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UPenn Loses Philly Advocate

Omar Blaik, the UPenn vice president who was the university's strongest advocate for good urbanism, is stepping down from his post, and that's a big loss for Philadelphia. During his nine years at Penn, Blaik held the unassuming title of Vice President for Facilities and Real Estate Services. But he became the closest thing Philadelphia had to a planning visionary.

Blaik's greatest achievement was transforming West Philly's Walnut Street from the university's unloved back door to its beloved main street - thus restoring its importance as a Philadelphia thoroughfare. He helped Walnut Street get its groove back in countless ways.

It was Blaik who reimagined 40th Street as a 24-hour intersection with movies, restaurants and a grocery store. Blaik was the mastermind behind the Hajoca Building's metamorphosis into The World Cafe music club and WXPN studios at 32nd Street. He lobbied for money to landscape Hill Field, once a muddy parking lot. Together with former President Judith Rodin and VP John Fry, Blaik promoted a policy of urbanizing Penn's anti-urban buildings along Walnut Street, like the Annenberg School of Communications - literally forcing them to make their front doors face the city street. While the Left Bank, which populated Walnut Street with hundreds of new residents, belongs on Fry's account, it was Blaik, an avid soccer player, who insisted in turning the parking lot just below the viaduct into a grassy playing pitch.

It is becoming quite the trend for urban university to re-engage with their neighborhoods. The thing that distinguished Blaik is that he also showed good architectural taste - a rare thing for a university official. He understood that planning without good design isn't enough, and he lobbied for top-notch architects, from MGA Partners for the Annenberg renovations, to Todd Williams/Billie Tsien for the new engineering school building going up on 33rd Street. Although Penn was his boss, you also sensed that Blaik cared equally about making the city better. He sat on the board of the Schuylkill River Development Corp. and helped raise the group's ambitions.

As described in today's [Daily Pennsylvanian](#), Blaik is leaving Penn to start his own business promoting Penn-style private development around urban universities - what else?. We wish for only two things - beyond Blaik's success. One is that Penn stay the course that Blaik pioneered. The other is that Blaik - now freed from the diplomatic constraints of being a Penn VP - will use his informed voice to elevate the planning and design debate in Philadelphia.

POSTED BY INGA SAFFRON AT 11:22 AM

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