University City District: Inclusive Infrastructure and the 21st Century BID
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In 2017, University City District (UCD) – a nonprofit focused on investing in the vibrancy of a 2.4 square mile district in West Philadelphia – celebrated its 20th anniversary. It was a meaningful opportunity to look back on our growth and trajectory. A lot has changed in twenty years, not only for the organization – which started in a janitor’s closet at the University of Pennsylvania and today operates on an $11 million budget – but also for University City. After working to address a legacy of disinvestment and crime, the neighborhood is now undergoing an economic transformation that has the potential to reshape the regional economy.

The anniversary also allowed us to reflect on UCD’s values and approach to economic development, which differs from most of our peer organizations. For the better part of 20 years, UCD fit the paradigm of most Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and busied itself with the vitally important work of making our district cleaner, safer, greener and more enticing for both retailers and developers. We might think of this work as investing in a neighborhood’s infrastructure, some literal and some figurative: the foundational infrastructure of clean and safe streets, the commercial infrastructure of bustling retail districts and the civic infrastructure of thriving common spaces. But one can’t possibly make a place better without simultaneously advancing inclusive infrastructure, which we have come to define as intentional and scalable approaches to sharing the benefits of an economically vibrant place in a broad and inclusive way.

Over the course of twenty years, we have demonstrated that BIDs like ours are powerful vehicles to take on the work of inclusion and equity. We are, after all, entities where major employers come together in
partnership, and we must begin to ask important questions about how to open doors to employment for local residents. We’re builders of public spaces, and we should consider whether these spaces reflect the needs of the surrounding community, and whether they invite people from all neighborhoods and all backgrounds to gather. And, finally, we’re stewards of growth, and we need to push ourselves on how economic growth in narrow geographies can transform opportunity expansively.

At UCD, this work manifests as a workforce development program that connects local residents to local employers, a social venture that creates quality jobs for community members, and an approach to place-making that honors inclusion and justice. Today our commitment to inclusive infrastructure is as strong as our dedication to fostering public safety and commercial development, and we continually strive to push the boundaries of our BID structure in order to maximize its impact.

The imperative to focus on opportunity and equity exists for all place-based organizations; not only is it our responsibility to grapple with the full set of challenges faced by our community – including the realities of poverty and race – but it is our great privilege to leverage the resources of so many stakeholders to tackle these challenges in creative, thoughtful ways. UCD has learned a great deal about what it takes to embed this work into our mission, values and – perhaps most importantly – daily operations. As we build our own capacity to invest in inclusive infrastructure, we continually learn from the field; similarly, we hope this white paper can be of use to peers looking to advance economic opportunity and equity in their own communities.
In 1997, local stakeholders in West Philadelphia – large universities and health systems, civic associations and local businesses – came together to improve their community. The result was University City District, a special services district with the mission of revitalizing the neighborhood, paid for by the significant voluntary contributions of our board members. In the early days, we functioned like most traditional BIDs, providing supplemental public safety and maintenance services in order to create a clean, safe and attractive neighborhood. We supported commercial corridors and small businesses through pedestrian lighting projects and façade improvement programs, and planned destination events to activate the streetscape, draw visitors from across the city, and improve the narrative about the neighborhood.

By the late 2000s, it was clear that University City was undergoing a transformation. UCD’s Clean and Safe services had made a marked difference throughout the community, perceptions of the neighborhood were shifting, and local meds and eds like University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia began advancing bold visions for their campuses. And we, too, expanded our vision.

Around 2010, we began designing and managing public spaces so that the district’s shared civic spaces could be as dynamic as the skyline rising around us. Today, we work year-round to keep our streets and open spaces beautiful, green, and safe for pedestrians, cyclists, transit riders, and drivers, and see these efforts as a necessary component of commercial development and neighborhood stewardship. UCD manages a robust portfolio of public spaces, ranging from the large-scale plaza outside Philadelphia’s train station to smaller interventions like pedestrian plazas intended to calm traffic and beautify intersections.

But like many urban communities, broader challenges exist in West Philadelphia, challenges related to inclusion, opportunity, equity, and justice. We realized that as a BID, we were uniquely situated to craft inclusive infrastructure in our district. By leveraging the trust cultivated through years of neighborhood stewardship, we could invest in our community’s most important assets: its people.
In 2010, we came to the conclusion that we couldn’t possibly make our community better without thinking about talent. While this kind of work is traditionally outside the purview of a BID, we sought to build a bridge between the relentless economic growth catalyzed by our institutional partners and the unacceptable poverty that exists in the adjacent neighborhoods, where 45% of households have incomes below $25,000.

We asked: What if we could connect people in the community to jobs with our partner institutions by helping them address the skills gap that makes employment at these world-class institutions seem unattainable? What if we could help our partners solve business needs by stemming turnover while enabling advancement and growth? In short, what if we could deliver business value from a human resources perspective the same way we offered it from a public safety and real estate perspective?

Thus, the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative (WPSI) was born, making UCD the first BID to expand its mission to include human capital by embedding a workforce intermediary into its daily operations. Since 2011, this employer-driven job training program has served over 950 local residents, connecting talented individuals to life-changing opportunities with the city’s premier institutions. Over the past eight years, we have developed a unique curriculum that – per individual employer’s needs – combines soft skills, technical skills, and on-the-job training to prepare lab technicians, security officers, medical assistants, landscape technicians and more to thrive in the workplace. As University City’s innovation economy blooms, we are pushing into new sectors every day. When our average participant walks through our doors, they have been unemployed for 53 weeks, yet over 90% of our graduates have connected to employment with living wages and opportunities for growth and advancement.

This work has succeeded not only because it’s transformational for our participants, but because it’s good business. The Skills Initiative helps our partners address longstanding challenges around recruitment, training, and retention by finding the talent they need. And when given the chance, local residents have proven over and over that they perform to exemplary standards. Collectively, our partners have paid approximately $33.5 million in wages to our graduates, providing an incredible economic boost that ripples through our community.
Opportunities

80,000
jobs in University City, a thriving economic engine

Approximately
$2.5 billion
in construction activity in University City since 2015, with billions of dollars on the horizon

$1.48 billion
invested in annual research and development by University City institutions

Challenges

Over 1 in 3
West Philadelphians lives below the poverty level

45%
of households have incomes below $25,000 a year

Only 21%
of the population aged 25 or older has a bachelor’s degree
West Philadelphia Skills Initiative Participants

Since Inception in 2011...

- OVER 950 adults and youth touched through WPSI job training, internships and workshops
- $33.5 MILLION in wages generated for previously unemployed West Philadelphians
- $5.16 MILLION of philanthropic investment in WPSI
- 53 average number of weeks unemployed prior to WPSI

Last Year...

- 91% of our graduates connected to employment
- 147 West Philadelphia residents served
- $13.44 average starting wage
- 26% average increase over pre-program hourly wage
In 2016, we wed our organizational areas of expertise – one in public space design and management, the other in workforce development – to create a social venture that employs local residents. UCD was spending increasing amounts of money to outsource landscaping services for our own public spaces, and at the same time, we wanted to connect West Philadelphia’s jobseekers to employment in a broader range of sectors. We saw an opportunity to build a landscaping venture seeded with UCD’s in-house spending, fueled by the purchasing power of our partners, and driven by the desire to create quality jobs for local community residents.

Green City Works is a design-build-maintain landscaping firm that harnesses University City’s explosive growth in order to create local economic opportunity. From universities and health systems to REITs and commercial developments, Green City Works already maintains more than 1.5 million square feet of green space for over 35 of University City’s largest institutions and businesses, whose landscaping needs are growing in tandem with their development footprint.
Today, we employ 14 local residents, all of whom received training through the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative. UCD is committed to being an exemplar employer, ensuring that we are not just creating jobs, but high quality jobs. Green City Works provides good wages and benefits, full time positions, and skill building and advancement opportunities – all a rarity in the landscaping business. During winter, when many firms lay off their employees, our crew is engaged in snow removal services and professional development training. And our investment pays off: we reap the rewards in the form of excellent work, a growing number of clients, and an incredibly committed team with limited turnover.

While Green City Works lives under UCD’s nonprofit umbrella, we operate the venture with a for-profit mentality. Our goal is to provide the highest quality service to our clients in order to grow our business, thereby creating more opportunities for talented local residents. Unlike many social ventures launched with the mission of providing job opportunities for individuals who have faced barriers to employment, Green City Works is on a rapid growth trajectory. While only in its third year, we project earning over $1.1 million in the current year.

**UCD’S Good Jobs Strategy**

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UCD has long prioritized the human experience in our public spaces and has increasingly explored how public spaces can help create a more just and inclusive district. Whether responding to community demand or changing our spaces to ensure that they better reflect the needs of our visitors, UCD is constantly focused on how to use investments in the public realm to advance our community. Indeed, our placemaking work stems from the belief that residents, employees, and visitors deserve verdant places to linger and gather where only concrete exists, and safe places to walk and bike where streets seem to only exist for automobiles.

Our flagship space, The Porch at 30th Street Station, was formerly a bleak parking lot outside of iconic 30th Street Station, the country’s third busiest Amtrak station. UCD wanted a better way to welcome visitors to Philadelphia, so we started with simple, moveable tables, chairs, umbrellas, plants, and programming to attract visitors. Over the years, we used rigorous and creative data collection and analysis to make the space more appealing by adding swings, food options, diverse arts performances, and thousands upon thousands of plants, and have been rewarded with increasing numbers of visitors. UCD’s recently opened Trolley Portal Gardens, a $4.5 million park and restaurant at the busiest at-grade rail station in Philadelphia, is also a reflection of the community’s needs. Over a decade ago, local residents began imploring UCD to help improve the space – then a utilitarian expanse of concrete – and we took it on. From the vision to the design to the funding of the project, the community has been involved every step of the way, and it stands as a testament to the enduring power of collaboration.
This past year, we advanced our placemaking approach in substantial ways, as we sought to better understand who wasn’t coming to our spaces, why they weren’t coming, or how it feels to be in our spaces. In late 2017, UCD began Just Spaces, an initiative designed to explore issues of justice in public space. Inspired by the research of CUNY anthropologist Setha Low, Just Spaces examines justice in public space through various lenses: who is physically proximal to the space? who has access to the planning of the space’s use, once the site is open? who feels comfortable or safe in the space?

Today, we are developing a tool to assess equity in our own network of public spaces, which will help us – and other public space managers – understand how individuals across lines of race, class, gender, age, sexual preference, ethnicity, and ability interact with and feel in our spaces. While still early in its development, this framework already informs the types of questions we ask as we design, maintain, and program our spaces, helping us answer those questions in a way that seeks to honor every human’s experience in our civic spaces.
University City is at a unique moment of economic possibility. The investment seeded by the anchor institutions in the early 2000s has catalyzed tremendous private development; there has been $2.5 billion in construction activity since 2015, and today, large scale developments rise within blocks of each other, promising to remake Philadelphia’s economy for decades to come. Nearly $1.5 billion is invested in annual research and development by University City’s world-class institutions and an innovation economy is steadily emerging. The 2.4 square mile neighborhood is home to 80,000 jobs.

The question we face is how to harness growth for the broader good of the community. How do we connect all of our neighbors to opportunity? How do we ensure that the physical neighborhood we are building – comprised of civic spaces both new and old – is welcoming, safe and inclusive? Philadelphia is not the only city experiencing growth like this, and it is certainly not the only city attempting to answer these questions. We have relied on core principles to guide our investments in inclusive infrastructure.

1. Trust is the lifeblood of social change. Build on the longstanding partnerships honed on physical transformation efforts and apply them to human transformation efforts.

BIDs like UCD are built on partnerships; indeed, we were founded by a group of stakeholders who sought to improve University City at a moment of crisis. Since 1997, we have worked side by side to improve our community, and our organization is the table at which our partners – from the largest anchor institution to the smallest local business – sit to make decisions about the district’s future. By addressing crime and public safety, creating shared transportation solutions for local employees, and much more, UCD has earned the trust of its partners.
In recent years, we have leveraged that trust to advance a social impact vision with institutional partners who share our commitment to the community. Our efforts to move the needle on local unemployment began with our partners, as we parlayed years of trust and shared problem solving into a new set of conversations. This time, we started talking about their challenges related to finding, training, and retaining entry-level talent; after all, our longtime partners are the largest private employers in Philadelphia. While another organization may have struggled to gain traction in those early conversations, we had years of experience navigating institutional dynamics and needs. We knew how best to work with institutions who were incredibly interested in creating hiring pipelines from the community, but needed a trusted partner on the ground to advance the work.

We went through a similar process in launching Green City Works, as we knew its success would be tied to institutions’ immense purchasing power (estimated at $5.3 billion in goods and services across Philadelphia). We asked our partners to give Green City Works a shot at their landscaping contracts, and they did – not only because they were looking for ways to direct their spend to small and local companies, but also because we have a track record of developing initiatives that address so many of their shared goals for the neighborhood.

Of course, without delivering results, our efforts would have quickly fallen flat. UCD’s partners were willing to give us a shot at these new endeavors due to their dedication to strengthening their local community, but have substantially scaled their partnerships with us because we deliver real business value. The Skills Initiative approach involves deep collaboration with employers to ensure that our training produces top-notch talent, and our worth is affirmed by the number of repeat cohorts we run for partners who ask us to recruit for an increasing number of positions. Our Certified Medical Assistant pipeline and supervisor training has drastically improved retention at the Drexel University College of Medicine, leading to significant savings for the hospital. Our partners at the University of Pennsylvania describe the ways in which Skills Initiative graduates – armed with soft skills training and a unique sense of professionalism – stand out in their labs. CHOP sees graduates as such an asset to the hospital that the staff are developing specific advancement opportunities for the Patient Sitters we train. Similarly, we have built Green City Works to provide the best landscaping services in the region, and our value can be measured in a skyrocketing number of square feet under management.

We have found success in operating these initiatives as yet another opportunity to serve our partners, whose commitment to economic opportunity allows us to advance a shared agenda to support local talent.

2. If you’re intentional about change, the choice between growth and equity can be a false one.

Too often, economic development is framed as a zero sum game, where the needs of neighborhoods are pitted against the needs of the commercial or downtown area. Here at UCD, we studiously avoid that trap. Investments in growth and equity are necessary to maximize value. We also know that equity doesn’t simply happen as a natural result of growth; you have to be intentional about cultivating strategies that maximize inclusive infrastructure.
It is increasingly clear that business value is built on a foundation of talent, and questions about whether companies can open, grow, and relocate in different locations often hinge on the availability of a trained workforce. This is true at all levels of the career ladder, and we believe that helping local residents connect to entry level employment benefits their families and communities as well as University City’s growing employment hub. As much as this work is about building pathways to economic success, it’s also about lifting up offices, labs, medical centers, and entire businesses with immensely talented team members and colleagues; it’s about ensuring that those businesses have the talent that is key to their competitive growth. Approximately one square mile in University City contains over 80,000 jobs, drawing talent from every Philadelphia neighborhood and throughout the region (see map on page 13). Those jobs can change lives house by house and block by block.

Nowhere is the potential of wedding growth and equity more tangible than Green City Works. As buildings rise throughout University City at a breakneck pace, many of our partners are leading their developments with a remarkable investment in green space: public parks, green roofs, redesigned campus quads, and verdant office buildings. When our partners hire Green City Works to care for these spaces, they help create new jobs. Green City Works serves as a vehicle ensuring that private investment can create opportunity for local residents to thrive. Indeed, when the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia hired Green City Works to manage their newest property, it afforded one talented employee the opportunity to become a crew leader, manage an account, and grow her skillsets exponentially. Time and again, Green City Works employees speak of their pride in helping to green and beautify the community they come from, as they actively participate in the transformation of their neighborhood.

Of course, with growth comes challenges. As University City transforms into Philadelphia’s ‘second downtown,’ we – like countless other commercial districts – have to contend with homelessness and panhandling, made all the more pressing by the opioid epidemic. Many public
Residents Commuting to University City Jobs from the Greater Philadelphia Region

- 80,000+ jobs
- 10,000 workers
- 9,500 workers from suburban New Jersey
- 4,500 workers
- 6,000 workers
- 2,500 workers
- 10,500 workers
- 27,500 workers from suburban Pennsylvania
- 1,000 workers from suburban Delaware
space managers choose to handle the challenges by policing them away, fearing that the presence of homeless individuals will hinder growth. UCD is also grappling with these longstanding, complex challenges in our public spaces and seeking approaches that align with our values. The issue causes our core values to come into conflict: on the one hand, our organization was created to cultivate a vibrant, flourishing district; on the other, we strive to improve the lives of our most vulnerable residents and provide dignity for all who come into our spaces.

The Just Spaces principles are helping us navigate these challenges, because as public space managers, we are committed to providing the best solution for our community. We don’t yet know how to resolve issues of homelessness and panhandling in our spaces, but we have well-informed principles to guide us. We lead with outreach, not policing. We have trained our public safety ambassadors to focus on problematic behaviors instead of an individual’s appearance. Over the years, we have developed a strong partnership with a local homeless organization, Project HOME, and instead of forcing homeless individuals to leave our spaces, we bring outreach workers onsite to connect individuals to much-needed services. We eschew so-called defensive design that makes it uncomfortable for individuals to stretch out, relax, or sleep on furniture in public spaces, and instead choose to design places that are comfortable and inviting for all.

By approaching this work intentionally, UCD has found it possible to cultivate both growth and equity by harnessing the economic might of a thriving community and developing strategies to balance the needs of the most vulnerable with the needs of a growing downtown.
3. When you’re advancing growth, it’s imperative to bake in equity from the beginning rather than sprinkle it on at the end.

University City is at a unique moment of economic possibility. The decisions we make today about how we leverage that growth will shape the future of our community just as much as the buildings rising along our skyline.

As University City’s economy advances at an unprecedented pace, UCD is intentionally embedding economic opportunity into our district, using Green City Works and the Skills Initiative as vehicles that bring local talent to bear on growing workforce needs. As the number of jobs grows by leaps and bounds every year – diversifying across sector while increasing in number – we are scaling the Skills Initiative, and are poised to offer it as a turn-key solution for employers looking to build pipelines into their workplaces. Together with our community of committed anchor institutions, developers, and businesses, we are creating plans to hire locally and exploring how to prepare residents for STEM jobs and skilled trades positions. We are planning now, before the buildings have been built and the companies have opened their doors. Otherwise, we risk turning our economic opportunity goals into an afterthought.

We are fortunate to have progressive, thoughtful partners who pursue this work alongside us. The University City Science Center – Philadelphia’s leader in start-up real estate and services – is collaborating with us to prepare local residents for the innovation jobs created by their tenants. Brandywine Realty Trust and Drexel University – who are responsible for Schuylkill Yards, the transformative 6.9 million square foot development planned for our district – are initiating the project with Drexel Square, a public square that, when opened, will be maintained by Green City Works. University of Pennsylvania has turned to the Skills Initiative for the sole-source recruitment of certain lab tech positions and CHOP is hiring for an expanding number of positions throughout the hospital. Together, we are laying the groundwork that ensures that economic opportunity is baked in from the beginning.

4. Ask organizational questions that make you uncomfortable.

As UCD has embarked on a journey to embed equity and opportunity into our core operations, we have had to become increasingly comfortable with change. This work began in earnest because we asked ourselves new and different questions – the right questions – and we haven’t been afraid to answer them in ways that pushed us to new, unchartered, and sometimes uncomfortable places. As we’ve built new approaches that take aim at some of the most challenging, thorny issues in our community, we’ve had to build new lines of operations, redefine our purpose, change things that weren’t working, and even tweak things that we thought were working until we allowed ourselves to take a deeper look.
Our first efforts in human capital work involved running a summer jobs program with high school students. We worked with multiple community partners to employ local youth and expose them to a range of career opportunities, from neighborhood greening projects to STEM internships at Penn Medicine. But over time, as we developed a deeper understanding of our employers’ needs, we shifted the model to serve adults. This required us to alter our curriculum while developing new philanthropic relationships, but we knew it was necessary in order to maximize impact.

Through Just Spaces, we are inviting new perspectives on our public spaces, and the nascent process is already helping us initiate changes. Since 2011, we have run a robust Parklet program, in which we replace one or two parking spaces with a temporary, landscaped platform. These tiny parks have attracted visitors since day one, with people gathering to eat, chat, study, and relax while adjacent businesses benefit from a 20% increase in sales. Yet through a series of Just Spaces focus groups, we learned that not all community residents liked the Parklets. Some felt that the platforms – installed on thriving commercial nodes with food and beverage retailers – were not intended for them; they stayed away. This feedback caused us to rethink our Parklet locations, and we responded by installing our first Parklet – featuring tables with chess boards – outside of a neighborhood laundromat. Located deeper into the residential corridor, we hope this space encourages residents to use not only that specific Parklet, but others located throughout the district.

Investing in inclusive infrastructure is vital – but it is difficult. We have learned that in order to best serve our stakeholders and community, we need to be open to experimentation, feedback, and adaptation.
Throughout the 20th century, BIDs cropped up around the country because committed neighborhood stakeholders came to the conclusion that district management doesn’t happen on its own. Similarly, as a community of practitioners, we have to be intentional about building systems that address economic opportunity and inclusion. If we want to create livable and vital cities and neighborhoods, then investing in inclusive infrastructure with the same vigor and focus with which we traditionally invest in physical infrastructure seems essential to us.

From our vantage point, we believe University City District and other special services districts around the country are powerful places to take on the hard but vital work of crafting equitable communities. The jump from Clean and Safe to inclusive infrastructure can be a big one – but we define ourselves not by the type of organization we are classified as, but rather based on what our community needs and what our partnerships empower. As neighborhood stewards working every day to make our communities better places, let’s maximize our unique organizational strengths to tackle the biggest challenges ahead.
University City District (UCD) was founded in 1997 by a partnership of world-renowned anchor institutions, small businesses and residents to improve economic vitality and quality of life in Philadelphia’s University City. Our primary mission is community revitalization. We work within a place-based, data-driven framework to invest in world-class public spaces, address crime and public safety, bring life to commercial corridors, connect low-income residents to careers, and promote job growth and innovation.

For inquiries, please contact Alissa Weiss, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Communications at 215.243.0555 x251 or alissa@universitycity.org.

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