



## AMTRAK AND PARTNERS REVEAL MASSIVE REDEVELOPMENT FOR PHILADELPHIA'S UNIVERSITY CITY

# Big Plans Off Campus

University City, a neighborhood in central Philadelphia, on the Schuylkill River, is in for some major changes in the coming decades, thanks to a new redevelopment initiative from Amtrak with the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), Brandywine Realty Trust, and Drexel University. 30th Street Station will be the center point of the overhaul, which is part of a vision to build a dense urban neighborhood over a rail yard

along the river.

The redevelopment site consists of a total of 175 acres in University City, 88 of which are occupied by the rail yard. The report and renderings released in the *30th Street Station District Plan* are the culmination of a two-year study of the site, which extends east of Drexel's campus, between Walnut and Spring Garden streets, and northeast from 30th Street Station.

The ambitious plan will be put into place over the course



of 35 years, starting with capping off the existing Amtrak rail yard to accommodate a proposed 10 million square feet of development. The area will see a total of 18 million square feet of new development and will include housing for ten thousand residents. It will also offer 1.2 million square feet of commercial space to an individual corporate or institutional tenant.

Currently, 30th Street Station serves as one of the central hubs for Amtrak trains on the East Coast and is also a stop on the SEPTA Regional Rail line. The station building, along with the rail yard, is owned by Amtrak and was last renovated in 1991. One prominent feature

of the station is the Pennsylvania Railroad World War II Memorial, a 28-foot bronze sculpture of Michael the archangel.

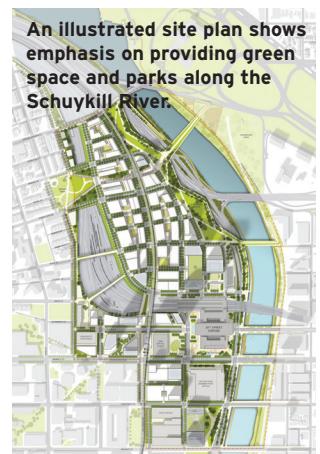
The project is expected to cost \$6.5 billion, with \$2 billion going to infrastructure investments and the other \$4.5 billion to private investment. Among the infrastructure improvements may be the relocation of a ramp for the Schuylkill Expressway in favor of an intercity bus terminal. A new pedestrian plaza will surround the existing train station.

Preliminary renderings put emphasis on expanding parks and public spaces, as well as adding high-rise commercial and residential buildings to the

area. According to the official report released by the district, an opportunity exists for the plaza around the station to become a "central civic space," akin to the one at city hall. The station saw 11 million passengers last year, and the district expects ridership to double by 2040, following Amtrak and SEPTA improvements. The development counts on this ridership to anchor growth around the station.

The name University City was coined as a marketing tactic, in the 1950s, as part of a gentrification effort, to encourage faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and, to a lesser degree, Drexel University to move there.

This redevelopment isn't the first sign of growth for the neighborhood. Much of University City is a designated "Keystone Innovation Zone," a program started by the state of Pennsylvania to encourage start-up companies to populate Philadelphia. The program offers tax breaks of up to \$100,000 annually for businesses younger than eight years old operating in the Innovation



COURTESY PHILADELPHIA 30TH STREET STATION DISTRICT PLA

Zone. New companies in the science and research fields are also drawn to the incubator at the University City Science Center, which is in the process of a major expansion. According to a recent report, firms that were incubated at the Science Center bring \$12.9 billion to the Greater Philadelphia economy each year.

Amtrak's first steps are expected to be finalizing the design of the pedestrian plaza and receiving permission from PennDOT to relocate the highway ramp.

**WIL BARLOW**



COURTESY NYC DCP

## DOES A NEW ZONING AMENDMENT MEAN NEW YORK POPS ARE UNDER THREAT?

# PUSH POPS

After much debate, the New York City Council passed the Water Street Upgrades Text Amendment on June 21, giving 110,000 square feet of privately owned public spaces (POPS) to the developers and owners of 17 buildings in lower Manhattan to infill. These specific POPS are defined as arcades—covered pathways originally intended to offer pedestrians continuous coverage and protection in inclement weather and provide places of respite. In the 1960s, developers were given additional square footage in the floor area ratio (FAR) in exchange for providing these spaces to the public. However, when these spaces were created, there were different design preferences and standards than what we have today. The modernist arcades are devoid of ornamentation, offer varying degrees of sightlines due to the overhangs and columns, and have deteriorated over the decades. The amendment would allow commercial infill in these spaces, ideally to better serve the community than the arcades did.

Opponents believe that the developers will benefit overmuch, as they received additional FAR for originally providing the arcades, and will now receive them "back" for commercial use—potentially earning additional millions of

dollars in rent. Community activists such as Community Board 1 member and architect Alice Blank have also voiced concerns that this will set "a precedent for the future conversion of public space for use as commercial space."

However, Harvard professor Jerold S. Kayden, author of *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience*, said, "I think it would be a mistake to view this as anything more than dealing specifically with the conditions of the Water Street POPS." The New York Department of City Planning and the Municipal Art Society also worked on the book; together they evaluated over 500 POPS spaces in New York and issued five different classifications: destination, neighborhood, hiatus, circulation, and marginal.

According to Kayden, the majority of the Water Street arcades received a classification of "marginal." "It's hard to make the claim that stellar spaces are being removed. This should not serve as a precedent for any other space in any other place," he said. "If a space is irredeemable as a public space and there is no benefit to continuing it as a public space, then one finding that I would be satisfied with is potentially removing it." Kayden suggested that, considering how much the owners stand to gain to profit from the situation, the city is in a good position to receive community benefits from them in return. Additionally, said Design Trust for Public space fellow, urban designer, and planner Douglas Woodward, "Retail activation in POPS is a frequently used strategy, and some of the best and most successful POPS (e.g. the Rubenstein Atrium at the Lincoln Center, the IBM space on 57th Street, and 60 Wall Street) all have active retail."

In the current amendment, the owners are responsible for revitalizing the nearby plazas to better serve the public, but exactly how that might play out is unclear. Our verdict? Watch these spaces—good things may or may not be coming. **OM**



COURTESY DOWNTOWN PARTNERSHIP OF BALTIMORE

## CITY OF BALTIMORE TO OPEN DESIGN COMPETITION FOR MCKELDIN PLAZA REDEVELOPMENT

# Farewell, Fountain

The City of Baltimore is hosting a citywide design competition to seek proposals for the redevelopment of McKeldin Plaza in downtown Baltimore. The call follows plans to demolish the existing McKeldin Fountain later this year and the Department of Planning will supervise the open competition.

This follows years of talk about redesigning the plaza, which is currently dominated by the 1982 Brutalist concrete McKeldin Fountain. The fountain stands adjacent to the Inner Harbor area and memorializes former Baltimore mayor Theodore McKeldin, who was instrumental in revitalizing the harbor area in the 1960s.

The Waterfront Partnership recently released plans for "Inner Harbor 2.0," which will improve the area with new green spaces and pedestrian connections using Brooklyn Bridge Park and Waterfront Seattle as precedents.

McKeldin Plaza is an important fixture of Downtown Baltimore, and a designated free speech zone that was the focal point for the city's Occupy and Black Lives Matter protests. In addition, the fountain is a historically significant holdout from the Brutalist movement, and its design attracts tourists and office workers

from the surrounding area.

The Downtown Partnership of Baltimore supports redevelopment of the plaza into an open space, while many local artists, designers, and architects support its preservation as a public art piece.

The fountain itself has fallen into disrepair, and according to the Downtown Partnership its mechanics are prone to expensive breakdowns that leave it non-functional for months at a time. However, maintenance and enhancements could also go a long way toward revitalizing the plaza while preserving the fountain.

Up until recently the Brutalist design of the fountain matched the nearby Morris A. Mechanic Theatre, which was demolished in 2015. The theater was designed by John M. Johansen and opened in 1967, remaining in use until 2004. After its owners chose not to renew the lease on the building in favor of the newly reopened Hippodrome Theatre, the building fell into disrepair. A new high-rise residential and commercial space is now under construction on the site. Since the demolition of the Mechanic, McKeldin fountain is the only example of Brutalist architecture in Baltimore.

The fountain has its share of defenders, including Baltimore's City Council president, who introduced a bill to block the demolition last year.

A Change.org petition calls for the postponement of demolition until a new design is approved. Others—including the fountain's designer—are against the demolition entirely and want to preserve the site.

The Downtown Partnership plans to move forward with the demolition in Summer 2016 pending approval of permits. The fountain and the skywalk across Light Street were recently closed to pedestrians.

The architecture firms Ayers Saint Gross, Mahan Rykiel, and Ziger/Snead will oversee the project and finalize designs. Details about the public competition are still taking shape.

**WB**