

Northeastern University and Boston's Avenue of the Arts

*An urban university
expands its campus,
taking into account
the surrounding city.*

IN 2000, WHEN Boston mayor Thomas Menino renamed Huntington Avenue the Avenue of the Arts, his intention was to celebrate the role of the arts on a major boulevard that linked Symphony Hall, the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), and several cultural and educational institutions, and to create a catalyst for economic development along what had become a moribund avenue. The first part of the initiative was easy: it gave prominence to a group of already existing institutions. The second—economic development—was a greater challenge, one that would take years to accomplish.

Several institutions of higher education front on the Avenue of the Arts. By far the

largest, in numbers of students and in the size of frontage, is Northeastern University. At the time, Northeastern was vigorously expanding on-campus residential housing for its 14,000 students. Richard Freeland, who became president of the university in 1996, identified the importance of the Avenue of the Arts as highly visible to a broad cross-section of Boston-area residents and an important element in a strategy to celebrate the “new” Northeastern. Freeland wanted to demonstrate to Boston that Northeastern was changing in hopes that Boston, in turn, would tell its nieces and nephews in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and even Florida and California about this dynamic university.

Northeastern hired William Rawn Associates in 1997 to create a master plan for its West Campus. Not content merely to expand, Northeastern wanted to support the surrounding city. A campus planning strategy thus became an economic and development strategy far broader than the university.

The new West Campus consists of seven buildings that have opened since September 1999, totaling more than one million square feet with more than \$300 million in construction costs. An eighth building is under construction. The six buildings designed by William Rawn Associates include one that is 16 stories high, consisting of a school of computer sciences on the lower four floors and stu-

dent apartments above, a student residence building that is 375 feet long, and a 13-story tower. In total, the West Campus has 1,900 new student beds.

How do these educational buildings influence the economic development of Boston? The original ten acres of parking lots constituted a huge “missing tooth” in the urban fabric of this neighborhood. This vacant space acted as a barrier between three neighborhoods: the Fenway, Mission Hill, and Roxbury. With the creation of an intense and dense new campus populated by 1,900 students, 24/7 for 12 months a year (Northeastern has a very active summer semester), a sense of urban activity and security now permeates the area.

In addition, the massive investment by Northeastern has encouraged investment by other institutions. For example, the MFA will soon break ground on a \$190 million first phase of a multi-phased expansion project; nearby Wentworth Institute and the Massachusetts College of Art have both expanded their facilities; and the MBTA (Boston's subway system) has completed a total renovation of its Huntington Avenue line. Private-sector investment in retail and residential uses has followed.

Private initiatives are following more slowly. New retail, for reasons cited below, has been slow in coming. A new restaurant has opened a half a block from the West

Campus. Farther down the street, to the east, several retail locations have been measurably upgraded. While no new office buildings have appeared, privately financed biochemistry and pharmaceutical laboratories have been built nearby (the major Longwood Medical Area is less than a mile away). All this reflects a confidence in this previously moribund stretch of Huntington Avenue. Ten years from now, the impact will surely be more clear.

Obviously, retail can play a role here. However, two factors suggest specific care should be exercised in counting solely on retail as a connective tissue. First, strong retail requires a strong market. Given the fact that college students do not have large spending power and that affluent or upper-class neighborhoods have been pushed away from campus edges by the less desirable affordable rental housing market, there may not be a sufficiently strong market to support extensive retail. Second, a rule of successful shopping streets in the United States (and most countries) is that they are two-sided, with stores on both sides. People prefer to shop by walking down one side of the street and returning on the other. Since university buildings often occupy one side of a street (without retail at their base), shopping streets on the edge of a campus are often one-sided. (The success at Harvard Square, Cambridge, and Walnut Street in West Philadelphia are exceptions to this rule.)

Architectural design has been central to Northeastern's strategy. Campus planning principles required that active public spaces, both inside and outside the buildings, be prominently visible from the adjacent sidewalks and streets. Buildings are built close to the street and celebrate that closeness. Lounges, student activity spaces, and recreation spaces line the street. These public spaces create "eyes on the street," increasing the overall sense of security. Simultaneously, the common spaces in the buildings are visible from the street, generating a greater sense of visible connection between town and gown. Security throughout Northeastern is located at the front door of each residence hall. The campus grounds are always open.

Campuses are best linked to the surrounding city by obvious visual connections. The traditional open quadrangles of major public universities, such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, serve as a visual connection to automobile traffic passing by. The large lawns and open spaces of the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan function similarly. In dense urban settings, such linkages, because they are dimensionally smaller, must be given stronger iconic importance, in essence to counteract the inevitable walls of buildings that separate internal green space from surrounding streets. Iconic

welcoming devices to the general public include: open entry corners, such as the one at 34th and Walnut Streets at University of Pennsylvania; specially designed retail spaces, such as that found at the Center for British Art at Yale; a system of open gates like those around Harvard Yard; and the three- and four-story portals at Northeastern. One cannot be too subtle at these thresholds between campus and city.

While some universities have debated the question of "opening up" to the surrounding community, the debate at Northeastern was settled before it began. More than 100 years ago, Northeastern started as an adjunct to the YMCA, and then evolved into a subway commuter school. Its roots are so deep in the city that any suggestion of separation was viewed as sacrilege.

On many residential campuses, the students become only inwardly focused. However, on Northeastern's West Campus, just as the city has been welcomed to the campus through architectural devices, the students have been pushed into the city through the same thresholds. Northeastern's urban location and its well recognized co-operative education program have served to actively engage students with the city. This engagement moves far beyond the lively bars and restaurants that mark the edges of many urban campuses.

Architecture plays a prominent role in joining the campus and the surrounding city. The two very large portals (one four stories high) that lead into the campus are prominent connections to the city, opening views from the street into an interior quadrangle that is full of student activity. One portal leads to a major subway stop near the center of the campus, thereby encouraging the general public to enter and pass through the university. A convenience store facing the interior of the quadrangle is open to the public, thereby increasing the sense that the university is open and accessible to all. The convenience store is operated by Wollaston's, a chain that had a store in another precinct of the campus. The West Campus store serves more than 2,500 students who live in apartment-style residence halls, many of whom are not on the school's meal plan, as well as many non-student residents. In essence, this residential customer base represents a "neighborhood" large enough to support a store.

A 16-story tower has become the new university landmark on the city's skyline. The most prominent feature of this building is an all-glass façade that faces the Avenue of the Arts. At night, four stories of public corridors and lounge spaces of the School of Computer Science are brilliantly lit, less than 20 feet from the sidewalk. The upper 12 floors are student apartments with all-glass walls (the bed-

Figure 1: Northeastern University: a beacon on the avenue



lected part of Huntington Avenue. This connectivity, this re-creation of a vital and vigorous urban fabric, this celebration of a permeable and transparent and thus accessible face of a major University, all suggest a framework for the economic development of the area over the coming decade. That this was developed as a non-profit institution's vigorous investment in its neighborhood in only seven years is remarkable, as is the sense that these buildings are leading to a turn-around of the economic fortunes of this important part of Boston.

rooms partially protected by translucent glass). Since the students study well into the night, the building becomes a beacon on the Avenue of the Arts. Specially selected glass gives the building a shimmering quality during the day. For automobile traffic heading inbound or outbound on the Avenue of the Arts, the signature element of the building is a 15-foot-wide, 220-foot-high "sliver of glass" facing east and west, another beacon that emits light day and night.

The new, two-block-long face of Northeastern not only connects the disparate neighborhoods, but also gives a sense of excitement to a previously neg-