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PLANNING AND DESIGNING OFF-CAMPUS FACILITIES

By Luis Bernardo, AIA, LEED AP

Today it seems that more university officials, administrators, and facility managers are faced with the challenge of planning and designing more off-campus facilities. As urban universities become more competitive in how they attract and retain new students, some are turning to sites in surrounding communities to increase campus appeal and solve their facilities needs. These universities are increasingly seeking ways to connect the campus to the community, significantly benefiting both.

For an off-campus facility to succeed, the university must first answer the strategic questions that connect the facility to the college or university and also to the local community. Four important questions include:

- Where do the institution and the off-campus community find common ground?
- How does the site selected for the project link to the campus? How will it link to the local community?
- Sending students off-campus creates new security concerns for colleges and universities as well as for local communities where students now spend time. How will the project ensure their safety?
- What amenities will develop and enrich the project for both the students and community residents?

Officials at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore answered each of these questions during the development of an \$80 million mixed-use off-campus project called Charles Commons, which opened last September in the Charles Village community, adjacent to the JHU main Homewood campus.

The 313,000 square foot complex spans a city block and reflects both the spirit and tradition of the Georgian style architecture that characterizes the main JHU campus, as well as the early 20th century style of architecture typical of Charles Village.

In developing Charles Commons, JHU used four strategies that can offer insights for other off-campus facilities.

STRATEGY 1: MAKE SURE THE COMMUNITY BENEFITS TOO

To succeed, an off-campus facility must benefit both the college or university and the local neighborhood. The trick is to find a common ground and use it as a catalyst. Like many urban universities, JHU had essentially built out the available space for housing on its campus long ago. As a result, juniors and seniors typically find their own housing off campus.





JHU established a goal of developing better residential options for juniors and seniors. Specifically, a 2003 report from the University's Commission on Undergraduate Education (CUE) recommended that the University begin immediately to develop new residences at Homewood which would, over a period of 10 years, guarantee four years of housing to all arts & sciences and engineering undergraduates who wish to remain in undergraduate housing.

At the same time, the Charles Village community neighboring the JHU campus had begun seeking redevelopment options to help reverse the neighborhood's declining economic fortunes and rising crime rate.

The university hoped to build an off-campus student housing facility with more than 600 beds. The redevelopment initiatives of JHU, working with the community, led to the development of Charles Commons.

But common ground is just the catalyst. The result cannot simply be the student housing that the university needs. The community must receive something in return. Why? Students do not always make the best neighbors, but a well-conceived facility can compensate for that.

A mixed-use project can provide for student housing needs, while offering plenty of benefits to the community. The JHU project installed a 30,000-square-foot Barnes & Noble bookstore and café on the first two floors of the building. Other amenities for students and the public include additional retail shops and a dining hall.

The design also sought to invite the community to the facility with wide sidewalks and seating that spills outside from the café. Another part of the strategy for ensuring community benefits is to allow plenty of time between proposing a project, designing it, and breaking ground. Time enables the institution and the community to get to know each other by holding community meetings, sharing concepts and plans, and asking for advice. Both sides will eventually take ownership of the idea.

The community contributed to the JHU Charles Commons design in Charles Village. During informational meetings held during the design process, the architects solicited ideas from the community and adopted several suggestions. Charles Village residents suggested changing the color of the storefronts at the base of the building to delineate the entrances. They also suggested canopy treatments for the St. Paul Street entrance. The designers implemented both suggestions.

The design process begins the process of building relationships with the community. Site selection can take that process a step further.



STRATEGY 2: USE SITE SELECTION TO LINK CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

Not every community in Baltimore needs a Barnes & Noble Bookstore and a university residence hall. Set in the wrong community, Charles Commons may not have worked. The same is true of site selection. The wrong site in the right community might lead to failure.

A site that links the community and the school has the best chance of succeeding. To find such a site, it is important to recognize that an off-campus facility plays multiple roles. It plays a role in an institution's master plan. And, it plays a role in the city planner's concept of the neighborhood and the neighborhood's evolution over time. The roles must be compatible and not competitive. Student housing over street level retail may fit a building, while an arena or science lab might be entirely inappropriate.

Finally, select a site that maximizes view corridors to iconic buildings or entries on campus. Use color, materials and architectural design to reinforce the effect of axial relationships, street edges and public spaces.

The Charles Commons site fit JHU's needs. It sits directly across the street from a JHU classroom building. The building's main entrance features a large, two-story portico that makes a powerful connection to JHU's traditional campus architecture. At the same time, a secondary entrance on 33rd street encourages interaction with the neighborhood.

Dual towers that rise 10 and 12 stories above the street ensure that the structure has a mass and a height that blend with the neighborhood. A skywalk connects the two towers at the third floor and marks the dividing line between the lower floors that allow public access and the access-controlled secure entrance to the section of the building where the students reside.

STRATEGY 3: MATCH SECURITY PROVISIONS TO THE FACILITY AND THE COMMUNITY

Moving students off campus always raises security concerns for college and university officials. On an urban campus, officials might worry about the potential for rising crime rates to spill over onto the neighboring campus. JHU officials believed that buying property and initiating redevelopment in Charles Village would improve the neighborhood and reduce the threat of campus crime.

Off-campus student housing, of course, must provide all necessary security tools for students living in the facility. In a mixed-use building with retail downstairs and student apartments upstairs, members of the public may come and go as they please in public areas. Access to the residence floors of the building must be carefully controlled. At Charles Commons, a 24-hour guard observes those who enter the student living area. A modern access card system and turnstiles provide students a secure entrance. Security cameras scan hallways inside the security entrance as well.





Among the amenities for students in the secure residential section of the building are large study lounges. Designed into each floor, the lounges feature floor to ceiling glass allowing students to see out and the public to see in. At night, light from the lounges transforms the upper floor of the building into a shining beacon, illuminating the sidewalk and streetscape below and creating a more inviting, safer pedestrian environment. The overall effect is an appealing place—for students and the community—that draws people to enjoy and benefit from the amenities it offers.

STRATEGY 4: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE RICHER AMENITIES AVAILABLE OFF CAMPUS



Student housing projects typically have little common space. A classroom, lounge or small fitness center might round out many housing facilities. Off campus, more is possible—and desirable.

Why would people living in the community visit the facility? Why would students want to live there? Why would students from the main campus want to visit? To take advantage of the amenities. Amenities attract people to facilities.



The retail bookstore for students—as well as members of the public—Charles Commons has helped to re-invigorate a struggling retail corridor. The bookstore has also sparked other retail developments. The newly renovated corridor is proving attractive to students and residents alike.

Another example: The students needed additional dining options. The designers developed a facility that not only offered food court style dining for students, but was also open to the community. With the inclusion of pool tables, fireplaces, stages for live performances, and outdoor seating, this facility created more opportunities for the campus and community to interact.

A conference center in Charles Commons gives the university the ability to host special functions throughout the year, bringing visitors to the community to patronize other available restaurants and stores.

RESULTS

These strategies have worked well with Charles Commons, leading to the consideration of more off-campus facilities at JHU. “This project (Charles Commons) is the beginning of that,” says Larry Kilduff, executive director of facilities operations at JHU. He adds that Hopkins wants to create a safer place for students to live both on and off campus.

Safe and appealing communities alongside college campuses can be reawakened to new development through new campus housing and connections. The key is to form sound collaborations to tap into students' needs, because students ultimately drive partnerships between universities and the community.

“The wow-factor when students first moved in was pretty dramatic,” says Paula Burger, JHU’s dean of undergraduate education. “They knew it was very nice and above and beyond what is offered at many universities. With this building, students are getting more out of their overall Hopkins experience.”

There’s a wow-factor for the community as well, as Charles Commons contributes to the restoration of the retail economy and residential life in what was once—and may again be—a signature Baltimore community.