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College Town

What Penn's expansion means to its neighbors.

By David Ortiz

A rusting elevated railway casts a shadow on acres of cracked asphalt parking lots near the west bank of the Schuylkill River.

Two rail lines and a highway run through the 42-acre strip where the University of Pennsylvania has planned its largest expansion since the Ivy League school established its campus in West Philadelphia in 1872.

Announced in June, Penn's 30-year, approximately \$6 billion east campus expansion project is intended to revitalize the west bank of the river that divides the university from downtown Philadelphia. The new development includes research space, offices, and housing; shops and restaurants; and athletic fields and public spaces that ultimately will integrate Penn's campus with the city as a whole.

For the most part, the university's proposals are being cheered by city officials, who see them as complementing their efforts to redevelop the riverfront and ultimately to help Philadelphia compete in a global economy.

On a wider scale, Penn's plan illustrates how urban research universities are playing an increasingly critical role in the economic development plans of many cities.

River and rail

The Schuylkill River is a powerful symbol of the city's history. "In the early 19th century, coal came down this river from upstate Pennsylvania, to light and heat Philadelphia," says Anthony Sorrentino, a planner who is Penn's executive director of public affairs.

By the mid-1800s, Philadelphia had become a thriving manufacturing and shipping center. It was home to the Pennsylvania Railroad, at one time the world's largest corporation. The river and the rail lines built alongside it were major shipping conduits. A century later, in the 1950s, thousands of factory jobs began leaving the city for the South and ultimately to places like India and China.

Today, the riverfront strip is bisected by transportation corridors: a commuter rail line connecting the 30th Street station with the western suburbs and the Philadelphia International Airport, an elevated freight railway, Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, and Interstate 76. The transportation lines share the strip with Penn's athletic fields and indoor facilities.

Blueprint

The campus expansion plan, completed in June by Sasaki & Associates of Watertown, Massachusetts, serves as a blueprint for the transformation of this industrial corridor. Its goals are both to meet the university's growth needs and ultimately to meld West Philadelphia with Center City, the city's traditional downtown.

The nexus of the expansion plan is a set of properties that will be vacated by the U.S. Postal Service as it moves its southeastern Pennsylvania headquarters to the Philadelphia airport. The 24-acre site includes the art deco post office, an annex, a parking garage, and a 14-acre surface parking lot. The plan calls for reusing the post office building, although the annex will go.

University officials stress that the new plan aims to correct the sins of the past. Earlier campus expansion took place in the residential area just west of Penn's original campus, and generations of West Philadelphia residents have complained that the university contributed to their neighborhood's decline.

"What's different this time around is that we're able [to expand] without really disrupting people. And that hasn't always been the case," says Penn's executive vice president, Craig Carnaroli. He cochaired the university's campus development planning committee and consulted with Philadelphia officials and representatives of the West Philadelphia neighborhood on various aspects of the plan.

He uses the image of a barbell to describe Sasaki's master plan, which concentrates dense, mixed use development at the northern and southern ends of the riverfront property. Those sites also happen to be closest to the area's existing transit hubs.

To the north, the focus is on the intersection of Walnut and 30th streets, two blocks south of the 30th Street Station, the city's 73-year-old central station. A mixed use node of some 1.7 million square feet of development is envisioned for the intersection, including research, office, hotel, residential, and retail space. A nanotechnology facility and other academic buildings are planned two blocks west on Walnut Street. Parking would be added in a deck below the Walnut Street Bridge.

At the south end of the property, near the University City commuter station, plans call for a 1.5-million-square-foot medical research district. A new pedestrian bridge would link the medical district with the University City station.

The middle section of the expansion site is currently occupied by Penn's Franklin Field football stadium and other indoor sports facilities, and an elevated freight railway called the Highline. Sasaki's scheme pokes pedestrian paths through the railway's steel and stone framework and creates new athletic fields and public spaces near the river.

The plan also proposes to extend Locust Walk, the main campus's historic, tree-lined pedestrian mall, across the river via a pedestrian bridge into the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood, the most expensive real estate in Philadelphia. That part of the plan is speculative, because the pedestrian bridge would have to be built by the city.

Sasaki makes heavy use of ramps, stairs, and decks to negotiate the grade changes and segmented parcels created by the tract's rail and roadway infrastructure. The proposed Locust Walk extension would involve a boardwalk that would leap from the higher land near Franklin Field, traveling under the Highline and over the Amtrak line and Schuylkill Expressway to cross the river.

"We're going in and between everything. We're leaving it all in place. We think the Highline is kind of interesting as a piece of industrial archeology," Sasaki president Dennis Pieprz says. "There's nothing more thrilling than seeing a freight train going through the district 50 feet in the air."

City connection

The Penn expansion plan integrates well with the city's four-year-old riverfront development strategy. That plan calls for remaking 38 miles of overgrown riverbanks encompassing thousands of acres of now-vacant port and industrial land into new mixed use and high-tech development, and public space for pedestrians and bicyclists.

As part of that effort, the nonprofit Schuylkill River Development Corporation is overseeing the transformation of the east bank of the Schuylkill into a landscaped park and trail that will link to Fairmount Park and the parkways that lead up to it.

The first phase of that project, completed last fall, revitalized 1.2 miles of the east bank of the river directly opposite Penn's campus. Last summer, boat cruises and sightseeing tours began operating along the new Schuylkill River Park Trail, which has already become a source of great civic pride.

Luring the creative class

Local planners and economic development officials hope that extending Center City to the west bank of the Schuylkill and opening its east bank to the public will speed the influx of young, college-educated residents into the city.

This is all part of Philadelphia's strategy to create a city attractive to the "creative class" — highly educated workers and entrepreneurs who blur the line between work and home. "If you can attract the workforce, employers and job opportunities come to you," says Duane Bumb, Philadelphia's deputy director of commerce.

In line with this strategy, the city has plans to redevelop several former industrial sites along both the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers. Right now, the region's technology industry is clustered outside Philadelphia in a suburban corridor along U.S. Route 202, but the city hopes to lure growing companies to riverfront sites, where they can market new computer and life science technologies developed at Penn, Temple University, and the city's other research centers.

To encourage such research-based ventures, the state of Pennsylvania has created tax incentive zones in the areas surrounding universities and medical centers. "There's a whole sort of economy that's built off of what happens on campus," Bumb says. "What Penn is doing and what Temple is doing around their campuses — they are literally becoming the engines driving that change in urban use."

In Temple's case, the new development involves student housing. Temple's evolution from a commuter school to one in which students live on or near campus is largely responsible for a spate of private residential construction in North Philadelphia. The number of students living in the area almost doubled in recent years to about 10,000. The housing has been followed by supermarkets and commercial development in the economically depressed neighborhood north of Center City.

The largest of these projects is a 12-story housing complex for 1,200 residents built on city-owned land on North Broad Street opposite the Temple campus. The \$80 million development includes shops, restaurants, bank branches, and the neighborhood's first new movie theater in 60 years.

Lessons from other cities

Both Penn's expansion plans and the private development occurring around Temple's campus have met with little opposition. In Penn's case, that's partly because the site involved is largely underused. And North Philadelphia residents have generally accepted the new developments around Temple because of the benefits they are expected to bring. That's not so true elsewhere.

In New York City, for instance, Columbia University wants to build new academic facilities in an underused, 17-acre industrial zone north of the main campus.

Proponents argue that the expansion will stimulate private investment in West Harlem's Manhattanville section, particularly along 12th Avenue. But neighborhood opponents fear that it will accelerate a wave of gentrification that has already made Harlem unaffordable for many lifelong residents.

"No matter what game Columbia runs in talking about its economic benefits to the city and the new biotech industry and all the rest of that stuff, we don't think in any way, shape, or form that what they're presenting is beneficial," says Tom DeMott, a member of the neighborhood group Coalition to Preserve Community.

In Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University's two recent expansions produced two rather different reactions. Both responses are a reminder that no matter the merits of their plan, universities have an easier time when they can move into less populated areas.

Many of Brown's College Hill neighbors fought the construction of the university's new life sciences building — a five-story, 169,000-square-foot, glass-and-brick structure that opened last April in the heart of the dense, wealthy neighborhood.

Six months later, Brown received a somewhat warmer reception when it announced plans to buy seven buildings in the city's Jewelry District, across the Providence River from College Hill and separated from downtown by a highway, for future expansion of its medical and life science programs.

The purchase, one of the biggest in the university's history, will provide Brown with 232,000 square feet of new space in a neighborhood where former jewelry factories are being redeveloped into commercial and residential spaces.

Brown also is likely to make a bid for almost 50 acres in the Jewelry District that will be freed up as part of a highway interchange relocation project. The university is expected to redevelop the area into a regional life science and biotechnology hub.

Responding to critics, who bemoan the loss of tax revenue when a university takes over, Brown and three other local academic institutions in 2003 signed an agreement to make in-lieu payments over the next 15 years.

Richard Spies, Brown's executive vice president for planning, says the different reactions to the two expansion proposals are in large part a result of the university's improved communications. The Jewelry District expansion is based on a long master plan process during which the university openly discussed its intention to move into the district. "Whether people liked it or didn't like it, they had come to terms with it," Spies says.

Of course, an urban university is more likely to broadcast its expansion ambitions when it believes its plan is a no-brainer. Standing under the Highline on Penn's campus as a CSX-Conrail freight train rumbles overhead, Penn's cultural assets manager, Andrew Zitcer, gazes at the downtown Philadelphia skyline rising across the Schuylkill River.

"What better new tenant for this space than the university, which is producing degrees and research — America's great export for the 21st century," Zitcer says.

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Images: Top — A planned new tower. Bottom — Sasaki's vision for the entire Penn campus following expansion. On the horizon is the West Philadelphia neighborhood. Images Sasaki Associates.

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