

Everybody Has a Coliseum Story

*How New Haven misses a
building it loved to hate*

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Early on the morning of January 20, 2007, thousands of New Haveners shivered together on the upper levels of a parking garage to watch the Veterans Memorial Coliseum—a giant, looming monolith of steel and concrete—come crashing down. A block away, it stood on its last legs in the freezing cold. The streets around it had been closed, and some nearby buildings had been vacated for the occasion; signs reading IMPLOSION PARKING steered visitors around downtown. At 7:50 A.M., the countdown began and the crowd hushed.

Finished in 1972, the building was a much-celebrated project of New Haven's ambitious construction spree, which was supposed to resuscitate the ailing city. New Haven was at the forefront of the urban renewal movement sweeping the country in the 1960s, and the Coliseum was part of a sprawling complex of new buildings—including the Knights of Columbus building, a brick tower that architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown called a “signpost building”—rising on the southeastern edge of downtown. The building would attract concertgoers and sports fans to the Elm City and conferencegoers to the accompanying exhibition space; then, so the logic went, the visitors would stay to pour money into the local economy.¹

The building, designed by the architectural firm of Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, brought a fair amount of strife. For starters, the building was never finished according to plan: The original design called for a large exhibition hall on the second floor that would

¹ The Coliseum site is now at the center of another downtown revitalization effort that will bring together a community college, housing, a theater, and retail shops. The city hopes to turn the area into an all-day, all-night hotspot. “The demolition of the Coliseum is part of an exciting new development plan for a key section of downtown New Haven,” said Mayor John DeStefano in a press release.

appear from the outside as a large glass box. This hall never materialized, and “the Coliseum’s finances and architecture suffered because this important piece of the complex was never built,” says New Haven’s city planner, Karyn Gilvarg. Moreover, she says, “the architects were responding to the huge change of architectural scale as the Route 34 connector² was rammed through the nineteenth-century fabric of New Haven, immediately south of the site.” Then, major problems plagued the parking structure, and as time went on, attendance dwindled. In the thirty-five years since its first concert (Bob Hope), the Coliseum had hosted rock shows, hockey games, tractor pulls, and professional wrestling matches. But on the inside-out morning of its last performance, the masses turned out to see a spectacle not at the Coliseum, but of it. The building that was supposed to breathe life into New Haven’s downtown was about to have its last gasp.

There were three main components to the Coliseum: the arena itself, with the surrounding seating; the parking garage, which was above the arena; and twin helical ramps that led from the street to the garage, on opposite sides of the building. An example of the Brutalist³ style of architecture, the building was dark and foreboding. On my way to work, I saw it as a grumpy ogre guarding the intersection of the two major interstates—I-95 and I-91—at the entrance to the city.⁴

² The Route 34 connector looks like a highway that abruptly ends. It extends from the intersection of I-95 and I-91 all the way to a parking garage near Yale–New Haven Hospital, a distance of about two miles.

³ Brutalist architecture derived its name from *béton brut*, which in French means “raw concrete.” Buildings in this style usually look like blocky adorations of right angles. Fans celebrate the utopian ideals of the buildings; critics complain that they’re intrusive and always out of place. For more information, please call Boston City Hall.

⁴ To be fair, some people liked it. A small but hardworking campaign, mostly comprising heartbroken hockey fans, fought for its survival and plastered

The blocks where the Coliseum used to stand have always been a pivotal area in New Haven. In the nineteenth century, they were ideally situated between the docks of New Haven’s harbor and the train station, and as a result, warehouses, hotels and factories grew there. In 1888, George Street was bustling with brick and wood buildings, including dairy and grain wholesalers, saddlemakers, and two-story houses. The Third Methodist Church backed up to the armory for the Second Regiment.⁵ At the corner of Whiting and State was the Hotel Converse, a four-story, 112-room building where travelers could stay for two bucks a night, within spitting distance of the train station.⁶ Down the street was the Hull Brewery, which produced more than one hundred barrels daily.

In time, the Methodist church became a German Lutheran church; the German Lutheran church later became a parking lot. The stables behind the hotel at the corner of George and State also became a parking lot. By 1958, the area was mostly paved over, with wide roads and the highway connector and parking lots, sprawling parking lots. No parks, no businesses, just intersections and asphalt. You could argue that the natural, asymptotic use for that prime piece of real estate seems to be a parking lot; that’s what it is now.

For two years before the implosion, construction crews were gutting the lower part of the Coliseum. Day by day, on my way to

the city with bumper stickers reading, “New Haven deserves a Coliseum!” Its construction in the late 1960s and early 1970s was accompanied by nearly as much fanfare as its destruction.

⁵ An 1887 periodical reports “this regiment having been judged, by one of the most competent authorities in the United States, to be equalled in organization and drill by no other in the country save the Seventh of New York.”

⁶ By 1887, the Hotel Converse, whose former names included the Eagle Hotel and the Austin House, was already more than one hundred years old. According to the aforementioned periodical, the hotel was “the oldest place of entertainment ‘for man and beast’ in the State.”

work, I watched bulldozers and cranes chew away at the vulnerable underbelly like metal dinosaurs devouring industrial carrion. I had never been inside the arena; I moved to New Haven a few months after the last show (Tool, 2002). But the dismantling of the Coliseum itself seemed like a dangerous and intimate performance, an undressing on a massive scale. It played out like an architectural revelation bordering on creation. The stoic brick façade fell away to reveal the skeletal cross-hatching of the escalators on either side, the seating arena balanced like a bowl in between. Then half the bowl was gone and half the seats were left. One could have sat there and watched the city—and commuters like me—go by.

Then all the seats were gone, and by that cold January morning in 2007, only the parking garage was left standing on concrete legs. Halfway through the countdown (oops?), more than two thousand pounds of explosives knocked out the remaining supports and the 48,000 ton building fell. On the neighboring parking garage, the crowd cheered and a dense cloud of dust and rubble tumbled through downtown.

When the air cleared, the remains looked like a metal bug squashed flat by that giant, holy foot that comes crashing down out of the sky in Monty Python cartoons. Spectators said that the parking garage shook, and the dust engulfed pedestrians on the street and most of Ninth Square, a commercial area of upscale restaurants and shops on the north side of the Coliseum site. Newspapers reported that you could hear the explosion twenty miles away.

Over the next few months, however, something interesting happened: As bulldozers and dump trucks carted away the last vestiges of the mighty arena, I saw visions of the Coliseum everywhere. It was a manifestation of what my wife calls the pterodactyl effect, which works as follows. One day, someone tells you an odd fact about pterodactyls. The next day, you're watching television and someone makes a passing reference to pterodactyls. And then your sister calls you up and says your niece wants to be a pterodactyl for Halloween. And so on.

In New Haven, I kept seeing paintings of the Coliseum in varying stages of use and disuse. One was on the wall of a friend's apartment. Then, during the city's annual Open Studios arts event, I visited a studio in which an entire wall was covered with watercolors of the Coliseum's wreckage. Two thoughts occurred to me: The Coliseum was quickly becoming a contemporary memento mori, and those art works formed an archive in progress. After all, they were probably the final images of the great and terrible Coliseum. But why was the building's destruction so inspiring?

Three years ago, Josh Gaetjen had a studio in the old F.D.

Grave cigar factory on State Street, just one block north of the Coliseum.⁷ From his window, Gaetjen could see the industrial underbelly of the Coliseum and track the changes in light through the day. When he heard that the abandoned arena had been condemned and slated for demolition, he began to paint it. As the sun moved behind the structure, Gaetjen hauled his brushes and canvas outside, set up, and got to work. He was particularly intrigued by the helical parking ramps. In some of his paintings, the helix stands alone; in others, the Coliseum stands behind other Ninth Square buildings like a coming storm.

A few months later, as the bulldozers and cranes began chewing away at the external supports, Hanni Bresnick⁸ got to work as well. Bresnick wasn't interested in the building for its appearance; she was more interested in creating art that combined the Coliseum's stark contours with its impending doom. She used lined tape on plexiglass to create translucent, dreamlike representations of the Coliseum coming down. She produced a series of six of these panels; in one, an emerging cloud of dust might be mistaken for a cloud. A native New Havener and unapologetic Coliseum hater, Bresnick also wanted to celebrate the destruction. "People in New Haven hated the

⁷ The old cigar factory now offers permanent housing to the homeless.

⁸ Bizarrely, Bresnick and Gaetjen lived across the street from each other.

building so much that if you'd given us hammers we'd have brought it down ourselves," she says. "It was hideous."

About the same time, architect Victor Agran—who himself is an architectural descendant of the Coliseum's designers—felt a similar urge to paint the doomed building. During his lunch hour and on the weekends, Agran took a sketch pad, a camera, and a few pencils down to the construction site, where the enormous machines were eating away at the iron beams. "Initially, it was coming down slowly," he says. "But then it started coming down in big chunks. When they disemboweled it, that was really cool. Those were the greatest moments spatially," he remembers. "Once they disemboweled it and started taking out concrete so it was just a framework, it became an architectural fantasy." He was watching from the neighboring parking garage when the Coliseum fell.

Agran keeps an art studio on the top floor of a brick building in Erector Square, a warehouse complex in the Fair Haven neighborhood. A huge window takes up nearly an entire wall of the room, and from it you can see a wide courtyard and a nearly identical brick building on the other side. These housed the factories that produced Erector sets from 1913 until the A.C. Gilbert Company, which manufactured them, went bankrupt in 1967.⁹ One wall of Agran's studio is covered with dozens of abstract paintings and monotypes. Hundreds more are piled high on a table next to the window. They are almost all dark, almost all made up of assemblies of straight lines or sharp angles. Together they represent Agran's version of the end of the Coliseum.

As an architect, Agran is normally concerned with buildings going up, but this wall shows his strong pull to buildings coming apart.

⁹ After passing through a number of corporate hands, Erector sets today are manufactured by the French company Meccano and distributed by the Nikko Group, a Japanese concern. With the right Erector set, you could construct a credible facsimile of the Coliseum.

His office is in downtown New Haven, and he regularly visited the slowly decomposing Coliseum for two years.

"You never see conditions like this," he said one day in his studio, indicating a network of intersecting beams in one of his layered monotypes. "The things I'm interested in are spaces that are outside the norm, things that have fallen into disuse, or some pocket of the city that is lost in a way." When he started drawing the Coliseum, it was "all beams and space, and as they started taking it apart, it became really amazing. I think that's part of it for me, is to draw these places in order to understand something about space."

At least one other New Haven artist, Bill Saunders, is still at work on his version of the Coliseum's final hurrah. He has set it up for me on an easel in his kitchen. His painting depicts the Coliseum in mid-implosion, with downtown New Haven in the background. It's the only painting I've seen that provides some account of what happened inside the arena: Surrounding the wreckage are hundreds of references to the shows, sports events, and personalities that visited the arena. They lounge, float, and flit through the ruins like cartoon spirits released from confinement. The painting is an unabashed celebration of the Coliseum's twenty-five years of entertainment; Saunders started working on it on the day of the building's implosion.

"Some of these are really straight references, some are real punny references," he says. "Everything here has a root in a Coliseum performance."¹⁰ The cartoon Cosby kids (a reference to Bill Cosby) are shown riding in the spaceship from the rock group Boston's first album. An Orange Crush can (R.E.M.) sits on a Heineken coaster (The Coasters). A lizard-like David Bowie lounges on the wreckage. The visages of Sonny and Cher grace a hot air balloon that flies overhead; in the balloon's baskets are Yosemite Sam and Frito Bandito

¹⁰ He has threatened to make a daunting and probably impossible trivia game out of the painting.

(representing The Outlaws). The mascots from various sports teams are portrayed sitting on different levels of the Knights of Columbus headquarters. The mascots are cheering the explosion.

“Most of my paintings are very New Haven-centric, and there’s nothing more New Haven-centric than the Coliseum. It holds so many memories,” Saunders says. “I think it’s a godawful ugly structure, as so much of New Haven’s architecture is. Despite that, it’s one of the few landmarks in New Haven that holds great memories for a wide swath of people.”

All of the artists—Gaetjen, Bresnick, Agran, and Saunders—were drawn to the unusual and the temporary; the wreckage of the Coliseum was a fleeting glance at another, almost impossible physical world, one that was just passing through. The memory that I will always associate with the destruction of the Coliseum is the birth of my son, which happened three weeks before the implosion. Perhaps in the Coliseum’s final months, I saw creation in the wreckage because I was about to become a father.¹¹ But maybe it’s not just me. Gaetjen’s son was born three weeks before the Coliseum came down, Bresnick’s son arrived five months after, and in March of this year, Agran’s son came tumbling into the world.

There’s no doubt that the big guy’s dismantling and implosion were more than just a spectacle of destruction. Its skeleton’s industrial geometry was aesthetic, its tangled metal bones outlining fantastical spaces. At the end of one urban-renewal movement and the beginning of a new wave of development, it sat at the intersection of cynicism and hope in New Haven’s cultural history. There’s also the appeal of the site’s ongoing narrative, one that says, *hey, check back in with me in thirty years*.

“There’s no better New Haven icon than that to talk about New Haven with,” Saunders says to me. “Everyone has a Coliseum story.”

¹¹ During that time, I also developed an unnaturally fervent interest in gardening.