

University Real Estate Development: Time for City Planners to Take Notice!

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shortage of affordable housing in the city.

The Boston Redevelopment Authority last year convened a meeting of the city's universities and medical centers to discuss collective strategies to address the

This year, a coalition of these institutions is discussing not just how to address that issue, but how they can play a larger role as an economic sector in shaping the future of the city.

In Chicago, several universities jointly developed a 2,500-bed housing facility right in the downtown, a \$151 million project that is being hailed as both a breakthrough of collaboration as well as a hallmark of the transformation of the city's traditional business core into a center of education, arts, and leisure.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is planning a conference later this year at the University of Baltimore to discuss the role of universities in smart growth, neighborhood sensitive development, and environmental issues. It picked Baltimore in part because of the city's focus on requiring master planning by universities.

These are just a few examples among many of the increased importance and visibility of urban university development projects. The bucolic campus in a pristine setting still retains its dominance as an image; indeed, in Thomas Wolfe's recent bestseller "I am Charlotte Simmons," set at contemporary fictional Dupont University, the outside world indeed barely appears in its 700 pages.

But the reality is very different. Of the nation's over 3,700 institutions of higher education, 51% are located in the urban core, and an additional 24% in the urban fringe. Of all university expenditures, 87% is spent by these urban institutions. Universities are the largest employers not just in traditional college towns, but also in cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore. It is time for city planners to take notice and begin planning more systematically with these institutions than has been the case until now.

This is one of the conclusions of a recent study I conducted with my colleague David Perry from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Great Cities Institute. With support from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, we have been holding annual workshops of university real estate staff and collecting case studies. We found a large number of university real estate development projects that encroach upon surrounding neighborhoods. That alone probably justifies more systematic attention by city planning staff to universities.

In addition, in many places, higher education has become such a large part of the urban economy, that any city with an economic development planning focus ought to be paying attention to how this sector can be sustained and grown. Conversely, universities should become more deliberate and proactive in playing a larger civic role, rather than concentrating only on their own specific institutional interests. With the disappearance of independent corporate headquarters from many cities, universities (along with medical centers, foundations, and other not-for-profit organizations) need to pick up the mantle of civic leadership previously carried by the corporate sector. This is beginning to happen in Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore, but still at a very limited level.

Formal mechanisms already exist, but do not go very far. For instance, Washington, D.C. requires a master plan from all universities. But in reality, these plans rarely involve much joint thinking and planning, and quickly become irrelevant from the city's perspective. Less formal, but more effective, is the collaborative involvement of Georgia State University,

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led by its president (not coincidentally, urban planner Carl Patton) with the mayor and other city leaders in Atlanta. As a result of years of relationship building, Georgia State has become an anchor of downtown Atlanta's revitalization, and benefited significantly from the housing built for the 1996 Summer Olympics that subsequently became student housing.

In other places, the relationship has elements of conflict as well as cooperation. The University of Illinois at Chicago, sited in an urban renewal area because of the determination of the first Mayor Daley, was pressured by the second mayor Daley to redevelop a 50 acre area south of its campus. While the mayor pushed, many of the city's planning department staff (often graduates of the university's own progressive and community-oriented

Urban Planning Program) were pretty sympathetic to the community opponents and created frequent obstacles. Strong mayoral support, and significant concessions by the university regarding preserving some buildings and facades, finally allowed the project to go forward.

The relationship between universities and local governments should be different than is the case for just any large institution. In the knowledge economy, universities are more important than ever. In most of the cases we studied, neither the university nor city planners appear to have thought much about how this affects the role of the university, or what the long-term real estate and policy consequences of this are. Projects tend to be handled in a piece-meal fashion, and city planners treat the university like any other

organization that needs some permit or services. Relationships tend to be project and task-oriented, rather than continuous, comprehensive, and strategic. Of course, much city planning occurs that way. Nevertheless, given the importance and permanence of universities, a more consistent and comprehensive approach to joint planning might serve both universities and their cities better.

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