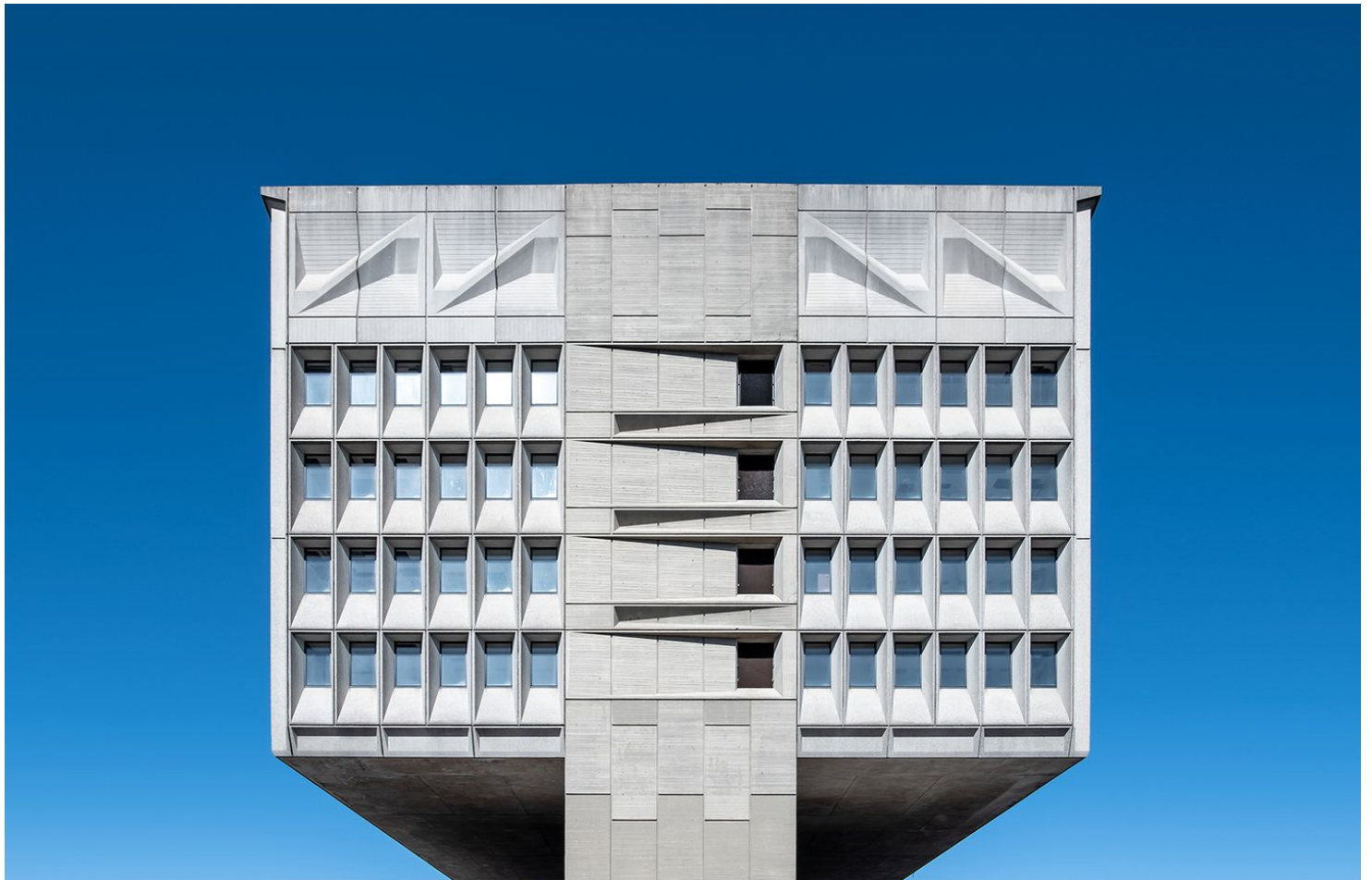


TRAVEL

New Haven's Hotel Marcel is a Brutalist beauty — and at 'net zero,' it's a gentle one, too

By **James Sullivan** Globe correspondent, Updated June 30, 2022, 11:40 a.m.



Hotel Marcel

NEW HAVEN — As a child, Violette De La Selle loved driving past the distinctively

blocky Pirelli Tire Building at this city's gateway. During family car rides up I-95 from New York City to visit her grandmother in Connecticut, she'd marvel from the back seat at the "strange flying building" — the one with the gravity-defying open space above the second floor.

De La Selle, who is 36, went on to earn her master's degree in architecture at Yale University, where she now teaches. A few years ago she read about a plan to convert the long-abandoned Pirelli building into a net-zero hotel, reportedly the first of its kind in the nation.

She wrote a letter to Bruce Redman Becker, whose architecture firm [Becker + Becker](#) launched the project. He hired her as his lead architect.





Sunken lounge in the first-floor lobby. JAMES SULLIVAN

Hotel Marcel is named for the late Marcel Breuer, the modernist architect who designed the building. Opened in 1970 as the Armstrong Rubber Building, it was quickly recognized as a notable example of Brutalism, the minimalist mid-century style typified by exposed concrete and imposing design.

“Out there in the world, this is either the best or the worst building in Connecticut,” said De La Selle with a smile, sitting in the sunken lounge in the lobby a few weeks after the hotel’s soft opening in May. Work on the upper levels, including eighth-floor suites that were once executive offices and a vast ninth-floor space suitable for conferences, trade shows, and art exhibits, is expected to be complete by the Fourth of July.

In recent years Brutalism — long disparaged for its “ruthless logic,” as one critic famously put it — has undergone a bit of a renaissance. Boston City Hall has been called “ugly” so often that the word might as well be part of the name, but when the late Mayor Tom Menino proposed selling it a little over a decade ago, advocates rushed to its defense.



The Hotel Marcel in New Haven JAMES SULLIVAN

The building that is now the Marcel, part of Hilton’s Tapestry Collection of independent hotels, earned a spot on the National Register of Historic Places in 2021. During a walk-through, Becker noted that Rudolph Hall, the once-controversial Yale

Art and Architecture Building on the corner of York and Chapel, a little over a mile away in downtown New Haven, represents a “harsher” style of Brutalism.

“This one, with its curves and lines, has a wonderful elegance and simplicity,” he said. His father, Nathaniel, kept a picture of Boston City Hall in his office, Becker said; back in 1962, the firm produced the program for the design competition.

Most of the 165 rooms at the Marcel feature views of the Yale campus in historic New Haven or, on the waterfront side, Long Island Sound. (A few interior rooms get natural light from Becker’s innovative addition of light wells.) Triple-pane windows create a surprising sense of stillness despite the steady flow of highway traffic at all hours of the day.



Hotel Marcel HANDOUT

The hotel runs entirely on solar power. The high-tech rooms have touchscreen panels to control lighting and motorized shades. The furnishings are functional and smart, indicative of the hotel's namesake, who early on led the carpentry shop at the Bauhaus and went on to invent tubular steel furniture. The art, primarily textile work by local artists (including Becker's wife, Kraemer Sims Becker), takes inspiration from the Bauhaus.

Legend has it that Breuer's design for the original tire-company headquarters incorporated negative space to separate the research and development labs on the first

two floors from the administrative offices above. The building “frames your view into the city,” said De La Selle.

“The lower part is capped at the level of the highway,” she explained, making the open space apparent.

The Long Wharf neighborhood is decidedly industrial. There’s a sprawling IKEA next to the hotel, and the Union Station trainyard creates a gulf between the Marcel and the city. The hotel is considering opening a bicycle concession (New Haven has miles of bike trails), and they’re awaiting delivery on a shuttle bus that’s being outfitted with Tesla parts.

For the intrepid, there are a few sites of note in the immediate area. Just under the highway overpass sits the wonderfully designed Canal Dock Boathouse, home to a new nonprofit organization offering various ways for the community to participate in recreational boating. From there, a short walk along the service road brings you to a familiar site for I-95 travelers: Food Truck Paradise, where a dozen or more mobile restaurants throw open their windows every day.

Until Becker came forward, the Pirelli building sat vacant for decades. He hopes to set a standard for energy efficiency with the Marcel, which is already generating enough electricity to sell some of it back to the grid.



Hotel Marcel

With each of his projects, he's grown progressively more ambitious in addressing the climate crisis. At the Marcel, he has targeted top-rated LEED Platinum status and Passive House certification.

“If you're not part of the solution,” he said, “you're part of the problem.”

In an increasingly disposable culture, said De La Selle, “I'm excited to work on a building that already exists.

“We live in a moment when we can't afford not to keep our buildings,” she said.

James Sullivan can be reached at jamesgsullivan@gmail.com. Follow him on

Twitter @sullivanjames.

[Show comments](#)

©2022 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC