

# Taking Off

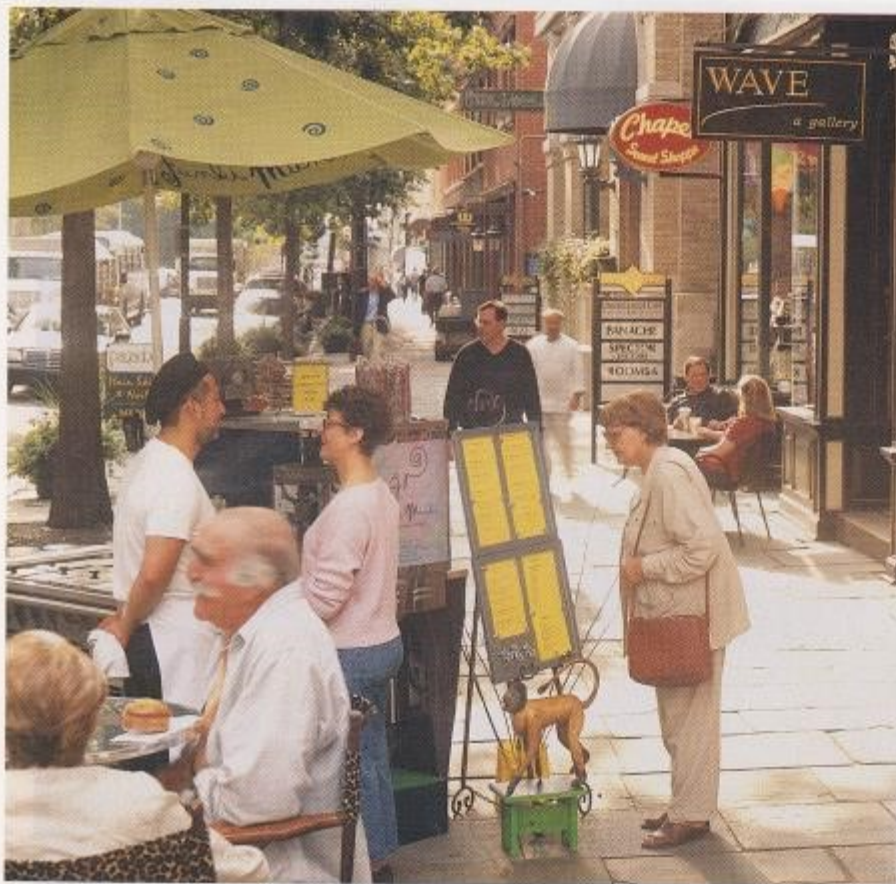
With its unique mix of history, high culture, intellectual ferment, first-class shopping, entertainment and dining, and even a nascent biotech scene, downtown New Haven is in the midst of a full-fledged rebirth.

The song, for those who fail to recognize the melody dropping out of the sky, is “On the San Antonio River.” Ken Shevlin plays it fluidly, striking the oak levers that work the bells above, undaunted by the chill inside the boxlike chamber that holds the console of the Harkness Tower carillon. The bells play over New Haven twice a day, not because someone pushed a button or tapped out a tune on a keyboard, but because someone—in this case an amiable political science major—wound his or her way up the tight circular stair and went to work on the levers arranged here.

Exactly how this music is generated is a revelation, but not the one I was looking for. I was hoping a hike up into the belfry of this venerable landmark might offer a better perspective on a city whose refueled vitality and endless variety defies short explanation. But below, the city remains a jumble, slate roofs of the Yale campus intersecting at all angles, struck here and there by steeples and towers and interrupted by larger-than-life

By Debra Judge Silber

Photography by Jeff Kaufman



The allure of Chapel Street, *above*, is enhanced by cultural treasures such as the Yale Center for British Art, *below*.



monoliths of late-20th-century urbanization.

More important to New Haven's present and its future is what can't be seen from here or anywhere else: perception. Bruce D. Alexander built a career on significant urban redevelopment projects that have included Harborplace in Baltimore, New Orleans's Riverwalk and New York's South Street Seaport before he took over as vice president in charge of Yale's Office of New Haven and State Affairs. He has spent the last five years helping orchestrate New Haven's comeback. "I was never in a city where the gap between the image of the city and the reality was so great as it was in New Haven," he says.

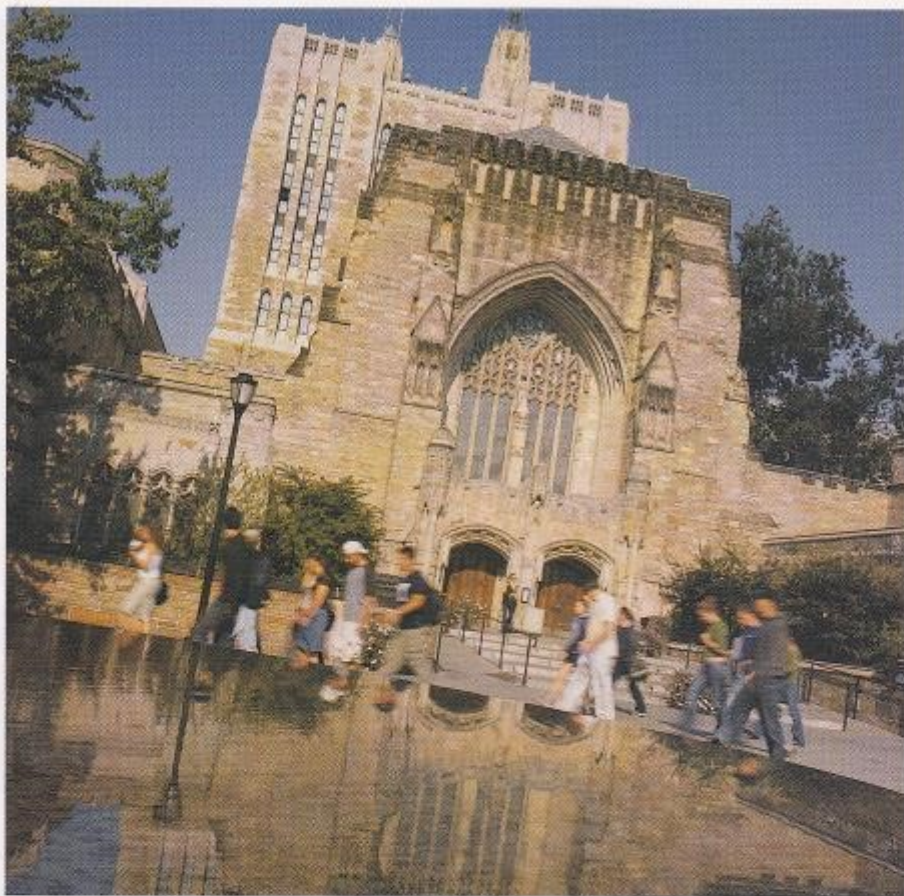
Despite the changes over its three centuries, downtown New Haven remains physically centered on the nine square blocks laid out by founder John Davenport in 1638. The Green, with its crisscrossing paths and three churches, fills the center square, with the other eight arrayed around it. The site of the first bicycle



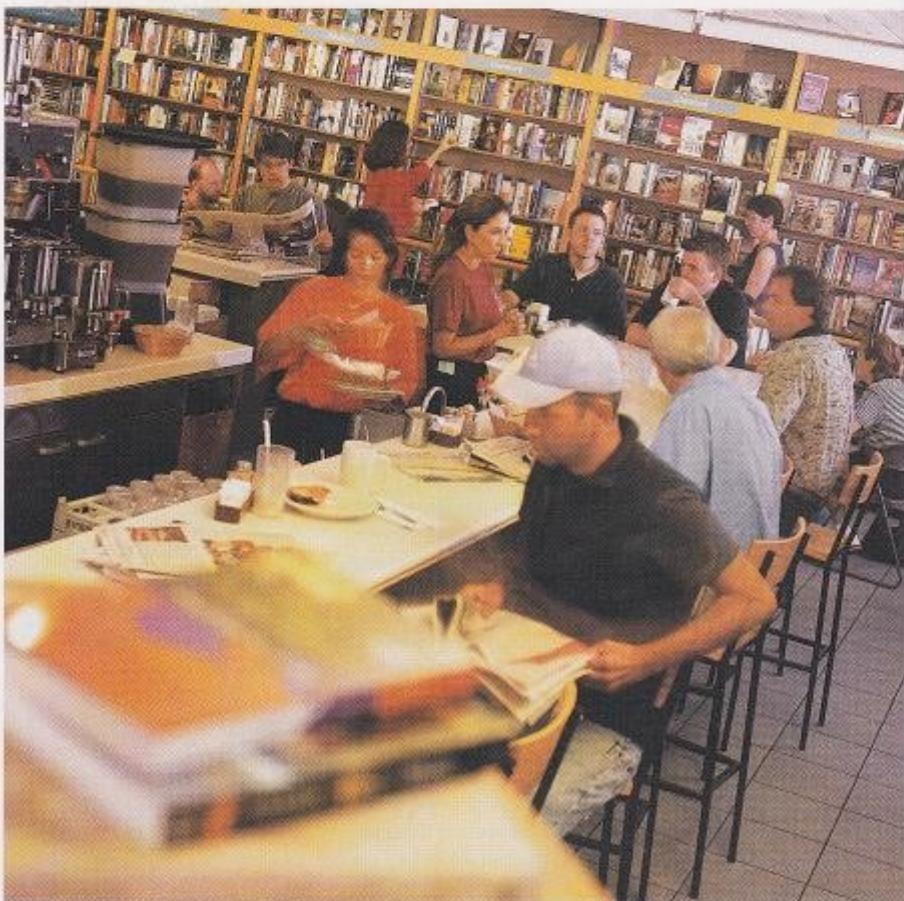
Peter Indorf Jewelers has been a downtown shopper's gem for over 30 years.

ride and first Frisbee toss, the New Haven Green remains the center of the city's summertime attractions—a venue for weekly concerts, an opera stage for the annual visit of the Metropolitan Opera and the main locus of New Haven's Festival of Arts and Ideas. The city, it should be noted, has never been short on ideas—the first public library (1684), the first woman dentist (1855) and the first adding machine (1905) are but a sample of New Haven's ingenuity. New Haven was in itself a new idea, the first planned city in the New World.

Of course, plans change. In the ensuing 365 years, downtown attractions have seeped beyond Davenport's grid. Wooster Street, to the southeast, is New Haven's linear Little Italy, lined with Italian restaurants, among them the venerable pizzerias and restaurants like Tre Scalini and Consiglio's. At Libby's Italian Pastry Shop, the ice-cream parlor atmosphere beckons almost as much as the gelato and overstuffed cannolis.



The students, faculty and staff at Yale, *above*, provide much of downtown's energy; so does the java at Atticus Bookstore/Café.



The Audubon Arts District, just north of where Church Street angles into Whitney Avenue, is the hub of the city's arts organizations. Here, The Neighborhood Music School, Creative Arts Workshop, Educational Center for the Arts and offices of the New Haven Symphony and New Haven Arts Commission share a bricked promenade, and passersby are as likely to tote a portfolio or instrument case as a collegiate backpack. The Creative Arts Workshop offers not only professional-grade weaving, print and pottery studios but the only public bindery in the state; with accomplished artists on both its teaching and student rosters, its shows are an opportunity to snatch up fine works at reasonable prices. Next door, the Neighborhood Music School's pitch is not just accomplishment but enjoyment, which means you'll find toddlers thumping about in tutus just a few doors away from a serious piano student working her way through Muczynski. In



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July, the school opens up its back doors, sets up cocktail tables and offers concerts during its "Twilight Tuesdays" series.

Off to the northwest juts the Broadway triangle, home of some of New Haven's longtime favorites: York Square Cinema, Cutler's Compact Discs and, around the corner, Toad's Place. It is here that Yale's influence—in the form of Alexander's office—is most keenly felt. Yale, you could say, owns Broadway—or 75 percent of it, to be precise.

There is no mistaking Yale as just another face in the New Haven scene. It is the area's biggest taxpayer, biggest landlord, biggest employer and—a point few dispute—biggest benefactor. "There is no town-gown rivalry in New Haven," says Renny Loisel, public-relations director of the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It simply doesn't exist. New Haven and Yale exist as one."

Physically, Yale is inextricably woven into the fabric of downtown. Its academic and residential *continued on page 78*

## New Haven

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buildings, with their Gothic archways, leaded windows and secluded courtyards, create an impression of a city much older than New Haven in fact is. Most were built in the early years of the Depression. Later buildings are noteworthy as well—from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library with its translucent marble walls, to the first and last structures designed by renowned modern architect Louis I. Kahn. The latter pair—the Yale Art Gallery and Yale Center for British Art—practically face each other across Chapel Street. Says Loisel, "People come to see what's inside and they don't realize that the buildings themselves are art." Yale's collection of outdoor art, including "The Woman's Table," by Vietnam Memorial artist Maya Lin, a sculpture garden by Isamu Noguchi and metal sculpture by Alexander Calder, make the free Yale tour a worthwhile excursion even if matriculation is out of the question.

In the past four years, Jeremiah Quinlan has led hundreds of curious visitors around the Yale campus, and bears the scars to prove it (a mark remains on his arm from the time he walked backward into a dumpster). A history major, he is animated as he spins out Yale folklore—how the face on the monument to Nathan Hale is not Hale himself but some unnamed member of the class of 1914; how architect James Gamble Rogers, in an attempt to give Harkness Tower the aged look of Oxford, actually washed the stones with acid, the resulting weakness requiring the installation of metal supports years later. The 21-year-old from Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., who also narrates bus tours and plans to stay on after graduation, is as enthusiastic about the city as he is about his alma mater. "I'm a student of Yale," he says, "but a citizen of New Haven."

His words might as well be Yale's own. The last decade has seen a marked shift in the university's own involvement with the city. Since 1990, Yale has poured \$98 million into New Haven, including \$53 million in real estate investment. Much of the change is credited to Richard C. Levin, who took over as university president in 1993.

"He believed that New Haven could be a great city and was articulate in the first interviews about the need for Yale to make New Haven a priority," says Linda Lorimer, a trustee who served on the committee that selected Levin. "That had never been on the agenda for Yale presidents, and he was passionate about it." Under Levin, Yale has initiated a homeowner program to help revitalize ailing neighborhoods, helped fund image-building groups such as Market New Haven, the Town Green Special Services District and the Festival of Arts and Ideas, and established itself as an engine of economic redevelopment through its Office of

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New Haven and State Affairs. University Properties, Yale's real estate management arm, owns 130 downtown buildings, including the bulk of Broadway and 16 properties along Chapel Street, purchased out of bankruptcy in 1999 and refurbished at a cost of \$3 million.

How Yale fills its properties is carefully calculated. Leases specify operating hours and in some cases even price points to ensure a retail and entertainment mix that is vibrant, unique and self-propelling. (For example, Gourmet Heaven, the New York-style Korean family grocery and buffet on Broadway, is required to display flowers outside its storefront.) Of 71 retail tenants, only five represent national chains—a point of pride for people like Andrea Pizziconi, a development associate with University Properties. Plucked from a focus group by Alexander to work with the development office, Pizziconi has been assigned to pound the pavement from New York to Boston in search of merchants that fit into the mix—from a shoe store on Newbury Street in Boston to a jewelry designer from Soho. "It creates a synergy that keeps us on the edge," she says.

The calculated approach hasn't always been easy to swallow, but has proven good medicine. Phil Cutler, whose grandfather founded Cutler's in 1948, wasn't particularly happy when Yale's Broadway redevelopment forced him to move the store he'd practically grown up in to a new location one address over. But he now says that Broadway has never been better. "Yale took a lot of heat for what they did," he says. "They built it the way they wanted to build it. But they couldn't have done it better." He shook his head. "At the risk of sucking up, I'd have to say it's been great."

Yale has also contributed considerable intellectual and financial capital to the city's burgeoning industry—biotech. Its continued development of Science Park is gradually providing economic growth to the surrounding neighborhood; it has also been instrumental in the conversion of former utility offices at 300 George Street to a biotech center, and its presence weighed heavily in the decision by Pfizer to open a clinical lab in the city. It is no accident that of 29 biotech firms in Connecticut, 25 are in Greater New Haven and 17 are downtown.

The re-establishment of downtown industry is one factor in the significant rebirth of New Haven as a residential city. "What we're finding now is that New Haven is becoming a great residential market. You have young professionals who want to work and live here," says Pizziconi. "We have 1,600 apartments coming on line in the next three years, and a lot of that is because of these biotech companies."

Some of the most talked-about residential redevelopments in the city can be found in the area to the east of the green, near the two city squares dominated mostly by New Haven's municipal offices, the

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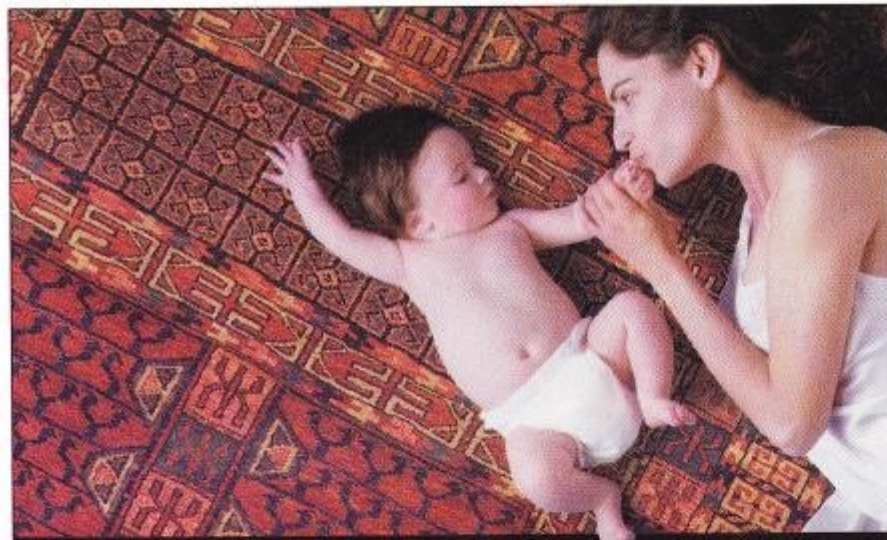
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Snicket in Hall/ox (detail), 1948, gelatin silver print © Bill Brandt Archive, Ltd.



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## New Haven

federal courthouse and office suites. The shell of the Strouse-Adler corset factory now houses 142 loft apartments, done up in industrial chic, that rent for up to \$2,000 a month.

When Mayor John DeStefano looks down on the green from his City Hall office in the late afternoon, he can see the difference. "Downtown doesn't empty out at 5 o'clock. You'll see people walking their dogs or going out to shop," he says. "I think all that contributes to a sense of activity and a connection among people."

It's a vibrancy he intends to build on by playing to the city's strengths—namely, its retail mix and its cultural attractions—many of which lie in the three city squares to the south, below Chapel Street. And it is here—particularly in Ninth Square—where much of the inner city's further improvements are expected to take place. Here, rehabilitation efforts begun in the 1990s are beginning to pay off as residents and businesses fill once-derelict buildings. When a recent fire alarm sent tenants of one apartment block into the street, Amy Romano looked down from her nearby apartment and was struck with a vision of a neighborhood on the rebound. "I looked at all the people and thought, wow—this is what Ninth Square is going to be like in a few years," she says.

Andrea Ward, who moved her women's clothing boutique from the Woodbridge border to Ninth Square, says she's lost none of her suburban customers. "I think we've inspired people to want to come here. It's great, it's edgy," she says. "These are exciting times—a renaissance is happening here." Throughout Ninth Square particularly, the results of the city's Façade Improvement Program, launched in 2001, are obvious. "Is that not the most elegant check-cashing place you've seen?" quips Pizziconi on a walk through the area, sweeping her hand out to the mauve-and-gold storefronts on lower Church Street.

It is also here that the city is aggressively working to rescale and rehabilitate the massive and now moribund structures erected during the "urban renewal" of the 1960s—the largest, and, in the opinion of many, most detrimental physical transformation of the city since its founding. Plans include the razing of the New Haven Coliseum to make way for a complex centered on a relocated Long Wharf Theatre, as well as conversion of the former Macy's and Malley's department store sites into a new home for Gateway Community College. Immediately adjacent to the green, the near-comatose Chapel Square Mall, built in 1965, awaits a renovation by Williams Jackson Ewing—redeveloper of Grand Central Terminal and Washington's Union Station—that will turn it inside out, replacing its bleak brick walls with

open storefronts.

The change can already be seen across Temple Street, where a handful of new restaurants have begun to take root. Temple Street Plaza—a dark, forbidding alley less than two years ago—has become an elongated, convivial outdoor café, its brick expanse set with tables from Diva at one end and those of the Backroom at Botega on the other.

A convenient passageway leads from there to College Street and the Shubert Theatre, itself on an upward swing. On weekend nights, lines form at nightclubs like Alchemy and the Playwright, an Irish pub whose architectural elements rival any of James Gamble Rogers' collegiate embellishments. "It's exciting," says Ronelle Williams, the former acting director of Market New Haven. "It's incredibly exciting to watch downtown change its entire face. I keep telling people that in three years the face of downtown New Haven will be completely different from what it is today, just as what we see today is completely different from what it was like here three years ago," she says. "New Haven is really moving and shaking these days."

With 5,000 students in residence most of the year and a higher concentration of 25-to-34-year-olds than any other Connecticut city, New Haven hums into the wee hours. "I don't know anywhere else you could go to have this concentration of nightlife," says

Giuliana Maravalle, owner of Botega. "The mood is very up in New Haven." Maravalle, who started her business as a Chapel Street shoe store 18 years ago, says suburban fears about the area have decreased markedly in the last few years. "People used to say to me, 'You work in New Haven? Aren't you afraid to do that?'" she says. "I don't hear so much of that anymore."

Maravalle's observations are reflected in the results of a broad survey taken last year of Greater New Haven residents, in which those with a positive impression of the city (47 percent) outnumbered those with a negative impression by nearly two-to-one. Four years earlier, the reception was much chillier, with nearly equal proportions of the population reporting a positive or mixed impression, and nearly that many—28 percent—picking up negative vibes.

Barry Cobden, who has been selling clothing on New Haven's Broadway for 40 years, is grateful for what he describes as the "evolution of goodness"—new stores, more people, less crime—that has transformed downtown New Haven in recent years. But he believes it all comes back to what people see in their own minds. "New Haven is the place to come because people's perceptions have changed," Cobden says. "You can do the greatest, best job possible of making New Haven a better place. But the most important ingredient that has changed is the perception." ■

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