

# A blah building is wrong for Route 34

**W**E'RE all experiencing the birth of a major gateway experience — the new Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge. It's becoming clear that it will be an extraordinarily dynamic focal point of both arrival and passage. The arcing glass lobby of the new Gateway Community College



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also promises to be a proud "Hello!" to those coming into downtown New Haven. "Gateways" are often intentional — the Statue of Liberty, the St. Louis Arch, the Golden Gate Bridge — all are iconic and capture the sensibility of their host cities and convey to strangers that something special surrounds them.

New Haven has succeeded in getting a great deal of funding for something called the Downtown Crossing: Route 34 East.

The \$31.7 million project has as its linchpin a development team from Parsons Brinckerhoff in Glastonbury. The site was previously ripped apart by the grand 1960s creation of the launching pad for a failed Robert Moses-like multilane highway zooming into the Naugatuck Valley. The lone building directly accommodating this effort is the Air Rights Garage whose huge post-tensioned concrete span was intended to accommodate the nonexistent highway.

Small cities like New Haven desperately need private development to leverage infrastructure

reform. The intention of the New Haven Coliseum to be a positive gateway experience never seemed to rock anyone's world except for fans of hockey, circuses, rockers and architects.

Just like the Air Rights Garage, the Coliseum came to be an embarrassing reminder of what didn't happen. Conversely, the Ninth Square development pooled public and private resources and has effectively transformed a depopulated and decaying part of New Haven into a place that, while not fully occupied, is stable and increasingly invigorated.

In the Parsons Brinckerhoff proposal for the Route 34 Connector, the initial and central private investment is a 400,000-square-foot, medical research and office building proposed by Winstanley Enterprises.

Set in front of the Air Rights Garage, this building will be one that should intentionally and proudly draw attention and focus to this new way into town. No matter what its design, it will be a gateway simply by its location. Given what has been presented to the public, its impossible to know just how this building addresses its crucial position.

Too often developers condition their investment in a community on changes in infrastructure involving cars, streets and streetscapes, but offer up only placeholder architecture in their proposals — promissory fantasies of how buildings might look in order to sell the project. The truth is that while most of us may appreciate reconnecting streets



Contributed art

**ABOVE:** A rendering of the proposed research and office building spanning Route 34 in New Haven.

**RIGHT:** A drawing shows the completed Gateway Community College building, which is under construction now in downtown New Haven.

in New Haven, what most people will see are the buildings that result from those infrastructure changes.

In trying to sort out who is actually going to be designing the proposed building at 100 College St., it seems that it is John Martin from the Elkus Manfredi architectural firm in Boston who has offered up a rendering to lube the skids of public acceptance. As presented, this vision study doesn't show the potential for the architecture to make a gateway statement of arrival and promise. It is a blank, slightly bent, glass faced hulk.

Unlike some proposals that lead with the architecture, such as the Yale Uni-

versity School of Management building designed by Lord Norman Foster, this proposal leads with a street grid and simply provides anonymous buildings as a consequence of recaptured land. Unlike the SOM building, the final occupancy has yet to be determined, but the quality of what is offered up is almost absurdly generic and scaleless.

Architectural recognition of a focal site and its context should be a key component of this development proposal. The various proposals that resulted in the selection of the 360 State building offered up differing visions of the site's character and potential.

Unfortunately, this large-



scale development project for Route 34 is spending millions upon millions of public dollars yet offers up a building that could be in Dallas, Miami or Los Angeles.

The project's seminal building, as proposed by the Manfredi firm, should be one that reflects the transition from the miscalculations of a multi-lane highway to the pride and potential of one of the world's leading research centers: Yale University and New Haven.

Regrettably, what has

been represented so far seems a fairly pale place holder in one of the few places where a signature building could make sense. Let's hope there is room in the budget for a building design that reflects thoughtful integration into a small New England city, and offers a vision that burnishes its unique character.

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