The West Philadelphia Story

A university gets

into the business of

neighborhood development.

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FOR MOST OF its history, the University of Pennsylvania has been deeply engaged with urban issues. But only in the past decade has Penn applied its intellectual and financial resources to transform its own backyard. In revitalizing West Philadelphia, the university has found its calling as an urban research university. It has assumed roles and risks that no other university has taken, demolishing walls that have kept the university and its neighbors from forging nourishing connections with one another. In the process, Penn has created a model for urban universities desiring to be catalysts for neighborhood transformation.

TOWN AND GOWN

Jane Jacobs' classic work on urban planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (published in 1961), described the wreckage wrought by urban renewal, the demolished city neighborhoods, sterile industrial parks and skyscrapers, and surface parking lots. Jacobs argued that healthy cities drew their economic and social vitality from what she called a "city ecosystem"—the very mix of land uses, buildings, shared public spaces, dense populations, and spontaneous human interactions that urban renewal efforts annihilated. Bringing cities back to life required restoring the damaged ecosystems of city neighborhoods, she wrote, paying attention to the smallest details. Jacobs concluded her book with a declaration that anticipated the challenges and opportunities that Penn faced in West Philadelphia. "Dull, inert cities," she wrote, "... contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves."

When Penn decided to devote substantial resources toward redeveloping University City, many members of our academic community were skeptical. Crime in West Philadelphia had increased dramatically from 1983 to 1993. One in five residents lived below the poverty level. Shops and businesses were closing, and pedestrian traffic was disappearing. Middle-class families were leaving, and empty houses were falling prey to abandonment and decay. The streets were littered with trash, and abandoned homes and buildings were canvasses for graffiti artists and business addresses for drug dealers. The public schools were in especially bad shape, overcrowded and antiquated, with three local elementary schools ranked at the bottom of the list in state-administered math and reading tests. Walnut Street, the main commercial thoroughfare through the campus, was dominated by surface parking lots, while the depressed and desolate commercial corridor of 40th Street at the western edge of Penn's campus had become an invisible campus boundary beyond which Penn students and faculty rarely ventured.

Despite many individual efforts of faculty and administrators to reach out to the West Philadelphia community, the residents by and large felt that the university had turned its back on the neighborhood. Penn was so near, and so large, and yet so remote. The city's largest private employer spent hundreds of millions of dollars a year on goods, services, and construction, yet little of that money trickled down to local businesses. Penn managed its commercial real estate holdings with seemingly little regard either for what kinds of businesses were leasing its properties, or what impact they had on the neighborhood's quality of life. Some establishments were seedy and menacing. It seemed unlikely that a university so alienated from a deeply distressed neighborhood at its doorstep would continue to grow and prosper.

This was the fundamental problem that the university faced in 1994, when I became President. Although some counseled that the problems were intractable, others encouraged Penn to take a leadership role in revitalizing the adjacent neighborhood as a matter of enlightened self-interest. Early in my presidency, I was persuaded by the latter view. Investing in West Philadelphia would pay academic dividends for Penn; this wasn't a zero-sum game, in which the university would have to ransom its academic future to improve the fortunes of the neighborhood. I believed that for Penn to flourish academically, our neighborhood also had to flourish. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to attract the finest faculty and the brightest students.

I also felt strongly that we had to set an example of integrity for our students. The state of the neighborhood was our business. How could we educate and exhort our students to contribute to society if we did not offer them an institutional example of positive civic engagement? If Penn could make discoveries that saved lives and drove the global economy, then surely we had both the capacity and moral obligation to use our intellectual might to improve things at our doorstep.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that Penn should have been involved in the development of its neighborhood. At the time, however, neither my job description nor my charge from the trustees included investing large amounts of my time and the university's funds in community initiatives. It was one thing to support and recognize the efforts of faculty to take incremental measures to solve West Philadelphia's problems, if it fit within their research purview. But to offer to take the lead as an institution in redeveloping a distressed neighborhood—that disliked us—and to assume an unprecedented level of financial and social risk, was a very different story.

Nevertheless, the decision to become involved in neighborhood development was made by Penn's trustees and senior leadership. At the time, the prevailing theory of community development was to work from the grass roots up. According to this view, government entities and private institutions, such as Penn, should write the checks and distribute resources to nonprofit community development corporations, which would take the lead in building social and economic capacity into the neighborhood. In other

words, you were supposed to sprinkle the grass roots with seed money, and watch the neighborhood blossom.

There were two flaws to this approach in our case. First, no community development organization in West Philadelphia had the capacity, or the track record, to turn a distressed neighborhood around. Second, there was no time to slowly cultivate this capacity. Nor could one rely on outside actors: real estate developers had not shown any interest in West Philadelphia; and the municipal government didn't have the financial resources to take a leadership role. Only one entity had the capacity, the resources, and the political clout to intervene to stabilize the neighborhood quickly and revitalize it within a relatively short time period: Penn. If the university didn't take the initiative to revitalize the neighborhood itself, no one would.

THE AGENDA

The community development agenda according to which we would rebuild West Philadelphia's social and economic capacity, required simultaneously and aggressively acting on five interrelated fronts: making the neighborhood clean, safe, and attractive; stimulating the housing market; spurring economic development by directing university contracts and purchases to local businesses; expanding local retail by attracting new shops, restaurants, and cultural venues that were neighborhood-friendly; and, improving the public schools. While many urban colleges and universities have taken action on one or another of these fronts, none had attempted to intervene on all fronts at once.

At the same time, the agenda incorporated cautionary restrictions on the university's behavior. First, Penn would not expand its campus to the west or to the north into residential neighborhoods, only to the east, which was made up entirely of abandoned buildings and commercial real estate. Second, the university wouldn't act unilaterally. Instead, it would candidly discuss proposals with the community, and it would operate with transparency. And third, the university wouldn't promise what it couldn't deliver. It would limit long-term commitments to promises that it could keep—and it would leverage its resources by stimulating major investments by the private sector. In my mind, nothing short of a revolution would do. I wanted to reorient the administrative culture at Penn toward transforming the university and the neighborhood. There was only one way for that to happen: from the top. The leadership of Penn would take responsibility for directing and implementing the West Philadelphia initiatives. To underscore this, I asked our trustees to form a standing committee on neighborhood initiatives, equal in status to committees on university finance, development, and others.

PUBLIC SAFETY

To make the neighborhood cleaner and safer, Penn strengthened its Division of Public Safety by hiring more police officers and investing in state-of-the-art technology. A new police station was situated farther west beyond the campus, combined with a Philadelphia police precinct substation. This signaled Penn's commitment to the safety of its neighbors as well as its students.

Penn took the lead in creating a University City special-services district, which employed both safety ambassadors, who walked the streets and supported campus and city police, and trash collectors, who supplemented city units and helped remove graffiti. These employees were welfare-to-work participants, which contributed to the neighborhood's social action goal. In addition, Penn partnered with local residents, the electricians' union, and the local electric company to install fixtures to uniformly light the sidewalks of more than 1,200 neighborhood properties. Not only did these efforts create a brighter and cleaner neighborhood, which attracted more and more foot traffic, but by requiring whole blocks—rather than individual homeowners—to commit, we encouraged a revival of community associations, block by block.

Another neighborhood initiative involved planting 450 trees and 10,000 spring bulbs and the creation of four public and three children's gardens, which set the stage for the dramatic transformation of Clark Park from a dangerous drug-infested space into a thriving recreational venue for children and the site of a weekly farmer's market.

In addition to making University City cleaner and safer, the university had a major impact on housing, which itself had become a public safety issue. The first stage involved acquiring 20 abandoned properties in strategic spots throughout the neighborhood. The houses were renovated and put on the market. The purpose was not to make a profit on the sales, but to build capacity by stabilizing blocks and promoting home ownership. The university stepped up its efforts to encourage more Penn affiliates, staff, and faculty to move into the neighborhood. But to make the neighborhood more attractive to residents, students, and visitors required not only safer streets and better housing, but also radical improvements in the public schools and expansion of the retail base. The university resolved to plan and build a public school, and to develop two large-scale mixed-use retail development projects in hopes that major anchors would bring

other shops, restaurants, theaters, private investment, and private development to University City.

MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

The university's first venture into urban retail development was University Square (Figure 1). The 300,000-square-foot project was located along a largely deserted stretch on Walnut Street—previously occupied by a parking lot—and included a hotel, a new university bookstore, several stores and restaurants, and a public plaza. The second mixed-use retail development, a 75,000-square-foot project, occurred at the periphery of the campus at 40th and Walnut streets. It entailed two critical amenities that would breathe new life into the shopping area around 40th Street: a multi-story parking garage atop an innovative new supermarket—Freshgrocer—and a movie theater.

Penn assumed all the risks in these projects and encountered its share of obstacles. The initial plan for the movie theater was to create a venue for independent and experimental films, and feature an art gallery and café, a video library, community meeting spaces, and a jazz club. However, a 1998 agreement with Robert Redford and Sundance Cinemas fell through when the parent company, General Cinema, filed for

Figure 1: University Square

bankruptcy and pulled the plug on the project. This happened while the movie theater was under construction. Understandably, some people admonished Penn for biting off more than it could chew and counseled us to abandon the project. Finally, less than two years after the Sundance project collapsed, the Bridge Cinema de Lux—a state-of-the-art movie theater complex—opened to rave reviews (Figure 2). The Bridge attracts 500,000 patrons a year, and if you were to visit the Freshgrocer at 10 p.m. or even 2 a.m., you would see students and neighborhood residents shopping, noshing, and schmoozing together—all indications of a healthy city neighborhood, just as Jane Jacobs taught.

All told, scores of new shops that run the gamut are opening throughout the University City neighborhood, and a commercial corridor given up for dead now bustles with art galleries, performance spaces, and an international restau-

Figure 2: The Bridge Cinema

rant row that reflects the dynamic cultural diversity of the area. Thousands of people—from the Penn community, from the neighborhood, from all over the region—flock to the shops, restaurants, and cultural venues that have come into being as a direct result of Penn's decision to redevelop a dying commercial core into a thriving, productive asset.

University City has become more attractive to real estate developers. Penn's investments have proved to be the catalyst

Figure 3: The Left Bank, looking east along Walnut Street

for attracting approximately $250 million of private investment to the area. Developer Carl Dranoff has invested $55 million to convert a former 700,000-square-foot industrial warehouse into the Left Bank, a mixed-use complex featuring 282 market-rate apartments, shops and restaurants, a child day-care facility, and office space (Figure 3). The Left Bank is a perfect model for creative reuse of historic properties that can transform a neighborhood. Dranoff Properties is now one of two lead partners in redeveloping two adjacent buildings.

But neighborhood development isn't just about building projects. It is also about building economic capacity back into the neighborhood by providing new opportunities for local businesses and job growth among neighborhood residents. Historically, only a small portion of Penn's institutional purchases benefited local businesses. The university decided to deploy its purchasing more strategically. In seven years, $300 million in goods and services was purchased from West Philadelphia businesses. In addition, construction projects were required to create substantial access to the building trades for women and minorities. The university also invested in small businesses that created opportunity for welfare-to-work recipients and other members of the community.

All told, these interventions have been remarkably effective in revitalizing the neighborhood. Between 1996 and 2003, crime has fallen 31 percent. Homeownership and the price of houses have increased significantly. More than 450,000 square feet of new retail inventory has been added to University City, with 25 new stores opening over the past four years. Hundreds of new jobs for local residents have been created. Thanks to a partnership with Citizens Bank, more than $28 million has been made available to local non-profit community development groups, for-profit developers, small businesses, and homeowners.

Perhaps the most intriguing statistic of all is demographic. While Philadelphia as a whole has seen its population decline by 4.5 percent over the past five years, University City has seen an increase of 2.1 percent. That may not be a staggering number by itself, but when you consider the alarming condition of this neighborhood a decade ago, that figure puts an exclamation point on our revitalization efforts.

EDUCATION

Shops and restaurants make University City a more enticing place to visit, but in order to attract families to the neighborhood, it was necessary to improve public education. This became Penn's greatest gamble.

The hard fact is that in American cities, children from low-income families, by and large, are trapped in struggling schools. Their parents have no choice and little hope of seeing their children receive a good education. Middle-class families with school-age children in University City did have a choice: They could send their children to a private school or they could move to the suburbs. What was it going to take to give children from poor families a reason to hope, and middle-class families a reason to stay and become truly vested in the neighborhood?

The answer was obvious: an excellent new school. Penn took the lead in creating an inclusive neighborhood public school whose enrollment reflected the broad diversity of University City. Only a school of this magnitude would capture the public's imagination and send the strongest possible signal to our neighbors that Penn was deeply committed to a sustainable future for West Philadelphia. However, for such a public school to model best practices and innovations to the benefit of other neighboring schools, and ultimately play a role in transforming urban public education, it had to involve the School District and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers in a true partnership.

Nothing quite like this had ever been tried in the history of U.S. public education. First, it took persuasion and gentle arm-twisting to reach an historic, three-way agreement. It took another year of painstaking, thoughtful collaboration with educators and community representatives to come up with a design for the new school, and then another year of addressing the fears and concerns of residents—some of whom were suspicious of our motives and others who didn't want to be left out in the cold. But ultimately, with the leadership of the Graduate School of Education, we were able to succeed (Figure 4). The university-assisted, pre-K-through-8 neighborhood public school accomplishes many things. It provides an excellent education for up to 700 neighborhood children. It strengthens existing neighborhood schools by providing professional development for teachers and serving as a source of best practices. Because the school is linked to ongoing neighborhood revitalization, the school is also evolving into a community center that offers many things to the community: vocational, recreational, and adult education programs; cultural events; and a town hall where the residents can come together to explore and debate issues and visions of the future.

Figure 4: The central atrium of the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School

CONCLUSION

Far from robbing Penn's academic future to pay for this progress, engagement with neighborhood development has played a critical role in enhancing Penn's academic reputation. All the markers of academic success—rankings, faculty awards, student applications, selectivity, growth in endowment—have risen to record levels.

The West Philadelphia initiatives are winning national and international awards and competitions for design, creative land use, and economic impact, most recently, the prestigious Urban Land Institute's 2003 Award for Excellence.

With strategic planning, brutal self-assessment, measurable implementation goals, perseverance, and luck, Penn has transformed its relationship with its neighbors. Ten years ago, the neighborhood was a liability to the university. Today, Penn

celebrates its ongoing transformation into a world-class urban research university that is nourished by the neighborhood it helped to redevelop.

The next decade will see Penn spearheading development primarily to the east. Surface parking lots will be turned into student housing and recreational space. Abandoned industrial and commercial buildings will be converted into mixed-use facilities for teaching, scientific research, and technology transfer enterprises. There will be more shops, more green spaces, and more lively streets as University City links seamlessly with Center City. This time, however, it will all be done through partnerships between Penn and private developers.

Penn is in the business of neighborhood transformation for the long haul.

Ten years ago, few thought Penn had the guts to stick its neck out for its neighbors. Today, we realize that by putting our money and reputation on the line to help revitalize University City, the neck we saved might well turn out to have been our own.