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Changing Skyline

Two new Drexel buildings bringing a livelier look to West Philly streets



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West Philadelphia's big institutions worked for decades to cleanse their streets of any trace of indigenous urban life - and they very nearly succeeded. Along Market, Chestnut, and Walnut Streets, block after block fell to a generic, corporate style of architecture that favored block-long facades, daunting setbacks, and inscrutable, windowless walls. It was a scary place, indeed.

Having belatedly recognized the error of their ways, those institutions - Drexel University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University City Science Center - have been trying to repair the damage, punching in a new door here, installing a corner cafe there. The sanitized blocks, from the Schuylkill west to 38th Street, may never regain their original vibrancy, but at least they now bear some resemblance to their bustling Center City cousins.

Re-urbanization has not come easy, especially for Drexel. Although its recent academic buildings dutifully follow Philadelphia's traditional sidewalk line on Market Street, the architecture (all of it by big-name firms) is as introverted and lackluster as anything from the bad old '70s.

But with the completion this spring of a glassy recreation center at Market and 33d Streets, and a new science building rising on Chestnut Street, Drexel may finally be getting the hang of the urban thing. While the design isn't as polished as one might like, it achieves something that has eluded most of Drexel's recent architecture: It feels alive.

What the two buildings have in common, and what distinguishes them from the architecture of Drexel's unfortunate orange-brick period, is that they fill in critical street frontage that had been left fallow in a misguided effort to provide open space. Just as important, both reserve high-visibility spaces for public eateries, qualifying the projects as "mixed use."

The \$44.6 million recreation center, designed by Boston's Sasaki Associates with local help from EwingCole, is the most dramatic example so far of Drexel's in-filling. The facility is an addition to Drexel's vaulted, orange-brick gym, which was completed in 1971 and turned a blank face to Market Street. Though the gym extension is modest in size, Drexel's late president, Constantine Papadakis, wanted it to signal the university's growing academic and architectural ambitions.

Because the structure was slipped onto a 60-foot-wide strip of land that Drexel had long ago deeded to the city, the university had to buy back the parcel and pay Verizon to relocate a fiber-optic trunk line. The costs

were worth it. The three-story addition not only equips the gym with a real front door, it gives Drexel's campus the center of gravity it always lacked.

Sasaki's recreation center acts as a giant fishbowl. Wrapped in glass on three sides, it offers full-on views of 300 exercise machines (and their buff users), as well as a dramatic, 30-foot-high rock-climbing wall at the 34th Street end. The interiors are so bright and airy that procrastinators now have one less excuse not to work out.

Since the Market Street facade receives intense southern light, Sasaki pleated the facade on the upper two stories like a skirt, angling the glass sections to face away from the direct sun. Some pleats fold east, others west. All the glass panels deflect heat and glare, and some have additional blue filters that jazzes up the rhythm.

Too bad the designers didn't carry the patterning down to street level. For all the project's virtues, this is another relentless, block-long facade.

The ground floor is faced in a one-note monotony of flat, vertical glass panels that drone on for 400 long feet. Yes, there are some visual breaks - for the restaurant's strikingly boring sign and for doors. An enticing restaurant patio holds the 34th Street corner. But you still feel defeated and exhausted by the time you've walked the length of the facade.

It's not clear why the architects left the ground floor so unmodulated. Sasaki's Gerard A. Gutierrez said he wanted people to be able to see easily into the restaurant.

But it's not merely the ground floor's facade that feels clunky and under-designed. So does the lobby. Once you get past the concierge desk at the eastern end, all the life bleeds out of the long, narrow space. Its only purpose is to provide a connection to Drexel's old gym, with its swimming pool and competition-size basketball court. This may be a design that leans too heavily on its users to energize the architecture.

It's hard to activate a block-long building anywhere, but especially in Philadelphia. The city owes its urban vibrancy to the eclectic mix of tenants, shop fronts, and architectural styles jammed onto every block. Philadelphia's zoning law frequently limits building frontages to 60 feet to preserve the variety, but the city has increasingly bowed to the modern demand for wider buildings with big floor plates.

When you allow a concentration of block-size buildings, you wind up with an architectural Sahara like the Science Center. But that dull academic corridor feels almost homey in comparison with the new cityscapes around the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass., a vast expanse of one-trick, one-use buildings.

So it's nice to see that Drexel's other new in-fill project, the Constantine Papadakis Integrated Sciences Building at 33d and Chestnut Streets, by Diamond + Schmidt, will have a modest footprint when it is finished next year.

The five-story classroom and research building is just big enough to hold down that key intersection, where Drexel and the University of Pennsylvania bump into each other, and to provide space for a corner cafe. It promises to be the kind of architecture where the real lessons about city-building can be taught.