

Allston Agonistes

FOR THREE DECADES, “Allston” has represented what an investor might consider Harvard’s ultimate option. It is the way for an increasingly built-out, landlocked institution nearing its 400th anniversary to continue to dream and grow. But at some point, the option has to be realized, or revalued.

Since the first land purchase in 1988, that option has yielded Continuum, a residential and retail complex built privately on a parcel leased from the University. The science and engineering complex and an associated power plant are now under construction. Looking forward, if Harvard is to maximize the value of its option beyond those isolated projects (and the first phase of the “enterprise research campus” to be privately built on 14 more leased acres), three things have to happen:

“Allston” has to be envisioned within an academic plan for the *entire* University—“One Harvard,” if you will.

That vision has to shape a coherent physical plan for campus development.

And the whole has to work financially.

THE institutional master plan unveiled in 2007—the product of Lawrence H. Summers’s administration, then recently ended—blocked out space for new Graduate School of Education and School of Public Health campuses; undergraduate Houses; and multiple millions of square feet of laboratories (the uses, and their users, unspecified). Today, the education and public-health faculties are sheltering in place in Cambridge and Longwood, and the College is about a billion dollars into renovating its residences—very far from erecting new ones. The planned physical grid, in other words, was untethered to academic uses (or the rest of the University)—and, in any event, the 2008 financial crash and Great Recession rendered the scheme moot.

Current development, guided by the 2012 master plan, is far more modest: those privately financed projects, and the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) complex, reduced in scale and repurposed for the burgeoning corps of Harvard engineers. But it is also scattershot and, still, financially ambiguous. (What goes on the rest of the vast foundations for that SEAS center, and beyond? Fundraising hopes appear to have come up short—and is Har-

vard game to spend *another* billion dollars to house, say, another 50 SEAS professors?)

AT THIS POINT, a new administration may wish to consider how it proceeds on what both the Corporation and President Lawrence S. Bacow underscore is a giant opportunity—and a high priority.

Other institutions have proceeded in illuminating ways. Princeton’s last campus plan resulted in, among other gains, an entire new arts precinct at an edge of the campus—the realization of then-president Shirley M. Tilghman’s vision. Now a member of the Corporation, and chair of its facilities committee (and previously the leader of a review of Harvard life sciences), she agrees “completely,” she said recently, that Allston development needs to be set in a broader, comprehensive academic context. Moreover, Tilghman emphasized, the limited current plan is not solely a short-term response to the financial disaster of a decade ago: “One of the challenges for Harvard is that because of its decentralized structure, there has been very little thinking about its physical space *as a whole*.”

That “makes it harder for Harvard to do the kind of planning...seen at Princeton”—including in the 2017 iteration, under her successor. It envisions as an integrated whole new undergraduate residences (for a larger student body); energy- and environmental-studies facilities; quarters for academic partnerships with corporate, government, and nonprofit entities; and, yes, development of a new “Lake Campus” on land banked nearly a century ago.

The strain on Harvard’s wallet continues to loom large, too. Using back-of-the-envelope calculations (firm guidance is apparently taboo), the Allston “option” has, to date, conservatively cost several hundred million dollars for land purchases; the 2017 financial statement shows among Harvard’s assets nearly a billion dollars of land, much of which must be on the Allston frontier. Planning and permitting have consumed at least tens of millions of dollars. The University paid \$1.3 billion to buy out the interest-rate swaps effected in 2004 to hedge borrowing for construction anticipated then (excluding the cost of the swaps themselves), and will have invested about \$1.4 billion for the

initial science-complex foundations, the new SEAS building, and the energy plant. Certainly, substantial borrowing costs are associated with all of the above, bringing the total, as a guesstimate, to \$3 billion to \$4 billion, *not* adjusted for inflation. Unwinding the swaps alone consumed about as much as the fees for Allston expansion that had been assessed on the individual Harvard schools’ endowments from 2001 to that point. Only a Harvard could absorb such costs—and not without constraining faculty growth and limiting other academic aspirations. It isn’t rich enough, or imprudent enough, to repeat that now, with only equivalent outputs to show for the investment.

HENCE THE NEED for the academic strategy and associated planning to proceed toward a future Harvard. President Bacow has a background in urban planning. (Additional expertise is close at hand: his wife, Adele Fleet Bacow, is founding president of Community

Partners Consultants, an institutional planning and development firm.) He initiated an update of the campus plan for the very landlocked Tufts during his presidency there, and guided that institution’s budget, building projects, and fundraising by a set of clear academic goals. As a member of Harvard’s Corporation, he chaired both the finance and the facilities committees. And he is avidly interested in partnering with Greater Boston universities and colleges, the affiliated hospitals, and others (see page 32), with Allston as a logical locus (data-driven biomedical research, anyone?).

Crossing the Charles River—moving beyond the Business School to enlarge the campus, not just as a distinct project in an outlying precinct called “Allston,” but *as a whole*—entails an academic plan suited to Harvard’s mission; a physical design that realizes this community’s aspirations; and realistic fiscal means for effecting both.

Rather than hurrying Allston development, taking the time now to set a practical path forward matters much more. Bacow would seem the right person at the right time to lead this work. He surely knows better than most the scale of the effort required, 30 years on, to begin getting Harvard’s fifth century right.

—JOHN S. ROSENBERG, *Editor*

