

CONCRETE DREAMS

One hotel portends a new future for Long Wharf

BY EMILY TIAN

I SAW THE PIRELLI BUILDING for the first time, like many, while driving northbound on I-95, en route to Yale. The building's poured concrete facade shades somewhere between gray and beige, depending on the hour. Its 216 highway-facing windows throw their gaze beyond the 150,000 vehicles rushing by the interstate each day, beholding instead the water that edges around the city, which mixes and meets as one small divot of the Long Island Sound.

It is a building of nine floors—or no, six, maybe seven—depending on how you count.

The counting confusion is caused by the absence of a third or fourth floor. The building vaults upwards from the second to the fifth, leaving a couple steel and concrete trusses in the place of a continuous facade. It is too massive of a structure to delude you into believing in its weightlessness: the suspension act appears more Atlas-like than acrobatic.

The absence of these floors creates all sorts of illusive effects: from a certain angle, New Haven comes into view in the gap.

For over 50 years, like a camera held in half-shutter, the monument has framed a changing city. But after sitting empty for more than half its lifetime, the Pirelli Building will reopen this fall as a new hotel.

WHAT IS NOW KNOWN as the Pirelli Tire Building was completed in 1969 by Marcel Breuer, a celebrated modernist furniture designer and architect of the Bauhaus School whose body of work includes the recently-closed Met Breuer in New York, the Boca Raton IBM, and Yale's own Becton Engineering and Applied Science Center on Prospect Street.

Breuer was brought onto the project at the behest of Mayor Richard C. Lee, whose urban renewal program dominated New Haven's mid-century planning and development. Already a celebrated architect, Breuer was responsible not only for designing a functional office and research facility for the Armstrong Rubber Company but also a dramatic urban landmark to symbolize a new, aspirational city.

Armstrong Rubber did not need nine or ten floors of office space for its new headquarters in Long Wharf, New Haven's waterfront district, but Lee hoped to use their move as an opportunity to inaugurate a city symbol. In a letter to Marcel Breuer dating to February 24, 1966, Lee wrote, "New Haven for more than a decade has been engaged in an urban development program which is unmatched anywhere in America.... The list of architects who have built in New Haven reads like a 'Who's-who' of the architectural profession."

Breuer's levitating floors responded not only to the public vision Lee promoted but also to the functional needs of the privately held company: The sometimes noisy or noxious effects of researching and developing rubber products could be contained within the lower two floors, while the upper stories, used for office space, were sealed by a natural sound barrier. The building, New Haven officials hoped, would draw in passersby from the newly constructed highway into the city proper; it was also a towering symbol of a flourishing automotive industry as car production boomed.

However, the city over which

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Breuer's building stood vigil never quite became the "model" that officials and planners had envisioned.

Lee's plan to redevelop New Haven amid industrial losses and economic stagnation included pursuing massive infrastructural projects with state and federal backing that cleared "slums" and displaced thousands of low-income residents—trauma that abides even today in many New Haven neighborhoods.

50 years past his tenure, many of the original aspirational structures commissioned during the Lee era have been demolished or neglected.

Despite its architectural significance, the Pirelli Building, too, was not immune to industrial decline. In 1988, Armstrong Rubber, once the fifth largest tire manufacturer in the world, was bought out by Pirelli, an Italian multinational tire company, who opted to leave the New Haven

site unused. The building passed hands again in 2003 from Pirelli to the Swedish furniture conglomerate IKEA, whose own blue building squats next to Breuer's.

"There's an idea behind this building—using common materials for ordinary people but levitating them [and] making dreams out of the mud," Laura Wexler, Yale Professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, said in an interview with *The Politic*. Wexler, who first moved to New Haven in the 1970s, has watched the Pirelli Building accumulate new meanings as it has aged.

"The Pirelli Building symbolizes a deep history of New Haven.... It was aspirational and failed," Wexler said.

IN THE PAST 20 YEARS, the Pirelli Building has served occasionally as a facade for IKEA billboards and as a temporary art exhibition space, its post-industry afterlife reamed

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somewhere between corporate convenience and spectral reminders of its past.

The box-like structure that presides over Sargent Drive is actually a severed version of Breuer's building. In 2003, in the face of vocal opposition from preservationists, IKEA (which, ironically, has inherited aspects of Bauhaus and modernist design) demolished much of the building's extended horizontal base, shearing it down to the length of the suspended tower, in order to create more parking space for their newly-opened warehouse next door. Its long reclining torso—which contributed to an essential "formal asymmetry" in the building, according to one preservationist—was replaced by parking asphalt.

It was this amputation that most interested the New Haven-native artist Tom Burr, who leased the ground floor of the building for a year in 2017 to present a site-specific installation drawing from local history. Telling news outlets at the time that

he wasn't there to save the building, Burr draped a symbolic white banner across the building's sutured wall, at once recalling both a bandage and a billboard.

The decline of the Pirelli Building was in part owed to limited public appreciation for Brutalist architecture, of which the Pirelli is an iconic exemplar. The *Business Insider* readership, in 2018, notably crowned it the "ugliest" building in Connecticut.

Brutalism comes out of the French term *Béton brut*, or "raw concrete." For many post-war architects, unfinished, frequently prefabricated concrete heralded a doing-away of excess ornamentation; it stood for authenticity, functionality, and populism. In concrete, architects found a highly expressive material that could be manipulated into near-sculptural forms.

With their frequently exposed frames and cantilevers, Brutalist buildings can be both enduring and skeletal—fashioned at birth in a form not so distant from their deterioration.

Despite its partial demolition, conversations about permanently adapting the space into a new role have percolated for years. In November of 2018, hoping to sell off the property, IKEA won approval from city planners for its plan to convert the unused building into a hotel without changing the building's exterior. Following a series of negotiations, the then-owners brokered a deal with the development firm Becker and Becker, who bought the building for 1.2 million dollars at the end of 2019. Hotel Marcel, a 165 room boutique hotel named for its pioneering architect, will operate under the Hilton Tapestry label. Construction for the Marcel began amid the pandemic last summer and is currently projected to be completed around November of 2021.

BRUCE BECKER is a familiar name to many in New Haven: just over ten years ago, his firm developed 360 State Street, the 500-unit apartment complex also occupied by Elm City Market on its ground floor. 360 State—the largest apartment building in the state and the second tallest building in New Haven—also broke ground as the first residential complex in the state to earn a LEED-Platinum designation for energy and environmental design. Many of the other projects in his portfolio feature adaptive reuse of historic sites and sustainable design in residential and mixed-use developments.

"I don't know of any building as captivating architecturally as that building," Becker, a graduate of the Yale School of Architecture, said in an interview with *The Politic*. "I hope that I'm not just fixing up one building but repairing something with a greater impact in the city."

Although the building is not yet open to the public, Becker's portfolio and the project's funding sources—a 25 million dollar permanent loan from Liberty Bank and a blend of various state and federal tax credits—

both suggest that the development will carefully attend to its history while breaking new ground in sustainable design.

Since the building is listed in the Connecticut Register of Historic Places, Becker's development project qualifies for historic tax credits, a federal incentive to rehabilitate older buildings by lowering an owner's tax liability. To remain eligible, the hotel is held to a set of historical preservation standards that will ensure that the exterior of the hotel will conform to the existing building envelope.

A handful of years ago, mid-century structures would hardly have been considered worthy of historic preservation. The building's aesthetic beauty may be contested, preservationists say, but not its history.

"If we were to tear down everything that wasn't objectively beautiful, we would be missing a lot of our history," Elizabeth Holt, director of the New Haven Preservation Trust, said in an interview with *The Politic*. "A building that incites questioning is worthy of saving."

By restoring the building as an operable hotel, developers are warding off the prospect of demolition.

"The building now has a new purpose, and to survive it has to change," Violette de La Selle, a Yale School of Architecture graduate who has worked closely with Becker on the hotel, said to *The Politic*.

Guided by Becker's "passion for sustainability," the hotel is projected to be one of the most sustainable in the country and the first nationwide to meet the Passive House certification, an energy efficiency standard widely accredited in Europe.

The building is supposed to generate enough renewable energy on-site through rooftop and parking canopy solar panels to fully power its facilities and operations. Traditionally high energy-expending laundry services and hotel kitchens will also be electrically powered, and Becker suggested that the hotel shuttle

service will incorporate a fleet of electric vehicles.

"The technology is there, but although hotels do more customer marketing and greenwashing of their eco-friendly amenities, their systems remain the same as they have been for decades," Becker said.

Hotel Marcel's sustainable design framework radiates naturally from the building's existing frame. The building's deep set windows reduce energy expenditure by shading the building in the summer and bringing in passive heat when the sun is low in the sky. And, most fundamentally, Becker added, "The greenest building is the one you don't have to build from scratch."

THE HOTEL RENOVATION has created over 100 construction jobs, and another 40 permanent employees—many which may be union—are expected to be hired once the hotel opens. It may seem quixotic that the project persists while a pandemic has knocked the hospitality industry to its knees. Extended furloughs hit over 150 hospitality workers at the Omni Hotel in downtown New Haven, one of the city's largest luxury hotels. During peak losses last April, employment in Connecticut's leisure and hospitality industry was down by 54.5 percent compared to years prior. As of February of 2021, 13.5 percent of the industry's workers are still unemployed—significantly more than most industries, according to the Bureau of

Labor Statistics.

However, in the years before the pandemic, hotel occupancy rates in New Haven hovered around 70 percent, edging out nationwide averages by several points. These numbers, Becker said, demonstrate that pre-pandemic New Haven was still underserved.

Of course, whether the industry will—or if it can, at all—recoup the losses of the past year remains as of yet unclear. But Becker, more than most, has reason to be confident in the hotel's success.

More than a decade ago, floors for his 360 State Street building were going up while the city still rocked from the 2008 economic recession. "I knew we were going to be okay as a city when I saw that building was still going up," Doug Hausladen, a longtime resident of New Haven and the city's transportation and traffic director, said.

With the Hotel Marcel projected to open as New Haven experiences a multi-year boom in boutique hotels, Becker is certainly not the first to observe the New Haven hospitali-

out of the

ty sector's potential for growth. In a cluster of hotels already populated by the Study and the Courtyard Marriott, the historic Duncan Hotel was opened as the Graduate New Haven in the fall of 2019, followed swiftly by The Blake on High Street.

Lauren Zucker, the Associate Vice President for New Haven Affairs at Yale, told *The Politic* that the Pirelli is a "welcome addition to the growing New Haven hospitality market."

Slightly farther afield from the downtown neighborhood of boutique hotel developments, Hotel Marcel, in theory, carves out a slimmer market of Yale visitors—Becker speculated that Yale-affiliated guests might constitute less than half of their clientele—but could draw from a more diverse market of conference-goers, medical visitors of the Yale New Haven Hospital system, and those intrigued by the building's architectural history or sustainable design. The hotel's affiliation with Hilton may also claim some customers loyal to the major operator brand.

In the long term, Becker is wagering on the prospect of a

symbiotic relationship between the hotel and Long Wharf's natural resources and neighboring sites. One 15-floor corporate office building, the Long Wharf Maritime Center, houses multiple biotechnology companies; education consulting, technology, and financial firms are filling up an office tower nearby.

"It would be great to get the hotels and restaurants from an academic calendar to a 12-month one," said Hausladen.

Hausladen speculates that more conferences and waterfront activities might bring visitors to New Haven year-round, in contrast to the usual slow burn of the summer months.

Just steps from the site of the hotel, the chic, glassy, 43 million dollar Canal Dock Boathouse—a multi-use 30,000 square foot facility that opened in 2018—may be an especially auspicious partner. The Boathouse, which serves the community with boating and kayaking activities and education initiatives, also doubles as an event or conference venue.

Plans to increase the connectivity between Long Wharf and Union Station—through an anticipated construction of a new tunnel directly linking the edge of the district to the railway—would also improve access to the site from New Haven's central transit hub.

In the coming years, recreational travelers may flock in larger numbers to Long Wharf following the completion of the Farmington Canal Greenway, a popular biking

and walking canal-turned-trail that winds from New Haven to Northampton, MA. The trail currently ends on Temple Street, tucked under Benjamin Franklin College, but the final phase of the project—planned sometime for the next several years—is expected to bring the trail through Wooster Square toward Long Wharf Pier.

The Hotel Marcel has the potential to become an important steward of its surrounding ecosystem, relying on local recreational resources and infrastructure to attract guests while itself also reanimating interest in Long Wharf.

WHAT IS TODAY Long Wharf is a palimpsest of its earlier forms. In 1890, a railroad company purchased the historic commercial wharf, terracing over northern segments of the wharf to expand its freight tracks. Decades later, the Connecticut State Highway Department decided to use the parcel of land and surrounding area to expand U.S. Route 1. After the harbor was dredged for highway construction, a redevelopment project carried out by the New Haven Redevelopment Agency in the mid-1960s transformed the infill into a district of horizontally sprawling plants and a recreational waterfront park.

"The story of urban renewal is a traumatic and very painful story for neighborhoods that were destroyed to make way for vision of the city they weren't a part of," said Professor Elihu Rubin, Yale Associate Professor of Architecture and Assistant Professor of American Studies, in an interview with *The Politic*.

Rubin explained that the parceled, industrial landscape of Long Wharf arose in part out of the city's desperate competition with the suburbs and its "concern for the obsolescence of the city center amid the automobile age." Newly filled in from highway construction, Long Wharf became such a site to create "suburban style" industrial parcels in the city.

Since those parcels were created

on highway infill, Rubin said that Long Wharf is spared some of the "darker narratives associated with urban renewal structures downtown, because there was no direct displacement [of local residents]." But, Rubin added, "it remains a part of a broader narrative of reconstructing the city, and a lament to what had been sacrificed and lost."

Although Long Wharf is currently non-residential, it is hugged by downtown New Haven and the Wooster Square neighborhood from the north and by the Hill, a mostly working-class and minority community from the west. Bearing signs of its industrial history, Long Wharf is today perhaps most beloved

for its public parks, the regional nonprofit Long Wharf Theatre, and the Latin American food trucks that line Long Wharf Drive.

"Long Wharf is for everybody. New Haven is really neighborhood-centric, but Long Wharf means different things for different people," said Aicha Woods, the City of New Haven's City Plan Executive Director.

Unlike decades ago, when then-Mayor Lee played matchmaker between Marcel Breuer's firm and Armstrong Rubber, the city government today has little steering power in the development of Hotel Marcel. But officials have for years been eyeing ways to reclaim Long Wharf as a vibrant public space.

In the spring of 2019, city

officials debuted the Long Wharf Responsible Growth Plan, a 100-page vision to build out the 352-acre waterfront which is currently separated from surrounding neighborhoods by the interstate.

But since New Haven is just under 20 square miles, there are a limited number of ways that the city can develop without directly displacing existing communities. Long Wharf, non-residential and under-utilized, is a linchpin of New Haven's vision of growth, Carlos Eyzaguirre, the City's Economic Development Officer, shared with *The Politic*.

Undertaking this vision will be neither fast or cheap—redeveloping Long Wharf in line with the plan,

into the economy every year amid the development process, and ultimately support around 3,500 jobs once the district is fully realized.

The ribbon of greenway and pockets of parkland that the project proposes are set up not only to open up the district to pedestrians and cyclists but also as a natural stormwater flood barrier. Incorporating recommendations from a 2017 Flood Protection study of Long Wharf, which observed that the coastal area is highly vulnerable to flooding, the plan proposes a raised pedestrian walkway along the waterfront that can double as a living shoreline.

"Our city suffered a great loss when its water access was cut off by

which breaks down Long Wharf into five walkable, mixed-use districts linked by a new greenway, would cost well over 100 million dollars in public spending and is intended to guide planning and development decisions over the next 20 years.

These five neighborhoods will each be anchored in distinct, but connected, sites or themes: gateway, innovation, market, parkway, and harbor. In total, the plan encompasses more than 77 million square feet of new development, including 4,600 residential units—assuming that the district will be rezoned to permit mixed and affordable housing development. The ambitious planned redevelopment is set to pump over an average of 600 construction jobs

the construction of the highway," Lior Tresman, an avid cyclist who is a member of the New Haven Safe Streets Coalition, wrote in an email to *The Politic*. "Any effort to reconnect the city to the water would in my mind be great progress."

IT SEEMS FITTING that concrete—the material used to lay down roads—is transposed onto the Pirelli building's monumental face. Were it not for the post-war car frenzy and highway construction that shot the automotive industry to new heights, the tires that spun out of the manufacturing line at Armstrong Rubber may never have been designed in the first place.

Without the interstate, it's hard

Despite this

to imagine why Armstrong Rubber would find a home in a seven (or nine) floor concrete building on a small parcel of coastal New Haven to perfect the sticky and noxious practice of tire making.

The twin history of the hotel and the highways is rife with complications: when highways barreled through New Haven, they directly displaced nearly 900 families, flattened and severed poor and minority neighborhoods from downtown, and cut the waterfront from the rest of the city. They also helped inaugurate new, sprawling suburbs, traversable by car, as an attractive alternative to urban life — spurting white flight that contributed

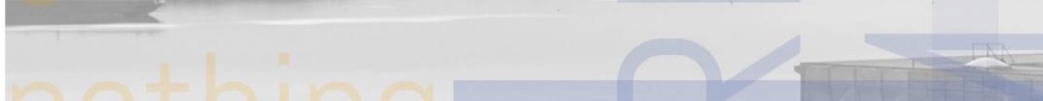
and lost,” Wexler said. “Bruce [Becker] isn’t trying to repair that. Despite this history, we can also go forward: nothing prevents us from having this, too.”

Right off the highway shoulder, a mile from Union Station, and minutes from the boats and bikes, the Marcel may now be able to use the interstate to draw visitors into the city where it had once driven them out. While New Haven sheds its industrial past in favor of a growing service sector, Becker’s office building-turned-hotel relates New Haven’s mid-century urbanist history to a visionary plan for Long Wharf.

“The coming two decades are all about the Long Wharf district and, broadly, the water,” said Hausladen. “The water is a problem and a solution



go forward:



nothing

to population decline and drained the city’s tax base.

If the Pirelli were to serve as the gateway to a new, modern, progressive city, its emptiness and near-demolition suggested that Mayor Lee’s vision of building a model city through urban renewal had failed. Weathered but generally resistant to ruin, concrete Brutalism offered a modernist account of functionality and durability—to “cement” something is to endue it with permanence. But the afterlife of the Pirelli as a buzzy, sustainable hotel, in direct contrast to its rubber-making history, suggests that the building can only endure if it is reconceived.

“We can read the landscape and see it as a result of choices made

for so many things.”

Earlier this month, I took a sunrise walk down to the Long Wharf waterfront and watched the first flashes of morning strike the building face, warming its cool wash of concrete into something golden. Before the year’s end, the Pirelli Building, whose exterior has never been excused from public scrutiny, can finally be seen from within. One might imagine that a visitor may take the elevator up to the ninth floor, catching a sweeping view of New Haven that includes both highway and harbor.



this, too.

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