New Haven, Conn. (February 3, 2020)—For more than a century, waves of humanity found their way to The New Haven Clock Factory. They came first to build clocks in what for a time was the largest timepiece manufactory in the world. In leaner times, they came for other purposes—some avant-garde, others grittier—but all in pursuit of freedom of expression or experience. “FACTORY,” the newest exhibit at the New Haven Museum (NHM), which opens February 20, 2020, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., documents the post-industrial, underground history of the massive building on Hamilton Street that housed visual and performance artists, punk bands, skateboarders, and a succession of music and adult-entertainment clubs in the decades following the factory’s closure. “FACTORY” will remain will be on view through August 29, 2020.

Using original and archival video and photography and artifacts, “FACTORY” highlights some of the people, personalities and artistic endeavors once present in the building. The aim of Jason Bischoff-Wurstle, the exhibit’s curator and NHM director of photo archives, was to portray the spirit of Elm City counterculture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He is fascinated by the many layers of the building’s afterlife. “To passersby it looked abandoned, but it was teeming with life and most people weren’t even aware of it.”
Another goal, Bischoff-Wurstle says, is to break down the canon of history. “Our day-to-day lives become history,” he explains. “But these days so much is lost in the flurry of incoming information that we felt it was important to preserve these very recent memories before they are lost forever.”

The New Haven Clock Company was founded in 1853. Two years later it acquired the assets of Jerome Manufacturing Co., the first factory to produce well-made, inexpensive brass clock movements in the U.S. The New Haven Clock Company eventually filled nearly two city blocks was world-renowned and the bedrock of a growing neighborhood. More than 1,500 men, women and children, and generations of families, produced 40 million watches between 1880 and 1959.

The G.I. Bill, post-war economics, new transportation infrastructure, and an ill-fated corporate takeover led to the demise of the company, and ambitious urban renewal dealt a final blow to the once-thriving neighborhood. New Haven was torn apart, rebuilt, and connected to two major interstates. By 1970, the surrounding neighborhood had been leveled and replaced with industrial warehouses and parking lots.

Left to languish, the structure attracted the attention of artists in need of space. Among them was Paul Rutkovsky, founder of the Papier Mache Video Institute (PMVI). Focused on activist art not typically found in museums and galleries, PMVI addressed feminism, war, capitalism, elitism, urban renewal and “TV mono-culture” with works of music, dance, poetry, visual art, performance, mixed media, papier-mâché and video. PMVI events offered opportunities to be videotaped smashing TVs, to make Xerox art, and for both men and women to compete in an annual Miss America Spectacle.

Later, experimental artist Beverly Richey took over PMVI and developed groundbreaking work in feminist art and the subject of food as a political statement. She was the driving force behind PMVI's legendary one-day “1984” exhibition in the former factory, which had crowds of visitors lined up around the block.
The New Haven Clock Company building was the ideal setting for the Yale School of Architecture’s annual, decadent Beaux Arts Ball thanks to its distinct industrial architecture heritage, general mystique and relative remoteness. It was considered the party of the year for architecture students throughout New England. For the notorious “Sex Ball” in 1984, the walls were decorated with original murals painted by Yale Fine arts students featuring neo-classical hermaphrodites. Decades later they remain on the factory walls.

During the same period, a notable artist live/work community was being pioneered by a troupe of mimes, the Petaluers, led by Dimitri Rimsky. Intrepid and resourceful, the artists improvised DIY electric, gas, and plumbing lines with the help of a lawnmower repairman named Goodie, and salvaged materials from the factory and dumpsters to create lofts with the comforts of home. Rimsky devised a series of security measures to confound would-be burglars, including doors with dummy doorknobs and concealed locks, broken glass on windowsills, and greased drainpipes.

Bischoff-Wurstle notes that everyone worked toward a shared goal of absolute artistic freedom—working class and far from elitist. Throughout it all, residents, community activists and the building’s owner, Tony Yagovane, sought ways to create legitimate artist live/work lofts at the site. True to the mindset of the 1980s, however, the city refused to allow residential housing in an industrial zone.

The visual and performing artists who worked and lived in the factory went largely unnoticed by those who frequented a succession of the nightclubs on the other side of the building, a block away. The lively music scene included the Country Palace, and Brick N’ Wood—the region’s leading upscale R&B dance club—where patrons could rub shoulders with the likes of Bobby Brown and Carl Weathers, and with Cornel West and bell hooks as they took a break from their studies and teaching at Yale University to bond on the dancefloor. Hardcore punk and death-metal performance spaces followed, as did J. P. Monroe headlining as drag-queen performer Candy Monroe at the 10,000 square foot LGBTQ club Kurt’s 2.
The “FACTORY” exhibit is one of three concurrent projects related to the building. A documentary on the factory’s colorful history is in development by filmmaker/director Gorman Bechard, with Connecticut entrepreneur and historic real estate consultant Bill Kraus producing. Bechard, the indie filmmaker known for creating the New Haven-focused film “Pizza, a Love Story,” and founder of the New Haven Documentary Film Festival, NHdocs, will kick off a second Kickstarter campaign and begin honing 100-plus hours of footage into a film this summer.

“Much of New Haven has been lost to urban renewal and redevelopment,” says Bechard. “We need to preserve both the legacy of New Haven and what made it great to begin with. Projects like this exhibit and the film are essential to raise awareness and build support, hopefully we will make people want to see more.” Bechard, Bischoff-Wurstle and Kraus share the goal of piquing the public’s curiosity about the secrets the old buildings hold, prompting questions on who lived, worked, died, dreamed, fell in love, performed, made art, and experienced difficult or possibly the best times of their lives in the process.

“This is unsanitized, authentic history” says Kraus, who specializes in the redevelopment of historic buildings for urban revitalization and plans to transform the space into 130 affordable live/work lofts for artist and affordable apartments. He adds that the clock-factory narrative can make history and historic buildings more relevant to younger generations. “The depth, breath, diversity and sheer quantity of the stories is astonishing,” he says, “as is the juxtaposition of an august, international industrial giant becoming the post-industrial den of crazed dreams and dreamers.”

Bischoff-Wurstle stresses the importance of recording the unique nature of the former clock factory, and those who occupied it, before the site is remediated and transformed into light-filled, airy lofts. Many of the exhibit’s images capture the character wrought by human inspiration, the elements, time and decay. A particularly riveting image shows the spectral imprint of a wall clock in The New Haven Clock Company’s former main entrance lobby dating from 1872, an ethereal reminder of the building’s original purpose, uncovered recently during interior demolition.
**About the New Haven Museum**

The New Haven Museum has been collecting, preserving and interpreting the history and heritage of Greater New Haven since its inception as the New Haven Colony Historical Society in 1862. Located in downtown New Haven at 114 Whitney Avenue, the Museum brings more than 375 years of New Haven history to life through its collections, exhibitions, programs and outreach. As a designated Blue Star Museum, the New Haven Museum offers the nation’s active-duty military personnel and their families, including National Guard and Reserve, free admission from Memorial Day through Labor Day. For more information visit [www.newhavenmuseum.org](http://www.newhavenmuseum.org) or Facebook.com/NewHavenMuseum or call 203-562-4183.