

An asphalt-level view of the parking lot across from the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning. The lot is at the center of an intense public debate over the merits of turning it into an amenities-filled town square that also serves as an entrance to sprawling Schenley Park.



Photo by David Aschkenas

PARK LOT

JOINING A REVITALIZATION EFFORT IN A KEY PITTSBURGH DISTRICT, TWO LOCAL FOUNDATIONS TAKE LESSONS FROM THE ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE OF PUBLIC PROCESS.
BY DOUGLAS ROOT AND C.M. SCHMIDLAPP

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At both ends of Pittsburgh's Oakland district, where prestigious medical centers, top-line universities and museums, trendy boutiques and flavorful ethnic restaurants bump up against tony estates, working-class homes and dumpy student housing, construction cranes are plying the air.

One wields beams for what will be the Collaborative Innovation Center, a high-tech workplace for Carnegie Mellon University. Less than one mile south of that site, two more cranes hoist loads for the University of Pittsburgh's Biomedical Science Tower 3. The flurry of construction

activity validates the high stakes as government officials, and academic, foundation and civic leaders are betting that the region's future economy depends on the fortunes of what is arguably the city's most complex neighborhood.

Certainly, Oakland is a place of contrasts. Even as Pittsburgh's downtown skyline is visible from any high perch, Oakland is a metro center unto itself—Pennsylvania's third largest—and, unlike downtown Pittsburgh, has a strong residential base of 20,000. Commuters entering the district each day swell the population to more than five times that number and strain a transportation system ruled by lumbering buses and streams of private vehicles.

In the distance covered by a 10-minute stroll, a compressed business district surrounded by hospitals, university campuses, museums and row-house–packed border blocks gives way to the vast expanse of Schenley Park. At more than 400 acres, the second largest in the city parks system, Schenley covers a golf course, skating rink, playing fields and wooded trails.

Between these extremes is a nondescript asphalt parking lot that civic leaders have envisioned as the staging ground for a new town square that will serve as the center of gravity between business–campus life and park entrance. It also is viewed as the symbolic first step among stakeholder leaders coming together under the powerful Allegheny Conference Oakland Investment Committee and the 25 represented organizations and groups of the Oakland Task Force, which includes planners from Pittsburgh city government, staff from the Allegheny Conference on Community Development and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy.

For the region's two largest philanthropies, The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon Foundation, membership on the committee and substantial investments by each in the plaza project design present unique opportunities for realizing long-term strategy goals.

But there also are some valuable “commitment-to-broader-vision” lessons offered as funders participate in a leadership group where priorities for revitalization are at odds with some elements of the community. In the case of the proposed Schenley Plaza, heavyweight Investment Committee members, in addition to the foundations—the University of Pittsburgh and its Medical Center, Carnegie Mellon University, the Carnegie Museums and Library, and Kennametal Corp.—have embraced the \$8.1 million

plaza project as a key symbolic move that will have tremendous impact on Oakland's future revitalization.

Indeed, symbolism was all over the unveiling of the foundations-funded plaza design in October 2002 when a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editorial championed it as a dramatic conversion of one of the city's most congested sectors “into a leafy, grassy thing of beauty.”

But since then, other opinion columns and news pieces have vented angry opposition from various single-issue constituencies: a group of commuters complains of the prospect of losing 178 parking spaces on the five-acre lot; some fiscal conservatives fume that a city on the verge of bankruptcy is giving up a cash cow in annual parking revenue; some urban planners worry that the plaza is taking attention away from knotty infrastructure problems that should be tackled first; preservationist and architectural critics debated the design.

Foundation officials, who have been singled out as well for embracing Schenley Plaza in a period of retrenchment in philanthropy, stand their ground. They believe that the project is symbolic in another important way: as a test of commitment to community process and long-term goals.

“I'm sure there was a time when foundations would have been reluctant to participate in a process that has been so public, where there have been dozens of public meetings and many opportunities for dissenters to influence the outcome,” says Endowments President Maxwell King. “But today, foundations can't afford to stay out of the fray. We're there as a steadying force to remind the community that the project—as vibrant as it will be—is just the first step in a long journey to reach some significant goals.”

Schenley Plaza is key, says King, because it has all the markers of what foundations envision for an Oakland of 2015: an international center for research, education and health care; a hub for technology-based entrepreneurial activity; a district of quality mixed-income neighborhoods; and a showcase for high civic design standards in public buildings and grounds.

While today's Oakland has small pockets of each of these

SCHENLEY PLAZA: then & now

Photos courtesy of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy



An image of one of the earliest forms of Schenley Plaza, as it was being created according to a 1915 plan developed by landscape architectural firm Sellers & Register after being selected in a national design competition.

1920

This 1940 photograph taken from the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning shows Schenley Plaza's groves of London Plane trees enclosing an oval lawn with a surround reserved for scores of cars.



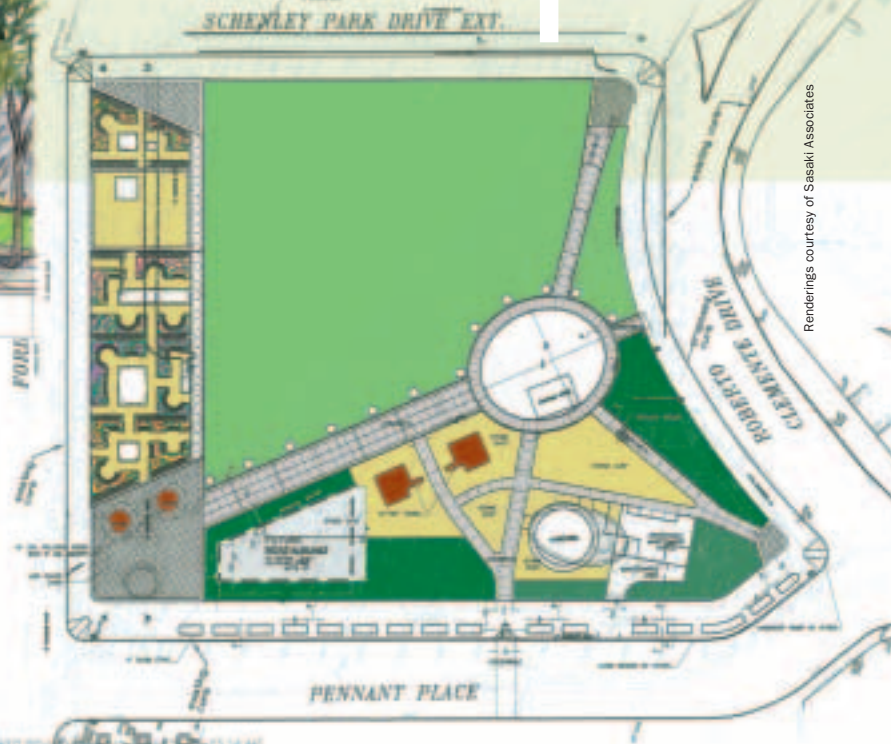
Below, an overview of the Sasaki Associates plan for a new plaza shows a pedestrian path that would cut diagonally across the five-acre site, with a great lawn on one side and a grove of trees and a restaurant on the other.

1940



Above, an artist's conception of the plaza entrance from Clemente Drive. Food kiosks are visible in the background, and other areas of the lawn will have tables with moveable chairs.

2004



Renderings courtesy of Sasaki Associates

activities, most civic leaders agree that many more projects beyond Schenley Plaza will need to be implemented during the next decade to ensure that the district reaches its full potential.

The foundation community will be involved in many of these, says Richard King Mellon Foundation Vice-President Mike Watson, with a continued effort to adapt long-range strategy goals to what emerges in a community process. “Those of us on the Investment Committee are not doing this in isolation. We’re working very closely with just about every possible Oakland interest group on issues they’ve identified as important,” says Watson. “We’re talking well beyond the plaza to issues of transportation, housing, the retail corridor, the portals to Oakland.” Though each project will meet a different need, he says, the unifying theme is that “a strong community that surrounds the two universities is essential to the future success of Pittsburgh.”

Much of that conviction is based on population demographics that foundations would love to see duplicated in other city neighborhoods and in suburbs. In Oakland, the most internationally diverse population in the region goes to school each day at one of four academic institutions, or works in medical research labs, in technology-based start-up firms, in specialty stores, or in one of the dozens of ethnic restaurants that thrive in the district.

Oakland’s potential for serving as a regional economic generator also has attracted the attention of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the venerable business–civic leadership group that has driven some of the region’s most important development since the late 1940s. The Conference supports Schenley Plaza as the first project out of the gate, says Vice-President Ellen Brooks, “because it benefits so many constituencies.” A chart on her desk showing relationships among plaza project stakeholders has so many inter-connecting lines it looks like a spider web. The park idea, says Brooks, “bubbled up from the various improvement plans undertaken by many of these groups over the years.”

In fact, so many studies of Oakland have been archived, among them a regional parks master plan, the Oakland Civic Loop Study and the Oakland Improvement Strategy, that one of the first actions of Investment Committee members was to order up a study

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Dan Biederman President, Bryant Park Restoration Corporation

of the studies. The result was *The Future of Oakland*, prepared by Urban Design Associates and completed early last year. Analyzing and integrating the earlier proposals, its recommendations ranged from improving the Forbes Avenue commercial district to constructing a new elementary school. Also highlighted in that plan and later approved by the Investment Committee was the plaza project.

“Our studies for the parks master plan told us that people wanted [the parking lot] to be a park-like space,” says Meg Cheever, founder and president of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, the advocacy organization supporting the city’s four regional parks, including Schenley. Wealthy Pittsburgh landholder Mary Schenley deeded the plaza site to the City in 1891, intending that it serve as an entrance to Schenley Park, and Cheever believes it is the Conservancy’s duty to honor that purpose.

The Conservancy also worked to justify it by bringing in urban parks expert Dan Biederman, internationally known for his dramatic transformation of New York City’s Bryant Park. Biederman focuses on specific strategies for attracting people, emphasizing the highest standards of design and maintenance. “Oakland needs a gathering place that’s common to all the parties that are there,” he says. “These include visitors to the museums, students, people who use the commercial districts. While [Schenley Plaza] won’t be retail, it will be active.”

A design process funded by the two foundations and grounded in Biederman’s “what people want” principle, led to a plan devised by Boston landscape architectural firm, Sasaki Associates, that incorporates many Bryant Park amenities, including a great lawn, small flower gardens near walkways, portable chairs and food kiosks.

Last September, Sasaki landscape architect Alistair McIntosh, outlining the design plan in a public meeting, talked about

the plan being anchored to the original 1915 plaza designed by Sellers and Register. But the new design's user-friendly amenities, the expansive gardens and trees, even a pedestrian walkway direct to Schenley Bridge, are included to make the park relevant to a district that must serve so many masters in so many different ways.

Both the City Historic Review Commission and the Art Commission saw the merits of amenities mixed in with a historically conscious design and cleared the way for construction. But *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* architecture critic Patricia Lowry has reservations. While appreciative of some of the amenities that mirror Byant Park, she sees a fundamental drawback in that, unlike the New York park, "Schenley Plaza must serve as the entrance to something greater than itself." She argues that the accepted design sacrifices the original plaza's "symmetry and monumentality, mostly to gain a restaurant within an informal bosque of trees."

While lofty arguments over landscape design have ignited passions among a few, none of these compare to scattered critics closer to street level who have savaged the project as green space supplanting essential parking space at a cost the community can't afford.

"I think the whole plan's a bunch of crap, and you can quote me on that," says Pittsburgh City Councilman Jim Motznik, who cast the lone 'no' vote in May when his eight Council colleagues approved land- and street-control agreements among city government, the Conservancy and the University of Pittsburgh.

Motznik cites costs of \$20,000 for new traffic signals, with another \$10,000 annually for maintenance. He discounts a portion of the plan that has the Parks Conservancy meeting the \$1.75 million in annual maintenance and management costs by developing new revenue streams, believing taxpayers will end up holding the bag. He also believes the \$5 million awarded to the project by Governor Ed Rendell in the spring should have been diverted to more worthy projects. "All this money, and for what? You're not going to attract a single person to Oakland as a result of this project," he says.

In a May opinion piece, Motznik staff member Cleda Klingensmith lamented the foundations' underwriting the park

design, and singled out the Endowments for agreeing to pay an extra \$750,000 to supply basic utilities infrastructure that a nearly bankrupt city government can't afford. "Since these groups don't pay taxes, they probably have a bit more money to throw around," she wrote.

While Motznik doesn't represent Oakland or live in the district, the Khalil family does. Mike Khalil was an immigrant from Syria in 1952 when he settled in Oakland with little education to earn a living and raise a family. In 1972, he opened a restaurant on Semple Street near the family home. Business was good enough that eventually he was able to move his parents and four brothers from Syria to Pittsburgh as well.

Today, the family runs a successful real estate business centered on renting out commercial property on Forbes Avenue and student housing on Atwood. Dalel, one of Mike Khalil's five children, each of whom is a Pitt graduate, helps run the family real estate business. Remembering the ethnic diversity of life in the neighborhood, where "you would walk down the street and smell Greek, Nigerian, Italian and Syrian cooking," she embraces Schenley Plaza. "Give me the scissors so I can cut the ribbon," she says. "This kind of thing is the lifeblood of this district." While pleased with the plaza's purpose, she worries about too much tweaking. "If it's pretentious, it doesn't belong in Oakland," she says.

The same "pretentious" test also might apply to regional foundations that want to be successful in grand grantmaking strategies but leery of getting too involved in the rough-and-tumble of an in-depth public process.

"We need to be on the ground level of projects like Schenley Plaza. We need to attend the meetings and do our homework and listen carefully to comments at public forums" says Caren Glotfelty, director of the Endowments' Environment Program and the foundation's representative on the Schenley Plaza Design Review Committee. "Doing all that gives us the ability to separate worthy criticism from complaints based on narrow self-interest." When foundations offer ways to shape future projects, says Glotfelty, we have more assurance that the community will come along with us. *h*