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## Is West Philly the Next Center City?

It's the age of brains, Philly, which means the real action in town is happening west of the Schuylkill, where new Drexel president John Fry and a host of other bold thinkers are building what could be the city of the future. (Amazing what a guy can do when he only sleeps four hours a night)

By John Marchese

Posted on 12/23/10 Page 1 of 8

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Of a little more than a dozen blocks, John Fry has guided his immaculate, country-club-ready Land Rover from a cute, leafy street right out of Michael and Hope's *Thirtysomething* to a streetscape more reminiscent of *The Wire*. Stopping at a corner near the informal border between Powelton Village and Mantua, the newly appointed president of Drexel University waits patiently for the car in front of him to move on.

A hooded figure emerges quickly from the shadows into the jaundiced, weak glow of a streetlight, shuffles to the driver's window of the run-down sedan, and makes a quick exchange. Now, the car in front clears out.

"I think we just saw a drug deal," says Fry's passenger.

With his well-cut conservative suit, neatly knotted tie and shiny loafers, the 50-year-old with the accounting MBA looks to-the-suburbs-born. (And, in fact, he now lives in Bryn Mawr with his wife and three children.) There is a quiet, precise and efficient friendliness about him that makes him seem either an extremely thoughtful rich man or a very worldly priest. But John Fry is a child of Brooklyn who made his professional reputation by manning the ramparts of the University of Pennsylvania at a time when the school seemed besieged by crime. He acknowledges what we've just seen — "So, you noticed that" — and with that, he drops the unpleasant subject and smoothly accelerates, pointing the Land Rover to a spot where he can stop for a moment and imagine a better neighborhood.

Soon we're parked overlooking a desolate stretch of rail yards lining the west bank of the Schuylkill, sprawling northward from 30th Street Station. "This is the gleam in my eye," Fry says. "You can't move the rail yards. But these tracks are used sparingly. I'm told there are possibilities of air rights and platforming. Look at this. You can see the killer view across to the city and the Art Museum.

"We could have a whole new place to go. Campus development has to be more about growing out to where it should go, rather than into the neighborhood. For Penn, it was the post office and the Civic Center. Maybe this area could be the same thing for Drexel someday. This is part of my minor theory."

John Fry presented his major theory early in October, after he'd relocated from Lancaster (where he'd run Franklin & Marshall College for eight years) and when he was just weeks into the role of replacing the now-deceased dynamo named Constantine "Taki" Papadakis, who for the previous decade had been transformative as president of Drexel. His business suit covered by long academic robes for the university's convocation ceremony, Fry stepped to the lectern and asked, "If Anthony Drexel were to walk today from the Main Building, where the Drexel Institute was founded almost 120 years ago, through our campus and into these neighborhoods, would he be satisfied that we are fulfilling our obligation as an urban university?"

Fry's answer was no. As he worked through his speech, he engaged in some rhetorical flourishes — such as proposing that Drexel become "the most civically engaged university in America" — but he also displayed his inner MBA, outlining a series of get-down-to-business programs like increased policing and public-safety infrastructure spending, a generous neighborhood home-ownership loan program for employees, and a proposed benevolent university takeover to improve a nearby elementary school.

The short-term goal is to make the northern University City neighborhoods around Drexel more like the clean, leafy, surprisingly safe and prosperous precincts that adjoin the Penn campus, whose very niceness Fry had more than a little to do with creating during a seven-year stint as Penn's executive vice president under then-president Judith Rodin.

But the really big idea that Fry and some others are hatching is to create a University City that rivals Center City, where the jobs juggernaut created by two major universities, a huge teaching hospital and medical research center, a world-renowned children's hospital, and the nation's oldest urban scientific-research park will finally occupy a neighborhood with a stable and attractive housing market, a vibrant street scene, state-of-the-art restaurants, upscale retailers, the arts, and the kinds of schools to which families are willing to send their



John Fry // Photography courtesy of Josh Smith

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