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## Yale Nurtures Elm City Bloom

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Driving south on I-91 into New Haven one day last week, I looked toward downtown and was surprised to see a couple of construction cranes. Hey, haven't you people heard? Recession? Fun's over? Been in all the papers?

Actually, the recession has been felt in the Elm City, and some construction projects have been postponed. But this is the home of Yale University, and there is still hundreds of millions of dollars worth of building going on. And though it wasn't always the case, what's good for Yale is good for New Haven.

If you've been to downtown New Haven lately, you know that it has come alive. It's as if someone flipped a switch. There are great restaurants, clubs, museums, theaters, shops. People live there. This is the downtown that thrived after it knocked down a sports arena. It has two train stations and two all-night grocery stores.

This is a revival — two decades ago, downtown was moribund, a flyover, dull but dangerous. The comeback can be credited to the enlightened city administration of Mayor John DeStefano Jr. and a remarkable commitment from Old Eli. Richard C. Levin became the president of Yale in 1993 with a mandate to get New Haven moving, and he has.

The school has helped more than 800 of its workers buy homes in the city. It

invested in projects such as the successful mixed-use Ninth Square and helped spawn the makeover of the old Park Plaza into the Omni Hotel. In 1997, Levin brought in former Rouse Co. executive Bruce D. Alexander as vice president, and Alexander has worked magic.

He and Levin focused on public education, economic development, downtown and adjacent neighborhoods. There are hosts of partnerships, projects and programs in all these areas; the school owns 600 market housing units and 90 retail outlets, most in the Broadway, Chapel Street and Audubon Street areas.

I was here two years ago and toured these projects with Alexander. I wanted to go back and see how things were going, with the recession and all. The short answer: Fine. Some highlights of the 2009 trip:

- An underrated but crucial part of Yale's initiative has been help in restoring housing in the neighborhoods north of downtown. Alexander has an insight about this that is worth repeating for other cities. To revive downtown, you need people living downtown, to be sure, but also people living within walking distance of downtown. Hartford is hurt in this respect by the unfortunate placement of the highways and the loss of housing stock for surface parking.
- Science Park is positioned to be a major success. The technology research and

incubator development next to Yale's Science Hill campus was opened in 1982 by Yale, the state and the Olin Corp. The idea was that the campus research would throw off start-up businesses. For a long time, not much happened and the park lost money. "Like Brazil, it had potential for years," said Alexander, dryly.

That potential is now being realized (so is Brazil's, from what I read). The buildings have slowly been rehabbed, and are now home to more than 1,000 workers at two dozen companies, along with a new influx of 600 Yale administrative employees, a number that will rise to 1,000. Now the 80-acre area is drawing long-ball hitters from the development world.

Winstanley Enterprises, a major national developer, bought and rehabbed a 266,000-square-foot building last year, 25 Science Park, and is now building a parking garage in preparation for the renovation of another building.

Another big player, Forest City Enterprises, plans to turn a huge former Winchester Repeating Arms factory into 400 residential units. Science Park is clearing land for more development. This and other Yale-related projects are at the core of what has become a \$2 billion bioscience industry in New Haven County.

- Having helped create an exciting

downtown, Alexander is now busily selling it. He's hired the talented Anne Worcester of the Pilot Pen tennis tournament to also run Market New Haven (see [inonewhaven.com](http://inonewhaven.com)). Since Worcester was already promoting the city, it was an easy transition. New Haven Restaurant Week starts next Sunday. Alexander said though retail sales aren't strong across the country, "ours are holding up," thanks in large measure to the marketing effort.

Alexander said his retail areas have some vacancies, in part because if he doesn't get the tenant he wants, he says no. There are other places for dollar stores — Yale can do that.

- Yale has developed great working partnerships with the Dixwell and Newhallville neighborhoods. The school has backed off projects the neighborhoods didn't want, and moved ahead with ones they agree on. "Mostly we just listen. In the end, nearly all of the time, we want the same things," Alexander says.

One such project is a campus police station and community center in which Yale students and other volunteers tutor 250 neighborhood kids each day. Good idea, no?

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