

A building's first impression is written all over its face

BEAUTY may only be skin deep, but when the skin is a public building's façade we all have skin in the game of architectural cosmetics.

On the other hand, building interiors are often hidden from view. Interior miscalculations only affect the building's users.

But a building's exterior design sentences all of us to its visual consequences for good or ill. In the last 30 or 40 years, architects have turned their attention with renewed energy to the skin of buildings.



DUO DICKINSON

In several buildings that are now reaching completion in New Haven, we have examples of what seems to work visually and what might not

work. Different budgets, sites and uses affect how a building's exterior is rendered, but success and awkwardness are out there for everyone to judge no matter what the design intentions or limitations may be.

The looming presence of the 360 State building at the corner of Chapel and State streets designed in-house by its developer, Becker + Becker, has recently shown how interweaving grids and patterns of transparent, tinted and opaque materials can mitigate the impact of its blank bulk. The exterior treatment is neither edgy nor triumphant, but its skin is a carefully calculated composition of line, grid and materials that rewards a casual glance.

Clearly, budget and a simple shape mandated a fairly circumscribed palette of techniques and materials for 360 State, but, so far, less seems more. When there is a little more money, and a desire to create a unique image, there is a greater potential for miscalculation.

The Metropolitan Business Academy interdistrict magnet school has an interesting site — set on a typical New Haven street at ground level it directly and tightly faces the elevated Route 34 connector — rendering



Brad Horrigan/Register photo

ABOVE LEFT: The exterior of the 360 State commercial and residential building under construction in downtown New Haven shows how "interweaving grids and patterns of transparent, tinted and opaque materials can mitigate the impact of its blank bulk."

ABOVE RIGHT: The Metropolitan Business Academy, a public magnet school in New Haven, is a "hyper-kinetic array of pieces and parts."

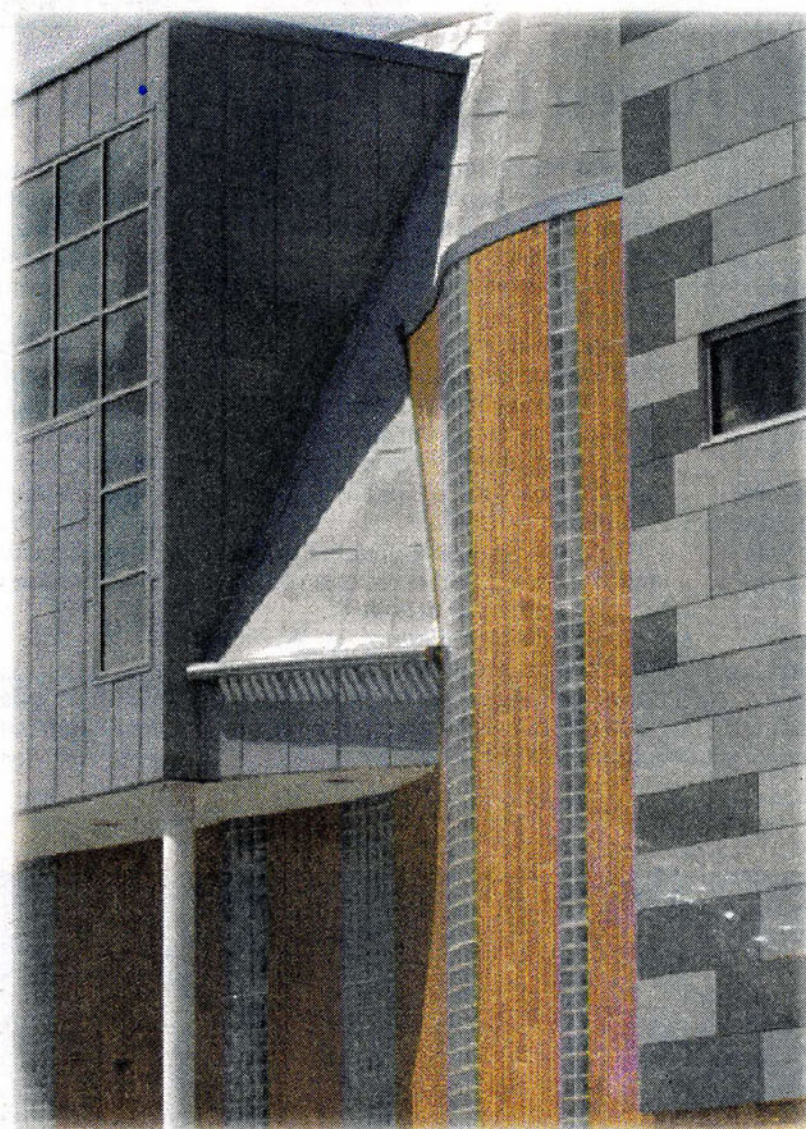
RIGHT: Yale's University Health Services Center has an "unrelenting Darth Vader black shell of corrugated material and bending, splaying walls."

its façade a high-speed drive-by event.

It was designed by the SLAM Collaborative, a firm of solid credentials and great experience in Connecticut and the region. This building takes on the same challenge of so many incidental visual visitors with a hyper-kinetic array of pieces and parts. On its tight site, there seems to be an overload of shapes, each having a heavy-handed reinforcement of each

of their skins' "identities" with color, texture and material. Glass, metal, masonry block and wood distinctively code each piece whether conical, bulging, sinuous or blank. The result is that a few too many ingredients have turned a simple soup into a confused concoction.

The ironic analogy of an architectural collision set upon a highway is too easy, but it may be apt.



Mara Lavitt/Register photo



Melanie Stengel/Register photo

Similarly, Yale University's new Health Services Center, on Lock Street and designed by superstar architects Scogin, Elam and Bray of Atlanta is, at best, passive-aggressive and at worst

perversely ad hoc. Intentionally kinetic, the shape of this building of wings tries hard to create a bold interplay between its unrelenting Darth Vader black shell of corrugated material and bend-

ing, splaying walls perforated by windows that progress from regularity to full-on erosion of the opaque skin to reveal bared structure and out-scaled voids.

The irony here is that this is a place of healing that has the feel of a building inspired by Tim Burton, brooding and dark. The designer's obvious desire for hipness overcame the need to comfort students in need of health care. This is a building designed for the inside baseball plaudits of the architects' peers. There is no doubt the building's artful manipulations will receive its share of awards for these world-class architects, no matter what its users and neighbors think of it.

The downside of designs that try too hard to be the smartest buildings in a crowded context can seem so obvious in retrospect. Why would talented architects try so hard to get so "giddy with it" when cladding prosaic functions like a small school and a university health clinic? When seen on a detached computer screen in an architect's studio, these facades and shapes are quite compelling as art pieces. Clearly, that perspective provided the baseline design criteria for both these buildings.

This is set in contrast to 360 State, where the astringency of the profit motive made the architect-developer hybrid pull tightly of the reins of cost, and thus expression. Sometimes high intentions can have the unintended consequence of conceptual misfit — and in architecture, those consequences can impact an entire neighborhood for a long time.

If architecture is indeed "frozen music" as Goethe said, then the tight rhythms of 360 State are a clear contrast to the cacophony of the business academy and the fugue state of Yale's new health center.

Duo Dickinson, an architect, writes about architecture and urban design for the Register. Readers may write him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison 06443. E-mail: duo.dickinson@snet.net.