

The Hartford Courant.

Yale Key To New Haven Revival

By Tom Condon

July 8, 2007

I was in New Haven a week or so ago, and the Elm City was abuzz with moviemaking. They were shooting scenes for the fourth Indiana Jones film (Is Dr. Jones now emeritus?) Anyway, part of the Hollywood magic was to redo the storefronts along Chapel Street to make the street appear as it might have in the 1950s.

That's kind of neat and all, but the real story isn't the storefronts, it's the stores. In 1999, 16 properties on Chapel and adjacent College Street were run down and in bankruptcy. Yale University bought the package - 80,000 square feet of retail and office space, 114 apartments and 200 parking spaces - from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. and did extensive repairs.

Now the area is as alive and hopping as it was in the 1950s.

If you knew New Haven 15 or 20 years ago, when downtown was moribund, litter-strewn and otherwise unwelcoming, the change is dramatic. Downtown is alive, with arts, shops and probably 20 outstanding restaurants. People live downtown. There are two all-night grocery stores. Private developers are coming in. A furniture store just moved in from the suburbs.

When we use the word "spiral" in speaking of our large cities, it is almost always preceded by "downward." In New

Haven, they are saying "upward."

This change has been wrought by an enlightened city administration, some good business and civic leaders and a remarkable level of engagement by Yale. And while not every town - in fact, no other town - has Yale, the approach that Old Eli took offers some helpful lessons.

With New Haven struggling in the 1980s and early 1990s - a student was shot and killed on the street in 1991 - Yale alumni started checking in from around the country. They said the city's image was hurting the school.

President Richard C. Levin arrived in 1993 with New Haven as a top priority. The school invested in some major downtown projects, such as the successful mixed-use Ninth Square and the makeover of the old Park Plaza into the Omni Hotel.

In 1994 Levin started a home buyer program, in which the school would give employees \$25,000 over 10 years to buy homes in the city. To date, nearly 800 workers have been awarded more than \$19 million to buy homes valued at more than \$125 million, in what is thought to be the largest program of its kind in the country.

Levin really put his chips on the table in 1997, creating a fifth vice president of the school, for New Haven and State Affairs and Campus Development. His choice for

the post was an Old Blue from West Hartford, Bruce D. Alexander, who had been doing some volunteer work for the school.

For what Levin had in mind, there may not have been a better candidate in the country. Alexander was senior vice president of the Rouse Co., the legendary developers of the "festival market" concept at Quincy Market/Faneuil Hall in Boston, Harborplace in Baltimore and elsewhere, along with new towns such as Columbia, Md.

Alexander and Levin formulated a strategy to encourage economic development, strengthen downtown and neighborhoods and support public education.

On the education front, there are partnerships with city magnet schools, scholarships for winter and summer programs, free classes, tutoring and numerous literacy programs including America Reads. One particularly innovative program, begun last year, is the Yale Urban Teaching Initiative, a 14-month program in which students earn a master's degree and teacher certification. They receive tuition and a stipend, and in return agree to teach in a New Haven middle or high school for three years.

Off campus, Yale is involved with development in the Dixwell, Hill and other neighborhoods. In an usual step, the university bought some adjoining land in the Dixwell neighborhood and built a combination police station for the Yale police force and a learning center where Yale students tutor neighborhood kids.

The most visible of Yale's revitalization efforts is in the area of economic development. The school's world-class medical facilities are drawing private companies. In 2005, Pfizer opened a \$35

million clinical trial center next to the medical school. Yale, along with the city, state and Olin Corp., have turned Science Park into a money-maker. The technology research and incubator development next to Yale's Science Hill campus, built in 1981 and a fiscal drain for years, now has almost 1,000 people working in 22 companies.

In the retail area, Alexander has focused on three areas: Broadway, Chapel Street and Audubon Street, in the latter two cases taking over well-conceived retail areas that needed Alexander's management expertise. Each of the three areas now has its own emphasis: arts and children on Audubon, young people on Broadway and a more mature audience on Chapel. Each has a mix. "You can't make it on students alone, because they are gone for five months of the year," Alexander said.

If Alexander doesn't get the tenant he wants, he waits until he does. Yale can do that. The school now has 90 retail tenants and a full-time person looking for more. Several years ago, Alexander told students who were visiting New York City to take business cards and pass them out in Gotham grocery stores.

A Korean-American owner, Chung Cho, decided to visit New Haven and liked what he saw. He closed his New York store and opened the 24-hour "Gourmet Heaven" on Broadway. He later opened a second store on Whitney Avenue.

Bow Tie Partners, the New York cinema people, did over the former United Illuminating building into a seven-screen theater with 45 luxury apartments upstairs. Projects such as this are creating a serious entertainment district. Alexander monitors the city's image in the area, and it is improving.

People of a certain age - including some friends of mine - are looking at downtown New Haven as a place to retire. Who'd have thought?

Yale's success has been made possible by its relationship with the city. While not all of his predecessors saw the value of partnering with Yale, Mayor John DeStefano has. The second train station, successful magnet schools, a facade program, the Monterey Place Hope VI housing program and many other city initiatives have been integral to the partnership. There've been a few bumps in the road - perfect marriages went out with Ozzie and Harriet - and there's still plenty of work to do, but the results speak for themselves. The city's active design community does its best to keep Yale and the city esthetically honest.

So if your town doesn't have Yale, what do you take from this? Your town likely has something - a strong company or business group, a government or military presence, another college or university - that can help leverage economic and social development.

Also, the Yale-New Haven collaboration is not a big-bang, one-time thing. It's been going on for 14 years, and is strong enough to outlast the current mayor and Yale president. It's had many more small projects than large ones. There's a lesson there.

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