LOVE
RODIN
HACKNEY
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PEACE

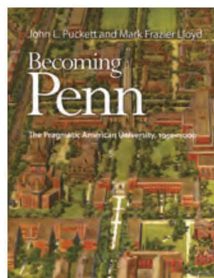
Building Blocks

Becoming Penn traces the University's development over the tumultuous half-century from the Cold War to the Millennium.

BY JOHN PRENDERGAST

Toward the end of our interview about *Becoming Penn: The Pragmatic American University, 1950-2000*, John Puckett muses on the "Pharaonic theory of presidential succession" (not limited to higher education, to be sure): "'The past is the past, but I am the future,'" he says. "A little bit of that goes on. That's natural."

The Penn presidents covered in the book—Gaylord Harnwell Hon'53 (1953-1970), Martin Meyerson Hon'70 (1970-1981), Sheldon Hackney Hon'93 (1981-1993), and Judith Rodin CW'66 Hon'04 (1994-2004)—all put their individual stamps on the institution, advancing Penn as their own priorities, personalities, and external circumstances allowed. But what comes through most strikingly in its densely argued pages is an overall continuity of purpose during this crucial half-century, during which the building blocks of the University we know today were assembled.



Puckett, a professor in the Graduate School of Education, and coauthor Mark Frazier Lloyd, director of the University Archives and Records Center, spent eight years researching and writing the book, which was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in May. The first comprehensive history since Edward Potts Cheyney C1883 W1884's *History of the University of Pennsylvania 1740-1940,* it draws on a vast array of materials from the Archives' shelves—including planning documents, presidential papers, and a trove of oral-history recordings from the 1970s by history professors Roy and Jeannette Nichols—as well as copious external sources, to chart the University's progress from a well-regarded regional school to a world-class institution with the physical plant to match its intellectual heft, and to examine its economic importance to the city and evolving relationship with the West Philadelphia community.

Since arriving at Penn in 1987, Puckett has been a frequent collaborator with Ira Harkavy C'70 Gr'79, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, and the late activist-scholar Lee Benson, professor of history, on books, research studies, and service projects related to community schools. But he says he has been "very interested" in Penn's development ever since being struck, in his early days as a faculty member, by the "vast difference in resources that existed" between the Lea School and the old West Philadelphia High School—visible from his 10th floor apartment at 47th and Pine streets—"and Penn's, at that time, $1.1 billion development drive." On campus, he would wonder, "How did Penn create this splendid park, in a setting that I increasingly came to know had been regarded in the late '40s, '50s, and '60s as blighted?"

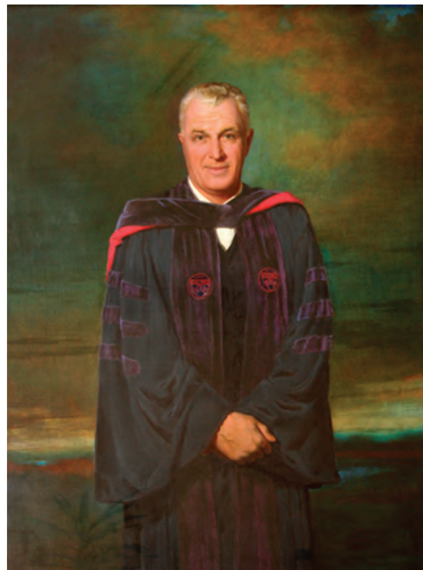
Puckett and Lloyd credit Benson, to whom the book is dedicated, with inspiring their collaboration. Lloyd had been Archives director since 1984, but in the early 2000s, at Benson's invitation, had begun teaching a course called "Penn and West Philadelphia." "Lee liked the subtitle of the course, which was, 'From Indifference to Conflict to Collaboration,'" Lloyd recalls.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID GOLDIN

These days Penn's campus is a major asset. Mid-20th century, that was decidedly not the case. *Becoming Penn*'s litany of complaints includes this:

"'Dull and depressing,' wrote David Goddard, a University provost in the 1960s, of the campus that greeted him on his arrival in 1946. 'The physical facilities were inadequate and their maintenance was poor; little construction had occurred in the last three decades … Trolley cars clattered so loudly that often lecturers in College and Bennett Halls had to pause to wait for the racket to subside. Old factories, hotels, and run-down houses threatened to engulf the neighboring community.'"

Things began to change during the presidency of once-and-future-politician Harold Stassen (1948-1953), with the approval of a new campus plan in 1948. It included some shockingly wrongheaded recommendations, among which demolishing the Furness (now Fisher Fine Arts) Library, and erecting a 30-story "Cathedral of Learning" at 36th and Locust streets stand out. But it also foresaw the elimination of Woodland Avenue and the closing of east-west streets, banishing trolleys and cars from the central campus, and sketched in the University's growth toward 40th Street—setting the stage for Penn's "Great Expansion" under President Gaylord Harnwell.



Puckett and Lloyd assign a descriptive epithet to each president. Harnwell's, appropriately, is "The Builder." From Hill House to the high-rises, encompassing Van Pelt-Dietrich Libraries, the Annenberg School and Center, academic buildings for the social sciences and GSE, and more, his term saw the creation of the modern campus. It also left gaps in the landscape that would bide their time as parking lots for decades, available for later presidents to build upon.

A faculty member since 1936 and the longtime chair of the Department of Physics, Harnwell had, while on leave from Penn during World War II, led the development of sonar for the US Navy as director of the University of California Division of War Research in San Diego. "He's a natural-born fundraiser. He built the Physics Department. And he is very much a part of what becomes a Cold War obsession with Big Science," says Puckett. "And he's also recognizing that Penn, to become a significant player in the second half of the 20th century, is going to have to be a national university and not a regional commuter university. It would have to diversify its excellence, and it would have to attract topflight [faculty] and students."

Early in his term, Harnwell's administration launched a massive evaluation project at the University, the Educational Survey, which was conducted from 1955 to 1959. "He told the faculty that, as part of the survey, each department was going to conduct a self-study on how it could get better," says Lloyd. "And he got all these reports of the faculty criticizing themselves. So now he was in the driver's seat."

Harnwell also recognized that Penn's facilities fell far short both of the academic and research needs of a great university and the large increases in the college-age population projected in the coming decades. As it turned out, the solution was practically thrust upon him.

The strong consensus for government support of higher education in the 1950s and much of the '60s, combined with new housing laws, conventional wisdom about the solution to "urban blight," local economic needs, and the closely aligned interests of the city's political, business, and educational leaders, eased the way for Penn's growth during this period.

"Penn didn't go out and seek the grant funds that would allow it to expand," Lloyd says. "The city and the federal governments came to Penn and offered money if Penn would be the redeveloper. Penn was seen as the leading institution in the city. And Harnwell wasn't quite sure what to do at first. But then he figured out this was going to be fantastic. And we began to get open land and new buildings as a result."

The authors go to some pains to disentangle myth from reality in discussing the fate of those displaced by this process. In fact, they say, the vast majority of the people living in the areas of Penn's own expansion—in what is now Superblock/Hamilton Village, and around Hill House—were white rather than minority, middle-class rather than poor, and homeowners rather than renters. "And they were homeowners who were quite willing to sell," for the fair-market value of their properties, says Puckett. "They knew a good deal when they saw it." (A significant exception would be the "savvy, feisty tenants of the 3400 block of Sansom Street," who waged a legal battle with the University that wasn't resolved until the Hackney administration 15 years later.)

It was a different story for the parcel to the north, however, where the University City Science Center and University City High School would be sited. This was the neighborhood known as "Black Bottom," and while the authors seem on the whole skeptical of memories that paint it as a thriving, vibrant community, "there is no denying the psychological harm … inflicted on these displaced people," they write, nor the lasting damage it did to Penn's relationship with the community. They quote history professor Mike Zuckerman C'61 as calling it "the invincible rallying point … the thing that is usable as a weapon against Penn forever."

The redeveloper was actually the West Philadelphia Corporation, but Penn controlled the WPC. Future President Martin Myerson, then a Penn faculty member, had recommended such an organization, based on the Southeast Chicago Commission, "which was a proxy, a surrogate organization for the University of Chicago in Hyde Park," says Puckett.

Creation of the WPC was sparked by the murder of a Korean graduate student, In Ho Oh, in April 1958. The perception—partially true—was that his killers were from that neighborhood, says Puckett. "That's when [Meyerson] started nudging Harnwell and saying, 'You've got to do something like the Southeast Chicago Commission. You have to have a heavy hand in redevelopment.'"

An added irony was the failure of the redevelopment project on its own terms: the hoped-for technology boom never arrived,

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and the high school, initially imagined as a local version of Bronx Science, quickly became one of the city's worst.

But the authors give Harnwell high marks for his handling of the student protests—against the war, over defense contracts, and in support of displaced minorities, among other issues, some led by then-student Ira Harkavy—that developed towards the end of his 17-year tenure.

"He made himself available to the protestors. He met with them outside his office, in the hallways of College Hall, wherever they were congregating," Lloyd says. "And he talked, and he was reasonable, and he tried to come to some solution. He didn't hide behind the police. He didn't sweep campus with police."

Puckett points out that Harnwell had seen the downside of such policies from earlier incidents at Columbia and the University of Wisconsin. As a result, his approach was, "Let's sit down, we'll take these students seriously, and we'll work out a negotiating mechanism."

"After doing all this work," Puckett concludes, "there's no question in my mind that he was one of the major university presidents of the last century."

When Martin Meyerson returned to Penn as president in 1970, having just headed the State University of New York's Buffalo campus, he was greeted by a vastly transformed university—and a load of debt.

"The bills came due," says Puckett. "There was a little voodoo math going on in the budget—it was all aboveboard, it was just that nobody was looking too closely at the bills that were piling up. Harnwell knew it on the way out. They had a major budgetary crisis. And it was happening everywhere. And then it just gets exacerbated."

The national consensus on support for higher education unraveled at roughly the same time the economy collapsed. "And we elected Richard Nixon, and he put Caspar Weinberger in charge of [the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare]," says Lloyd. "And places like Penn suffered." (Weinberger had already earned the nickname "Cap the Knife" as Nixon's budget director.)

The "huge budget deficits" he inherited were a "genuine shock to Meyerson," Puckett says.

Eventually, they would push him to institute what became known as "responsibility-centered management." Often summarized as "every boat floats on its own bottom" and the subject of frequent complaints for fragmenting the institution, RCM sits uneasily with another hallmark of Meyerson's presidency, his promotion of the "One University" concept.

Meyerson's section of the book is titled, "The Visionary."

"He's a man of vision in the sense that he had this idea of One University," Puckett says, "this sort of utopian idea of a campus that was both intellectually and physically integrated and respectfully diverse. And he wanted all of that. And yet [you have] RCM ...

"It's a contradictory legacy. He was a better president than I had imagined when I started this," he says. "Those were tough years at Penn. This campus was not a happy place—because the other big factor was escalating violence on Penn's periphery, and crime, coming out of the late '60s, early '70s."

"The morale of the institution was under siege," says Lloyd.

As the Vietnam War was receding as a rallying point, the student protest movement was fragmenting, Puckett notes. "And so you've got the women's movement on campus. You've got the rise of the Black Student League." While still minor in comparison to other campuses, "the incidents that happened on Penn's were significant."

"The trustees must have known, when they hired Meyerson, that he had an Achilles heel," says Puckett. "And that was his ability to deal with recalcitrant students."

When protests at SUNY Buffalo spilled over into police beatings and student vandalism, Meyerson, "for all intents and purposes disappeared from the scene," taking a leave of absence and resigning the presidency.

Yet apart from this "inconvenient truth," the trustees would have seen many valuable attributes in Meyerson, Puckett adds. "He knows cities intimately. He's a major world figure as an urban planner. He seems in good times to get along well with students. The man was almost a legendary intellectual, probably the greatest intellectual that Penn has had in that office."

Meyerson's signal accomplishment on the administrative side was the academic reorganization of the University, which resulted in the creation of what is now the School of Arts and Sciences. "That was part of the One University [concept]," says Puckett. "You had this crazy quilt of schools."

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The reorganization brought together the graduate school and the College, moved four departments that had been part of Wharton—political science, economics, sociology, and regional studies—into arts and sciences, and put an end to the separate College for Women.

Pursuing a policy of "selective excellence," his administration also moved to eliminate the School of Allied Medical Professions (to the lasting chagrin of many SAMP alumni). According to the book, Puckett's academic home, GSE, also came close to getting the ax.

An attempt to trim the budget by, among other measures, eliminating the hockey and golf teams and cutting funding for the Annenberg Center, sparked the College Hall Sit-In of March 1978. Meyerson was on vacation in Barbados at the time, and in what the book calls "perhaps the biggest mistake

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of his presidency," returned to negotiate directly with the students. "And he says, in effect, 'Give them what they want,'" Puckett says. "Basically, [his attitude is] 'I'm not going to deal with it,' which is the old SUNY-Buffalo Meyerson reappearing."

Seeing Meyerson's action as both a capitulation to students and a subversion of faculty governance, the Faculty Senate, "in probably its last moment of any real authority on campus," says Puckett, "rises up and says, 'No more.'"

"They called it a crisis of confidence," says Lloyd. Meyerson was pressured into announcing in the summer of 1978 that he would step down in 1981, after completing the $255 million Program for the Eighties campaign. He became, in effect, "a lame duck."

Meyerson's provost, Eliot Stellar, who had served since 1972 and "really carried a lot of weight" in the administration, says Lloyd, had already resigned in the spring. "And then of course Meyerson promoted [Vartan] Gregorian," who had been the first dean of the new School of Arts and Sciences, to replace Stellar.

"So this is the entry point for Gregorian to campaign to be the next president," Puckett says.

Lloyd calls the Meyerson administration "a complicated paradox."

"He was all about One University, and pretty soon RCM popped up," he says. "And that development, I thought, typified his administration."

On the other hand, "he did rectify the budget," Puckett notes. "That is, he brought it back into balance. He kept Penn's research trajectory on an even keel—Penn actually gained in its research profile. And that was a tough time for universities throughout the 1970s," with steeply rising energy prices and double-digit inflation rates.

Meyerson also accomplished one campus improvement project of lasting significance, in the landscaping of College Green as Blanche P. Levy Park.

"The man was, I think, well-suited temperamentally to administer a university in a hard time," says Puckett, "but he wasn't suited to deal with young people in the throes of rebellion."

AT first, the descriptor for Sheldon Hackney—"The Conciliator"—seems an odd choice for someone whose tenure was marked by so much angry opposition and fierce controversy. But it speaks to both his personality—on first meeting Hackney, "I was struck by his dignified gentility and his decency," says Puckett—and his role in beginning to repair Penn's frayed community relations.

"Hackney came in against tremendous odds," Puckett says. First off, he had to contend with the "enormous popularity of Gregorian, and the sense that the University had just gone to central casting [and] brought in a stock figure that they could control," in choosing Hackney, then the president of Tulane University. "There was deep resentment across the faculty and in the minds of students." Hackney's contemporary journals, which he made available to the authors, reveal that "he was deeply hurt by that," Puckett adds. "And it was unfair."

The Water Buffalo incident and the protest-trashing of *The Daily Pennsylvanian* by a group of black students, which roiled the end of Hackney's term, are well known, of course, but racial tensions ran high on campus throughout his tenure. "On the day of his inauguration," says Puckett, "he was confronted by the Black Student League, saying, 'Now, what are you going to do?'" There were also repeated run-ins with campus fraternities, including an alleged gang rape at Alpha Tau Omega; protests over controversial campus speakers such as the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan and the exhibition of controversial artwork by the likes of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano; not to mention student demands that the University divest from companies doing business with apartheid-era South Africa.

The book calls the 1980s "perhaps the most turbulent decade in Penn's history."

"Hackney did a good job of managing some of the crises, which were perpetual," Puckett says. "I think people recognized his decency, and he stood for the right things most of the time, until values came into conflict."

"One aspect of Sheldon's personality that did not go away at any point, even in the points of crisis, was that he would not intervene," says Lloyd. "He would not exercise a strong authority decision, a strong centralized decision."

Puckett agrees: "Hackney would not intervene in a process that had in his mind been established democratically and legally by a 'consultative process,' he would call it—that once you had a judicial policy in place, however inadequate it was, it had to run its course."

The ATO case in 1983 highlighted the perils of that attitude, he believes, and perhaps the inherent limitations of such procedures. "I think that accounts for the reason he did not call off all the little machinations that were going on in the fraternity and simply say, 'I'm taking charge of this, and we're going to put this in the hands of adults and senior administration, senior faculty. And we're going to work this out, and work it out with the police,'" he says. "And instead what happens is the frat boys get a rap on the knuckles, community service, and some sensitivity training. That was the end of it."

As his tenure progressed, Hackney eventually won over many of the faculty—pre-Water Buffalo/*DP* trashing, at least—and even as those controversies were emerging, he was successfully leading the largest higher education fundraising campaign for its time, *Keeping Franklin's Promise*, which would finish with a $1.4 billion total.

And amid the crises, Hackney actually began to act on the University's rhetoric of community involvement. "I think he left what will be a permanent stamp on redefining one aspect of Penn, which is its undergraduate culture, in the sense that he did advance a Franklinian kind of concept of service, that the University's social responsibility is more than just financial," says Puckett. "And he was very sensitive to what had happened prior to his coming."

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One representative effort at fence-mending was to reform the WPC, still mistrusted for its role in the Science Center/University City High School debacle in the 1960s. At Hackney's behest, the name was changed to the West Philadelphia Partnership (WPP), and neighborhood groups—which had not previously enjoyed voting rights—were given a voice in its decisions. Hackney also engaged key African-American political leaders in West Philadelphia, and brought activist and restaurateur Judy Wicks of White Dog Café (and Sansom Street Committee) fame, onto the board, Puckett says.

The WPP was instrumental in supporting the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), a youth corps—started by students in a course co-taught by Harkavy, Benson, and Hackney in response to the infamous MOVE tragedy in 1985—that led to a wide array of neighborhood initiatives. The enthusiastic response of faculty and students involved in WEPIC's activities led in turn to the creation, in 1992, of the Center for Community Partnerships (now the Netter Center), with Harkavy as director.

"I think [Hackney's] stellar achievement was his role as a conciliator and his creation of the Center for Community Partnerships," says Puckett, who served on the task force that formulated the proposal for the CCP in 1991. "But he was an adroit fundraiser. And he put new buildings on the campus. And he made a conscientious effort to advance diversity, particularly African-American voices at Penn."

Puckett compares Hackney to another Southerner who took a lot of heat over his presidential stint. "He's sort of, in some respects, a Jimmy Carter figure, I guess, who's due better than he gets."

If a lack of decisiveness plagued Meyerson and Hackney in their different ways, that wasn't the case with Penn's next president, Judith Rodin, formerly Yale University's provost.

"Absolutely not," says Puckett.

The first woman president in the Ivy League, Rodin was a Penn alumna and a native Philadelphian. After the troubled Hackney years, her decade in College Hall has often been portrayed—not least by Rodin herself, Puckett suggests—as unprecedented, a sharp break with Penn's past. The book takes a conscious step back from that view, characterizing her as "The Implementer."

"This was a hard call in the sense of she was clearly, in my mind, transformative, [and] that transformation was an acceleration more than simply an implementation," says Puckett. "But it could not have been done without this foundation that she inherited."

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On the building side, "Gaylord Harnwell had done all the dirty work," he explains. "Harnwell knocked down the buildings. He acquired the properties." When Rodin wanted to construct a hotel-bookstore-retail complex at 36th and Walnut, "she didn't have to go through the Redevelopment Authority, [or figure out] what to do with the merchants, where are we going to put them, [or confront] the African-American anger and bitterness. All that had been done for her. So in that sense all she had to do was build on properties that the University already owned."

One thing that did break sharply from the past, according to Lloyd, was how the University was managed. "She did something that hadn't been done for 50 years. She brought in a businessman to run the University in John Fry. The last non-academic to run the University was Thomas Sovereign Gates, who retired in 1944."

The book calls Fry "the most consequential administrative appointment of Rodin's tenure." Previously a higher-education management consultant, he served as executive vice president from 1995 to 2002, when he became president of Franklin & Marshall College. (He's now president of neighboring Drexel University.) "Rodin really focuses on the business side," says Lloyd. "She and John Fry together agreed to corporatize the university."

Rodin also benefited from the strength of the US economy and booming stock market during her tenure, the authors say, having "inherited the largesse of Hackney's $1.47 billion" and been able to raise $3.5 billion for the University herself, "even without a capital campaign." This was a far cry from the years after 1970, when "Penn lacked the financial resources to sustain the WPC's University City initiatives," the authors note.

But however much of her agenda may have existed on paper or been tried in preliminary form, the authors acknowledge that Rodin's focus and energy ensured that it moved forward—if not quite at "warp speed" as her "hagiographic" (Puckett's word) account, *The University and Urban Revival: Out of the Ivory Tower and Into the Streets,* puts it, then a lot faster than anyone on campus could remember.

"She did do things, and big things," he says. "And she did some things that were bold and brave that she got the trustees to go along with." Puckett cites the Inn at Penn and the redevelopment of Walnut Street and the 40th Street corridor, with the movie theater (now Rave Cinemas) and Fresh Grocer supermarket.

And while current president Amy Gutmann deserves full credit for the way Penn Park turned out—"I find no evidence that anybody had thought about that until [her] administration," Puckett says—it was Rodin who committed the University to buying the postal lands it sits on, having signed the agreement of sale before leaving office, after negotiations that had extended back to the Hackney administration.

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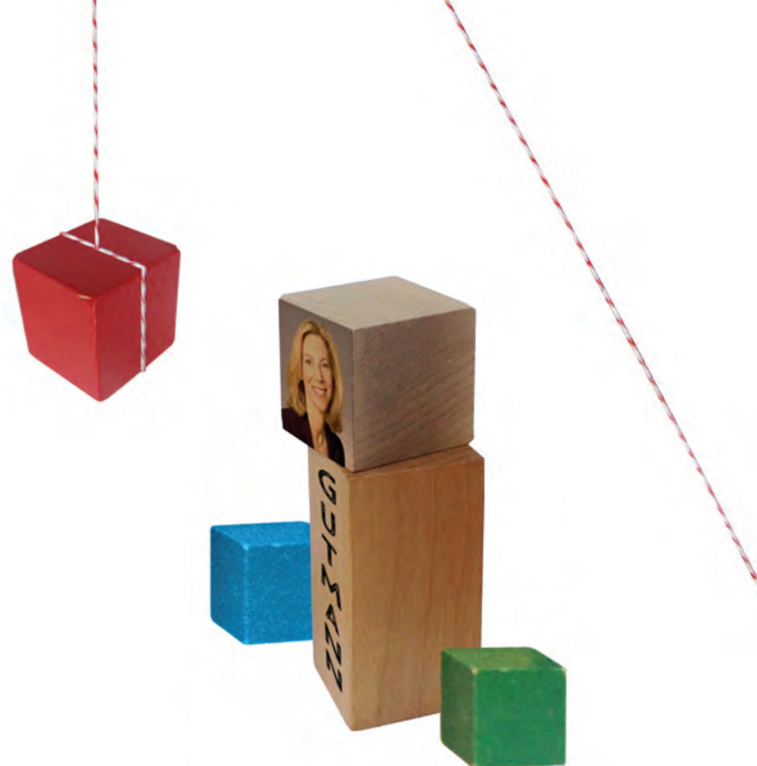
Early in her administration, “Rodin came face to face with the problem of West Philadelphia, particularly the crack cocaine” epidemic and its associated crime and violence, Puckett says.

First there was the murder of Al-Moez Alimohamed Gr’94 in August 1994, which happened the summer she took office. That killing, Puckett notes, took place “on my block, right on my corner. This doctoral student in the math department is gunned down by teenagers.”

At a candlelight march from campus to the murder site organized by Penn Faculty and Staff for Neighborhood Initiatives (PSFNI), there were calls for Rodin to make neighborhood revitalization Penn’s “highest priority.” But the administration’s initial response was similar to what Penn had done after previous high-profile crimes, Puckett says, a piecemeal approach that primarily emphasized increased campus security.

Crime continued to rise, and then, on October 31, 1996, Vladimir Sled, a Penn research associate in biochemistry and biophysics, was stabbed to death near 43rd and Larchwood streets.

“Action took off after that,” Puckett says. “That was the echo of In Ho Oh. And what [Rodin] does is she completes the Harnwell vision of this multi-pronged initiative,” encompassing mortgage and other incentives encouraging faculty and staff to live in West Philadelphia, commercial redevelopment, and of course, what became the Penn Alexander School, which opened in 2001.



Penn was “really the bellwether university for what we call ‘university-based urban renewal’—universities involved in the remaking of the American city since World War II.”

Several earlier plans had been developed for a Penn-assisted school “that would serve this area and keep kids in the public school,” says Puckett. But Rodin committed University financial and intellectual resources, hammered out negotiations with the school district, and made it a reality.

“That was a great accomplishment. There’s no question about it,” says Lloyd.

“It was bold. It was adventurous,” Puckett agrees. “And it becomes a jewel in her crown, and it’s her baby. Her heart and soul was in Penn Alexander.”

Asked to characterize the ongoing presidential administration of Amy Gutmann, Puckett tries “The Steward” on for size briefly—Lloyd, who calls her “the best fit for the presidency since Harnwell,” doesn’t seem to think that carries enough weight—and then rejects the question as premature.

“I know she’s raised a hell of a lot of money, $4.3 billion,” in the *Making History* campaign. “And some lovely new buildings have gone up. And the Penn Park is spectacular,” Puckett says. He also speaks approvingly of the Penn Compact’s goals for local and global engagement, and the promise of the Pennovation facility in sparking new-technology initiatives where the Science Center came up short.

“But you can’t talk about legacy or anything like that till after it’s done,” he adds. “Somebody’s got to look at it and mull it over from all sides and as many lenses as possible. Because otherwise it’s just opinion.”

In its conclusion, *Becoming Penn* sketches in the experiences of other urban schools, including the University of Chicago, Columbia, and New York University, with both core-campus expansions and redevelopment initiatives through “proxy” organizations like the WPC, and also looks at some additional types of renewal projects, such as the creation of new campuses and scattered campus sites, as in Fordham’s Bronx and Lincoln Center facilities.

But Penn was “really the bellwether university for what we call ‘university-based urban renewal’—universities involved in the remaking of the American city since World War II,” Puckett says. “You get more happening at Penn than you do in other places because we had three urban-renewal agencies working simultaneously on the campus: the General State Authority, the Redevelopment Authority, and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Facilities Authority. And they’re all working hand in glove.”

Penn’s experience also shows that “urban universities are well-positioned to use their resources in the city for academic purposes,” says Puckett. “And we offer academically based community service as an example—that this is civic, cognitive, and moral development. Penn illustrates how that can work.”

“To my mind, [*Becoming Penn*] represents the best of what can happen when the faculty collaborates with the University Archives,” says Lloyd. “We had all the raw materials here, and John was the engine that shaped it into a finished product.

“Ever since I came here I’ve been told that somebody had to write a history of the university that picked up where Cheyney left off. So to me, this is a successor to Cheyney,” he adds. “This book is a bold initiative because we were willing to take the risk of talking about events that are still fresh in people’s memory, and people have strong opinions about them.”◆