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Resettling in Philadelphia
by Adam Glaser, Senior Designer

Fifteen years ago, Philadelphia had an image problem. Back then, the country's fifth-largest urban center seemed to embody everything wrong with U.S. inner cities: a declining population, high crime rates, and blighted neighborhoods—all of which hurt its national reputation for years. During this period, many in the region turned away from the city, preferring instead to live and work in suburbs distant from the historic core.

Facing up to many of its problems, Philadelphia today is moving in an exciting and more prosperous direction. Over the last decade, waves of new development have transformed the city's downtown, known locally as Center City, into a highly successful mixed-use district—with new residential, academic, and retail projects appearing on virtually every block. According to the Center City District's State of Center City: 2004 report, Philadelphia's core added more than 4,000 units of new housing from 1998 to 2003, making it one of the strongest residential downtowns in the country and the American city with the highest percentage of residents who walk to work. Moreover, this pattern has triggered a slow but promising resettlement from the same suburbs that have long eroded Philadelphia's population and growth.

Center City is not the only bright spot, however. The art museum district and, more recently, University City also have grown at an unprecedented rate, particularly in the areas surrounding the University of Pennsylvania ("Penn") and the nearby medical center. Currently, almost every local art museum, the central public library, and the convention center are all engaged in a major expansion/relocation project.

In contrast to what transpired during past booms, today's prosperity has also touched parts of Philadelphia that generally lag behind the city's traditional hot spots. Peripheral neighborhoods such as Northern Liberties and Bella Vista have been home to urban pioneers for years—yet only recently have they evolved into more diverse urban centers with potentially distinct identities and broader constituencies. Even areas in far north and west Philadelphia—historically among the poorest and most disadvantaged parts of the city—are seeing investment and redevelopment for the first time in decades, particularly along Girard, Cecil B. Moore, and Washington avenues.

Three Issues for the Decade Ahead

If anything, current growth trends are expected to continue and even accelerate during the coming decade. In a recent Philadelphia Inquirer article, critic Inga Saffron counted almost 35 new residential towers slated for completion over the next five years, most located in or near Center City. If the added office, retail, and service buildings required to accommodate all the new residents are factored in, current plans will have a major impact on the population, demographics, and shape of the city for years to come.

Three issues—science-based development in University City, a government initiative to turn the entire city into a wireless Internet (WiFi) "hot spot," and the increasing number of cars in the city—are catalysts or consequences of this historic growth. Together, they help illustrate where Philadelphia is heading and some of the challenges it faces in getting there. Interestingly, these three seemingly disparate topics all touch on a single key theme for the city's future: attracting and retaining recent graduates and young professionals.

Science, Jobs, and the Future of University City

Though the housing market is also hot in University City, the larger development focus is medical and biotech research. Penn, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), and the Science Center are all pursuing mixed-use, research-oriented science developments within a ten-minute walk of the Schuylkill River, hoping to capitalize on the wealth of talent, transportation, and historic character in this area also known as "West Philadelphia." A recent Brookings Institute report identified Philadelphia as one of nine potential biotechnology centers in the country, and a great deal of the region's research in these fields occurs in University City. While these projects would add several million square feet of new medical and biotech research space, many seek to do so in a way that encourages stronger connections to the city and allows for a wider range of uses like housing and retail that can help foster a viable, live/work community.

Beyond the potential economic benefits of these projects, University City's science-based developments are intended to make Philadelphia more attractive to younger residents, especially graduates of nearby universities like Penn, Temple, and Drexel. Recent studies have shown that while Philadelphia has one of the highest percentages of university and graduate students in the country, it also has one of the lower retention rates. Reversing this trend means providing an entrepreneurial environment for people who are looking to put their educations to use, and an exciting, urbane living environment—preferably one that blurs the traditional boundary between "town and gown." University City has several of the same institutional and urban advantages that places like Cambridge and Berkeley have, but it offers them in closer proximity to the region's business center and its main transportation hubs.

If the new life-science and technology developments in University City do succeed, they may spark an unprecedented realignment of jobs in the city's regional economy. Over the years, Philadelphia has lost many of its major employers to the outlying suburbs. This is especially true of the pharmaceutical companies, one of the city's primary industries that now tends to congregate along the Route 202 corridor to the north and west of town. By attracting a critical mass of research and commercialization activity, University City may eventually reverse some of the corporate flight from the urban core to the outer-ring suburbs, as these technology-driven industries are increasingly looking to locate near major research universities and medical centers.

A Wired City: Bridging the Digital Divide

On the subject of technology, the city's proposed plan to provide wireless Internet access to the entire city is drawing national attention (www.phila.gov/wireless/faqs.html). While the program is still preliminary, proponents say the move will attract young, technology-oriented people from cities like Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle, and elevate Philadelphia's predominantly low-tech image—the city currently ranks below the national average in the number of computers per household. It also would minimize the cost of providing low-cost Internet access to the several square miles of neighborhoods without broadband infrastructure—places that otherwise would have little or no access to the Web and its resources.

On the other hand, opponents counter that the city is ill equipped to administer what would, in essence, be a new municipal utility comparable to its water or electrical services. Critics also worry that converting Philadelphia into the world's largest WiFi hot spot would discourage private Internet companies from upgrading their infrastructure there since so much of the market would opt for the city's lower-cost wireless service.

Beyond making the city attractive to the young "digital" set, another key driver of the WiFi program involves providing educational tools to disadvantaged students. The Center City District's State of Center City: 2004 report notes that citywide, only 29 percent of Philadelphia's citizens aged 25 to 34 have college degrees, while in Center City that number is closer to 80 percent. This educational divide is mirrored by a digital divide given that the highest concentrations of computer ownership and resources are also located in Center City and University City, in ratios very similar to the college degree disparities. Since Philadelphia intends to compete with other knowledge-based regions like Boston and San Francisco, it needs to improve the educational profile of the entire city.

If the city ultimately follows through with its WiFi initiative, the distribution system would be mounted to existing electrical poles, light poles, streetlights, and traffic lights. Costs have yet to be established, but user fees will certainly be less than those for comparable services from telephone and cable companies—making flexible, high-speed Internet access available to potentially millions of people who currently do not have the option. Either way, the WiFi initiative is a welcome sign that Philadelphia is taking a more active, progressive role in promoting innovation and technology in the city.

Drivers Wanted?

What can be said for Philadelphia's approach to technology, however, cannot be said for its approach to automobiles. One negative aspect of the city's recent growth is the surging number of cars in Center City, and even more, the struggle to park them. A recent report by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC) notes that transit trips into Center City have fallen by 24 percent since 1980, while automobile trips have risen by 30 percent during the same period. Since this 30 percent increase translates to nearly 30,000 cars, the parking implications are enormous. However, this report also notes that many Center City garages are rarely even 80 percent full, raising doubts as to how much additional parking the city really needs.

Unlike Chicago or Seattle, which have actively sought to control or even discourage excessive traffic and parking lots, Philadelphia and many of the developers there follow design models that resemble those of Sunbelt cities—especially in the housing market. Generally, the city zoning code requires that all new apartments and condominiums provide at least one parking space per unit, and in the case of townhouses, one curb cut per car, which is disruptive to pedestrians and drivers alike. Although many new office/retail developments provide only minimal parking, Center City is littered with massive garages catering to commuters who do not use public transportation. Until recently, it has often been more profitable to tear down existing buildings and create surface parking in Philadelphia, so jarring asphalt lots line many city streets—even major thoroughfares like Market and Chestnut streets.

At the center of this debate is the Philadelphia Parking Authority (PPA). The PPA controls some of the most important open parcels in the city, but shows little interest in developing them for any use other than parking. Most of the PPA's sites would actually make better (and more strategic) opportunities for mixed-use housing and retail space, but the agency often counters that developing nonparking uses falls outside its charter. On some of the more important sites, the city is trying to create joint ventures, pairing the PPA with developers in hopes of realizing the sites' highest and best use potential. But it is still unclear whether this strategy will work and to date, the PPA seems resistant to the idea.

As with science-oriented developments and WiFi, the spreading car culture also affects Philadelphia's goal of attracting young people. In cities with higher concentrations of younger residents, like Cambridge and San Francisco, apartment buildings are often tied directly to transit centers and offer little or no off-street parking—which means lower rents and higher densities. In contrast, while Philadelphia's provision of one car per housing unit makes sense in a condominium-driven market focused on older, more affluent customers, it tends to ignore the needs of students and research-oriented renters who may not own cars. Until the city diversifies its housing models, it will struggle to compete with other cities in regard to both youth and streetscape.

Creating a Vibrant, Younger City

Most indicators suggest that Philadelphia is in for another decade of growth. The nature and success of this expansion will reflect, in part, how the city adapts to new technologies and market sectors such as life sciences and biotechnology. To make its recent gains sustainable, Philadelphia must attract recent graduates and young professionals looking to start their careers in a place that will encourage and reward their efforts for decades. Science-oriented developments and the WiFi initiative are encouraging starts—but diversifying the housing base and drafting a stronger parking strategy would help even further.

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