



Jeff Strikeman for Robert A.M. Stern Architects LLP

Two illustrations show how Yale University's new residential colleges will look. At left is the main courtyard of the north college. At right is a view of colleges from Prospect Street.

New colleges' homage to gothic style adds to Yale 'brand'

JUST as Broadway shows used to go through New Haven on their way to national attention, many trends in architecture have followed the same path. Even though the start of the historic preservation movement is usually dated to the demolition of New York's Penn Station in 1963, the tug of war between existing

buildings versus new, "branding" architecture has been starkly evident in New Haven since the 1950s scorched-earth urban renewal efforts of Mayor Richard C. Lee.



In the past, when Yale university built or thought about it, existing buildings fought a losing battle for a voice amidst the lure of the new. But in 1979, when Yale proposed demolition of the Davies Mansion on Prospect Street, a relatively new group of historic preservationists became galvanized behind a central cause, saving the

home built in 1868 and designed by the architect Henry Austin.

It was saved by Yale listening to all the arguments for adaptive reuse. It was completely rehabilitated in 2000 to become Betts House, Yale's center for international studies.

This consciousness raising set a precedent that, despite many other previous excisions from Yale's campus in favor of the new, the university would cast a more thoughtful eye when thinking about the consequences of new construction on the existing fabric of its hometown.

Yale has since put its money where its public relations was in dozens of subsequent meticulous renovations and extensions of its existing buildings.

Last year, in a clear statement of this ethic, Yale responded to meetings with the New Haven Preservation Trust and found an alternative to tearing down two buildings on Church Street that were on the National Register of Historic Places.

Pedro Soto, president of the

New Haven Historic Preservation Trust, notes that "the purchase of the Bayer campus in 2007 (which increased campus size by a third overnight) acted much like a pressure relief valve in terms of Yale's space needs," and that investment ultimately saved those buildings.

But just this spring, Yale offered up a new way to break some existing eggs while proposing a greater omelet — the removal of both Seeley G. Mudd Library and Hammond Hall to make way for a new set of residential colleges needed to expand the undergraduate student body.

Unlike Sir Norman Foster's high modern design for Yale's new School of Management on Whitney Avenue, a stylistic approach is being employed for these new residential colleges that may ease the potential for community discomfort over the demolition they necessitate.

The dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Robert A.M. Stern, is designing buildings that are a paean to Charles Gamble Rog-

ers' previous century's work as the pre-eminent practitioner of "college gothic" — an earlier type of branding architecture at Yale and elsewhere, including Harkness Tower and most of Yale's celebrated residential colleges.

Given the overwhelming consistency with so many existing residential colleges at Yale, there is a legitimate basis for Stern's design. But given the fact that the proposed sites for these new structures are fully occupied by intact functional buildings, the creation of new, large-scale "antiquified" buildings does seem rather like an architectural neutron bomb. Stern's romantically evocative buildings are so warm and fuzzy, they silently wipe away a pristine, modern building, the Mudd library, and a lumpy older one, Hammond Hall, among other less noteworthy constructions, for the good of an even greater Yale.

In the pre-Davies Mansion past, objections to new construction were based on the violence

done to history and the visual continuity of a neighborhood when obviously new buildings replace venerable, old ones. The arguments protested turning a deaf ear to the emotional ties that bind people to buildings and a city to its history.

Stern's stylistic lubrication has muddied the visual waters by making the new buildings feel so delightfully familiar that they create instant history in a visually mixed neighborhood where the most prominent structures, Mudd library and Ingalls Rink, are overtly modern.

As a culture we have added a component when discerning value in the buildings around us. It is now undeniably true that an environmentally conscious, green value system is being applied to every building decision that is being contemplated in America. The size and impact of these new and lovely buildings will be sensitive to this environmental code of conduct by having every possible green technology applied in their construction.

The energy conservation will be high-tech and cutting edge, the materials will meet standards of sustainable sourcing and fabrication.

But, these brand new buildings are not being built on an unoccupied site. Central to the green value system is the fundamental tenet that any existing building's embodied energy has undeniable gravitas. "The Greenest Building is the One That Already Exists" was the title of an article in a recent New Haven Preservation Trust newsletter about Yale's expansion plans.

When the green agenda marries with an established historic preservation movement to question the wisdom of "progress", does a visual philosophy of "everything new is old again" follow? Stay tuned.

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