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Urban Renewal Snarls Slow Science Center

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The University City Science Center deserves to be seen in a broader context than campus demonstrations or the city's low-income housing shortage.

When the Science Center was just getting organized in 1964, the case for building a large research complex in West Philadelphia was set forth as well as it's ever been since.

A report that year by the city's Economic Development Committee called the Center a "momentous step in the right direction"—the direction of giving Philadelphia new depth in its efforts to attract science-based industries of the future.

The committee's report represented no slight effort. It was a compilation of economic trends in the metropolitan area over the decade from 1952 to 1962.

The report qualified Philadelphia as the first big city eligible for special aid from the Federal Government as an area of economic distress.

The Science Center's campus and community critics have been attacking the research complex largely in terms of the people who were displaced to make room for it, as well as the new University City High School being built next door to the Science Center.

Relocation hardships

There's no denying the hardship relocation entails. Many of the families displaced in the Unit III renewal area, where the Science Center is located, moved into better housing than they had before. But their rents went up, too, and added to the strain on their budgets.

Still, the case for the Center can be put in terms of even larger issues and, ultimately, much larger numbers of people. In a way, the controversy over it neatly illustrates the difficulty of seeing urban problems whole, or dealing with them all of a piece.

Unemployment high

In 1964, when the Economic Development Committee made its report, unemployment in Philadelphia was running at nine percent. It was much higher in ghetto neighborhoods. The committee found that the city had lost 90,000 jobs in the ten years before.

Of special note, 63,000 of those jobs were in manufacturing. The city's economy was too heavily dependent on jobs in old-line industries, and it was faltering.

Some way of spurring the city's chances of becoming a magnet for the high-technology industries of tomorrow was needed. The Science Center was conceived to be such a generator.

It was the brainchild of the West Philadelphia Corp., the community-development arm of the University of Pennsylvania. The idea was to take fuller advantage of one of the Philadelphia area's underused resources, its colleges and universities, and its plentiful supply of academic and scientifically trained manpower.

The Center was chartered by 20 colleges, universities and hospitals, with Penn in the lead, but with the schools as distant as Lehigh University in Bethlehem, and Lafayette College in Easton, included.

The Science Center is, in fact, a regional facility. Many of the jobs it's likely to stimulate will be located outside the city. That it's being built on land acquired from a low-income black community suggests the need for dealing with employment and housing opportunities on a regional basis, too.

The Economic Development Committee saw the Center as "the long-needed bridge between academic research and the research needs of the industrial and business community."

In the style of the Stanford Research Center in California, or the research complex around Boston's universities, it was expected that the Science Center here would "create many opportunities for the 'spinoff' of new industries."

The spinoff concept is the heart of the Science Center's case. It can work either through advances in industrial research, or in building Philadelphia's position as a leader in the life sciences and the study of urban problems.

The Center has had a big disappointment in the housing field itself. A proposal it submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development last year for programing President Johnson's low and moderate income housing goals lost out to one from the General Electric Co.

Progress slow

So far the Center's growth has been slow, it's [sic] real potential unproven. The slow pace of the urban renewal process itself has been one of its problems. In 43 months of operation, it has had an accumulated deficit of \$106,000.

But its first building, a converted printing plant at 34th and Market sts., now employs 534 people with an annual payroll of \$4.5 million. A second building is rising at 36th and market sts., and a third will be started this Spring.

The Center has been strengthening its internal organization, and improving its links with its member schools. It appears lately to have turned a corner of its own.

“When I first came here,” says Dr. Jean Paul Mather, the Science Center’s president, “they told me my job was to save jobs for Philadelphia, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

(Mr. Bedell is a member of the editorial page staff.)



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