

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL UNIVERSITY DRIVING SOCIAL AND URBAN CHANGE



LDĀDESIGN

THE POWER OF THE CITY AND THE UNIVERSITY

Universities competing in a global environment require a world class setting. They need to be outward looking, and well integrated into the local community. They need exciting and creative spaces to maximise chance encounters and exchange.

So when LDA Design was asked to masterplan the pioneering new campus for University College London East, we decided to go on a tour.

We visited five universities in the States which are doing some hard thinking about new development.

We returned from our tour thinking that many universities in the UK could do with radically refreshing their approach.

First, all universities have an unrivalled capacity to improve the places in which they are based, but in the States they often have a far clearer vision of their role as drivers of social and urban change, and how this will benefit their students.

Second, many universities here appear to merely mildly lament the barriers between research, education and public engagement, rather than actively challenge convention and break those barriers down.

Third, too few universities here recognise the power of good public realm to achieve their aims.

DRIVING SOCIAL AND URBAN CHANGE

1. CREATE A PLACE OF GENUINE VALUE

A growing number of students are choosing to study in a city centre. They want authenticity. This increasingly means their place of learning will be close to disadvantaged communities, and our US universities were determined to eliminate the unproductive 'town and gown' divide.

So they are switching investment from old-school "look at me" architectural commissions to signal their distinguished status. Instead they are investing in good urban design to connect the campus to its surroundings, strengthen local identity, and create a place which works for residents, workers, students and staff alike.

Universities can develop neighbourhoods which are neither campus nor city, and are cohesive and inclusive.

2. HELP TO TURN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AROUND

In the US, we found the best universities are using their financial muscle to effect economic regeneration.

This includes developing generous partnerships with commercial tenants to generate vitality on neighbouring streets. They are subsidising rents to encourage a night-time economy. In Philadelphia, Penn is procuring in a way that supports local employment and businesses.

Columbia is improving the opportunities for local children by sponsoring community schools, and views this 'feeder' investment as creating future students.



The ambition in the masterplan for University College London East (covers and this spread) is for an inclusive, accessible institution where the public is welcome, collaboration is highly valued and the public realm plays its part in creating serendipity. @LDA Design



The masterplan for UCL East connects people and place through landscape. Half the site will be open space, maximising opportunities for overlap between students and the local community. A muscular approach to design ensures the public realm works hard as an ideas incubator, becoming a place of genuine cultural exchange.

3. MASTERPLAN BY STARTING WITH PEOPLE, NOT THE BUILDINGS

Campuses are judged on the quality of their public realm. So in a competitive market, a university campus with an “anywhere” character will lose out. Many in the UK have developed in an unstructured way, and their open space is what happens to be left over between buildings, dominated by car parking.

By contrast, forward-looking universities are now masterplanning in a landscape-led way. This means starting with how people will use the place, rather than with decisions about where the buildings will go.

4. EXTRACT FULL VALUE FROM PUBLIC REALM

Even with new development, there is a strong divide when it comes to the design of public realm. It can be viewed as an attractive backdrop to a collection of faculty buildings. Or it can be set to work as a functional part of the university programme, the setting for exchange and new collaboration.

More universities in the UK are realising that taking the backdrop approach is a lost opportunity. The public realm needs to provide a functional and inclusive learning environment. It needs to support collaborative learning, whether as a living lab or for curated activity.

With the rise of online learning, there is growing demand for hub buildings for informal, flexible learning and social spaces. Good public realm blurs the boundaries between internal and external spaces, and feels accessible.

In this respect, full marks to those UK universities who are already extracting full value from their public realm. But universities in the US will shortly be catching up, given our fifth and final point.....



5. PROVIDE DECISIVE GOVERNANCE

We were impressed by how determined the five US universities were to align their academic vision with a spatial solution that supported their goals. Such alignment might seem obvious, but in reality it is far from easy. It means taking hard decisions, and sticking with them.

The estates team in Chicago, for example, has a clear procurement vision. Knowing that students were troubled most by the quality of the run-down neighbourhood, the team decided to closely control its investment in local regeneration, but seek a partner investor for the delivery of student housing.

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SUCCEEDING IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET

LDA Design is an independent creative consultancy. We have almost 40 years' experience of helping clients to deliver places which succeed against global competition.

We have delivered many masterplans for the higher education sector. Our projects include University College London East; Birmingham Eastside's Learning Technology and Leisure Quarter; the University of Exeter; Oxford's Old Road Campus research campus in a parkland setting and the New Museums site in Cambridge.

LDA Design takes a landscape-led approach to masterplanning and urban design. We start by thinking about how people live, and how the place can be designed to meet their needs. Our masterplanning team works alongside our public realm and landscape design team, and we bring expertise on energy and resource use, strategic ecology and biodiversity.

We would be glad to discuss our research into the five American universities, and our work for the higher education sector in the UK.

