

Losing a Coliseum

written by Guest Contributor | December 19, 2019



1/20/2007, Xerox transfer and gouache on mylar, series of 4, 2017

Sirens wail. A cheer rises up from the scattered crowds. One by one, booms like gunshots ring out through the winter chill, swelling into a chorus of thunder that builds until it swallows the city whole. Like the accumulation of pops, one million times over; a drum corps, magnified by one thousand; a twenty-one gun salute, but several times stronger; whatever it is, it is *loud*. The news will later report that the blasts echoed out over the hills to towns twenty miles away.

Plumes of dust appear in the crevices of the dark metal skeleton, then quickly subsume it as it falls from the sky. The girders do not fall straight down, but rather sag under the force, forming shallow upside down arches that careen toward the ground. They quickly disappear behind rolling curtains of light brown dust, flecked with dark spots of debris that sail through the air. The billowing clouds fan out gracefully, blooming in every direction, kissing the asphalt while grazing the walls of neighboring buildings and leaving a thin beige film in their wake. One section of the skeleton—the spiraling ramps a quarter of a mile long—still stands, to be taken apart bone by bone in the following days.

It is the morning of January 20th, 2007 and more than one ton of dynamite has felled the New Haven Coliseum. The sirens halt. The cheers ebb and then subside. Slowly the dust clears, revealing a tangle of bent beams and joints, broken and exposed.



New Haven is an experiment in order and entropy, a nine-square colonial grid that has never kept its inhabitants from subverting its rigid lines. There is its Connecticut old guard and their university, its enslaved and its disenfranchised, its waves of immigrants and migrants. At its heart, the

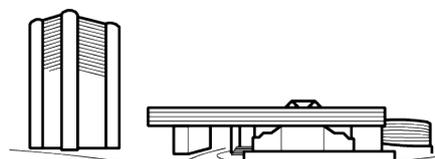
center of the grid is reserved as a Green, a public square in both the loftiest and most plebeian sense of the term. Around it, gothic revival halls have grown for centuries shoulder to shoulder with working class tenements and storefronts, all huddled against the four sides of the square.

After the Second World War, asphalt so new it still stinks carries away the white and affluent to the woods that ring the small city. Blocks are bulldozed. Mayor Richard C. Lee, a former publicist, promises to make New Haven into a model city. Storefronts darken. A stream of federal dollars flows over the town, fertilizing the fresh ground with the seeds of parking garages, a shopping mall, and office towers that cast shadows over the Green. When construction crews begin digging the new foundations, they find old wood pilings, the remnants of when the shoreline meandered all the way up to the edge of New Haven's Ninth Square. The rubble of the buildings that stood on the ground mere years earlier had already been more carefully cleared. An architect enters the frame.

Eero Saarinen—the designer of swoops and curves, the drafter of delicate lines, the *Yale man*—has died. His firm, now headed by a thirty-two-year-old architect named Kevin Roche, has already begun a move from Michigan to an old lakefront mansion, one half mile north of New Haven city limits. Roche works heavier than his mentor, the firm's buildings taking a turn toward the weighty and geometric and away from the natural. The new projects are classical and monumental and round and square, executed in perfect proportions that speak to a lasting solidity. They are perfectly suited to rebuild what Yale secretary Reuben Holden IV termed "an Athens of the twentieth century," and its centerpiece, pasted in from another ancient capital: a Coliseum.

1972. The Colossus of Rhodes did not actually span the entrance to its city—it has since been revealed that this stance was nothing but a medieval fantasy—but the Coliseum does. Two heavy concrete masses bracket Orange Street, a dark cage of steel stretching out overhead. Once complete, the arena is a smoothly-finished base of purple tile and concrete pedestals that make staggered steps down toward the street level. Inside, 11,000 seats rise up in four symmetrical sections and massive ductwork soars overhead, rumbling over the hum of the nightly crowd. On its two ends, two corkscrew-shaped on and off ramps leap six stories up from ground level to the crown: a four-story exposed steel parking structure that cantilevers over the edge of the arena below. Two massive escalators make a steep descent from the garage to the plaza level, crossing midway to form a massive X visible from the street.

The finishing touch is a trio of twentieth-century gladiators—a basketball player, a hockey player, and a monster truck—all lit up in neon and plastered across the parking structure above letters one story high: The Coliseum.



2002. Three hockey teams have come and gone, momentary bursts of excitement that explode in bloody fistfights that leave the ice speckled red. They captivate crowds for a few seasons before struggling to stay afloat in a town one half size too small for a sports franchise. Three decades of road salt and ice have eaten away at the concrete slabs that hold the parking structure aloft. Rain has corroded the soaring steel beams, staining the tile below a deep umber. Nets stretch across the underside of the parking structure, protecting passerby from falling bits of concrete that escape from the widening cracks. The escalators sigh and lurch. The ice melts, the music fades, the stage darkens, and the Coliseum closes its doors. The costs to refurbish it are too high, the effort to find another use too great, and so a new mayor decides it must go.

In the months leading up to the explosion, construction crews begin disemboweling the structure from within while skinning the exterior. Piles of cracked tiles accumulate in the shadow of the parking garage, from which sunlight now pokes through the concrete and steel canopies. 11,000 seat cushions, tattered, torn and covered in a layer of construction dust, huddle at the edge of the lot.

Perhaps it got what it deserved. The colossus flew too close to the sun, having launched off the ashes of the blue-collar neighborhoods leveled in its path. An overzealous mayor, an aloof architect, and a dash of white hubris demolished a city and built anew on its ashes, only to fall to the same dynamite and wrecking balls one generation later. Why did they fail? Perhaps a performer prone to shouting found himself on a stage too small for his volume. Bureaucrats swooned over an idea without the commitment to see it through to completion. Or perhaps history was simply recalibrating, a reestablishment of order in a city brought back from the extreme.



“It is not the first time in history that a vision failed,” says Roche. “There are many ruins all over the world of grandiose visions, which never came to pass or never survived. That is the nature of history, that is the nature of architecture, the nature of culture, the nature of evolving civilizations.”

The New Haven Register reports that on the day of the demolition, Roche left town, unable to witness the final blow.



“He was soft-spoken, with a distant echo of an Irish brogue,” read the March 2019 obituary for Kevin Roche in *The New York Times*. He was soft-spoken. That changed something. How could a man of such strident buildings be so quiet?

I should have known—I spent the summer of 2018 working inside one of Roche’s whispers. The Jewish Museum, an ornate mansion designed by C. P. H. Gilbert, sits like a wedding cake along Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street. It is grand, if only seemingly less so in comparison to the ornate facades of the apartment buildings that bracket it on either side. Its front is defined by elaborate stone-cut reliefs that dance across the limestone, wrapping around the doorways and window openings in a celebration of timeless wealth. Then there is the thin line, the subtle indent that shows where Roche’s extension begins: a near exact continuation of Gilbert’s gothic edifice. It hides its own existence behind a mask of fluted molding and recedes into its fate of forgetting. Here, Roche plays with pointed arches, ornamental railings, and delicate finials that feel naughty coming from an otherwise modernist. From the windowless offices of the fifth and sixth floors, the line where the new space begins and the old ends is imperceptible, Roche’s hand nonexistent. The giant of modernism put aside his own touch to mimic the work of another. As Herbert Muschamp put it, “Mr. Roche has successfully managed to crawl inside Gilbert’s skin.”

With demolition comes no chance of reconciliation. It is a final act, reached at the point at which a building and its architect have arrived at no chance of forgiveness. Roche designed a near-perfect prosthetic to extend the life of Gilbert’s mansion a decade before the city of New Haven chose to end the Coliseum’s.



New Haven Coliseum RIP, a closed Facebook group, has over 1,800 members. Together, they reminisce over hockey memorabilia, local news stories, and hundreds of ticket stubs. Nearly every day, one of a few devoted fans posts a stub and a message:

Eagles, Jimmy Buffett, March 26 1977. 40 years ago today

Good Rats, Opening for Rush 1979 NHC

Freddie Jackson February 1987

One man, who moderates the group from his home in Fort Lauderdale, is responsible for the majority of these posts.

“Why?” *The Register* asks him.

“There’s comfort in melancholy.”

The ticket stubs are often wrinkled, one edge shredded and frayed from the quick tear of an usher packing the arena full as quickly as possible. The ink is faded, the titles of the acts receding into the background. They are troves of detail, with names, dates, graphics, and assignments jammed onto a few inches of colored paper. In their chaos, they speak volumes.

I joined the group late, and felt out of place among the members largely belonging to a couple generations ahead of my own. But I recognized their sorrow, a confusion over the lot that still sits empty as the same politicians who so eagerly tore down the Coliseum argue over what to erect in its place. Driving into the city, where once the colossus rose over the edge of the highway ramp to greet you, a vast open stretch now unfurls, dotted with commuter cars and parking kiosks. Its emptiness remains an open question.



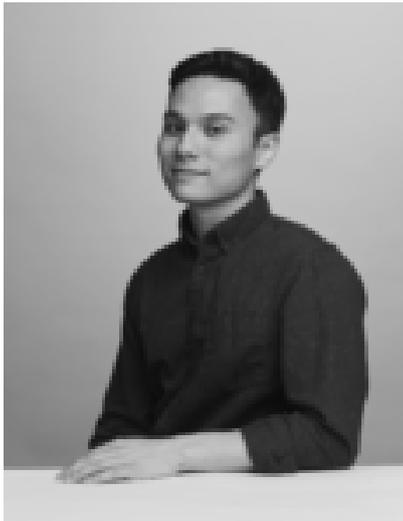
The demolition has long fascinated me—that the twentieth century solution for an aging, underperforming structure would be to level it in an explosion that cast a haze over the city and sent bits of debris hurtling into windows hundreds of feet away. The New Haven Police, unaware of the sheer volume of material that the explosion would unleash, allowed families to look on unprotected and so close to the site that parents huddled over their children as ash rained down on the watch parties.

The scene of destruction is spectacular. About a dozen Youtube videos capture it from nearly every angle, with all types of commentary. Sometime a few years ago, I pause one of these clips, reprint the frame, and trace over the swirling clouds in translucent gouache that barely clings to the tooth of the paper, trying to capture the mythology of the moment. I let the edges of the dust leak into the margins. The image is cloudy, smudged, viscous. I want to claim the image as my own, but even underneath my own marks it feels distant.

A good friend and mentor once described architects as optimists and urbanists as pessimists. About a year later, I went to a lecture given by Paola Antonelli, Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, in which she proclaimed that pessimists are the real optimists and that optimists are deluded. In a sense, both are right. Going backward into the history of urban space requires a criticality that often dredges up darkness, but one only does so in the pursuit of something better. And the decision to

put aside doubt and design for the real world requires delusion to a degree, an over-self confidence in one's ability to find that better future.

I rewind the video. The dust rises from the ground, filling the frame with a murky haze that covers the skyline. This stays in place for several minutes, then condenses into cauliflower-like blooms of debris that quickly shrink out of sight. First, the parking garage emerges, a deep purple skeleton lifted six stories off the ground. Under this, the solid piers fade into view. The Coliseum stands stripped, battered, old beyond its years. But for a moment, it rises again, a ghost of its former self.



Jeremy Lee Wolin is a writer, designer, and recent graduate of Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design. His work focuses on the intersections of art, architecture, and public memory.