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New Upscale Hotel In New Haven Boasts Bookish Theme

By Eric Gershon

NEW HAVEN- Travel may be getting more expensive and less convenient, but Paul McGowan is betting that this university town will remain a steady draw in bad times as well as good.

The hotelier begins testing his theory today, when he opens The Study at Yale, a bright, 124-room hotel with a bookish theme and big windows that look out on the university around it.

"We don't feel as if we're speculating on location," McGowan, 47, said Wednesday morning as a small army of workmen and decorators buzzed about the airy lobby of granite, walnut and glass at 1157 Chapel St., across from the Yale University School of Art.

New Haven's first major new hotel in more than a decade will be among the city's most expensive: Rates for a regular room start at \$279, suites at \$409. The Presidential Suite is priced at \$1,400.

The first guests are expected today. The hotel's 100-seat restaurant, Heirloom, is scheduled to open Oct. 24, just in time for Parents Weekend at Yale. The university hosts hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, and university officials say it's often hard to find accommodations in town. New Haven has a total of about 1,400 hotel rooms, about 820 downtown.

At a time when many businesses are struggling to stay afloat, McGowan and his development firm, Hospitality 3, are moving in high gear. That means that the company has been hiring - bellhops, doormen, valets, housekeepers, front desk personnel, a general manager, a head chef and others - as other employers lay off. So far, The Study employs about 45, a staff that will grow to about 100 by the end of the year, McGowan said.

Even so, McGowan is concerned enough about the economy to have slowed another Connecticut project, a high-end housing development in Litchfield County, where he lives. But he feels good about the hotel's prospects because there's little competition at the upper end of New Haven's hotel market - other than the Omni Hotel New Haven at Yale - and because the school and the city's hospitals are mainstays of the local economy. Not to mention the hotel's special aesthetic.

Several other big building projects are moving ahead downtown, including a new Yale Cancer Center at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Just down Chapel Street from The Study, Fairfield developer Becker & Becker has begun site preparations for a 32-story, 500-unit apartment tower that's expected to open in the summer of 2010. And the local Marriott, visible from the backside of The Study, is adding about 50 rooms.

However, Centerplan Development of Hartford has cited the economy as the reason for deciding to postpone a downtown mixed-use project with condominiums, retail and 250-room hotel about three blocks away.

On Wednesday, about 24 hours before opening, The Study smelled of sawdust and hummed with the sound of workers testing elevators, arranging furniture and tasting items from the Heirloom's menu. McGowan said that the hotel will be 95 percent complete by the time it opens today and should be in full swing by the end of next week.

Intended to appeal to people with academic tastes, The Study offers lots of soft leather reading chairs and lamps. Seven suites (called "Studies") have extra long desks built into the walls. Every room is outfitted with seersucker bathrobes stitched with the hotel's logo, a pair of eyeglasses. The hotel is well supplied with books - McGowan bought 300 cubic feet of them from the Strand Bookstore in New York. A tiny store in the hotel lobby will sell books by Yale authors.

McGowan would like to reproduce The Study elsewhere and said he has been scouting locations in other college towns and "cultural centers", but he has not settled on one.

"The dynamic of this location is hard to replicate," he said.