



SUMMER 2005

Bulletin

VOL. LVIII, NO. 4 NO. 4



Page 16

Universities as Urban Planners

E. John Rosenwald, Jr., Robert Campbell, James Stewart Polshek, Omar Blaik, and Lee C. Bollinger

Omar Blaik

Today, as we talk about universities as planners, community builders, and economic drivers, we must address several questions that pertain to the topic:

- What is the difference between campus planning and urban planning?
- How can you integrate community development with institutional processes?
- If you accept the proposition that universities should engage with their surroundings, how do outside constituents, such as a neighboring community, contribute to a process of strategic planning on campuses that is inherently internal and bureaucratic?
- Lastly and most importantly, can urban universities succeed without engaging in comprehensive urban planning for both the campus and the community?

Let me first give you some context. The University of Pennsylvania was founded on the principle of teaching what is useful and what is ornamental, on integrating undergraduate education with professional graduate studies, with an emphasis on both theory and prac-

tice. Penn is unique in that it is one of a handful of large urban universities in one of the largest cities in America. It experienced its largest expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, during which six million square feet were added. Federal urban renewal programs facilitated and financed most of this growth. Through eminent domain, the Redevelopment Authority acquired and then demolished many residential and commercial city blocks to accommodate Penn's expansion. Having destroyed the fine urban fabric around it, Penn proceeded to physically expand with massive, institutional, super-block-like development.

The institution that promoted the values of service, engagement, and integration found itself physically insular and detached. The physical disconnection from its surroundings eventually caught up with Penn, as the neighborhood deteriorated and started a downward cycle that threatened its academic status and risked its core mission. The cycle is all too familiar to many cities: homes were abandoned, services were cut, residents migrated to suburbs, crime became rampant, and streets were left unattended. In short it was a cycle of divestment. It reached a new low when a Penn graduate student and a professor became victims back in the mid 1990s.

A crisis instigated a rethinking. A new leadership took the helm and decided that Penn must adjust its attitude toward the city and neighboring communities and embarked on a unique integrated approach toward community revitalization known as the West Philadelphia Initiatives. It encompassed five distinct strategies:

Clean and safe: Penn would increase the size of its police force and would create a special services district devoted to public space maintenance and safety.

Homeownership: Penn would provide incentives to its employees to purchase homes, or improve homes, in the adjacent neighborhood, and today more than four hundred faculty and staff have moved into the community.

Commercial development: Penn would convert its land at the edge of campus into lively retail and mixed-use space, mitigating the invisible walls of the campus border by adding three hundred thousand square feet of retail and over forty new businesses serving both the campus and the community.

Economic inclusion: Penn would create a "Buy West Philadelphia" program that supported local businesses in the trade and professional services, adding approximately \$50 million to the local economy, resulting in higher employment and increased economic stability.

Investing in public education: Penn would partner with the Philadelphia School District to construct a new public elementary neighborhood school and then support it through curriculum and resources.

Most of these strategies can be traced back to community demands discussed and debated over the prior decade. Rather than starting from scratch, Penn listened to the community to understand its needs, aspirations, and concerns.

These initiatives were formulated at a time when Penn was beginning 3.5 million square feet of newly planned construction representing more than \$1.5 billion in capital investment. The convergence of the initiatives with an intensive capital program elevated the effort from community development to a full-fledged urban plan. The campus-built environment and its surroundings represented the fabric on which Penn knit these initiatives together.

By engaging in community and urban planning, universities are preserving the values of our democracy.

We took on the challenge of creating a campus plan that would guide growth and development for twenty-five years. After a two-year process that included participation from our faculty, students, staff, and community, we established a vision for creating a coherent identity for the entire campus by reintegrating the campus with the city of Philadelphia – its streets, sidewalks, and residents. The vision and values from our West Philadelphia Initiative and Campus Development Plan began to converge and something remarkable happened. We realized that updating the campus did not require alienating the community. In fact, integrating the West Philadelphia Initiative and our campus plan improved the community, and an improved community would no doubt enhance the quality of life on campus.

If the sins of our past were building walls, now we had the chance at redemption, to build again, but this time through integration and transparency reflected in architecture, prudent land use planning, and smart development. The goal of integration has been met and is spreading energy into the community through art galleries, theater, community centers, locally owned retail, and economic development. The new cafes and restaurants are bustling; the newly designed pocket parks are filled with people, live music, and pick-up soccer games. Our built environment today is one of the key factors in our ability to recruit and retain a world-class faculty and student body. Penn finally reclaimed, in a physical way, the values to which we as an institution had always aspired.

In conclusion, I would like to answer one question I raised earlier: Can universities, especially urban ones, remove themselves from the exercise of community and urban planning? The answer is no: this is a core mission. Cities large and small are dependent on higher education and the health-care industries as economic engines. Our metropolitan areas depend on the economic, job creation, and intellectual capital of such institutions. In a post-9/11 society, cities, with their mixed population and rich ethnic and cultural heritage, are our window to the world. By engaging in community and urban planning, universities are preserving the values of our democracy.

This presentation was given at the 1888th Stated Meeting, held in New York on February 28, 2005.



Omar Blaik (University of Pennsylvania) and James Stewart Polshek (Polshek Partnership Architects LLP)