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CITYSPACE

Declaration of Inter-dependence



The Dead Zone: The walk from Drexel's campus at 31st and Market St. to Liberty Towers is far and desolate. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Institutes of higher learning have a vital role to play in the transformation of neighborhoods.

by Steve Conn

Over the past generation, the Philadelphia economy has come to rely increasingly on medical and educational institutions to generate jobs and other economic activity. "Meds" and "eds," in fact, now constitute the largest private-sector fraction of the city's economy. And without question, as the city struggles to make the transition from a manufacturing to a post-industrial economy, med and eds will play an even more central role.

That much has been widely discussed. What has been less extensively commented upon is the connection between those institutions and the urban development that goes on around them, the role of institutions in the transformation -- or not -- of surrounding neighborhoods.

The University of Pennsylvania's efforts to reinvigorate West Philadelphia have received much local and national attention, and those efforts have, by and large, paid off. West Philadelphia streets are safer and cleaner than they were when I lived there as a grad student. The commercial life of the area, after four decades of decline and erosion, is picking up, and the area is one of the few places in the city that attracts new immigrants.

Many of those who live west of the university -- and I am one of them -- seem generally pleased with the way things are moving. The almost reflexive cries of "gentrification" on the part of a few residents strike me as that most typical of Philadelphia responses: phobia of change of any kind. In any event, it is not substantiated by any real data. West Philly remains a remarkably diverse, marvelously heterogeneous place.

The other big institution in West Philadelphia, however, seems much less interested in playing a role in its neighborhood. Drexel University sits at the intersection of Center City, Powelton Village and the Lancaster Avenue corridor and should be instrumental in connecting all three. Drexel's developments along Market Street, which ought to link West Philadelphia with Center City, instead turn their backs on the street, creating a shabby interface between campus and city.

Drexel's student population has grown in the past few years; its on-campus housing has not. As a consequence students have invaded Powelton Village and even encroach on Mantua looking for cheap apartments, but they have done little in return. At the very least, big campuses ought to generate things like book and record stores, cafés, restaurants and performance venues. Drexel has spawned none of those things.

For years Temple University, my employer, acted as a hostile or indifferent neighbor, engaged for a time in a protracted pissing match with then-Councilman John Street that resulted in nothing but neighborhood stagnation. Now Temple seems ready to explore the real and exciting potential of its North Philadelphia site. More students live on campus now than ever before, and Cecil B. Moore Avenue, epicenter of the 1964 race riots and in decline ever since, seems finally poised for a resurrection, thanks in part to Temple developments.

Jefferson University has been roundly and rightly thrashed in these pages, and in every major publication in the city, for its awful parking-garage proposal for the 900 block of Chestnut Street. Just as bad, however, is Jefferson's lack of any public master plan for its extensive real estate holdings. Jefferson's campus could link the Avenue of the Arts with the historic district and the Washington Square West neighborhood if it were developed with attention to these things. As it is, who knows what Jefferson plans for its neighbors in the future?



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the revitalization of North Broad by investing more in its Spring Garden
ing its subway stop the way Temple did some years ago to make it a

Industrial age has left it with a rich legacy of colleges, universities and
hospitals scattered widely around the city. Each could become the catalyst for improvements in its host neighborhood,
and each would find its own institutional situation improved in turn.

But capitalizing on this potential means more visionary leadership, and more extensive planning and cooperation among
the institutions, local neighborhood groups and the city. It means that these institutions will have to see themselves as
more than schools, hospitals or employers. They will have to see themselves as nothing less than good neighbors. The
future of many city neighborhoods depends on it.

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