

University City: History, Race, and Community in the Era of the Innovation District by Laura Wolf-Powers

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Laura Wolf-Powers, *History, Race and Community in the Era of the Innovation district* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 196 pp., ISBN: 9781512822731.

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innovation district, urban planning, urban renewal

The economic development goal of innovation has left a lot of disappointment and inequality in its wake. *University City: History, Race, and Community in the Era of the Innovation District* adds to the growing critique of innovation by showing that formally novel and forward-looking projects ostensibly centered on human capital operate much more like old-fashioned, retrograde urban renewal than anybody involved in creating a so-called innovation district would like to admit. The book's thorough and substantive critique of innovation is timely and important. More fundamentally, Wolf-Powers' book stands out for making several overdue points that few readers would initially relate to innovation. In short the book, unlike its namesake topic, is highly innovative.

Wolf-Powers organizes her arguments through a sixty-year history of the University of Pennsylvania's ("Penn") and Drexel University's ("Drexel") redevelopment machinations in West Philadelphia. This deep dive focuses the assessment of innovation on the institutions with a vested interest in it—a simple corrective that pays dividends by tying the pursuit of innovation to real estate, place making, work, and urban politics. The empirical chapters proceed linearly, from a history of Philadelphia's Black Bottom and mid-century development efforts by Penn and Drexel, to an eye-opening account of the area's thriving Great Society programs and organizers, to the post-90s building and (secondarily) innovation boom in West Philadelphia. The book's simple structure, skillful narrative, and storytelling economy recommend it for undergraduates and master's students grappling with the inglorious history of urban planning and redevelopment. Scholars will remember the book for making four novel arguments about the world and the institutions we operate in.

First, *University City* makes a compelling case that we should think about the current-day university staples of research parks and entrepreneurship programs as (ostensibly) enlightened evolutions of urban renewal programs which were themselves seen as forward-looking endeavors. The book focuses on Penn and Drexel, but those of us who learned or who teach at urban publics conduct our day-to-day activities on land that was acquired and securitized through urban renewal. Today's makerspaces, entrepreneurship centers and research parks are built and justified with the same promises of economic development and university-community connection. Those aspirational goals, Wolf-Powers shows, rarely receive the resources or institutional support they need. Land clearance and development have less fickle backing. The weight of historical detail in *University City* makes this simple point with real power.

Second, Wolf-Powers' narrative of urban renewal and its successor land grabs brings community organizations and urban politics into the story in a full and satisfying way. Rather than chronicle a few hopeful acts of resistance, *University City* examines the rich and diverse world of organizing and activism in West Philadelphia in a level of detail that's simply omitted in more polemical accounts. In doing so, it points to a hard truth that gets scant attention in scholarship on urban development and politics. Wolf-Powers' detailed narrative of the thematically diverse organizations funded by Great Society programs, and the still-strong descendants of those programs, reminds us that the Great Society worked remarkably well on its own terms. Questions about its legacy today, however, are mitigated by the simple imbalance of power and resources in urban politics. Once the short-lived political project of the Great Society faltered, the power and connections of two well-financed private universities simply ground away what resistance remained.


Third, *University City* connects the project of economic development, which planning scholars rarely discuss in spatial terms, to land use. Wolf-Powers' fluency in economic geography is on full display as she shows that innovation and economic novelty have to happen somewhere, and that this "somewhere" is now cities. Thus, economic development is land use and vice versa—a fundamental connection rarely made in urban studies academia.

Fourth, the book replaces the nostrum "space matters" with the more challenging insight that specific spaces matter. *University City* depicts, at multiple scales, a sixty-five-year struggle for control over small slivers of real estate proximate to Philadelphia's Center City. As the amount of global real estate capital seeking a stable investment home continues to compound, the stakes and complexity of the struggle over spaces like this will continue to grow. Reading about one such long-term struggle focuses us on the reality that the fight over public space proximate to urban universities—universities often sited near central business districts via their historical formation through urban renewal—will constitute a growing issue for all of us in the years to come.

A slender, innovative book like this leaves little room for complaint. Still, I was hoping for more explicit attention to the theoretical implications of this story—the shift from government to governance, the changing institutional worlds of the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors over time, and the place of this very old-fashioned struggle within urban political economies negotiating globalization and pressures for equitable distribution.

Those minor quibbles do not significantly detract from the big picture of a novel, skillful book that charts a lot of new ground on an old subject that seemed to have little room left for innovation.

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