

**Urban Renewal Renewed?**  
**Recent Real Estate Development**  
**at the**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

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**Introduction**

This paper will analyze the dramatic real estate development in University City, a neighborhood located in West Philadelphia, as a manifestation of the University of Pennsylvania's (Penn) vision for the neighborhood. Especially since 1994, the University has dramatically transformed the landscape of University City; these changes manifested themselves not only through dramatic physical development, but also in the marketing and "imaging" of an entire neighborhood, as a strategy for security and gentrification around the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) campus.

While this development explicitly aims to build partnerships with the West Philadelphia community, I will argue that the planning processes and strategic plans put forward, as well as the vernacular of the spatial configuration work in opposition to that, and in fact, merely serve to reinforce and perpetuate the power dynamics between the University and the neighborhood that has existed for decades. Ultimately, I will draw out the implications of Penn's institutional embrace of physical determinism, reveal its limitations, and propose alternative methods of implementation that may better benefit both the university and neighborhood constituencies, while building strong partnerships.

**Background**

The history of the University of Pennsylvania's presence in West Philadelphia dates from the 1870s<sup>1</sup>. Much has been written about the 1960s, a time of urban renewal on campus, when Drexel and Penn systematically dismantled the Black Bottom

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<sup>1</sup> In June 1871 the first cornerstone of the University of Pennsylvania's new College Hall was laid in West Philadelphia. The University would be able to pursue their much-needed expansion from their downtown location at 9<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut Streets in West Philadelphia. At the time, the distance to West Philadelphia and the lack of infrastructure made the location remote and fairly inexpensive. However, with the University's presence, the land became more valuable.

neighborhood for the sake of their expansions. Some of the most interesting development, however, has occurred in the past ten years.

Beginning in 1994 with the hiring of Judith Rodin as Penn's seventh president, the development of West Philadelphia took a dramatic turn. Rodin initiated the Penn Agenda for Excellence, a five-year plan for urban redevelopment and improved community partnerships.<sup>2</sup> University-owned, vacant land was promptly developed, independent landlords bought out, cleanups coordinated, curriculum developed, and massive public relations initiated by the University. This past year, Judith Rodin resigned from her post as President and will be leaving the University this summer. After an astounding ten year presidency, Rodin and her administration have successfully facilitated dramatic changes in the landscape of Penn and University City.

While Rodin and her colleagues celebrate these transformations, a more careful analysis is necessary. What is the subtext of this spatial expansion? What messages have the planning processes sent? How has the surrounding neighborhood responded? Has Penn really improved relationships with the community or has it merely re-coded the existing power dynamic between the University and the neighborhood? Through a descriptive analysis of a few key development projects on campus, I hope to answer these questions and provide guidance for more sensitive development practice.

### **Physical Determinism**

The argument that buildings or site plans hold intrinsic symbolic meaning is too simplified and deterministic. However, buildings and spatial configurations do serve as symbols; as much as other symbols represent social constructions of meaning,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.upenn.edu/president/agenda.html>

architecture and urban design can be read as a code. As Murray Edelman suggests, buildings serve “as an objectification of whatever shared meaning a particular group of people need to reinforce in each other” (75). Buildings can thus serve as a unifying or divisive force; the existing relationships determine the role they play because they serve only as a codification of these relationships. In Edelman’s words, “Spaces reaffirm a dialectic of hierarchical distinctions” (80) and “it is the meaning read into a scene, rather than its physical properties, as such, that is critical” (87).

Thus, the deconstruction and analysis of a particular space is arguably a futile effort without feedback from individuals and/or communities who use the space (or who are excluded from use because of new configurations). Architecture and spatial design is subject to the perennial debate about whose meaning dictates the message conveyed. Is it the urban designer’s vision and intention for the use and narrative of a space, or rather, the users and surrounding public who must read and interpret the vernacular of the place? Edelman argues that what matters in the determination of meaning are the “responses, not the intentions” (84).

In considering a massive real estate development, one can not help think of utopian visions. David Harvey’s analysis of the role of utopian dreams in the city informs the discussion. He suggests that “urban politics is fraught with deeply held, though often subterranean, emotions and political passions in which utopian dreams have a particular place.” Visions for the construction of space thus represent a manifestation of conflicts. Of great importance, however, is how those conflicts are exacerbated or diffused through the physical actualization of this utopian vision.

Considering the economic and political realities of real estate development in a city today, the construction of meaning begins one step back, at the mere initiation of a large scale development project. Regardless of what the intended or ultimate design conveys, the act of production of space and transformation of landscape conveys a particular power dynamic. Access to economic and political resources place large institutions in the position to embark on development and redevelopment projects, which inherently result in the systematic construction and reconstruction of space.

Starting with this assumption calls for a heightened consciousness about the design and implementation of such development, so as to ensure a democratic process and design that relies on multiple voices and a consistent dialogue over time. However, this argument begs the question: is it possible to create a democratic design process, when democracy relies on a dialogue and feedback, while real estate development and design rely more heavily on a singular vision and permanence? Further, can an institution serve as a mediating role between these two processes?

Perhaps the function of buildings is as or more important than the design. One may get lost in the semiotic argument around implicit meaning-making of buildings. However, usage offers more explicit messages about the intended community of people. As Edelman says, “Spaces in general present themselves as having an explicit use function and an aesthetic function; that they can also condense psychological and economic anxieties people do not want to face makes them all the more potent as political symbols, for the explicit function covers for the unconscious one” (89). In this way, the uses and aesthetic choices made for the built environment serve as manifestations of

explicit intentions, and also as a means to obscure or relieve underlying tensions between communities.

Increasingly, public spaces in the United States have become privatized spaces, or alternatively, private entities have created semi-public spaces, which, while open to a broader public remain controlled and guarded by a private parties. While these spaces are ostensibly for the general public, their uses are predicated on consumption, and therefore create an implicit exclusivity, only welcoming those with enough purchasing power or desire to participate in these consumptive activities. As Margaret Crawford points out, “Consumption hierarchies, in which commodities define life-styles, now furnish indications of status more visible than the economic relationship of class positions” (11). This dependence on commodities extends not only to class relations but also towards individual identity. Again, Crawford suggests that if “the world is understood through commodities, then personal identity depends on one’s ability to compose a coherent self-image through the selection of a distinct personal set of commodities” (12).

Developers design and build public spaces with these ideas in mind, which conflates development of public thoroughfares and commons with cagey marketing strategies. Michael Sorkin’s cynical view of redevelopment also encapsulates this idea: “Here is urban renewal with a sinister twist, an architecture of deception which, in its happy-face familiarity, constantly distances itself from the most fundamental realities...such design is based in the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to the real needs and traditions who inhabit it” (xiv). Of course uses, needs, and traditions change over time. The question is what is the dialectic

between the built environment and these changes? Do they facilitate and foster each other? Is one caused by the other? Does institutional power affect this dialectic, skewing it in the service of its own hegemonic agenda?

### **University Real Estate Development**

University real estate development is not an entirely new phenomenon. College and university campuses, especially urban ones, have always required the acquisition of land from its surrounding environs. Likewise, in the early- and mid-eighties publications such as *Business Week* cite university real estate investment as a new, innovative strategy for bringing financial resources into the university. Brian P. Kelly, a professor of architecture at the University of Maryland at College Park, notes that “Campus planning...occurred mostly behind closed doors” (Lewis, B20). He compares campus planning to “medieval fiefdoms,” in which development concerned only a small number of senior officials, facilities managers, and consultants, while other university and neighborhood stakeholders remained outside of the process.

The past decade has brought a notable change to the development process, however. Universities now work to provide a more transparent process in which neighbors and other stakeholders engage openly. In his recommendations for improved campus planning initiatives, Roger K. Lewis explicitly addresses the “town gown” tension: “Love-hate relationships are typical...colleges must look beyond their borders and coordinate their planning with municipal officials and neighbors” (B20). Also explicit is the need to use the physical planning and development as a means to “represent and facilitate” a university’s intellectual and academic mission.

### **Strategic Planning and Development at the University of Pennsylvania**

With respect to these trends of campus planning, Penn has not behaved differently from other colleges and universities. Penn was a key player in the Urban Renewal efforts of West Philadelphia in the 1950s; in some instances, in fact, Penn's political influence expedited neighborhood demolition. Penn also has maintained real estate holdings in West Philadelphia and elsewhere. Recently, Penn has also shifted its public relations, if not its planning process, around the University's real estate development activities.

In the following section, I will present some of the explicit vision and goals propagated by Penn as part of their initiatives under the "Agenda for Excellence" and "The Leadership Agenda." Second, I will use Penn's new 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor initiative as a specific example of their visioning process. Finally, I will contextualize this development in light of the theoretical constructs laid out previously.

#### ***Agenda for Excellence and The Leadership Agenda***

In 1995, the University, under Judith Rodin's leadership, published the Agenda for Excellence (<http://www.upenn.edu/president/agenda.html>). The Agenda served as a five year strategic plan to set "critical priorities" for the university through 2000. The introduction of the Agenda asserts a clear identity of the university, which fulfills Benjamin Franklin's goal to "learn everything that is useful and everything that is ornamental." Penn creates an environment of "multidisciplinary education" that includes liberal arts, professional schools, and research endeavors. The Agenda serves as a framework for Penn to "ensure its stature as one of a small number of genuinely outstanding universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," and further insists on a "clear institutional identity."



The Agenda for Excellence concentrates on the academic and intellectual missions of the University. However, some of these goals expand to include Penn's relationship with the neighborhood. Under Subgoal 3(b), the Agenda calls for the implementation of a "University-wide Public Safety Master Plan to reduce crime and enhance the security of people and property on campus and in adjacent neighborhoods." Further, Strategic Goal 5 directly speaks to community relations:

The University will plan, direct, and integrate its government and community relations to enhance its mission of teaching, research, and service. The University also will clarify and strengthen the links between its academic programs and the public service performed by its faculty, students, administrators, and staff. To achieve this goal, the University, working with the schools, will take the following steps, among others...

- Build partnerships with corporations, educational institutions, medical institutions, medical institutions, and others that have financially invested in Philadelphia, to share resources and services that strengthen the community.
- Consistent with the University's basic missions of teaching and research, work with the community to promote economic development and increase the quality of life in West Philadelphia.

This plan from 1995 reflects the desire to move Penn up in the national rankings of undergraduate colleges and universities, as well as to focus on the internal University community. The Agenda makes reference to inclusive campus planning only in the context of these efforts' contribution to University vitality.

In April 2002, the University published a second strategic plan, entitled "Building on Excellence: The Leadership Agenda"

([http://www.upenn.edu/provost/strategic\\_plan.html](http://www.upenn.edu/provost/strategic_plan.html)). This new plan "builds on the Agenda for Excellence, but updates it to reflect Penn's current context." The Leadership Agenda furthers a clear vision for the University, calling for a "singular and distinctive role in shaping the future of society, in this country and around the world." Like the

Agenda for Excellence, The Leadership Agenda contextualizes Penn in the “practical genius of Benjamin Franklin,” which sought to link theoretical and applied endeavors “while promoting service to mankind, country, friends and family.” Penn also sees its mission as “a complex and continuing act of negotiation between the old and the new, conserving, interpreting, and transmitting mankind’s legacy of intellectual and cultural achievement while at the same time adding to that store by producing and transmitting new knowledge.”

These bold and lofty visions for the University lead to a more complex set of goals and initiatives that more completely acknowledge the University’s place in the City of Philadelphia, as well as in a global sphere. Through their repeated references to service, they create an immediate connection to the external environment of Penn, in contrast to the more internal goals of the Agenda for Excellence. This strategic plan also refers to the “urban context” in its introduction, identifying civic engagement “in all its multifaceted forms” as “the norm and hallmark of Penn’s faculty and students, as it has of the university itself.” Further, the Leadership Agenda repeatedly emphasizes the “larger human communities” the University serves; the University’s role as a “global competitor;” and the critical part that the University plays in the economic vitality of the City, Region, and the State. Again these multiple connections refer back to the University’s well-being: “Finding ways to help Philadelphia renew its regional economy will be one major determinant of our own future success.” This clear articulation of community relations seemingly marks Penn’s transition from “feudalism” to more inclusive visions and planning processes.

Another notable difference between the Agenda for Excellence and the Leadership Agenda is that the latter incorporates civic engagement and service-learning throughout the document, not only in a few specific goals. For example, the goal concerning “excellence in all undergraduate education programs” speaks of teaching students “an education for citizenship,” through the development of courses that “integrate campus and city...institutions.” The urban context receives individual attention in a section called “The Urban Community.” This explicit goal succinctly frames Penn’s urban context as a unique asset on which the University can build a reputation and distinction:

Goal: As one of the nation’s premier academic institutions, Penn can and should be a nationally recognized leader in urbanism...Our location creates many opportunities for model partnerships, analysis of critical problems confronting cities, and the design and testing of new approaches to urban revitalization...If we wish to achieve a national reputation in urbanism and public policy, a central organizing mechanism that would provide visibility for these efforts is essential.

In light of this goal, the University announced the advent of the Penn Urban Research Institute, an interdisciplinary institute headed by faculty from the School of Design and the Wharton School.

The Leadership Agenda contains an entire section called “Creating the Capacity for Success,” in which the University actively articulates its “non-academic activities” as an integral part of its operations. The second goal in this section states: “Create a physical environment supportive of the academic and research missions of the University, both on campus and in its surrounding environment.” The narrative continues, focusing on the fact that Penn’s success depends on attracting high quality students and faculty and that “attractive, functional physical facilities are essential” to this success. Further, Penn articulates that the campus facilities represent only one piece of the physical

environment, as they must be “woven together with other determinants of the Penn environment – a vibrant cultural hub, varied shopping and dining opportunities, and efficient transportation.”

The recommendations suggest the creation of “a culture that encourages Penn and the surrounding community to become a more inviting and supportive place within which to live, work, study, and visit” through improved integration of “food, retail, and cultural venues;” support of “the development and improvement of arts and cultural venues on the Walnut Street and 40<sup>th</sup> Street corridors;” and the maintenance of “the ongoing improvements to Penn’s West Philadelphia neighborhood in partnership with other University City-based institutions, private businesses, local foundations, and the public sector.” The devotion to these strategies represents a dramatic shift of Penn’s focus from a primarily internal interest to external projects and programs. Further, it represents a commitment to physical determinism never before expressed.

### *The 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor*

One of the newest initiatives for the University is a comprehensive visioning process for the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor. After the success of University Square (also known as “Sansom Common,” “Sansom Row,” “Shops at Penn,” and “36<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Street,” alternately between 2000 and September 2002), the University is looking to create another retail and restaurant district on 40<sup>th</sup> Street, in a more organic way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> University Square provides extensive retail and restaurant space for the University and surrounding community. Current tenants include Smith Bros., EMS, and Urban Outfitters, three up-scale clothing stores targeting a generation X market; Cosi coffee shop and restaurant; Douglas Cosmetics; and the Inn at Penn, a hotel run by Hilton. The development, sited on a former of a parking lot, was completed in 1999. Recently, the Citizen’s Bank located across 36<sup>th</sup> Street from the major development has been converted into an Ann Taylor store, which, according to Eric Goldstein, Executive Director of University City District, is the highest grossing Ann Taylor in the area, earning approximately \$410 per square foot (compared with \$350 per square foot for other area stores). University Square employs a new urbanism aesthetic and incorporates a number of open space plazas and eating areas. The scale of the building is fairly large, although, like other New Urbanism design standards, harkens a small-town aesthetic.

The University has identified a few key retail and cultural assets as the anchor of future 40<sup>th</sup> Street development. The University developed a 24-hour grocery store at the corner of 40<sup>th</sup> and Walnut, a much-needed retail use for the neighborhood, and like University Square, successfully created a vibrant development on a former parking lot. It also contracted with the Bridge du Lux, an upscale movie theater, which proves to be a popular entertainment venue for the campus and broader Philadelphia communities. Perhaps the cornerstone venue that perpetuates this organic “arts and culture” image is the Rotunda, a venue developed as part of a student initiative, that sits just west of 40<sup>th</sup> Street on Walnut Street. The Rotunda houses the Foundation, a student-initiated and – oriented performing arts organization.<sup>4</sup>

Penn is not a monolithic entity, although in the case of the Rotunda, there seems to be consensus across a number of vested departments. The real estate division sees the Rotunda as a link between the University’s academic mission and its real estate endeavors. Further, it provides a wonderful opportunity for community development that represents a true partnership between the University and the community. The Center for Community Partnerships sees the Rotunda as the ultimate success of its goals of providing and creating service-learning initiatives that benefit both students and the community. The President’s office sees the Rotunda as fostering its positive public

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<sup>4</sup> From the Foundation’s web site and mission statement ([www.foundationarts.org](http://www.foundationarts.org)): “The Foundation is a community gathering place for the promotion of arts and culture. This center seeks to bring together the Penn student community with the people of West Philadelphia and the greater Philadelphia area. We work from the belief that art is a catalyst for change, and that arts events can lead to the formation of meaningful Penn-West Philadelphia partnerships.” According to founder Andrew Zitcer (who is now the 40<sup>th</sup> Streets Cultural Asset Manager for the University), the Foundation runs on a curatorial model and relies on community members to act as curators and book shows, giving them full artistic freedom and full responsibility. Many of the musicians and artists involved live in West Philadelphia. The venue is alcohol-free and thus offers a cultural evening as an alternative to other University activities and to families in the neighborhood. The identity of the Rotunda and the Foundation programs relies not on particular bands or music genre, but rather on the venue itself, as an open, innovative, and partner-driven performance space. Through the work and perseverance of Zitcer and his partners, the Rotunda has been hugely successful. The University recognized this and suggested increasing activity from one or two performances per week to three to five. They hired one of the guest curators to organize and manage the programming.

relations around the University's relationship with University City. Andrew Zitcer also serves as a role model; he began his career as an undergraduate and through a service-learning class developed the concept for the Rotunda; has gone on to work in the University and is simultaneously pursuing a Master in City and Regional Planning degree; and is a neighborhood resident who maintains a professional and a personal commitment to the West Philadelphia community.

Now that the grocery store and movie theater serve as landmark buildings on the corner of 40<sup>th</sup> and Walnut, the Rotunda creates a core for arts programming, and other initiatives such as the Slaughter Gallery and the International Cultural Festival foster a culturally enhanced environment, Penn is looking to create a cohesive character from Filbert Street on the north through Baltimore Avenue on the south. The University's goals claim to work towards a more comprehensive character for the rest 40<sup>th</sup> Street, as opposed to previous spot development efforts.<sup>5</sup>

In the spring of 2003, the Department of City and Regional Planning sponsored a service-learning class, Planning Problems Workshop. The students produced a document, "Planning at the Interface of Campus and Community," which outlines potential development strategies for the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor. The 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor project literature promotes a vision of arts and culture, explicitly contrasting this retail corridor with the more upscale University Square.<sup>6</sup> The planning document asserts a mission to:

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<sup>5</sup> The plans for the grocery store and movie theater emerged primarily from a singular vision out of the President's Office and from John Fry, Executive Vice President, who was hired from Coopers and Lybrand after publishing a report on the need for Penn to adopt a model of corporate downsizing (Ruben, 5).

<sup>6</sup> This planning document makes similar recommendations as, yet is independent from the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Retail Market Study prepared in 1999 by the University City District with the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Community Steering Committee and Square Foot, LLC.

Identify a strategy and plan to create a unique identity for 40<sup>th</sup> Street that builds upon existing arts and cultural assets of Penn and West Philadelphia, and enhances the academic and social life of faculty and students at Penn, while increasing interaction with and enhancing quality of life for neighborhood residents (7).

The focus on enhancing quality of life for University-affiliated people and for neighborhood residents fits with the Leadership Agenda.

The authors argue that the cohesive vision for the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor takes the University in a new direction. As the plan comments, “the University’s history of interaction with West Philadelphia neighborhoods over the last half-century mirrors the evolution of urban planning philosophy.” The plan continues to talk about a shift in the “University’s top-down, self-centered outlook” to an approach that “embodies self-interest and sees community participation as essential” (9). The nuanced distinction between “top-down, self-centered” and “self-interest” is lost on this reader, however.

The plan describes Penn’s involvement in Urban Renewal accurately, and also succinctly describes the architecture of the 1960s, which “faced their backs toward the street...as the University...attempted to protect it[self] from the decline of West Philadelphia” (9). The plan does not at all speak to the current architectural aesthetic that may work to alienate the community in a different way, by creating an upscale, arguably sanitized and opulent aesthetic. Further, due to the above-market rents that the University demands on its properties, the businesses that can afford to stay do not necessarily represent the retail needs to the surrounding community. Assuming Crawford’s analysis around identity and commodity applies in this case, the development of upscale retail may in fact exacerbate and reinforce existing class and cultural distinctions between “town” and “gown.” Further, as Edelman describes, the aesthetic of

the new development may “reaffirm...hierarchical distinctions” between the University and West Philadelphia community, although we can not assert this without further understanding of the meaning inferred from the development (80).

As the planning document states, 40<sup>th</sup> Street may serve as an interface between the community and the University, but “what is the quality of this interface?” (12). In the past, 40<sup>th</sup> Street was the geographic line between the safety of the University campus and the dangers of West Philadelphia. The “neighborhood” was seen as a haven for illicit activity and crime. In the 1980s, the University began to understand that the health of the neighborhood was inextricably linked to the vitality of the University, and among other things, President Sheldon Hackney created the precursor to the Center for Community Partnerships as way to more closely involve students in service activities in the neighborhood. In the mid 1990s, crime was at an all-time high, and in many ways, Rodin’s Agenda for Excellence was a direct response. Slowly, students felt more comfortable living west of 40<sup>th</sup> Street and as the University expanded its development, the clear distinction between “hood” and campus dissolved (or moved further west).

However, it would be naïve to believe that this increased sense of safety on the part of the University community represents an actual qualitative shift in the relationship between the University and the community. The dynamic is much more complex. As Andrew Zitcer comments, the 40<sup>th</sup> Street initiative could never happen without the strength of Penn’s public relations or financial resources. President Rodin concurs, “It is about Penn leveraging its resources – its ability to convince other entities that also must make investments that we are serious” (“Planning at the Interface of Campus and Community,” 11).



At the same time, the sheer mass of property that the University owns demands the perpetuation of the power imbalance. As much as the plan calls for creating a “unique identity” for 40<sup>th</sup> Street, the way to accomplish this is through a consolidated and perhaps unilateral vision and implementation. The University’s systematic land banking during the days of Urban Renewal are now given great thanks as “strategic property acquisitions,” which facilitates the University’s influence over “how the street develops in the way that a smaller property owner cannot...[but rather] as a mall developer would” (56). The plan does suggest using “commerce as a means to further connect the University to community,” which provides a more sustainable relationship than its other strategies (56).<sup>7</sup> Penn’s strategy feeds the notions of privatized public spaces discussed earlier; the plan explicitly looks to consumerism as a transcendent force that can bring together the diverse constituents of University City. However, this approach may only serve to make visible the economic relationships defined by a stark divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

The plan calls for “filtering for retail development,” and explicitly seeks to foster retail uses that build bridges by promoting “interaction between Penn and non-Penn constituencies” (57). Further, the matrix suggests avoiding establishments that may “unintentionally exclude certain groups of people based on age, race, income, affiliation with Penn, gender, etc.” or “engender complaints of growing gentrification” (57). The University can often combat arguments against gentrification because many of the current projects are not actually displacing lower income people and are in developing infill on currently vacant land. The strategic plans tend to ignore the fact that Penn has

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<sup>7</sup> The University prides itself on employing local and minority contractors on construction when possible and on placing “welfare to work” hiring requirements on tenants, as well as purchasing from local vendors.

already displaced lower income peoples and that the vacant land exists because of Penn's history of demolition. As Ruben describes it, "the current Penn-driven redevelopment of University City constitutes part of an *historically discontinuous* process of gentrification" (16).

While, the plan aims to highlight opportunities for diverse communities to interact, the plan employs patriarchal language that serves to perpetuate the existing power dynamic between Penn and the neighborhood. Suggesting that the University can use "properties on 40<sup>th</sup> Street, particularly in the North Zone [where there is a concentration of subsidized housing], to host service learning projects run through the Center for Community Partnerships" does not provide for a vision of the North Zone as an independent, empowered community that may or may not want to engage in "service" projects that often serve students more than recipients (Bierbaum 1999).

Other observers of the process see this final stage of upscale development as the final step in solidifying a new identity for the neighborhood. George Thomas and David Brownlee, both faculty members at the University comment:

With these changes, it is anticipated that Penn's neighborhood will lose its provisional quality and become a true University City, serving University faculty, staff, and students, as well as others who appreciate the possibilities of a cosmopolitan community set in a handsome Victorian suburb with remarkable transit connections to the city and the entire east coast (137).

This comment denies this West Philadelphia community any identity independent of the University. Further, by defining "others" as only those people who "appreciate" the "cosmopolitan" atmosphere the University has systematically engineered, polarizes the analysis of the University's endeavors; it leaves those that may critique the development in the role of ungrateful, insular, and unsophisticated.

### **Community Involvement**

While evaluating community involvement and reaction thoroughly is outside of the scope of this paper, I would like to comment briefly on this key piece of the puzzle. The student-prepared plan does emphasize strategic planning, community involvement, and stakeholder buy-in. However, there is not a clear articulation of an implementation scheme that can successfully achieve the ideal “shared vision” for new development. Additionally, as previously noted, the language of the plan serves to perpetuate existing dynamics, which does not create a climate for that shared vision.

With this most recent publication as an example of the planning process, I do not find it terribly surprising that tensions still exist in the community. While residents welcome increased safety and improved aesthetics, “some community leaders fear that [further development] will lead to higher rents for storefronts – forcing current tenants out and replacing them with upscale retailers focused only on the University market” (Stockson). Community residents still fear that Penn’s self-interest dominates decision-making: “I don’t think they would be going into it if they couldn’t make money,” said John Woodin, an independent landlord in University City (Ruscitti).

In an effort to systematically address neighborhood concerns, in 1997, the University collaborated with other nearby academic institutions and created the University City District (UCD). According to the organization’s webpage ([www.ucityphila.com](http://www.ucityphila.com)):

University City District (UCD) was established in 1997 to improve the quality of life of this 2.2 square mile area of West Philadelphia. An independent, not-for-profit organization, UCD builds effective partnerships to maintain a clean and safe environment and to promote, plan, and advocate for University City's diverse, urban community [by managing] programs and services that enhance public space, increase public safety, assist homeowners and commercial and

rental property owners, and promote University City attractions. UCD is managed by a 25-member Board of Directors representing University City's prominent institutions in education, health care, and scientific and medical research as well as representatives of University City's business and residential communities. Funding for UCD's programs and services comes exclusively from **voluntary** contributions from University City businesses, institutions, and individuals. Tax-deductible contributions are dedicated to programs and services that enhance the public environment and quality of life in University City.

While Penn has an obvious vested interest in contributing to UCD, the University by no means dominates the organization's agenda.

Working with local businesses and entrepreneurs, UCD has focused its attention on two other corridors, Baltimore and Lancaster Avenues. According to Executive Director Eric Goldstein, UCD's priority is to help develop and foster local businesses for a local consumer base, as compared with Penn's goals of creating a destination location for a broader Philadelphia and regional market of consumers and a global market of students and faculty. Even UCD's marketing efforts have been internally focused, employing a grassroots strategy to correct the negative images of University City and more recently to build positive perceptions and community pride around the international and diverse population of University City. Julian Beinart's theoretical writing explains such a split of marketing as inevitable: "[T]here are two sets of images of a town: one, the mental images carried by its citizens; the other, those held by outsiders" (4).

Further, as Beinart suggests, often "the images created for external purposes and those designed to nourish the city's own inhabitants are congruent;" Penn's strategic plans at times intersect and complement the mission of UCD. In other ways, however, the work on 40<sup>th</sup> Street remains separate from the activities of the UCD.<sup>8</sup> Goldstein

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<sup>8</sup> The UCD develops its own marketing strategies parallel to the work of Penn. It is also invested in the vibrancy of University City as a destination neighborhood in Philadelphia. Initiatives have included Third Thursdays, special

carefully qualifies that there is a difference between “high quality merchants” and “high end” retail, and sees Penn’s plans for 40<sup>th</sup> Street as a vision for mainstream, high end retail. He postulates that its strategy may actually draw people to the “funky,” “authentic,” high quality, locally-owned businesses on Baltimore and Lancaster Avenues.

The parallel work of Penn and UCD around a vision for University City thus creates a challenge to “nurture and resolve the many and often conflicting meanings of...cities so that identity is, most importantly, a locally constructed and understood quality of good city life” (Beinart, 32). A tension exists between University City’s role as a local neighborhood nested in a broader regional and global context because of the University. This tension points to the dialectic between the “marketed city” and the material city, as well as the manipulation of that dialectic. Briavel Hotcomb suggests that there are “mutual influences between the material city and the imagineered city” (38). The city in marketing brochures is a “highly selective version of its material counterpart” (39). However, the actual material city may re-make itself in response to or because of the urban identity put forth through marketing efforts: “the material city is often ‘re-engineered’ itself in the interests of marketing...A successful [marketing] campaign can be the catalyst in transforming the urban landscape” (39).

UCD strives to work with the existing material city, choosing select characteristics and existing neighborhood strengths into explicit assets to highlight and emphasize in their marketing scheme. Penn, on the other hand, has created a vision of

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festivals and other cultural events, marketing the array of ethnic restaurants, and capitalizing on Penn’s development and activities that contribute to University City’s appeal. UCD provides neighborhood banners, facilitates parks rehabilitation programs, collaborates on mural projects, establishes safety enhancement programs, fosters local business through improvement and support programs, offers home ownership counseling, etc. See [www.ucityphila.com](http://www.ucityphila.com) for full scope of services.

the neighborhood, marketed that vision, and can then through its resources, manifest that vision on the physical landscape through extensive development projects. Goldstein believes that the general population in University City “appreciates both approaches and understands why both are needed in different parts of the district.” Perhaps this marks a success of integrating local meaning into the institutionally dominated landscape, and a balance between a “comprehensible” environ for inhabitants and the “obfuscation” of marketing campaigns (Hotcomb, 55).

### **The University and the City**

The University, while dominating the landscape of University City, is also nested in the City of Philadelphia and the State. Regime theory “suggests a version of the golden rule: Whoever has the gold makes the rules” (Hotcomb, 36). Facing economic hardship, cities across the country have sought innovative public-private partnerships to fund city initiatives and to remain competitive in a global marketplace. Certainly the partnership between the City of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania is a prime example of these types of relationships. While in the past, Penn often looked to Philadelphia industrialists for capital, today, Philadelphia seems to rely heavily on Penn’s status as the second largest employer in the City (Thomas and Brownlee, 120).

In the early 1960s, the City certified a University Redevelopment Area as part of Urban Renewal efforts in the early 1960s, an act which facilitated Penn’s systematic westward expansion (Thomas, xi).<sup>9</sup> In a more recent struggle, Penn worked with the local councilwoman to eliminate food truck vendors from the campus. During the City Council hearings on the matter, Council President John Street (now on his second term as

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<sup>9</sup> It was at this time that the moniker “University City” first applied to the area of Penn’s potential expansion.

Mayor) stated, “We have an obligation to the second-largest employer in the City of Philadelphia. If you don’t think that I and the other members of Council are conscious of all the economic benefits that flow from that, you’re wrong...The University has rights as a property owner and I think that’s often forgotten” (Ruben, 2). In other words, City Council was willing to defer much governmental authority to the University because of its role in the City’s economics. While Penn positions itself as contributing to the local and regional economy, clearly this dominance provides them with leveraging power that advantages them in particular situations.

### **Conclusion**

The University of Pennsylvania and the surrounding neighborhood serves as a compelling case study for analyzing the dynamic between large institutional power in a neighborhood setting. Penn has tried to create a democratic planning process, but seems tied to its historic roots of dominance. Even in forays made to the surrounding community, Penn’s leverage overshadows the “friendship.”

While we can only understand part of the dynamic without more extensive research in the neighborhood, from observation, however, I remain convinced that the University has put forth a “utopian” vision of the environment as it would best serve the University’s mission and goals. The underlying conflict between “town” and “gown” manifest themselves in the planning process, the architectural design, and the ultimate development of this vision. The amount of land Penn owns, its political sway with elected officials, and its large investment portfolio allows the University to dominate the agenda of West Philadelphia both through policy and physical development.

While elements of these processes diffuse the conflict to an extent, this may be due in large part to particular individuals and other mitigating agents, such as the University City District, which understands and accepts the role Penn will play in the neighborhood, while maintaining a commitment to neighborhood residents and local businesses. Penn has not demonstrated an overwhelming ability to create a true democratic planning process, as their feedback loop remains primarily internal. The University's choice of retail establishments focuses on the University community, although the grocery store has been a success drawing a wider consumer base.

The University of Pennsylvania has updated their planning strategy to a point; they recognize that its success is linked to the neighborhood's vitality. However, Penn's vision of the built environment still focuses internally and while extending itself to a point, fosters an upscale, sanitized, and homogenized environment that does not necessarily reflect the true character or desires of all stakeholders in the geographic community. The dialectic between the University and the neighborhood's sustainability and image continues, yet still in a skewed direction, which perhaps favors the University constituents.



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### **Web Resources**

University of Pennsylvania Archives  
<http://www.archives.upenn.edu/img/entry.html>

University of Pennsylvania Office of the President  
<http://www.upenn.edu/president/plan.html>  
<http://www.upenn.edu/president/presidency.html>  
<http://www.upenn.edu/president/westphilly/index.html>

University City District  
<http://ucityphila.org/about/index.cfm>

Daily Pennsylvanian Archives  
<http://www.dailypennsylvanian.com>