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Early Returns on Dramatic Efforts to Change

The West Philadelphia Initiatives, 1990–2005

On October 21, 1994, Judith Rodin walked into her inauguration and into history as Penn's seventh president, after a distinguished twenty-year career in higher education. She returned to Penn as the first woman president of an Ivy League institution. Rodin's return to Philadelphia was also significant because it was a homecoming to the section of the city where she had been raised. Stories in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, as well as some university announcements, suggest that Rodin's realization that her tenure would be about resolving the "West Philadelphia problem" came only after a series of high-profile crimes on and around the Penn campus in the mid-1990s, but there is evidence that refutes this suggestion. In her inaugural speech, Rodin stated:

Philadelphia is my hometown. I first came to Penn three decades ago, wide-eyed, only because of a precious scholarship for local students. Returning here, I find special meaning and emotion in so many of each day's rituals and experiences. . . .

I have no doubt that this city, despite its problems, is one of Penn's greatest blessings. It is central to the Penn experience—not a world apart. I intend to work every day that I am here, as both a personal and an institutional mission, with community leaders and public officials, with our schools and health clinics, on things both large and small, to enhance the relationship in ways that will enrich both Penn and Philadelphia. We are, and must be, truly one.¹

During my research, a Penn staffer I spoke with shared copies of administrative memos and reports given to Rodin and other senior university administrators regarding Penn's impending action plan for West Philadelphia. In one briefing paper from March 1994, nearly eight full months before her inaugural, I identified five priority issues that required attention: (1) safety, (2) jobs, (3) economic and commercial development, (4) quality of public education, and (5) health care. The report geographically separated West Philadelphia into two areas with different populations, challenges, and priorities. The first area was an "inner ring" that was (and is) more racially and economically diverse than the "outer ring" that was (and remains) more homogenous and predominantly African American. The briefing paper speaks specifically to the university's activities and to a clear rationale for urban engagement—self-interest.

In late November 1994, a much more detailed draft report, "Strategy and Actions for West Philadelphia Plan," provided more information about specific opportunities for engagement and steps to be taken by the university to take advantage of them. While jobs, public education, and health care were still a part of this second report, they were much less prominent. In their place, economic and commercial development—particularly along distressed retail corridors—was described as a critical piece of West Philadelphia's urban revitalization. The report differed from both its predecessor and later drafts about the West Philadelphia plan by its lack of hubris about the university's capabilities and by referencing opportunities to partner or support the work of local organizations in their community development/urban revitalization projects.

The last pre–West Philadelphia Initiatives (WPI) report I uncovered was a draft prepared for the university in November 1996, which most closely resembled what actually took place between 1994 and 2004. It called for improvements in commercial and economic development, housing, and general quality of life and educational opportunities for children. The total proposed cost at that time was more than \$10 million. Those funds would be used in a variety of ways, including the construction of a new public school and a supermarket, a public safety effort, and property acquisition and rehabilitation.

In the end, the WPI proved to be larger and more expansive than any draft report had proposed. As a result, “buckets” of activity were defined to organize disparate (and possibly contradictory) efforts across and beyond the university. To that end, five major strategic objectives or themes were identified: (1) clean and safe streets, (2) excellent school options, (3) high-quality housing options, (4) reinvigorated retail, and (5) increased job opportunities. Many of the participants in this study cited Ira Harkavy, the well-known director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships as the source of these ideas. However, there were other segments of the Penn community, including Penn Faculty and Staff for Neighborhood Issues (PFSNI), that had become very concerned about the rise in crime around the campus and had publicly outlined their wishes for an engaged university.²

Many of my informants understood that on some levels Penn was able to make significant strides in its revitalization effort largely because of the coalescing of various trends and factors that contributed to the university’s progress. This chapter focuses on three components of the university’s West Philadelphia Initiatives that were most often cited as significant drivers of change in University City and West Philadelphia. As stated in Chapter 1, this book is not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of the initiatives. As significant contributors to urban neighborhood change in University City, however, they do warrant description and analysis. The two components that are not discussed are those that had missions that my informants either did not know about or did not care to discuss. My

view of the relatively scant discussion of those components—public safety and economic inclusion—is that most informants believed and expected that Penn would play a significant role in crime reduction because crime was the issue that launched the WPI. Economic inclusion was developed later in the process and was not well known among many people either within or beyond the university.

What follows should not be read as an alternative interpretation of the facts laid out in Kromer and Kerman's WPI report.³ That report was a balanced and comprehensive review of the rationale behind the WPI and a plainly written account of positive Penn-driven change in West Philadelphia. Instead, my analysis briefly restates what is publicly known about the WPI and provides some analysis of the WPI's impacts based on data generated from interviews with West Philadelphians.

Housing

Based on Harkavy's guidelines, improving housing became central to the West Philadelphia Initiatives. Stabilizing the neighborhood in many ways depended on the university's ability to lure middle-class residents and ultimately their own students back to the area. The challenges of the area's housing supply were obvious even to the most casual observers. The three major components of Penn's strategy are summarized here.

Mortgage Programs

Residents believe that this component of the initiatives, known popularly and simply as "Penn's mortgage program," has had a great effect on home values and neighborhood composition. The history of the university's support of employee homeownership is actually much longer than the history of the initiatives. Since the 1960s, the university has been guaranteeing mortgages for employees. However, it was not until the initiatives were adopted that more banks were added to the program to increase the competitiveness of interest rates and the program was better marketed to Penn faculty and staff.

The success of the “revived” program inspired Penn faculty and staff to live much further west than many had ever considered before. The character of many blocks was changed by the presence of often highly educated and white or foreign-born faculty and staff. In some cases, these beneficiaries of the mortgage program assimilated well into the social fabric of their new neighborhoods, while others isolated themselves from intricate social networks based on the geography of block/neighborhood associations.

The program consists of two parts. The older part, the Guaranteed Mortgage Program, is structured to provide mortgages to full-time Penn employees seeking to buy homes within a defined portion of West Philadelphia. As it evolved, the coverage area was expanded to include more of West Philadelphia as well as additional banks with higher mortgage guarantees to provide capital for renovations. The newer part of the program provides cash to aid with closing costs and mortgage fees. Both segments were designed exclusively to assist full-time university faculty and staff. The guarantee amount was reduced in 2004 from \$15,000 to \$7,500 to make the program available to a greater number of employees. The program has since been renamed the Forgivable Loan Program and is administered by the Penn Home Ownership Services Office.

A notable anecdote on the program is that it has not been accessible exclusively to full-time faculty and staff of the university. Throughout its history, there have been occasions when people other than Penn employees or affiliates were able to pursue homeownership through Penn’s programs.

The “Fund”

Through the capitalization of an endowment in partnership with a private developer, the university created a \$5 million fund (known as the “Fund”) to acquire and renovate apartment buildings close to the university campus. The goal was to create a larger pool of nearby market-rate housing for students and to rid neighborhoods of the crime-ridden buildings that housed hundreds of poor and transient residents.

In all, five large buildings between Fortieth and Fiftieth Streets were renovated. Their average rent, before the Fund acquired and renovated them, for a one-bedroom apartment was \$550 per month in the 1999–2000 academic year. The average for the same size apartment in 2004–2005 was \$670.

Tenants were not evicted or relocated during the renovation. As residents terminated leases and relocated out of a building, upgrades were made to individual units. The modest increases in rent do not reflect the perception that rents skyrocketed in West Philadelphia as a result of the initiatives. Instead, the number of lower-cost options was reduced by other landlords who made substantial improvements to their own buildings (independent of any assistance from the university) in order to have their building “acquired” by Penn via the Fund and so obtain a higher price at sale. When the university opted not to purchase several buildings, landlords kept rents high to recoup their losses and match competing services and rental prices.

Vacant Home Rehabilitation

Another effort initiated by the university at this time was the acquisition and rehabilitation of persistently vacant housing in the University City neighborhoods. A small team of Penn officials traveled the streets of West Philadelphia—on foot—exploring the area’s persistently vacant and decrepit homes. The goal was to identify long-term vacancies for acquisition, renovation, and sale. Given the architecture of Philadelphia’s housing stock, one or more long-term vacancies could potentially destroy the aesthetic quality of a block of homes and contribute to the idea that the area was blighted and neglected—even if it was not.

Between 1998 and 2002, nineteen homes were acquired and renovated using university funds. The homes were then sold on the private market. The renovation costs in many cases exceeded the prices that the homes were able to fetch. According to some Penn officials, prices were not a reflection of the university’s poor management of the property renovations or failure to select appropriate properties but were rather the sign of a market that had not caught

up with demand. A former Penn staffer intimately involved in the housing program shared the following:

We had houses that didn't even make it to the market. Couples would walk by and ask if the house being worked on was one of the "Penn" houses. We sold one or two before we even listed it. The houses got the reputation in the area for being renovated by good contractors using the best materials.

In the end, the university lost money on these houses, which by several accounts sold for less than \$250,000 but cost more than \$300,000 to acquire and renovate. This cost to the university was repaid in the increasing stabilization of the area's housing market. The thrust and mission of the project was consistent with other efforts—to allow the university to engage in investments that were too risky or that appeared unattractive to the market and then allow the market to do the rest.

For others, particularly seniors and those on limited incomes, the increased tax assessments encouraged them to consider selling and leaving the area. Many homes increased in value by over 300 percent between the middle 1990s and 2006.⁴ Renters have been the most affected. In 1999, the university created a capital fund for the purchase and renovation of several large apartment buildings surrounding the Penn campus. This collaborative effort by the university and a real estate development firm not only made several buildings more appealing to students; it also limited their accessibility to lower-income residents and inspired many other landlords to renovate their buildings as well. The net effect was a steep climb in area rents. Another consequence was the phenomenon of many absentee landlords selling their multiple-unit buildings or converting them into single-family homes and selling them at higher prices. Through the conversions, many renters were either priced out or simply had their leases terminated when they expired. Some renters, including many students, moved west and south in search of cheaper rents, while others took their evictions as an opportunity to purchase

homes. Many of those in the best position to do this were Penn employees who took advantage of the Enhanced Mortgage Program.

The 2004 expansion of the program's target area included many neighborhoods where home values had not risen to the point of being beyond the reach of lower-salaried university employees. The movement of renters and new homeowners into these areas unsettled housing patterns in previously homeowner-dominated neighborhoods west and south of University City. The divide between community organizers, homeowners, and renters was clear. Indeed, few of my homeowner informants could name renters to whom they could refer me. A number of the renters I did speak to were students or potential informants who were "struggling" or "working too much," or they were potential drug addicts or what several called "too intense." When I asked about former renters who had moved around University City or out of it, most informants were unable to provide me with contact information or did not follow up on promises to facilitate an introduction.

Retail Development

Several groups worked along with the university to create new retail options. The rationale on all sides was that there was an undiscovered and underexploited market for high-end retail services in the area.⁵ Like many other Philadelphia communities, West Philadelphia was underserved by retail amenities. Focus group research conducted by Penn revealed a great demand among area residents and on-campus constituencies. The university directly managed three major projects: (1) the Fresh Grocer, (2) the Bridge: Cinema de Lux, and (3) Sansom Common/University Square.

A fourth retail development owned and managed by the university is a former eatery/office building at the intersection of Thirty-Fourth and Walnut Streets. The Fortieth Street corridor between Walnut and Spruce has been almost entirely upgraded, including additional space on the first floor of the School of Dentistry. There are also new retail developments along Walnut Street on the ground level of the Inn at Penn between Thirty-Sixth and Thirty-Eighth

Streets and between Thirty-Eighth and Fortieth Streets in the Radian building.

The university worked, and continues to work, with community leaders, small business owners, and other interested parties on the rehabilitation of the Fortieth Street, Baltimore Avenue, and Lancaster Avenue retail corridors.

Before 1999, the parcel immediately adjacent to the Annenberg School of Communication, the Annenberg Theatre, the rear of the Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, and the Institute for Contemporary Art was an open parking lot. This central location was a geographical crossroads of the campus and the northernmost face of its contiguous campus core. It was also woefully underutilized as useful space.

One of the jewels in Penn's retail development efforts was University Square. Situated at the corner of Thirty-Sixth and Walnut Streets, the \$90 million, 300,000-square-foot complex contains a popular plaza, the Penn bookstore (the largest by square footage in the entire city and managed by Barnes and Noble Booksellers), several high-end retail brand stores, two high-end and noted restaurants, and a Hilton hotel. This was the only project in Penn's portfolio that was financed entirely by the university.

One of the other jewels is the Fresh Grocer complex at the corner of Fortieth and Walnut Streets. For several decades, supermarkets and other food outlets poorly served the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia. Prior to Penn's involvement, the primary supermarket in the area was a Thriftway at the intersection of Forty-Third and Walnut Streets. The popular consensus garnered from interviews was that this store was inexpensive and poorly managed. The meat section often displayed old and fatty meats; the aisles were often crowded with unstocked goods, open palettes, and other debris. Spills and other hazards were often not quickly removed. Given its place as University City's only full-service market, Thriftway was often very crowded and chaotic. Its best feature was its array of international foods that served West Philadelphia's diverse immigrant communities and middle-class tastes.

The university's various outreach offices and a number of community groups attempted to address grievances with the Thriftway

operator on several occasions. The operator's perceived reluctance to make improvements prompted the university to draw up plans to either buy out the store and shut it down or construct a new supermarket and drive Thriftway out of business through pure competition. The result is the Fresh Grocer that sits at Fortieth and Walnut, directly across from the university's subsidized entertainment complex. A young squatter who was living in West Philadelphia in various vacant houses shared the following perspective with me:

I hate that store. It's just this rich bougie⁶ place that caters to white people who have too much money. I've stolen stuff from there, which is really easy. They have cameras everywhere, and you can see the security booth and that no one's inside watching the cameras. For some awful reason, they never figured out to put up a one-way mirror to stop people from seeing that no one's watching the cameras.

The Fresh Grocer was aided by the development of a retail entertainment complex on the southwest corner of Fortieth and Walnut that includes a high-end eatery, the Marathon Grill, a high-end movie theater, and, on the second floor, a well-decorated cosmopolitan lounge/bar. The goal of this development was for Penn students to find entertainment directly off campus.

At one dinner meeting, I asked a group of African American former West Philadelphia residents how they felt about some of the new developments, particularly the movie theater. One said, "Yeah, I think that the tickets are like \$10.75. That's just a nigga tax. They don't want us up in there. Wasn't that theater supposed to be for the community? Who's going to pay that to see a movie? I'll take my ass to Sixty-Ninth Street."

Nevertheless, the entertainment complex continues to be popular with West Philadelphia teens, who have difficulty traveling to other movie theaters that show first-run movies and new releases (other than the one at Sixty-Ninth Street mentioned by my informant). For most residents, the new retail amenities are convenient and were sorely needed. They are, however, beyond the means of

many and perhaps the most public manifestation of the changing neighborhood. More important, the quality of the retail offerings is a symbol of a shifting community identity.

Public Education

Over the past seventy years, the Philadelphia public school system has been one of the nation's most troubled. A state takeover in 2001 facilitated the privatization of several schools and the creation of a slew of new charter schools as well as relationships between existing schools and "educational management organizations" (EMOs).⁷ Prior to the takeover, Penn was finalizing plans to create a new school to meet the needs of the communities closest to its campus that it would design and manage itself. Through the takeover process, Penn's memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Penn-Alexander School made it a university partner, similar to the for-profit corporations that had accepted contracts to run a select number of troubled schools.

This component of the WPI has been reported as successful, but it has also been an incredibly divisive issue pitting neighborhood association against neighborhood association and even neighbors against neighbors and friends against friends. One neighborhood association has done more with Penn than all of the others, leading to a charge of being "in bed" with the university. One year before the university announced plans to establish and support a new neighborhood school, several University City neighborhood associations were sending delegates to a newly formed "Community Council."

Once the plans for the school were announced, one group (the one that would benefit most) withdrew from the Community Council, creating a rift between the neighborhood associations that is still somewhat unresolved. The issue that inspired the rift was the definition of the school's catchments area, which would have limited access to the area where the greatest proportion of Penn faculty and staff lived and that was closest to the university campus itself.

Alternative proposals for a magnet school, an expanded catchments area, or a lottery were rejected by the university outright. The

recent release of the school's test scores on state assessments had revealed that they were "disappointingly mediocre." Contrary to many media-driven myths about the school, a good number of students attending it are neither children of the long-term persistently poor nor privileged children of Penn professors. It is in fact a mix of the two groups and several others. Many families of all economic backgrounds crowded into owner- and renter-occupied housing when plans for the school were announced. In some cases, families who rented apartments in the catchments area were "doubling" up on children so that as many as possible could be eligible to attend. This did not, however, dissuade many parents of all races and economic levels from attempting to move into an area that many assumed had one the best run and most resource-rich schools in the entire district. The result was a dramatic increase in sale prices for homes in the school's catchments area.

The university's housing initiatives were varied in both scope and transparency. Many of the university's efforts, such as the Enhanced Mortgage Program, were advertised and well known to the general public. Others, such as the Fund rehabilitation program and the Vacant House Rehabilitation Program, were less well known but significant in their impacts. The sections that follow describe these three major programs and present resident views of their impacts on West Philadelphia neighborhoods. Many resident informants cited major changes in housing prices. At the very least, the marketing of West Philadelphia—or a small part of it—as a neighborhood with a quality public school succeeded.⁸

Community Perspectives on Penn's Work

"Penn should give itself a passing grade. Although it may be a leader among its peers in this regard, it still has quite a long way to go." —West Philadelphia resident

How can one university undo nearly a century of urban social isolation, racism, the residue of inadequate social services and public infrastructure, and persistent poverty? If it wanted to, would it even

be possible? Consider patterns of disinvestment and decline that extend well beyond Penn's circle of influence. Penn is a wealthy, large, exclusive institution situated in a contested urban terrain that will most likely draw criticism regardless of the initiatives it undertakes. It represents both the exclusion of many from the best the American educational system has to offer and the best opportunity for them to gain access to another social and economic station in life.

Penn's decision to engage in urban revitalization was based on the idea that West Philadelphia had reached an unacceptable state of crisis. This may have had more to do with the real dangers of West Philadelphia than it did with the inability or unwillingness of Penn students, faculty, and staff to navigate an urban environment that was becoming increasingly hostile generally—but also increasingly hostile to Penn's broadened sense of entitlement and race/class privilege. How white or black was West Philadelphia in actuality?

Questions about the university inspired a variety of responses. They were for the most part positive, with many residents expressing gratitude for its efforts. Still, many informants were skeptical of the university's interests, citing their perception of its current withdrawal of investment and effort. One resident of more than thirty years felt that the university's efforts were cyclical. Once a crisis ended, priorities shifted and disinvestment restarted. Myths about Penn's interests abound and are endlessly scintillating. These myths are often in conflict with the university's stated interests, but are propagated by the fact that various university offices and units are continually engaging different community groups on a variety of projects in an unorganized, incoherent, and inconsistent fashion.

Still, many found Penn and the other area schools to be of great benefit. Even for the most marginal of residents, the university provides resources that other city institutions do not. For this reason, many were sympathetic to the university regarding criticisms about the intent and impacts of the West Philadelphia Initiatives. That sympathy, of course, came from a genuine interest in and loyalty to West Philadelphia as home. During the era of the WPI, the university's presence in West Philadelphia has a dual nature. It simultaneously

presents opportunities in the form of resources and poses threats to the status quo. As one resident explained:

It's a good resource for me. I go to the library and use the Internet there. I can go and pick through the garbage there. Stuff like that. As an institution, they're gobbling up West Philly, and it's sad because the poor just get pushed out further and further. They should be invested in building up West Philly, not reinventing it. They have so much land right now; they should be interested in taking over my building and making that college housing. I've got other places to go. It's kind of sad to see my building going unused.

Many informants complained about Penn's services for students and faculty living in West Philadelphia neighborhoods. This was particularly true of the bicycle police and the shuttle services. One of the subordinate discourses in the larger body of literature on neighborhood redevelopment and change concerns crime. Richard Taub, Garth Taylor, and Jan Dunham, in their now classic book *Paths of Neighborhood Change*, studied the relationship between residents' perceptions of crime and their psychological attachment to their neighborhood.⁹ The researchers suggest that neighborhood changes are prompted by three factors: ecological conditions, corporate decisions, and individual decisions.¹⁰ These interlocking variables contribute to neighborhood change but do not definitely cause it. A major thrust of Taub and colleagues' argument is the empirical evidence they offer that crime and racial succession patterns significantly define individual (and in some ways corporate) decision making.

In 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (VCCA),¹¹ which facilitated the hiring of more than 64,000 new police officers by providing states and localities with 75 percent of the funds for new hires for three years. The objective was to stop a nationwide rise in crime that had peaked in 1991. In their analysis of the impacts of this legislation on crime rates, William Evans and Emily Owens show that, although the VCCA never met its objective of helping place a hundred thousand

new officers on forces around the country, it did go a long way in helping to reduce crime.

A number of U.S. cities have experienced two years of significant increases in violent crime after a decade of historically low crime rates. Philadelphia in particular has been hard hit by this trend. In 2006, it had the highest violent crime rate among the nation's ten largest cities: 1,526 violent crimes per 100,000 residents, nearly twice the rate of Los Angeles (787) and more than twice that of New York (638).¹² Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that violent crimes in Philadelphia increased by 5.9 percent from 2005.¹³ This increase was not spread evenly across the city, however. In reviewing Philadelphia's statistics for aggravated assaults between 1999 and 2005, I found that the incident rate per one thousand persons in University City had climbed by more than 60 percent, but this was still somewhat below the city's average and less than half that of some of its neighboring communities.¹⁴

In 2006, there was a crime spree in West Philadelphia that departed from the relative peace of the late 1990s, when the effects of the VCCA began to show. This rise in crime was perhaps because of the reversal during the early 2000s of the Clinton administration's anticrime policy. Despite some of the attention received by student muggings and attacks in the Philadelphia media outlets, crime statistics for the areas adjacent to the Penn campus are and have been kept low by the extensive and collaborative policing done by the Philadelphia Police Department, the University City District Bicycle Police (known locally as "yellow shirts"¹⁵), and the University of Pennsylvania Campus Police (who also ride bicycles and are known as "red shirts"). A West Philadelphia squatter shared the following with me:

The yellow shirts—I don't like them at all. I mean, they're paid for by, like, the shadow government in West Philly. They're just like the West Philly narcs, driving around calling the police. The one last night threatened to arrest me. They don't have power of arrest. Yeah, he threatened to arrest me. I've noticed the red shirts moving further and further

out. They're out there being the gentrification police, looking out for the white kids, so they haven't messed with me. They've been nothing but nice to me when I'm trash picking on the campus. They realize that I'm not messing with the neighborhood. A lot of the red shirts I've talked to are born and raised in West Philly. The yellow shirts really aren't. The red shirts are a little more understanding. They understand the West Philly tradition of squatting a little bit more.

During the course of my research, the university installed flashing strobe lights on top of the Penn Shuttle vans that transport students and staff throughout the University City area at odd hours of the day. While the university intended the lights to make the vans more visible to waiting students, they proved to be a nuisance for area residents.

One of the strongest and most frequently aired criticisms of the university was that its dealings with area leaders, city politicians, and even different neighborhood groups were not always transparent or fair. This came up most often about the organization of the Penn-assisted elementary school. An informant explained:

Penn said that they were going to establish committees that parents could be on. They gave numbers out. It was supposed to be a wonderful demonstration school. I came home and told my constituents and neighbors that they better get on the horn, get on some of these committees and fight for your kids so some of these kids can go to that school. And I'm real sensitive to that because I was bused when I was in elementary school. I was one of the first black kids bused out of West Philadelphia, and I know that I got a better education by going to a different school. By the time the people called the next day, they were told that the committees were already established. The very next day. It was never done forthright. They were giving people lip service. They already knew what they were going to do. And it made people very angry.

According to another informant, “The only rumor I’ve heard [is about] their support of the shadow government of West Philly. The people who pay for the yellow shirts [security]—that they somehow pay for that or are involved in that scheme. They’re just trying to eat West Philly.”

While most of those interviewed knew of one or more of the university’s initiatives, many did not fully understand the breadth of the WPI and were unaware of the Kromer/Kerman report that summarizes the university’s activities. Sources within the university intimated that this was deliberate. Any suggestion that the initiatives were part of a larger comprehensive planning effort were to be avoided, as they might have inspired resistance from community groups or recalled the university’s long history of troubled relations with West Philadelphia communities. One informant stated, “Folks as far west as Sixtieth Street are scared that Penn’s going to come out there.”

There was also great praise for the university and an understanding that on many levels the university was keeping West Philadelphia’s interests at heart. An informant said:

Penn definitely wants the neighborhood around it to be more stable. I think that the real impetus was safety. At least while I was there. A lot of the work had started before I got there. There was a recognition that we can either build walls, or we can integrate. It was in their self-interest. Parents want to send their kids to a safe place. I actually feel like the neighborhood is [becoming] more diverse. I mean, I don’t feel like it’s becoming a cosmopolitan Brooklyn or Mt. Airy type [of] neighborhood. And I like that, because there aren’t a lot of places in America like that.

Criticisms of the WPI for their relative lack of transparency are reminiscent of Lance Freeman’s discussion of the myths of gentrification that abounded in Harlem when it went through its process of change.¹⁶ It is simultaneously easier and more difficult to create

myths about Penn's interests and agendas. The West Philadelphia Initiatives never made up a comprehensive planning document. University administrators I spoke with told me that this was intentional. Given Penn's history with Urban Renewal, a comprehensive planning document would have complicated its efforts by creating a focal point for dissenters. However, without one, residents could create myths about what the university was going to do and more weight was assigned to the WPI. Residents knew that the institution was wealthy and possessed enough political capital to get a great deal accomplished. In this case, the myths were tied to a university, which, in reality, was working on its own behalf to manage the local real estate market. The goal was to manage the many rumors about the university's intentions or plans.

A part of what created negative impressions of the university in the community was the thought that its engagement could be cyclical. Long-term residents—that is, residents who have lived in West Philadelphia for their entire lives or who belong to families who have lived there for several generations—viewed the university's engagement as being episodic. One West Philadelphia resident I spoke with belonged to a family that had lived in West Philadelphia for more than four generations and eighty years. She believed that crime rates and mortgage interest rates help determine the university's cycle of engagement. In her view, lower mortgage rates allowed investors to purchase properties that were not selling. Given other poor conditions in the area, these properties would not be profitable as single-family homes, so the investors divided them into student apartments. If crime increased, the students would look for housing in other parts of the city, yielding a housing oversupply in West Philadelphia. The overstock would cause landlords to drop rents and fill their apartments with renters with few other options. Through their neglect of neighborhood social mores and standards, renters would invite other elements and residents to view these communities as blighted and in decline.

The vicious cycle would continue until the university intervened with public safety initiatives or other efforts aimed at making the area more attractive to university faculty, staff, and students, or

until market conditions made the sale of single-family homes attractive for investors and home buyers.

Despite Penn's reported success, tensions remain. At the close of the West Philadelphia Initiatives and the transfer of university leadership from Rodin to Gutmann, many community leaders used Gutmann's inaugural as an opportunity to express displeasure about how West Philadelphia had changed during the Rodin years. The critique was that Penn had prospered and that the residents of West Philadelphia had not. Anecdotal evidence of rising rents and property values permeated the discourse about neighborhood change and became manifest in posters, community newsletters, and other local news reporting that challenged the university to increase its social and economic inclusion activities and work to mitigate the effects of its policies on the poorest segments of the surrounding neighborhoods.

For the most part, this chapter and its data exist primarily because various informants suggested other explanations for neighborhood change in West Philadelphia. Naturally, many of these are obvious, but given the university's assumption of successes in urban revitalization, it seems best to place those successes (and failures) in their proper context. Many of the alternative explanations discussed in this chapter deserve their own rigorous analysis. Their inclusion is intended to describe a few of the many other redevelopment efforts that took place, or are currently taking place, alongside Penn's. The extent to which these competing variables have contributed to the overall patterns of urban change in West Philadelphia are unclear. I identified the themes and initiatives of demographic shifts, regional economic restructuring, national-level crime trends, and "other" redevelopment projects as being the most frequently mentioned in the interviews.

Aside from the factors already mentioned that changed the composition and character of West Philadelphia, many informants noted the significance of the area's aging population. A survey of census data at the tract level between 1990 and 2009 does not show dramatic changes in neighborhood composition in this area.¹⁷ Between 2000 and 2009, the median age for the University City area remained a

consistent 25.3 years. This is not to suggest that there have not been some changes. Some tracts experienced wide swings in their median ages, with many becoming much younger presumably as students moved into areas that were not options for them before the WPI. The movement of families and professionals into other parts of University City increased the median ages in those areas, providing a stable median age. There was a small change (a 2 percent increase) in the percentage of University City residents with graduate and professional degrees between 1990 and 2009 and a drop (three percentage points to 7.3 percent) in the unemployment rate for the population over sixteen years of age.

Despite the \$5.5 million and nearly 800 mortgages provided to Penn faculty and staff in University City, the proportion of owners to renters has remained relatively unchanged. The reasons for this are perhaps multiple, and resident informants are a useful source of information for perspective on this phenomenon. As buildings were upgraded by the university through the Fund, other property owners also moved to renovate their properties and raise rents to capture the student housing market. Simultaneously, a process of invasion and neighborhood succession may have been occurring, leaving the proportions of renters to homesteading property owners virtually intact.

Several data points reveal how these changes are reflected on the ground. The first is the relative proportion of racial groups. The percentage of white residents in University City tracts started at 47.4 percent in 1990, dropped to 38.4 percent in 2000, and rebounded to 48.2 percent in 2009. The black population remained steady between 1990 and 2000 at 42 percent and then dropped to 32 percent in 2009. There was also an increase in the Asian population. Another important data point that reflects how things have changed in West Philadelphia is housing affordability. Common standards of affordability suggest that households should not spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. Between 1990 and 2009, the average percentage of income spent on housing in West Philadelphia went from a barely affordable 29 percent to 34 percent. Had the recession not stagnated housing sales and prices in University City starting in 2008, that number might have been higher.

Other Revitalization/Development Initiatives

Many of the participants in this study continually pointed to other factors that were contributing to the neighborhood changes they were experiencing. Economic restructuring is perhaps the single most significant direct or indirect feature of large-scale changes in Philadelphia's neighborhoods. It does not go without saying that many of the initiatives outlined below, and many features of the WPI, focus on place-based improvements or enhancements to institutions and structures that have been affected by economic restructuring. The policy implications of this for low-income communities can be extrapolated from Sugrue's analysis of Detroit. As in that city, in Philadelphia African American workers fought hard to gain access to unionized manufacturing jobs at the precise moment when these jobs began to evaporate.¹⁸ While professional and technical occupations have replaced a fraction of the manufacturing jobs lost, they are often offered only to workers with college degrees.

The new economic outlook for low-skilled workers in Philadelphia involves access to service jobs in the sprawling, and transit-deficient, suburbs and low-paying retail and clerical jobs in the urban center. The city's colleges and universities—especially Penn—provide the lion's share of those jobs. That the occupational status of West Philadelphia residents in particular has changed dramatically over the past fifty years is in large part because of the effects of deindustrialization. West Philadelphia, one of the older parts of the city, has been particularly hard hit by this process. Its northern and southern ends were at one time linked to light manufacturing industries. Between 1990 and 2000, University City lost nearly 4,100 manufacturing jobs.

The collective workforces of the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel, the University of the Sciences, area hospitals, and the Science Center account for nearly 35,000 jobs.¹⁹ A job cluster of that size not only rivals the central business district; it also represents one of the largest in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The University of Pennsylvania alone (without the Medical Center) can boast that it is the Commonwealth's second largest private employer and

Philadelphia's largest by a wide margin.²⁰ The degree to which that employment base is rooted in West Philadelphia remains to be understood. Based on the commuting patterns of West Philadelphians, it is a safe assumption that a majority are within walking distance of their workplaces.

Qualitative data from interviews suggest that access to that job market appears to be as elusive for low-skilled, noncollege-educated West Philadelphians as is admission to its undergraduate colleges. Labor force participation rates indicate that disparities remain between whites and African Americans, as they do in per capita and household incomes. Rising housing prices may further skew this pattern in years to come as lower-income African Americans flee to outlying areas and inner-ring suburbs in search of affordable housing.

Numerous other efforts initiated by federal, state, and local government have had impacts on patterns of change not just in University City but in Philadelphia as a whole. The following discussion of these efforts should not be taken as a comprehensive treatment or as a comparison of their impacts with those of the university's revitalization efforts. Instead, they should be interpreted as playing a role—however large or small—in the broadest possible conceptions of change. What is important about them is their geographical location within the orbit of Penn's work. Only in the cases of the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative and its rapid transit line refurbishment do these projects intersect with the West Philadelphia community.

In 1994, the Philadelphia Empowerment Zone was established by the Clinton administration, via the Department of Housing and Urban Development, to aid redevelopment of the city's most distressed areas through a mix of tax incentives and social services. This was a national program designed to reverse the deleterious urban policy of the previous twelve years of the Reagan and Bush administrations and, specifically, Reagan's "enterprise zone" program.²¹

Locally, city leaders, such as former mayor and now Pennsylvania governor Edward Rendell and current Mayor John Street, saw the Empowerment Zone program as a way to make good on promises they had made earlier to turn the focus toward neighborhoods

after so much political and economic capital investment in Center City.²² The program merits attention here not only because it appears to have been successful in Philadelphia but also because one of the key empowerment zones abuts University City (the western edge of West Powelton and the northern edge of Walnut Hill/Garden Court). The revival of the street car along Girard Avenue in 2004 and the relative successes of the Girard Avenue Coalition in developing that commercial corridor and some of the residential neighborhoods that align with it were possibly aided by a combined West Philadelphia/Center City spillover effect.²³

In 2001, Philadelphia Mayor John Street launched an ambitious effort to address decades of decline in Philadelphia neighborhoods, known as the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI).²⁴ With a total project budget of \$295 million, the campaign focused on two key strategies: land assembly and blight eradication in areas where the city's efforts might best inspire private investment. Practically, this meant that the city would acquire and bulldoze abandoned properties and then redevelop them. Mayor Street used the NTI as an opportunity to realign some city departments and direct them to work in a more integrated fashion to support NTI's success. A key and very visible example of this was the coordination of several city offices to increase the volume of abandoned cars removed from neighborhood streets.

In many ways, this work facilitated the construction of new low-rise housing developments that required more land than did the high-rise or denser public housing that was dismantled with the aid of HOPE VI funds. Two studies of NTI have been published. The first, Philadelphia's *The Reinvestment Fund*, was engaged early with NTI in a market value analysis (MVA) to guide the city's efforts. The result was a six-tiered typology that characterized areas as "regional choice," "high value," "steady," "transitional," "stressed," "reclamation," and "non-residential."²⁵ The second study on NTI, a doctoral thesis by Lisa Bates, analyzed its spillover effects. Bates concluded that a range of other factors contributed to redevelopment and property valorization in many parts of the city after the start of the NTI program.

NTI is important for an analysis of Penn's work in Philadelphia, which geographically overlapped with NTI in a number of places around University City. In my interviews with residents from each of the major University City neighborhoods, I most often encountered "NTI spillover" in the Walnut Hill neighborhood, where a great deal of effort had been invested on the blocks of Sansom and Chestnut Streets between Fortieth and Forty-Sixth Streets. Residents of this twelve-block area successfully prevented Penn from acquiring the property for a nursing home, and prevented the city from acquiring it for a homeless shelter. The continued construction along their street because of NTI, as well as a new set of social relations emerging from the influxes of new residents who were mostly Penn staff taking advantage of the Penn's mortgage programs, created a "hot spot" of renewal in a very troubled section of the neighborhood.

Stephen McGovern, who wrote one of the only comprehensive evaluations of NTI, concludes that the effort was ambitious and had great potential to deal with the city's stock of blighted and abandoned properties.²⁶ Yet, he says, despite high hopes for success in both Philadelphia and in national-level urban policy circles, the effort lagged and did not achieve as much as it might have had the mayor's interest and support been sustained over time. The relative lack of engagement by community development corporations and the focus on leveraging private capital for housing construction took the NTI's focus off affordable housing and put it on housing for middle-class and upper-middle-class families. In the University City/West Philadelphia context, NTI performed the tasks Penn-driven and community-based efforts could not or would not carry out, such as removing abandoned cars and reclaiming vacant lots.

Another significant improvement project that contributed to West Philadelphia's rebirth was the renovation of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority's (SEPTA) Market-Frankford elevated subway. Constructed by the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company and operational since 1907, this is the city's oldest rapid transit line.²⁷ Two key components of the rehabilitation project may prove critical to the viability of West Philadelphia small businesses. Many of the current stations along the Market-Frankford elevated

are situated at the top of the intersection of two arterial streets (Market Street being the one they all share). Almost by default, each intersection has come to serve as bus depot, public commons, and retail corridor. By eliminating half of the columns that support the line's tracks, project architects hope to invigorate these intersections by enhancing pedestrian and vehicle traffic flow. Each station is being completely rebuilt to include modern conveniences such as elevators, wheelchair access, and improved lighting in and underneath.

Summary

The view that community groups were assisted by the University of Pennsylvania in their attempts to redevelop and "save" their communities is correct but somewhat flawed. Penn's view of its role overstates its importance in reversing urban decline. West Philadelphia neighborhoods experienced a precipitous drop in crime that was driven by Penn, the University City District, the Philadelphia Police Department, and community public safety organizations. However, those efforts took place at a time when crime rates and urban crime rates in particular were dropping nationally.

The same can be said for housing values and their appreciation. The real estate boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s spurred radical housing price gains in many metropolitan-area markets. A cursory analysis of comparative housing appreciation rates reveals that Philadelphia's rates lagged behind those of other northeastern cities during the same period. The most stable and attractive residential areas of Philadelphia thus became fertile ground for real estate speculators in search of unexploited markets. Also attractive to speculators was Philadelphia's relative proximity to the unaffordable housing markets of Washington and New York and its relative affordability. Then historically low interest rates nationwide only spurred this speculation in real estate.

Penn's investment in the University City neighborhoods, which are incidentally those closest to the tight housing market of Philadelphia's central business district, also hastened speculation in these areas. In this scenario, Penn served as the promoter, not the master

engineer. Improvements to retail and public education accentuated this process. In a local context, such improvements may appear to have been the key to neighborhood revitalization, but instead they may only have been a significant, but micro-level, factor in the transformation of West Philadelphia. Penn could not and cannot control or influence national trends in crime, interest rates, housing market appreciation, and the like, but it could and can benefit from them locally by understanding the trends and leveraging its own policy to maximize their impacts on its host communities. At some point, home values do come to reflect appraisal prices in that they can create wealth for sellers. That wealth bears implications for the standard of living sellers are able to afford after a sale.

In Chapter 4, I explore the contemporary dual nature of urban revitalization. This is an appropriate chapter to follow the discussion here of what I learned from West Philadelphia residents. There is no single, easy answer to the question of whether the University of Pennsylvania has made significant improvements to the quality of life in its local context. As the preceding pages show, there have been real improvements in educational options and retail and housing quality. There have also been clear reductions in crime and spending by the university with local entrepreneurs. At the same time, it is clear that there was a context to those successes and that similar efforts to stabilize or improve the area's housing stock might have been more difficult or impossible after the start of the Great Recession. Crime rates may drop for a time but rise again without vigilance, continued investment, and a clear understanding of how area crime may be related to larger trends in the city and region. In other words, improvements may be ephemeral without a larger commitment by the university.

If nothing else, this chapter reveals that West Philadelphians are viewing the results of the WPI as mixed. The university led a revitalization program that encompassed both place-based (housing, retail, beautification) and people-based (crime reduction, schools, local spending) approaches. It is important to note that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. For example, the Penn-Alexander School simultaneously represents a service, an investment in human capital,

a strategy to improve investments in the area's real estate, an employer, and a community resource center. These types of improvements were welcomed; however, the unintended consequences and impacts are only partially documented here and well beyond the view of the casual observer.

