By its isolation amid the ancient technologies of its neighborhood, this piece of machinery obtains poignancy and functional necessity, the wind turbine has to have minimal mass and



Harkness Tower at Yale University.

Photo courtesy of Yale University

its blades have to be as long and lightweight as possible.

Their spidery precision has a presence that virtually no other structure in this state has.

When you combine that with the kinesthetic movement of its blades (sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes not at all) and the orientation of the rotor, (east or west, seldom north or south) there is a strange quality of fusing the high-tech and the fundamental in one built thing.

By definition, icons not only capture the present, but kidnap our imagination. Phoenix Press's wind turbine does that effortlessly and completely.

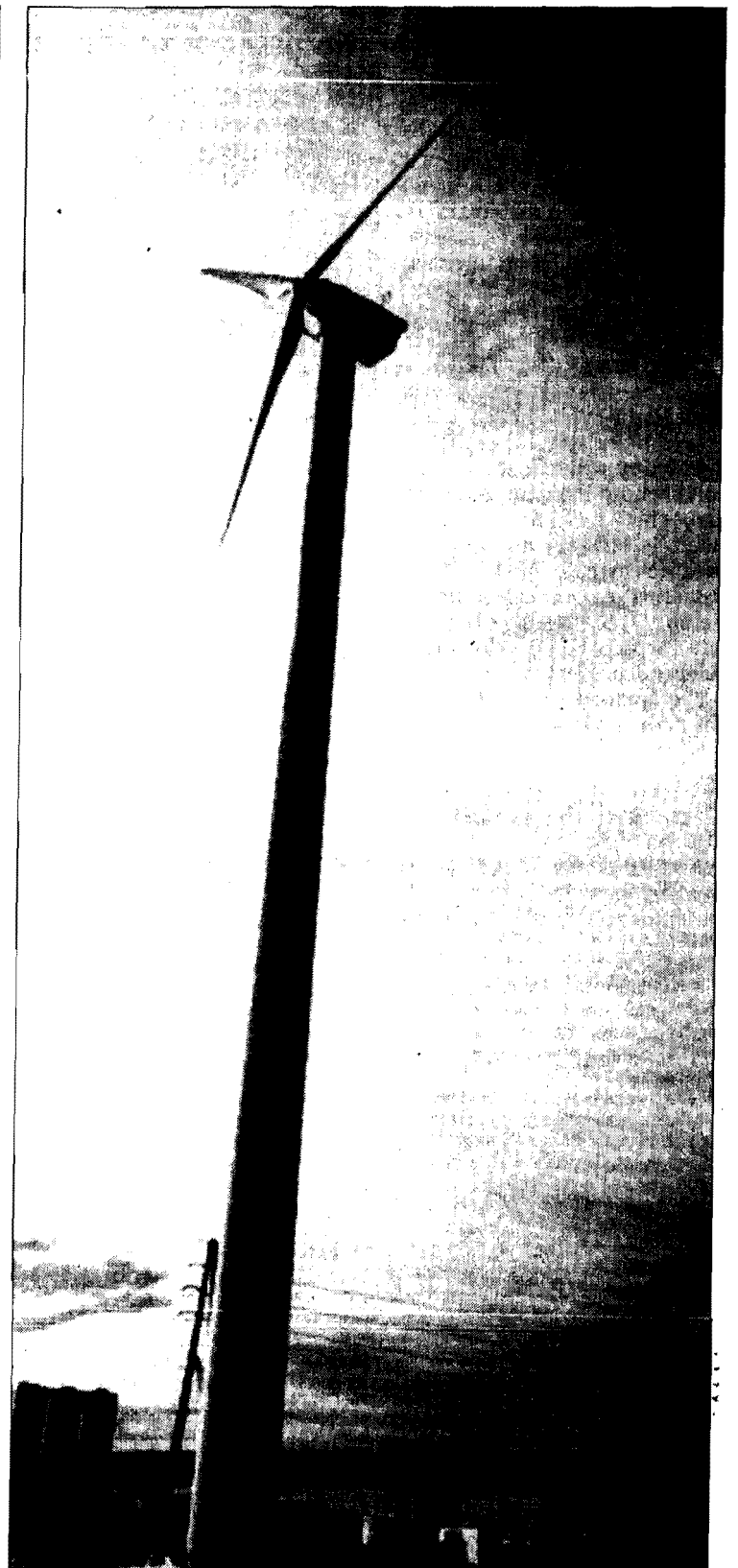
Time will tell whether its

blades keep rotating or freeze in a failed effort.

Perhaps, its ultimate message is that our culture has been literally tilting at this particular windmill of progress only to find more efficient sources of energy.

It could well be that better designs render this dynamic and alluring presence absurdly ironic. But right now, this new piece of our landscape is right, now.

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Phoenix Press' wind turbine on the Quinnipiac River.

Photo courtesy of Phoenix Press