

Remembering the Coliseum, anticipating Yale's SOM building

FOR a city of its size, New Haven has an outsized number of signature buildings — structures that are intentionally cutting edge and designed by the bright lights of architecture. The New Haven Coliseum was one of those buildings until it was demolished in 2007. Its absence may be the most significant architectural event in a generation for our little city.

But, there is a new architectural event that will have a high profile. Yale University's new School of Management, under construction on Whitney Avenue, has some aspects that harken back to the Coliseum, and some distinctions as well. Comparisons, while often odious, can give context, a desirable commodity when dealing with monumental buildings.



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Both the Coliseum and SOM's building are tour de force designs by world class "starchitects" of undeniable ingenuity. Yale's SOM's designer, Sir Norman Foster of Foster + Partners has received just about every international acclaim available, and Roche-Dinkeloo's Kevin Roche is a living lion of mid-century Modernism's heyday.

Both buildings have a flat cap roof raised over 60 feet above grade — a la an aircraft carrier, harboring shapes and spaces below.

Yale's SOM design intends its flat top aesthetic to relate to the highest cornice lines of lower Whitney Avenue, including its neighbor across the street, the Peabody Museum of Natural History.

The Coliseum's form was part of an offshoot of mid-20th century High Modernism, appropriately dubbed Brutalism. Roche's design manifested the rare opportunity for an architect to design a duet. The Coliseum was artfully rendered to horizontally complement Roche's other New Haven tour de force, the adjacent, vertically punched up Knights of Columbus Building built in 1967,



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two years before the Coliseum. Beyond that binary relationship, the building was in blissful outsized ignorance of its neighbors other than its aggressive address of the elevated Route 34 connector.

The SOM building, by contrast, truly has one obvious and expressed front. Its sides anonymously take care of business and its back, where its sinuous underside forms pop out into the light of day, sits on mounded earth above the neighborhood to the south.

Just like its opposition to the removal of the Coliseum, the architectural establishment (with

Yale as its local headquarters), promotes the sense that the Foster building is part of an international juggernaut of progressive design, encouraging a sense of the building's inevitability.

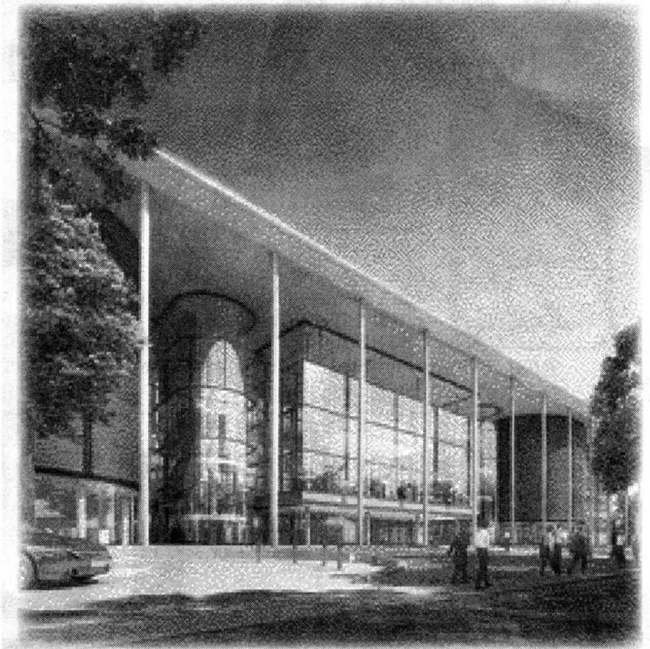
But, plausibly placing architectural tour de forces in a small New England city typically requires more breathing space around them, such as Eero Saarinen's Ingalls Rink, unless the design's form and detailing are deferential, such as Louis Kahn's art museums on Chapel Street.

The superficial similarities are undeniable. Both intentionally render those who encounter

them as Lilliputians addressing Gulliver. The extreme urban space made by the underside of the Coliseum's gigantic elevated parking deck had a similar sensibility to what promises to be the capped multiple forms and courtyards present in the Yale SOM building.

There are also stark differences. The SOM project will have ongoing uses involving small to medium numbers of people. The Coliseum was an event-purposed space, dealing with thousands of users at distinct times.

The mottled brown block and evolving rusting rawness of the Coliseum was a brooding, super-structural presence, while the sleek white-skinned curvilinear glass and mullioned supersophistication of Yale's SOM building is anything but raw. The Coliseum's cap was multi-story and inviolate, the SOM design's roof is comparatively razor thin with a huge central



Register file photos

LEFT: The New Haven Coliseum will be the subject of a Connecticut Public Television documentary Nov. 8. The building opened in 1972, closed in 2002 and was imploded in 2007.

ABOVE: Yale University's School of Management building is under construction on Whitney Avenue.

void. The crowning glory of the Coliseum was its parking deck, lofted above its performance space — a relatively high risk effort given the six-story ascent cars were forced to undertake on spiral ramps. The proposed parking for Yale's School of Management serves far fewer cars and is the direct inversion of the Coliseum's triumphalism — apologetically subterranean and accessed by a steeply descending driveway with a hard turn at its base into a gaping maw of a car cave.

Although both designs rely on the flat top, Foster's design harkens back to Lincoln Center in New York or the Kennedy Performing Arts Center in Washington, with slender columns parading before glass curtain walls while Roche condensed his points of support to a few huge raw concrete piers. Both mega roofs frame movement below their overarching pres-

ence — architectural billowing of plate glass and whiteness at SOM, and the hustle and bustle of traffic and humanity moving through the Coliseum's huge outdoor lobby.

The Coliseum's gone, but not forgotten, by anybody who experienced it and my sense is that those who will experience Yale's SOM building will have a similar reaction to its presence.

Right now, these two extraordinary buildings live only in our minds, but at opposite scales of the temporal plane — one only in memory, the other in prospective anticipation. It is never a bad idea to have a good memory when thinking ahead.

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