



## Tom Burr's Latest Project is Inspired by Iconic Building in New Haven



Conceptual artist and Norfolk resident Tom Burr has a magnetic pull toward structures that have preceded him, and the Marcel Breuer-designed Pirelli building in New Haven is no exception. Burr was born in New Haven only a few years before the building's construction, so it was front of mind (and windshield) when he was growing up. Whether you consider it a masterpiece of Brutalist architecture or a menacing eyesore on Interstate 95, the floating concrete box across from New Haven's Long Wharf is impossible to overlook.

Today, the Pirelli building is probably best known for its proximity to Ikea, but in 1969, when the Armstrong Rubber Company tapped the celebrated modernist Marcel Breuer to design their headquarters, it was a hot topic in the architectural world.

It turns out that rubber is noisy business. To separate the executives from the employees performing endurance experiments on this noxious material, Breuer designed a giant Borg cube for the executives, perched above an elongated two-story slab for R & D. In 1988, the building was acquired by the Italian manufacturer Pirelli, and several years later, when Pirelli decided to sell, the Scandinavian furniture behemoth IKEA moved in, lopping off the northern section of the building's two-story tail for their parking lot.

Panicked, architecture buffs scrambled to get the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office to force the building onto the State Register before the Swedes did any more damage. To be fair, IKEA denies that they ever had the intention of tearing the entire building down. But thanks to the hard work of these architectural conservationists, demolition's not an option. And so the remaining section of the building has sat there, year after year, playing the Brutalist sandwich board for one Ikea kitchen sale event after the next.



Enter Tom Burr. An unabashed Brutalism fan and a longtime practitioner of site-specific artwork himself, Burr saw a chance to revitalize this historic structure when his New York gallery, Bortolami, launched an initiative called “Artist/City,” which pairs one artist with a specific space for one year.

According to Burr, leasing the building from IKEA wasn’t difficult, but understanding how to properly use the space was. Fire codes, capacity issues and a need for railings and ramps might have cooled a less tenacious spirit, but Burr was actually inspired by these administrative complications. After all, his large body of work has concerned itself with the intersection of public and private spaces for over 30 years.

The yearlong show, entitled “Tom Burr / New Haven,” will take place in different phases throughout 2017. Initial exhibits will explore concepts of restriction and access, inspired by the code issues Burr encountered while taking possession of the building. By way of example, four abandoned restrooms, with plumbing but no walls, provided Burr, in his words, “with a rich frame within which to create works about notions of privacy and the body within a public or corporate setting, at a time when the public restroom is once again the site of contestation and debate.” A conversation pit inscribed with Jean Genet’s text from his 1970 May Day speech at the Black Panther trials in New Haven similarly reveals the confluence of the personal and the political. A later phase, more intimate and introspective, will combine some of the building’s original windows with materials, text and images from Burr’s childhood home.

The relation between the idea of the building as body and the physical bodies within that body is a driving force behind the show’s conception, so much so that Burr put together a collection of writings on this subject, entitled “body / building” to function as a road map to the larger project. Some of the writings are his, and some are others’—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Mignon Nixon, Rem Koolhaas, Louise Bourgeois—but all of them speak to the territory Burr wants the New Haven show to occupy.

Specific viewing hours are still being worked out, but the project will be up and running by May 1. Those interested in visiting “Tom Burr / New Haven” can write to [info@bortolamigallery.com](mailto:info@bortolamigallery.com) or consult <http://bortolamigallery.com/artistcities/tom-burr-new-haven/> for more news about the exhibit, along with project photographs and selected texts.