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The new 144,000 s/f Connecticut Science Center: A marvel to the eye; a bolt to the brain

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Igor Sikorsky would be proud of the site. So would Samuel Colt, as well as Dr. Horace Wells. And Mark Twain, after a tour, might have used it as backdrop in a novel about youthful innocence, invention and dreams.

These Connecticut giants of invention would be in awe of the groundbreaking, Cesar Pelli-designed glass building called the Connecticut Science Center at 250 Columbus Blvd. in downtown Hartford. A marvel to the eye and a bolt to the brain, this new, must-see, one-of-a-kind addition to New England's landscape offers an out-of-this-world view of science to us all. And already it is living up to its educational, cultural and economic development DNA.

At 144,000 s/f, the Connecticut Science Center is breathtaking in its soaring, every-which-way presence. Sitting majestically under a magic carpet-like roof, the multi-angled, see-through structure includes 40,000 s/f of exhibition space. One hundred fifty hands-on exhibits greet guests - even the most unscientific among us. Where else could one learn about the Connecticut River, personal health, the physics of motion and the Wiffle Ball, all under one roof?

The Connecticut Science Center is a one-of-a-kind classroom that invites and encourages students to learn about the world above, around and below them. Visitors can talk to Gallery Scientists about the latest and greatest in scientific inquiry and discovery or glide wide-eyed through exhibits named Kid Space, Sight and Sound Experience, Invention Dimension, Picture of Health, Sports Lab, Planet Earth, Exploring Space and Energy City. They can visit the i4 Initiative, a showcase of the innovation, ingenuity, imagination and invention taking place right now in the research labs across the four schools of the Connecticut State University System.

The Connecticut Science Center's mission is to increase career awareness of science, technology, engineering and math among the next generation of Connecticut workers. And the companies that do the hiring are very involved in the center as well. The \$165 million structure was opened by Governor M. Jodi Rell on June 12th after a successful fund-raising campaign. More than \$26 million was donated by Connecticut companies, led by Pfizer, Phoenix, Aetna, General Electric, Northeast Utilities, Pitney Bowes, Travelers, FM Facility Maintenance, WFSB TV and United Technologies Corporation, with gifts of \$1 million or more.

In addition, these and other businesses donated products. For instance, an Ovation guitar from Kaman Aerospace, a rocket engine from Pratt & Whitney and an airplane propeller from Hamilton Sundstrand - both business units of United Technologies - are displayed in the center.

It is safe to say that work force development has never looked so cool!

The Connecticut Science Center is the newest addition in downtown Hartford's renaissance, joining the 540,000 s/f Connecticut Convention Center and the 409-room Marriott Downtown Hartford Hotel,

both of which opened in 2005. All three eye-catching buildings are situated alongside I-91 and the Connecticut River. Future developments in the vicinity include a retail district, called Front St., which will connect the area to the well-known Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and Riverfront Plaza attractions.

Symbiotic to this capital city's development is the renaissance on the other side of the Connecticut River in East Hartford. Rentschler Field, the 40,000-seat stadium of the University of Connecticut Huskies football team, hosted its first home game in 2003. Cabela's, self-billed as the "World's Foremost Outfitters," opened in 2007. And Goodwin College, which opened its doors in East Hartford in 1962, initiated the redevelopment of a brownfields site along the river in 2007 and launched its new campus for students in January 2009.

I applaud the hard work of the many people behind the idea, development and opening of the Connecticut Science Center. From board of trustees chairwoman Cheryl Chase to her predecessor, Dr. Henry McKinnell, and the hundreds assisting them, their Connecticut Science Center is now our Connecticut Science Center. As an amazing, powerful and memorable attraction integral to the renaissance of both Hartford and East Hartford, this building will attract visitors from throughout New England and the nation to our capital city.

Who knows? We may find the inventor of the next flying machine or author of the next great American novel walking the halls.

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