

John M. Cleary

Selling out our neighbors

With any great story, there is always the potential of an "other side." Even in the land of the Trojans the "College of the Year 2000" all is not glitter and gold.

We've seen hints of it in flyers passed out on street corners, the small protests and quotes from community activists expressing concerns about USC's development plans. The nagging question is, could these livid community members have justification for their anger and fears over USC's recent University Village and Radisson purchases?

They just might.

Untold history

For nearly four decades, USC has been participating in its community in highly-touted beneficial ways.

Simultaneously, however, the university's history makes community members justifiably uneasy.

Century Apartments, at the corner of Jefferson Boulevard and Orchard Avenue, were originally intended as low-income housing. But on Feb. 7, 1978, as soon as construction was completed, USC purchased the property. Watt Industries, which constructed Century with one stated purpose but then immediately sold it to USC for another, was consequently required by the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency to develop a new complex the Billy Mills Complex on Vermont Avenue.

In the interim, Century Apartments existed as that rare thing a truly blended community: USC students lived side-by-side with low-income families. Ultimately, though, the community members were forced out to create space for USC students.

On Dec. 30, 1981, the McDonalds Corporation announced a gift for the construction of the McDonalds Swim Stadium, to be used for the 1984 Olympic games. In a 1982 Daily Trojan article, an Olympics spokesperson said that following the games, the stadium was to be "available as a recreation facility for university-area youth programs and the community." The Olympics came and went, and McDonalds Swim Stadium never became this blended-community resource.

USC mumbled about pool depths not being conducive to family use, and McDonalds Corp. backed away from the potential public relations fiasco, saying that the blended-community idea was only that. It had never been in writing as part of the gift agreement.

On Dec. 20, 1989, community members were present at an "open house" where USC and the Figueroa Corridor Associates (a partnership of Jones Commercial Development and the USC Real Estate Development Corporation) presented USC Plaza. This new development would be placed on the southeast corner of Figueroa Street and Jefferson Boulevard, where a large parking lot now exists.

USC Plaza was to include two to three large buildings with underground parking, providing as much as 600,000 square feet of office space and 2,000 long-term jobs. Strong emphasis would be placed on hiring



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community residents.

This was not "pie-in-the-sky" planning; the Community Redevelopment Agency had coordinated the purchase of the land for USC. Documents list major consultants for the project and an Environmental Impact Report had already been prepared. Yet more than a decade later, all we and the community have is a large parking lot.

Granted, Los Angeles was particularly hard hit by the recession of the early-1990s, yet USC Plaza has not been heard of since.

Is the planned USC athletic arena better than a parking lot? Yes. Is the community's frustration, concern and sense of betrayal justified? Absolutely.

Fast forward to today. Why the community concern about USC's purchase of University Village, the University Gardens Building and the Radisson hotel?

Because these are the very same developments created to compensate for the terrible disruption of the last major USC land expansion.

In 1966, after years of controversy and tumultuous hearings, the Los Angeles City Council approved the Hoover Redevelopment Project, with one of its primary goals being to "provide a cohesive neighborhood environment compatible with the needs and functions of USC." The result:

Through the CRA's coordinated use of "eminent domain," USC forcefully expanded west from McClintock Avenue to Vermont Avenue and north from West 34th Street to Jefferson Boulevard, increasing the physical space of the university by more than 50 percent, while literally displacing hundreds of residents and small businesses.

We've come full circle today as USC moves more offices into the University Gardens Building, it also converts University Village storefronts into office space.

Communication breakdowns

USC's difficulties with the community stem not only from issues of physical space; they also stem from issues of communication.

In the mid-1990s, USC's School of Social Work received a grant establishing the Neighborhood Resource Center. Under the guiding hand of Liz Dias, this center became what one community leader called "the best collaboration between USC and the community ever."

The brilliance of the Neighborhood Resource Center was that it provided a vital and community-altering link between all the various local churches, community centers, agencies and activist networks. It helped to create institutionally the connections that happen naturally in a more stable community, without the transient masses of students brought by the university.

But the life of the center was brief, its death sudden.

Brian Eklund, pastor of St. Marks Lutheran Church, remembers a meeting where community leaders were simply told that the grant had not been renewed and that the center would be closed shortly. It took only three weeks until nothing remained but community frustration, concern and heartache.

The original purpose of the donor's grant had been student involvement, and when that was not met, he understandably withdrew his support. But the tragedy is that not only did the university fail to step in to save this vital program, it did not even give the community opportunity or time to seek out funding of their own. Only a couple years after the beginning of "the best collaboration between USC and community ever," it was over.

A matter of mindset

Sadly, this is only a sampling of complaints. But if the point were to list complaints and successes, I'm sure USC and community activists could continuously submit matching lists. However, that is not the point. I provide these examples only as a counterbalance to the accolades of USC's service to the community, which are much better documented. The point, rather, is that even by this short list, we ought realize that there are systemic issues that USC must overcome for the good of the surrounding neighborhoods and for the good of this great institution.

USC should strive to be revolutionary, to show the world how an institution can be not just a responsible neighbor but a desirable neighbor.

There is certainly a question of responsibility. As Senior Vice President for External Relations Jane Pisano bluntly and correctly said last week, "We are not a social service agency." She further explained that the key to success for our outreach efforts "is when they naturally match USC's primary mission" that they fundamentally involve our students, faculty and staff through the opportunities such experiences provide for education and research.

Agreed. This is simply harnessing the strength in our organizational behavior models. However, I'm concerned that USC hides behind such arguments.

Were we not a university, and instead simply some large corporation which, by our physical expansion and other aspects fundamental to our nature, detrimentally impacted our surrounding neighborhoods, I would still see us having an ethical responsibility to provide redress.

Although examples such as the Neighborhood Resource Center may have failed in part because they do not match our organizational behavior models, that does not mean that the program could not have been adapted to do so. Or even barring a structural change, that a service like the Neighborhood Resource Center might be deemed necessary and appropriate because it directly addressed some problems created by USC's involvement and membership in this community.

Brian Eklund said, "This is not a USC problem it's a class problem, an elitism problem. We see it with the LAPD, politicians, businesses, and universities—including USC. It is the perpetual problem of poor and disadvantaged communities that they are not perceived and treated as equals in decisions affecting their own destiny."

A question of courage

So where do we go? How do we overcome the stigma and accusation of being corporate imperialists? How do we break the mold and creatively, constructively and ethically rise above the elitism problem faced by so many other institutions in growing in a built-out community?

First, we must develop some core principles in writing and distributed for all to see that outline USC's commitment to and interactions with our neighbors.

But these must be principles that are developed with community input and in partnership with all voices, including our most strident critics. They must be principles to which the community can hold USC accountable. We, as a university, must dare to allow ourselves to be held accountable by our neighbors.

Second, USC must regularly engage our harshest critics and provide avenues for these voices to reach our highest levels of institutional authority. And most importantly, for them to trust that they will be received honestly, without the deceit of semantics and half-information, and be treated as equals in discussion and debate. Some believe that such actions on the part of an institution only motivate critics to become ever more emboldened and do not actually lead to good discourse and development. That belief is cowardly and presumes that discussion assumes acquiescence.

Third, USC must establish good lines of communication from us to individual community residents and between the residents and institutions of this community. Every action USC takes has an explanation, and USC needs to communicate this directly to residents. But residents have the right and responsibility to react

positively or negatively, to discuss and debate and ultimately, to participate in a process.

USC and community leaders should endeavor to create a community paper through the use of joint resources put to joint benefit. Editorial control must be responsible and independent of any single institution, making sure that such a publication is neither paternalistic in function and public relations in content on the one hand, nor strident and reactionary in voice on the other.

Fourth, USC must functionally and significantly address concerns of physical space. USC administrators continually say that our latest expansion will be our last for decades to come. But consider this: The total physical space of our university including the newly acquired University Village and stretch of land containing the hotel on Figueroa Street has more than doubled since the mid-1960s. Whatever our intentions and proclamations are now concerning space, administrators can not anticipate what will happen in years to come.

In this regard, we must have the courage to lay down some principles of action to which we can be held accountable. The business world would say that it's bad business to limit our future operational capabilities, but that simply brings into question how community relations fit into the university's values.

Fifth, we must find modes of interaction with our neighbors that are non-paternalistic in nature, that are not defined by our invitation or our "going out" into the community. The possibility and promise of the community-use pool was an example. Or think of the life-education for both students and the community that could be provided by blended housing, an experience in which USC was at least a brief participant.

Even as a strong community, ours is limited by the extent to which USC positively participates. It is far better for the extended health of our community and its institutions that we find modes of interaction that allow growth, that enable our churches, community services and activist networks. But this assumes a dramatic shift in mindset.

Change is our responsibility

We are on the cusp, in this moment of greatness and triumph, as we are recognized across the nation for our community outreach and partnerships, in particular with respect to children and education indeed as the "College of the Year 2000."

We must recognize this not as a time of culmination, but rather as the harbinger of a model relationship.

We must establish formative and substantive dialogue at all levels of the USC family, with USC's loudest critics, and effect a new paradigm in institutional/community partnership.

But what will you do?

Either you believe that we have come to the culmination of community relations, or you believe, as I do, that there are fundamental and systemic actions that must be taken by our university if we are to continue to inform and inspire ourselves, our neighbors and all who watch our example.

Writer John Cleary is a senior majoring in international relations. He can be reached at dtrojan@usc.edu or (213) 740-5665.

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