

President Judith Rodin delivered this address, *The University and The City*, on March 4, at which time she announced the formation of a Penn urban research institute (Almanac March 2, 2004).

## Forging Connections and Creating Transformations

Judith Rodin

For most of its history, Penn has been deeply engaged with urban issues, and I want to pay tribute to many trailblazers in this room who led some of those efforts.

But it's in the past decade that we have found new ways to *apply* our intellectual and financial resources toward the transformation of our own backyard. In revitalizing West Philadelphia, we found our true calling as an urban research university. We assumed roles and risks that no other University had ever taken on. We demolished walls that kept Penn and our neighbors from forging nourishing connections with one another. We created a model for urban universities to become the catalysts for neighborhood transformation.

And we dared to believe that town and gown could unite as one richly diverse community that could learn, grow, socialize, shop, and live together in a safe, flourishing, and economically sustainable urban environment.

Our experience has inspired us to find new ways to bring the richness of Penn's academic and administrative strengths to bear on urban issues throughout Philadelphia and other world cities.

We're working closely with the city, with the business community, and our sister colleges and universities to make Philadelphia a world leader in the knowledge industry. We're building on our momentum in West Philadelphia to lead efforts to redevelop the area east of campus and form a dynamic seamless connection with Center City. We're training the next generation of urban entrepreneurs at the Center for Urban Redevelopment Excellence at Penn.

### A New Initiative: A Penn Urban Research Institute

Today, Penn is viewed throughout the world as a leader in the field and practice of urbanism for the 21st century. But Penn can't sit still even on these laurels. We are well aware that most of the world's population will be living in cities by the year 2006, and we are driven to become the leader in international urbanism.

Today, I am pleased to announce that our commitment has found expression in a major new initiative—the establishment of an urban research institute at Penn—an institute that will enable the University to have a profoundly beneficial impact on the material, cultural, and social life of cities as close as our own Philadelphia, and as far away as Jakarta and Jerusalem.

Just as we worked with our neighbors to transform West Philadelphia, through this institute we hope to form creative partnerships with urban planners, government officials, foundation leaders, urban developers, and all concerned citizens who are looking to transform their cities.

We envision this institute as the catalyst to get everyone who's passionate about cities—including students who are considering an exciting career in urbanism—to think Penn.

And what will Penn do? We will provide a gateway to the rich array of

cross-disciplinary expertise, experience, and conceptual tools to be found across all 12 schools, within the Center for Community Partnerships and Civic House, and throughout the University's administrative divisions in facilities and real estate, business services and purchasing—all of which have a strong urban neighborhood orientation.

Why form an urban institute at Penn? Well, by their very complex nature and scale, cities pose unique challenges to researchers, activists, and policymakers. Meeting these challenges requires an integrative approach that merges the social and physical sciences with engineering, urban and regional planning and architecture. It requires a broad perspective that engages the biomedical sciences and the humanities, as well as the professions of law, education, business, social work, and communications. And it must rely on new technologies in communications, geographical information systems, and computer modeling to capture and understand the complexity that has thwarted so many previous efforts at improving urban life.

Penn enjoys a comparative advantage in all these disciplines and areas of expertise. Thanks to having all 12 of our schools located on one contiguous campus, collaborating across disciplines comes more naturally to our faculty and students. Indeed, Penn is known for its integrative academic and administrative approach to solving problems.

And why form an urban research institute now?

Simple: Because cities are where the action is—and will be for the foreseeable century. By the year 2020, two billion people will be concentrated in the world's cities. Many of the world's problems—inadequate housing, rising infant mortality, income inequality, poor nutrition, illiteracy, crime, not to mention racial, ethnic, and religious tensions—will clearly manifest themselves with greater frequency and intensity in cities.

By addressing these problems creatively now, Penn can help shape the future of urbanism and promote the future viability and vitality of cities.

Last summer, I reread a classic work on the history of urban planning that I'm sure many of you have read. It's Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which was published in 1961, and in light of all of Penn's recent experiences in West Philadelphia and how I've come to view urbanism, the book's then-revolutionary visions and prescriptions resonated even more powerfully with me.

In the book, Jacobs surveys the wreckage wrought by urban renewal—the demolished city neighborhoods, the sterile industrial parks and skyscrapers, and surface parking lots. She argues that healthy cities draw their economic and social vitality from what she called a “city ecosystem”—the very mix of land uses, architecture, shared public spaces, dense populations, and spontaneous human interactions that urban renewal efforts had annihilated. For Jacobs, bringing cities back to life meant restoring the damaged ecosystems of city neighborhoods—with attention paid to the smallest details.

Jacobs concludes her book with a declaration that anticipates the challenges we faced and the truths we discovered in West Philadelphia. “Dull, inert cities,” she writes, “... do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.”

Today, I want to talk about how Penn's engagement with its neighbors has had a regenerating effect on both our neighborhood and the University, which, in turn, has energized us to find new ways to bring our knowledge and experience to bear on urban problems locally, nationally, and internationally in the decades ahead.

### Setting the Stage for the West Philadelphia Initiatives

In telling the Penn story about the past decade, I will discuss the history, vision and intellectual underpinnings that set the stage for our West Philadelphia initiatives. But I am going to focus more on action, on implementation, on how we executed a strong plan, which had been well formulated and articulated, to build capacity back into the neighborhood. By capacity, I include *educational* capacity, *retail* capacity, *quality-of-life* capacity, and especially *economic* capacity.

Of course, whenever I hear the word execution, I am reminded of a famous quip from the late John McKay, who went from coaching national championship football teams at Southern Cal to coaching the NFL expansion Tampa Bay Buccaneers, which lost its first 26 games. During that losing streak, which stretched over two seasons, a reporter asked McKay what he thought of his team's execution. Without missing a beat, McKay



The Left Bank, looking east along Walnut Street.

replied, "I'm in favor of it."

Now, I can tell you that when Penn first offered to devote substantial resources toward redeveloping University City, many members of the academic community were not much kinder. Though they didn't call for the execution of Penn's leaders, they did wonder aloud what we were smoking.

Yet, picture what we faced. Crime had increased dramatically from 1983 through 1993. One in five residents lived below the poverty level. Shops and businesses were closing, and pedestrian traffic was vanishing. Middle-class families were leaving, and more houses were falling prey to abandonment and decay. The streets were littered with trash, and abandoned homes and buildings became canvasses for graffiti artists and business addresses for drug dealers.

The public schools were in especially bad shape. They were overcrowded and antiquated, and three local elementary schools ranked at the bottom in state-administered math and reading tests. The main commercial thoroughfare through Penn's campus was dominated by surface parking lots, and the depressed and desolate commercial corridor of 40th Street at the western edge of Penn's campus had become an invisible campus boundary beyond which Penn students and faculty were advised not venture.

And despite the many individual efforts of faculty and administrators to reach out to the community, residents by and large still felt that Penn had turned its back on the neighborhood. Who could blame them? Penn was so near and large, and yet, remained so remote. The city's largest private employer spent hundreds of millions of dollars a year on goods, services, and construction, yet little of that trickled down to local businesses. Penn operated commercial real estate with seemingly little regard either for what kinds of businesses were leasing its properties or their impact on quality of life. Some establishments were seedy and menacing. Even our buildings kept their distance.

Could a University so alienated from a deeply distressed neighborhood at its doorstep continue to grow and prosper? That was the fundamental question we faced when I became President in 1994. While some counseled that the problems were intractable, others encouraged Penn to take a leadership role in revitalizing the neighborhood as a matter of enlightened self-interest.

During the early months of my presidency, I found myself persuaded by the latter perspective. I saw that investing in the neighborhood would pay academic dividends for Penn, and that this wasn't a zero-sum game, in which Penn would have to ransom its academic future to improve the fortunes of the neighborhood. I believed that for Penn to flourish academically, our neighborhood had to flourish as well. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to attract the finest faculty and the brightest students to Penn.

Moreover, I felt strongly that we had an example of integrity to set for our students. The state of the neighborhood was our business. How could we educate and exhort our students to contribute to society if we did not offer them an institutional example of positive civic engagement? If Penn could make discoveries that saved lives and drove the global economy, then surely we had both the capacity and moral obligation to use our intellectual might to make things right at our doorstep.

As you will see, in hindsight the right call looks like a no-brainer. At the time, however, neither my job description nor my charge from the Trustees included investing large amounts of my time and the University's funds in neighborhood initiatives.

It was one thing to support and recognize the great efforts of faculty and staff to take incremental measures to solve West Philadelphia's problems, if it fit within their research purview. But to offer to take the lead as an institution in redeveloping a distressed neighborhood that disliked us, and assume an unprecedented level of financial and social risk? That was a different story.

But we set about the task. At the time, the prevailing mantra of community development was, work from the grass roots up. Government entities or institutions,—in this case, Penn—would write the checks and distribute resources to nonprofit community development corporations, which would take the lead in rebuilding capacity into the neighborhood. In other words, sprinkle the grass roots with seed money, and watch the neighborhood blossom.

There were two flaws with that approach. One: No CDC in West Philadelphia had the full capacity or the track record for turning distressed neighborhoods around. Two: We didn't have the luxury of time.

Only one entity had the capacity, the resources, and the political clout to intervene to stabilize the neighborhood quickly and revitalize it within a relatively short time period. And that was Penn. Outside developers were certainly not beating on our doors. And local government didn't have the resources. If Penn didn't seize the initiative to revitalize the neighborhood itself, no one else would.

So, we created a community development agenda in which we would strive to rebuild West Philadelphia's social and economic capacity by simultaneously and aggressively acting on five interrelated fronts:

- We would make the neighborhood clean, safe, and attractive with a variety of new interventions.
- We would stimulate the housing market.
- We would spur economic development by directing University contracts and purchases to local businesses.
- We would encourage retail development by attracting new shops, restaurants, and cultural venues that were neighborhood-friendly.
- We would improve the public schools.

### **An Integrated Approach**

I want to stress the point about our integrated approach. Many urban colleges and universities had taken action on one front or another. None had attempted to commit to intervening holistically on all fronts at once.

Here is what we promised we wouldn't do.

First, we would never again expand our campus to the west or to the north into residential neighborhoods. We would only expand to our east, which was made up entirely of abandoned buildings and commercial real estate.

Second, we wouldn't act unilaterally. Instead, we would candidly discuss what we could do with the community, and we would operate with transparency.

And third, we wouldn't promise what we couldn't deliver. Instead, we would limit long-term commitments to promises we knew we could keep—and we would leverage our resources by stimulating major investments by the private sector.

In my mind, nothing short of a revolution would do. I wanted to reorient the entire administrative culture at Penn toward transforming the University and the neighborhood simultaneously.

There was only one way for that to happen: It had to come from the top. Beginning with me, the leadership of Penn would take responsibility for directing and implementing the West Philadelphia initiatives. To underscore this, I asked our trustees to form a standing committee on neighborhood initiatives, equal in status to committees on University finance, development, and others.

### **Safety Initiatives**

Now, let me take you back to the real-world crisis, and how we intervened. To make the neighborhood cleaner and safer, we strengthened our Division of Public Safety by hiring more police officers and investing in state-of-the-art technology. We also opened a new police station further west beyond campus, co-locating it with the Philadelphia police precinct substation and the special-services district that we took the lead in launching. We did this to signal Penn's commitment to the safety of our students and our neighbors.

At the same time, this newly created University City special-services district, which you all know as the UCD, employed both safety ambassadors who walked the streets and supported campus and city police, and trash collectors who supplemented city units and helped remove graffiti.



*University Square, looking north at 36th & Walnut.*

These were welfare-to-work participants, thus contributing to another social action goal.

In addition, we partnered with neighborhood residents, the electricians' union, and the local electric company to install fixtures to uniformly light the sidewalks of 1,200 neighborhood properties. Not only did these efforts create a brighter and cleaner neighborhood, which attracted more and more foot traffic, but by requiring whole blocks, rather than individual homeowners, to commit, we encouraged a revival of community associations, block by block.

This, in turn, led to greening projects—such as the planting of 450 trees and 10,000 spring bulbs and the creation of four public and three children's gardens—which set the stage for the dramatic transformation of Clark Park from a dangerous drug-infested space into a thriving recreational venue for children and the locale for a weekly farmer's market.

Along with making University City cleaner and safer, Penn had a huge initial impact on housing, which itself had become a clean and safe issue.

We began by acquiring twenty abandoned properties in strategic spots throughout the neighborhood, rehabbed them, and sold them to the public. We weren't seeking a profit on these homes. Rather, we were seeking to build capacity by stabilizing blocks and promoting home ownership.

We also stepped up our efforts to encourage more Penn affiliates to move into the neighborhood. But to make the neighborhood more attractive to residents, students, and visitors alike, we needed to provide retail and cultural amenities and engineer radical improvements in the public schools.

Here is where we really rolled the dice. We resolved to plan and build a public school, and we chose to undertake two large-scale mixed-use retail development projects in hopes that major anchors would bring other shops, restaurants, theaters, private investment, and private development to University City.

## Retail Development

Let me first talk about Penn's excellent adventure in urban retail development. Along one largely deserted stretch on Walnut Street, we built a 300,000-square-foot project that included a luxury hotel, a beautiful new Penn bookstore, public plazas, and a raft of stores and restaurants. At the periphery of the campus at 40th and Walnut, we bought out the lease of a Burger King to make way for a 75,000-square-foot project that would create true convergences between town and gown. This project entailed two critical amenities that we gambled would breathe new life into 40th Street: A fabulous movie theater and an equally fabulous grocery store. We assumed all of the risks, and encountered our share of obstacles.

Penn had inked a deal with Robert Redford and Sundance Cinemas in 1998 to build the movie theater. It would show independent and experimental films and feature an art gallery and cafe, a video library, community meeting spaces, and perhaps a jazz club. Across the street would be a multi-story parking garage atop an innovative new supermarket, Freshgrocer.

Construction was proceeding apace two years later when the parent company, General Cinema, filed for bankruptcy and pulled the plug on the Sundance Theater project. Just like that, a critical project had stalled, and my lunches with Robert Redford came to an untimely end.

Understandably, some admonished Penn for biting off more than it

could chew, and counseled us to suspend the search for another partner. But others lobbied to go the extra mile to sign a deal with another chain that had shown some interest in the project.

True, it wasn't easy convincing the Trustees or me to spend more money to seal the deal with National Amusements. But at the end of the day, and less than two years after the Sundance project collapsed, the Bridge Cinema de Lux—a sensational state-of-the-art movie theater complex—opened to rave reviews at 40th and Walnut. The Bridge attracts 500,000 patrons a year, and if you were to visit the Freshgrocer at 10 p.m. or even 2 a.m., you would see throngs of students and neighborhood residents shopping, noshing, and schmoozing together—all indications of a healthy city neighborhood, as Jane Jacobs envisioned.

All told, scores of new shops that run the gamut are opening throughout the neighborhood. And a commercial corridor given up for dead now bustles with art galleries, performance spaces, and an international restaurant row that reflects the dynamic cultural diversity of University City. Thousands of people—from the Penn community, from the neighborhood, from all over the region—are flocking to shops, restaurants, and cultural venues that came into being as a direct result of Penn's decision to redevelop a dying commercial core into a thriving, productive asset.

Having large crowds on the streets has made the neighborhood safer and much more exciting. It's been a shot in the arm for the local economy. And it's made University City very attractive to outside private developers.

Penn's investments proved to be the catalyst for attracting approximately 250 million more of private investment dollars to West Philadelphia. Now, we have partners like developer Carl Dranoff, who invested \$55 million to convert a former 700,000 square-foot industrial warehouse into the Left Bank, a mixed-use complex featuring 282 market rate apartments, new shops and restaurants, a child day-care facility, and brilliantly redesigned office space.

The Left Bank is a perfect model of creative reuse of historic, fallow properties that can transform a neighborhood, and Dranoff Properties is now one of two lead partners in redeveloping two contiguous buildings.

But this isn't just about building and attracting amenities. This is also about building sustainable economic capacity back into the neighborhood by providing new opportunities for local businesses and job growth among neighborhood residents.

As I mentioned earlier, historically, only a small portion of Penn's purchases benefited local businesses. So we asked ourselves, "Why not deploy our purchasing more strategically?" We required that our construction projects create substantial access for women and minorities to the trades. We invested in small businesses that created opportunity for welfare-to-work recipients and other members of our local community. And we redirected a portion of our purchases toward West Philadelphia vendors.

In seven years, we have purchased \$300 million in goods and services from local businesses. And we are receiving incredible service.

All told, these interventions have been remarkably effective in revitalizing the neighborhood. Over a seven-year period, crime has fallen 31 percent. We've added more than 150,000 square feet of new retail inventory, with 25 new stores opening over the past four years. We've encouraged the creation of thousands of new jobs for local residents. Thanks to a partnership with Citizens' Bank, more than \$28 million has been made available to local non-profit community development groups, for-profit developers, small businesses and homeowners.

Perhaps the most intriguing statistic of all is the population change. While Philadelphia as a whole has seen its population decline by 4.5 percent over the past five years, University City has seen an increase of 2.1 percent. That may not be a staggering number by itself, but when you consider the alarming condition of this neighborhood a decade ago, that figure puts an exclamation point on our revitalization efforts.

## Educational Initiative

I've left our educational initiatives for last, since in many ways, this represented Penn's greatest gamble. Everything else we did made University City a much more enticing place to visit. But if we wanted to make the neighborhood more attractive for families, we had to improve public education.

Yet, we could not have even begun to transform the schools had we failed to build safety, life, and economic capacity back into the neighborhood. We were also building and fostering relationships of trust among all our neighbors to forge a community of shared values—a community in which we all would learn, and grow, and flourish together.

This was the context in which we resolved to do something substantial and dramatic to improve the local schools. As much as Penn had worked in the past to improve the learning environment in a number of schools,



*The Bridge Cinema at 40th and Walnut.*

we faced some hard facts. Children from low-income families by and large were trapped in struggling schools. Their parents had no choice and little hope of seeing their children receive a good education.

Middle-class families with school-age children in University City did have a choice: They could send their children to a private school or they could move to the suburbs. What was it going to take to give children from poor families a reason to hope, and middle-class families a reason to stay and become truly vested in the neighborhood?

The answer would become clear to a large number of stakeholders: an excellent new school. We chose to reach for the brass ring and create a Penn-assisted, inclusive neighborhood public school whose enrollment reflected the broad diversity of University City. Only a school of this magnitude would capture the public's imagination and send the strongest possible signal to our neighbors that Penn was deeply committed to a sustainable future for West Philadelphia.

However, for this public school to model best practices and innovations to the benefit of other neighboring schools and ultimately transform urban public education, it had to involve the School District and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers in a true partnership.

Nothing like this had ever been tried in the history of public education in America. First, it took a lot of persuasion and "gentle" arm-twisting to reach an historic, three-way agreement. It took another year of painstaking, thoughtful collaboration with educators and community representatives to come up with a design and plan for the school, and then another year of addressing the fears and concerns of residents—some of whom were suspicious of our motives, and others who didn't want to be left out in the cold.

But ultimately, with the great leadership of the Graduate School of Education, we were able to create a university-assisted, pre-K-through-8 neighborhood public school near Penn's campus that now accomplishes many things. It provides an excellent education for up to 700 neighborhood children. It is strengthening existing neighborhood schools by providing professional development and serving as a source of best practices. Because we linked the school to ongoing neighborhood revitalization, the school is also evolving into a community center that offers many things



*The central atrium of the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School at 42nd and Locust Streets.*

to the community: all kinds of vocational, recreational, and adult education programs; cultural events; and a town hall where the community can come together to explore and debate issues and visions of the future. And by making University City more attractive to young families with children, the school has stabilized the neighborhood even further, while Penn continues to leverage our resources and investment in the new school to improve all local schools in West Philadelphia.

There is no doubt that Penn has been transformed by our engagement with West Philadelphia and our decision to become the lead developer in University City. We have overcome decades of hostile relations with our neighbors to forge partnerships that have achieved remarkable progress.

### **Enhancing Penn's Reputation**

And far from robbing Penn's academic future to pay for this progress, our engagement has played a critical role in enhancing Penn's academic reputation. All the markers of academic success—our rankings, faculty awards, student applications, selectivity, growth in endowment—have soared to record levels.

Our West Philadelphia Initiatives are winning national and international awards and competitions for design, creative land use, and economic impact. We were especially proud that the initiatives received the prestigious Urban Land Institute's 2003 Award for Excellence.

With strategic planning, brutal self-assessment, measurable implementation goals, guts, and some good luck, Penn indeed did transform its relationship with our neighbors, and in the process, we've all been happily transformed. Ten years ago, the neighborhood was a liability to the University and did not register even a blip on any private developer's radar screen. Today, Penn celebrates its ongoing transformation into a world-class urban research university that is nourished by the neighborhood it helped to redevelop.

Every day, Penn faculty and students form new, mutually rewarding alliances and relationships with our neighbors. It's especially exciting to see how our urban-minded students are getting more involved with the ongoing transformation of 40<sup>th</sup> Street. For example, students in one of our Penn Design architecture studios are designing new facades for buildings near the 40<sup>th</sup> Street corridor. And this is just one of an extraordinary number of efforts, many led by our outstanding Center for Community Partnerships.

The story I have told is a happy one, and happily, it's not about to end any time soon. Indeed, I see the West Philadelphia story as merely the first chapter of an epic narrative that is now entering a new phase.

### **The Future**

While remaining fully committed to contributing to a robust, healthy future for our neighborhood, we at Penn are ready to devote more of our academic resources toward fostering a healthy, robust future for Philadelphia and, we hope, for cities everywhere. The emergence of a University-wide urban research institute illustrates how Penn's identity and academic mission now are deeply linked to urbanism and the future of cities.

I might also mention that the transformative development of University City is continuing at an almost breathtaking pace and scale. Over the next decade, you'll see Penn spearheading development primarily to the east. You'll see surface parking lots turning into student housing and recreational space. You'll see abandoned industrial and commercial buildings converted into mixed-use facilities for teaching, scientific research, and technology transfer enterprises. You'll see more shops, more green spaces, and more streets come to life as University City links seamlessly with Center City. This time, however, it will all be done through partnerships between Penn and private developers.

At the same time, you will also see our work along 40th Street take on a new life of its own. Seven years ago, Penn took the lead in redeveloping this distressed commercial corridor. Today, we've called upon our own Penn Praxis, which partnered with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial board to lead citizens' discussions on the future of Penn's Landing, to lead a similar community-wide effort in creating shared planning principles for the future development of 40th Street.

At these public forums, you'll find representatives of University City's rich diversity—from local merchants and neighbors to the west and north, to Penn students, and even including our fiercest critics—all hashing out their ideas together.

From pursuing an aggressive urban academic agenda to working with all of our partners (and our critics) to build on our progress in West Philadelphia, the message is very clear: Penn is in the business of neighborhood transformation for the long haul.

Ten years ago, few thought Penn had the guts to stick its neck out for its neighbors. Today, we realize that by putting our money and reputation on the line to help revitalize University City, the neck we saved might well turn out to have been our own.