Penn’s South Bank: 23 acres of pure potential

By Heather A. Davis

In 1863, the Harrison Brothers chemical company purchased land at the corner of 34th Street and Grays Ferry Avenue. By the early 1900s, the plant was mixing paints and producing sulfuric acid, and employed hundreds of people in South Philadelphia.

In 1917 DuPont purchased these labs, hoping to assert its dominance in the paint manufacturing market. In its heyday, this industrial site churned out paint-related products and research, mainly for automobiles. The site was a hub of economic activity and innovation—until it was closed at the end of July 2009.

Facilities & Real Estate Services

In September 2010, Penn purchased the 23-acre site, dubbed South Bank, for $13 million. And while it is raw, consisting of warehouses, shuttered laboratories, and open space, the University has envisioned an opportunity to enhance its southern gateway by transforming this parcel of land along the banks of the lower Schuylkill River.

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If this narrative sounds familiar, it’s because it is not unlike what the University did with Penn Park, when it purchased a former industrial site, greened it, and turned it into a striking eastern entranceway to University City.
But in contrast to Penn Park, which opened to the public in September of 2011 after two years of renovation, the South Bank transformation will undoubtedly require a longer timeline.

“It’s a strategic property that will enable us to achieve a multitude of objectives, so I’m excited,” says Craig Carnaroli, Penn’s executive vice president, who credits Ed Datz, executive director of real estate, and Paul Sehnert, director of development management for institutional real estate, for realizing the site’s potential. “We saw some interesting opportunities. We held a discussion with some of our colleagues [who said] there’s the potential to really solidify some of the principles of the Penn Connects master plan.”

The Penn Connects 2.0 master plan builds upon the original campus capital development plan, released in 2006. The latest iteration continues to focus the academic mission on the core campus, encourage connections and interdisciplinary research, develop living-learning spaces, and incorporate sustainability.

Already, Carnaroli says the South Bank parcel is helping realize these goals.

For years, Penn has been trying to minimize the prevalence of surface parking lots, which can chop up the campus and contribute to storm water runoff. The purchase of South Bank has allowed the University to shift some offices there, including Penn Transit Services. Penn Transit’s former location, a surface parking lot between 32nd and 33rd streets along Walnut, is now being transformed into the Krishna P. Singh Center for Nanotechnology.

Other South Bank tenants include Penn Vet’s Working Dog Center, which opened on Sept. 11, and several tech start-ups. In addition, Penn is in the planning phases to situate its Data Center at the South Bank site, which Carnaroli says offers a more energy-efficient home than the Center’s current location.

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Ultimately, the South Bank site has the potential to align Penn research functions and facilities with private commercial enterprises. Businesses may want space with close proximity to Penn that also feature lower rents than sites in Center City. At the Trustees Meeting held in June, Penn President Amy Gutmann emphasized these possibilities, stating the site “enables us to have a 23-acre plot immediately across the river from our campus, where we can expand our technology transfer and commercialization of discoveries by Penn faculty on very favorable economic terms. Ultimately, I think it could be our technology park.”

Carnaroli also stresses the importance of creating a more attractive entry to Penn. “It is a major gateway entrance to campus. All of our employees that live south of the campus … trek through here,” he says. “I don’t think we can underestimate the gateway concept. People are forming perceptions every day.”

To read more about the South Bank project, visit www.pennconnects.upenn.edu and click on “Find a Project” on the left side of the page.

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