

# CONTEXT

studying higher  
education

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Rediscovering the  
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PLEASE TOUCH MUSEUM

THE WALLS AND HALLS  
OF ACADEMIA

# REDISCOVERING THE URBAN CAMPUS

By David Sokol

College campuses are insular places, leaving students in their own world and conveying the idea that higher education is better served in relative isolation. But recent expansion projects at four large Philadelphia universities show that weaving the schools back into the urban fabric is not only a neighborly thing to do, it can yield significant benefits.

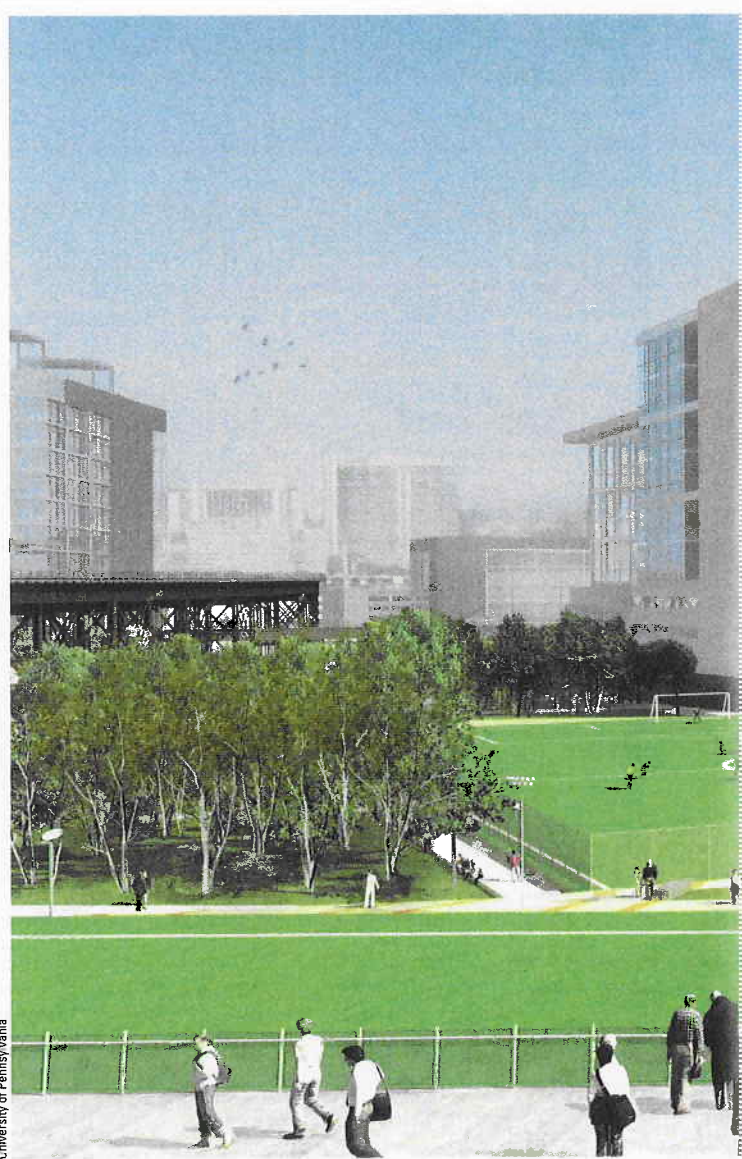
*Bright college years, with pleasures rife*

*The shortest, gladdest years of life*

*Regardless of your alma mater, you probably know the first two lines of this famous song. There's not much to know about the substance of the tune, however. While the lyrics of Bright College Years percolate with heartfelt emotion, only the opening of the second stanza hints at exactly why college represents a "happy, golden" time.*

*We all must leave this college home,*

*About the stormy world to roam*



Was song stylist Henry Durand an urban planner in disguise? He intuitively understood that environment plays a role in defining the American college experience — specifically, that its uniqueness hinges precisely on its distance from the stormy world at large. Since the establishment of Harvard Yard, the Sir Christopher Wren Building at the College of William & Mary, or The Lawn at the University of Virginia, architects and planners have designed the university campus as an insular place.

The trend continues today, with the newest academic campuses treated as far-away fantasylands for learning rather than as neighbors engaged with a dynamic, if messy, urban fabric. Take Vedanta University, which Ayers/Saint/Gross is creating in Orissa, a remote outpost of rural India: the very isolation of the campus has contributed to the notion that higher education is removed, distinct, special. What Americans imported from Oxford and Cambridge, we are now exporting to the BRIC nations.

Another example is the University of California Merced, opened in 2005 and the first UC campus to be built in 40 years. It demonstrates that, besides unplugging academia from cities, physical characteristics amplify the sense of isolation. California's newest research school has a complex of student residences at its core, hemmed in between two bodies of water and bookended by metaphorical moats — athletic fields on one side and academic buildings on another. Just as the traditional quadrangle building looked toward a courtyard, in the wake of the GI Bill institutions have encircled themselves in a belt of athletic fields and parking lots that make their campuses feel even more separate. Similar ideas carried out at disparate scales.



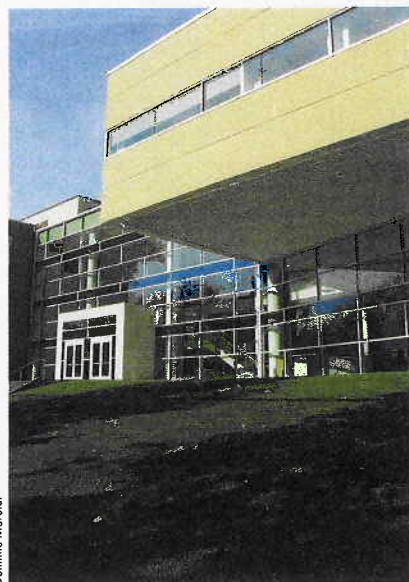
But as any college student nervously hurrying to her dorm room late at night can tell you, such ideas can feel uncomfortable, too. The traditional campus plan perhaps isn't so bright after all.

The University of Pennsylvania's engagement with West Philadelphia in the mid-20th century offered an object lesson in such dim urban planning. Reflecting the sweeping, Robert Moses-style moves of Philadelphia's own city planner Edmund Bacon, Penn unceremoniously cleared huge swaths of the urban fabric to match its growth in stature and organization. And buildings like the Harrison and Harnwell College Houses — opaque, unknowable monoliths far removed from the streetfront — emblemized the architectural and urban-design strategy of this expansion. Financed by federal urban renewal programs and girded by the power of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority to claim eminent domain, the university only accelerated white flight, suburbanization, and other phenomena causing property-value decline and depopulation in West Philadelphia.

There were precedents. After leaving its original Center City location in 1870, the school molded its acreage west of the Schuylkill River in the image of a closed community — exemplified by idyllic and vehicle-free Locust Walk. Its development at mid-century, like at schools elsewhere, increased the magnitude of isolationism by a multiplier.

Since the 1990s, Penn has embarked on an ambitious program to right its urban-design wrongs. It is re-emerging as a truly urban school by bringing Philadelphia to it. And in subsuming barren and under-used lots to buildings and valuable public space, it does not sacrifice

**Above:** Penn Park, part of the University of Pennsylvania's planned expansion toward the Schuylkill River, will replace 14 acres of former industrial parking lots and add new green space for both programmed and passive recreation. **Left:** Temple University's new building for the Tyler School of Art - the school is moving from suburban Elkins Park to Temple's main campus in North Philadelphia - is just part of \$400 million of development activity.



Dominic Mercier



Erdy McHenry Architecture

the identifiable markers of the archetypal American campus, such as abundant green and pedestrian space.

Change began in 1994, under university president Judith Rodin. The so-called West Philadelphia Initiatives notably included an undertaking in which the edges of campus would be commercially developed. Those moat-like parking lots and green borders since have been transformed, helping redefine the area as University City.

Besides simply adding hundreds of units of housing and 300,000 square feet of retail, these new buildings do so smartly. The recently completed Radian building designed by Erdy McHenry Architecture, for example, features a uniquely folded and incised residential volume atop a plinth devoted to commercial activity. The tower places population density where it's needed to support new retail, but its setback keeps the streetwall from overwhelming pedestrians. The Wood and Zapata-designed Parking Garage 40 and Fresh Grocer building relegates parking, a necessary but deadening function, to the sky. The ground-floor grocery component is almost entirely glazed to lend activity and a sense of protection to the neighborhood scene.

Penn's sights for growth have shifted eastward, toward the Schuylkill. This ailing waterfront, seemingly strangled by various transportation corridors, is being reclaimed as a gateway to University City and it will create a tighter weft to downtown Philadelphia. Nothing better exemplifies this milestone program of infill than Penn's 2007 purchase of the U.S. Postal Offices and Lands, the plans for which are laid out in the Sasaki Associates document *Penn Connects: A Vision of the Future*. The entire 42-acre east campus is given consideration in this master plan, and Sasaki has carefully balanced positive and negative space — focusing athletic facilities to a core area, extending and strengthening internal pedestrian corridors for student movement, identifying redevelopment opportunities that strengthen Walnut Street as a lively and pedestrian-friendly linkage to Center City, providing breathing room elsewhere for building expansion, and creating public parkland along the waterfront, exactly where residents would take most advantage of it.

Such large-scale expansion could have been waged on cheaper building blocks and empty lots in West Philadelphia.

Although Penn certainly has the resources to execute a massive redefinition of the West Philadelphia streetscape, a deep pocketbook is not a prerequisite for animating the urban sphere. A significant number of Philadelphia's centers of higher learning are expanding. Within these activities are efforts to create genuine urban places.

Drexel University, located immediately to the north of Penn, has undergone swift and dramatic growth in recent years: In 2002 MCP Hahnemann University was relaunched as Drexel University College of Medicine, College of Nursing and Health Professions, and School of Public Health; four years later Drexel opened the Earle Mack School of Law. These are two of several moves traced to the tenure of president Constantine Papadakis, and they promise more to come.

Warp-speed building has accommodated the academic programs and student body. Another Erdy McHenry Architecture building, the Race Street Residence Hall, was executed as a fast design-build project. The firm will complete a 10th residence hall, for which ground was broken in May 2008, by 2009. In September Drexel broke ground on a new 84,000-square-foot recreation center adjacent to the John A. Daskalakis Athletic Center, just months after it worked out an agreement that also channels student-athletes into the Philadelphia Armory. And perhaps most telling, on the corner of 33rd and Chestnut Streets — currently a parking lot — the school is working toward realizing a Diamond + Schmitt-designed integrated sciences building whose atrium include a vertical planted wall.

Indeed, Drexel is filling in the blanks of its campus, transforming it into a consistent urban experience not unlike Penn's attempts. The new recreation center reinforces Market Street as an important corridor, for example. Besides creating another footprint on the street, the center, too, is largely glazed to animate and patrol and streetscape, and it includes a restaurant to vary its uses. The Race Street Residence Hall creates a point of compression with Calhoun Hall. And proving that urban densification and amenity coexist, in October 2008 the university celebrated the completed redevelopment of an industrial site into a 2.5-acre park on 32nd Street and Powelton Avenue.

This plugging-of-holes strategy extends to North Philadelphia, where Temple University's main campus is expanding without impinging on surrounding areas. The school has rung up approximately \$400 million in development activity, which ranges from additions to its student center and Fox School of Business to turning vacant row houses into the multi-tenant 1800 Liacouras Walk building. Yet the school still has its work cut out for it. Consider its two-year-old TECH computer facility, or the new Tyler School of Art buildings: one overlooks a parking garage, the other a lot.

Farther afield, schools like La Salle University and Saint Joseph's University have followed relatively unintrusive densification activities in close order. In both places, however, the context is different. La Salle enjoys a protective cushion of parkland, while Saint Joseph's straddles Philadelphia and the suburban Main Line.

These respective expansions, therefore, are not so much about linking gown to town but rather creating cities within the city. La Salle has fashioned itself into an enclave perhaps more effectively, thanks to its expansion's pedestrian walkway and its mixing of uses evidenced by The

**Opposite page:** Erdy McHenry Architecture's newest residence hall at Drexel University, for which ground was broken in May 2008, is representative of the furious building pace the university is keeping. **Below:** The Radian, an Erdy McHenry-designed residence hall on Penn's campus, brings housing and new retail to Walnut Street, replacing old, single-story retail and stirring economic development.

Shoppes at La Salle (despite its unfortunately large parking lot). Just as La Salle purchased Germantown Hospital as a site of additional expansion, Saint Joseph's effectively doubled its square footage with the acquisition of an adjacent prep school — now the Maguire Campus.

If not arbiters of civic engagement in urban design, the La Salle and Saint Joseph's campuses offer an object lesson of another sort. They set quality-of-life standards for students, suggesting that a tightly knit and self-sufficient community of buildings and functions is preferable to America's vast automobile-dependent suburbs. This is an especially keen point for Saint Joseph's students, standing on the edge of the Main Line and peering into America's quintessential, romantic suburb.

nations of credit-crunched, gas-sipping Americans.

Hybridizing practices may allow all to leap forward. Could minimizing floor plates in future mixed-use buildings allow independent retailers — or even light industrial manufacturers — thrive in the face of national competition? Could stormwater management — principles of which are driving Penn's development of its waterfront east campus — be integrated throughout these campuses in a manner similar to Kevin Robert Perry's award-winning NE Siskiyou Green Street in Portland, Oregon? Now let's combine those two: what if the living wall inside Drexel's integrated sciences building took the streets, planted instead with the ingredients of a locavore's favorite recipe?



University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia's campus expansions underscore the current controversy at Fairmount Park — arguably highlighting that a fellow institution like the Fox Chase Cancer Center can successfully grow without eliminating public space.

That is not necessarily to laud these universities for championing best practices. Enlightened, to be sure, considering that wholesale urban renewal really is not so distant a memory. Perhaps an institute of higher learning should be held to a higher, more visionary standard.

These projects stick closely to the Jane Jacobs playbook, packing life and diversity into their campuses and reaping the rewards of economy, public safety, and intellectual provocation. But, as planning and design still comes around to Jacobs's point of view, nascent movements like local production and sustainability are grabbing the imagi-

In the wake of the recent presidential election, in which the always-promised-but-never-delivered youth constituency actually materialized, it may even be time to reconsider public spaces as protest spaces. Imagine ADA-compliant ramps transformed into outdoor amphitheatres.

To be sure, these are what-if scenarios. But considering universities' positions as educators and civic participants, not to mention their more contemporary roles as economic engines, such experiments in urban design could catapult former American idylls into the forefront of American ingenuity.

David Sokol is a writer for *Azure*, *Interior Design*, *Mark*, and other publications, and he is a contributing editor at *Architectural Record* and *Surface* magazines.