



THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY DISTRICT
DESIGNING A BETTER NEIGHBOUHOOD

UNIVERSITY DISTRICT URBAN DESIGN COMMITTEE
ALMA MATER SOCIETY

The Composition and Purpose of the Committee

The University District Urban Design Committee was struck by AMS Assembly on October 30th at the request of the Municipal Affairs Commissioner as part of the AMS-commissioned Queen's School of Urban and Regional Planning study of the University District. The Committee consisted of five student members, with the Municipal Affairs Commissioner serving as chair of the committee.

The primary motivation of forming the committee was to capture in-depth student feedback on the state of the student housing market within the University District, and possible recommendations for its improvement in the future. Essentially, the committee was tasked with the question of "what kind of housing do students want?" This is a critical question within the context of any study containing the area of the University District, since students are overwhelmingly represented in the population of the area and constitute a key stakeholder.

The Challenges of Gauging Student Opinion

Of course, there are various factors which compound the complexity of having students describe their preferences for housing and the neighbourhood design of the University District. Firstly, students are largely inexperienced tenants, who have likely only searched for long term housing options in one or two housing markets, including Kingston. This hinders their ability to compare the housing stock and the relatively unique demographic profile of the University District with other rental markets and neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the great majority of students attending Queen's are undergraduate students originating from outside of the Kingston area. The significance of this phenomenon is that few students consider Kingston as their "home" beyond their three or four years of undergraduate study. Often this impedes students' ability to consider the long term viability of the neighbourhoods in which they reside. For instance, while a student may perceive their tenancy in a neighbourhood to be short term, older residents can become concerned about the long term consequences of having more student-rented homes in their area. It also decreases the likelihood of their participation in municipal forums such as public meetings. Owing to the residential nature of Queen's, it is also common for many students to remain relatively isolated from the City of Kingston outside Queen's campus and the downtown core. This can lead to a lack of self-reflectiveness, as students can be unaware of their impact on issues such as affordable housing and family displacement within Kingston's downtown neighbourhoods.

In order to help resolve some of these issues, it was determined that striking a committee consisting of student leaders within the AMS would be most appropriate. These students have been elected by their faculty peers to represent and advocate for their interests. A committee



format would also have the benefit of engaged discussion and feedback, and the ability to inform participants of the larger context in which the University District resides in the City of Kingston.

Summation of the Committee's work

Five meetings of two hours each were planned, and the committee met throughout the month of November. A summation of the content covered and discussed at each meeting is below.

The Problem of the University District

A brief history of land use patterns in the City of Kingston since 1950 was explored, including the westward expansion of automobile-centered suburbs. A more specific focus on the neighbourhood of the University District was then applied, tracing its origins as a middle class neighbourhood in the 1950's to the peak of its notoriety as a "student ghetto" in the 1980's and the preceding explosion of enrolment growth at Queen's.

The current context of the University District was also analyzed, including the effect of student housing demand on affordable housing in Kingston, and 'student sprawl' which has resulted in family displacement from downtown neighbourhoods. Other possible consequences of 'student sprawl' include the decline of downtown businesses and schools. In addition, the environmental effects of poorly maintained housing stock and increased suburbanization were also discussed.

It became evident that the more problematic aspects of the University District have resulted from the poor institutional planning on the part of Queen's, but also a failure from the City of Kingston to leverage a viable student population and to accommodate it strategically within its downtown core. In other municipalities across North America, a growing student population has catalyzed downtown revitalization and economic development, as being first wave gentrifiers and also a ready talent pool upon graduation.

The Regulatory Environment

After analyzing the current situation, it was important that committee members understood the regulatory environment within which the University District is governed. A broad overview of the relationship between the province and municipalities through the Planning Act and the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) was examined, before the committee examined the Kingston Official Plan and relevant zoning bylaw.

Policy tools that were considered significant for the University District included the PPS intensification target, 'E' zoning for institutional use in the City of Kingston, and the 'Campus Expansion Area' identified in the Official Plan. These policies were found to encourage increased



development within the University District and particularly by Queen's. However, significant parking requirements set out in Bylaw no 8499 represent a large cost for private developers, particularly for areas such as the University District where parking is not in high demand.

The committee also analyzed the relationship between the City of Kingston Planning Department, Planning Committee and City Council as well the relationship between private developers and City Hall.

Planning Case Studies and Reviews

The problem of effectively accommodating the student population in Kingston has resulted in a multitude of studies from both Queen's and the City of Kingston. The committee was careful to review the large number of studies, including the joint Queen's University and City of Kingston Housing working group, the Downtown Residential Review, and the Queen's School of Urban Regional Planning report in 2009, and understand the implications of their recommendations. The committee was careful not to duplicate potential solutions which have been implemented or have been found to be infeasible.

The cities of Waterloo and Philadelphia also provided insightful case studies for the committee. Waterloo's Northdale Community Improvement Plan was held as a best practice in participatory planning for a neighbourhood characterized by a large student population in a Canadian municipality. Likewise, the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia provided a much more inspiring example of how a university can, and should, integrate itself within the community to achieve neighbourhood revitalization. Judith Rodin's *The University and Urban Revival* informed the committee's discussion surrounding UPenn and West Philadelphia.

As part of this session, the committee also reviewed past and present development projects in Kingston which revolved around student housing, by developers such as Patry Inc, Podium Development and Highpoint Developments. This informed the committee of the political and planning context in which housing projects in the University District are proposed.

Community Stakeholders

Two separate meetings were held to meet with Queen's Housing and Hospitality Services, as well as community leaders from the Sydenham District Association (SDA) and the Williamsville Community Association (WCA).

Bruce Griffiths, director of Queen's Housing and Hospitality Services, elaborated on the housing stock owned by Queen's in the University District under the Community Housing department,



and the strategic direction of Queens' land banking policies. These policies were created for the University to avoid costly land purchases in order to facilitate campus expansion when needed. A small reserve fund has also been established for Queen's Community Housing to consolidate lots when possible, and help to avoid the use of expropriation. Community Housing also administers the Queen's Landlord Contract Program, a provincial program to improve property standards in student rental units. The committee drew parallels between Queen's University and UPenn and the potential for Queen's University to further leverage its housing resources, however Mr. Griffiths expressed his belief that the City of Kingston's policies to encourage private sector development would be sufficient to accommodate the growing student population.

A more critical narrative arose from the meeting between the University District committee and the local neighbourhood associations. Members from the WCA and SDA both expressed their concerns about the long term consequences of purpose-built student housing projects such as Patry Inc's "The Edge" at 663 Princess Street. These projects feature units of four bedrooms or more which helps to achieve maximum density, but also severely reduces the likelihood of a mix of tenure and demographics within the building. This may lead to the 'ghettoization' of these buildings, similar to Princess Towers, which was originally a Queen's student residence named Elrond College.

However, both the committee and community members were in agreement that smart growth projects such as infill development were possible within the University District, by taking advantage of the vacant space located at the centre of many residential blocks. It was noted that achieving greater density in homogenous student neighbourhoods was key to protecting more mixed neighbourhoods which are at the periphery of the student sprawl area. Moreover, the community members noted the repeated calls from the community for Queen's to become more involved in the upper year housing market by re-developing its existing student housing properties, similar to UPenn and other American universities. It was noted that while there are a number of development projects recently completed or in the works within or around the University District, the resultant number of bedrooms created falls short of the planned enrolment increase over the next three years.

These two meetings provided a sharp contrast for the committee between the outlook of Queen's University and the perspective from the community surrounding campus. The challenge appears to be with respect to motivating Queen's to recognize community concerns and play a much larger role in shaping the long term future of the University District.

Discussion on the future of the University District



At this last session, committee members walked the University District and identified sites of interest such as previous neighbourhood amenities converted to student housing, larger scale development projects, underutilized housing lots and properties demolished by neglect.

Committee members were then asked to complete their final submission forms, from which the findings of this committee are based on.

Findings

The Committee was largely concerned with three key areas of the University District, the streetscape within the area, quality of housing and increased density.

The University District is one of the few areas in Kingston that contain such a large number of pedestrian and cyclists as well as two of Kingston's top three employers (Queen's and Kingston General Hospital) and various neighbourhood amenities, such as recreational facilities, local restaurants and schools. Thus, the people-scaled residential area within the University District, was identified as one of its great advantages. Features such as historic Victorian homes, front porches and front yards give the area a "neighbourhood feel" for many residents living and passing through the area. However, at times the cleanliness and maintenance of these same features can also be an issue, and degrades the visual appeal of the neighbourhood. Green elements such as trees and parks are also important features that help the visual appeal of each street. Unfortunately, these features are predominantly located on private property and there are few green spaces for pedestrians and residents except for Victoria Park and City Park at the periphery of the University District.

While the Victorian homes in the University District lend an historic aspect to the neighbourhood, there are many smaller homes with starkly different architectural features and materials. Oftentimes, small bungalows are adjacent to larger Victorian style homes, which creates incompatibility within the housing of the neighbourhood.

Corner lots within the area are also frequently not effectively taken advantage of, and are an opportunity for more retail space to help revitalize the neighbourhood. These lots are generally larger, and have the opportunity to be anchors on the block and also encourage street activity. The intersection of University Ave and Johnson St for example contains a compatible mixed-use low rise apartment building at the northeast corner with an excellent sight triangle for pedestrians, while the remaining corners are occupied with converted student houses which obstruct pedestrians from traversing their underutilized corners. In contrast, the intersection of Division St and Johnson St contains three excellent examples of mixed use buildings utilizing their corner lots for patrons and pedestrians walking by. In order for the neighbourhood to be



revitalized, these high traffic intersections should be enhanced with mixed use buildings at corner lots, which can be occupied by local businesses.

Frequent surveys conducted by Kingston Police, Queen's and the AMS indicate that students perceive there to be a lack of safety within the University District at night. It is difficult to assess how much of this perception may be in part due to external factors such as each students' own personal background, however it is important for the urban design of the neighbourhood to take this into account. Increasing lighting from residential buildings and ensuring that public and semi-private spaces can be viewed from the street can help mitigate these concerns. Students also point to the lack of active transportation infrastructure within the neighbourhood, such as crosswalks and bike lanes. Implementing these and other traffic calming measures would also help to increase safety for residents.

A long standing issue within the University District is that of property standards. Often, many landlords own a property in the University District as an investment and are not actually residents of Kingston. These 'absentee landlords' are frequently identified for allowing the physical appearance and maintenance of their properties to deteriorate. The Committee recognized early that it was critical for landlords to be held accountable to property standards bylaws as well as provincial building code and fire regulations. Partnerships between the City of Kingston Property Standards department and the AMS should continue and be expanded. The proactive property standards recommended by the AMS Assembly as part of the *Proud Citizens: Student Election Platform* should form a basis for this partnership.

Concerns with property standards were raised by community leaders in tandem with the issue of the frequent conversion of family homes into student 'monster homes'. The growing student population and permitted use of extensions in low density zoned areas has created the appeal of landlords to accommodate more students by adding unit extensions to their properties, in order to maximize rental income. These monster homes can lead to an intrusion of privacy into neighbouring backyards, and affect the property tax valuation of homes. This creates "push factors" for families to leave the University District and other neighbourhoods nearby. As the student population continues to grow, more and more converted properties push families out and lead to neighbourhood amenities such as day care centres to be closed. Thus, a key piece of retaining families in the University District is upholding property standards and addressing 'monster home' conversions. That said, this does not tackle the question of how to accommodate a growing student population directly.

Increasing the residential density to accommodate a growing student population was identified by the Committee as the most effective way to mitigate the negative consequences associated with such a large student population. Fortunately there exists a large amount of underutilized land in



the centre of residential blocks within the University District. Infill development should be encouraged in order to retain the historical value of Victorian homes in the area and to retain the “neighbourhood feel” of pedestrian scale residential development. Backyard space which students rarely use, can also be employed more effectively to create more green spaces in the neighbourhood and promote shared community spaces. Developments should also follow the changing demographic and preferences of the student body at Queen’s. Only 1 in 7 students own a car and many use cycling as a method for transportation, yet currently many properties have an excess of parking spaces and a lack of bike storage options. Moreover, real estate developers and landlords report a shift in preferences of students from the traditional five to seven bedroom houses, to much smaller units of two to three bedrooms.¹ Increased housing units in the area of highest demand can provide more choices for students in the housing market as well as create more competition for landlords to provide safe, well maintained and affordable housing options.

Finally the committee also explored the roles of major stakeholders in the neighbourhood and how they might play a role in rejuvenating the area. Specifically, the committee investigated the intersecting roles played by Queen’s, the AMS, the City of Kingston, and private real estate developers.

Queen’s has the potential to play a more significant role in the University District. Currently, Queen’s owns approximately 75 properties in clusters within the University District, most of them on the block defined by University, Earl, Alfred and Union streets and also on Clergy Street West. From a development perspective, Queen’s is an extremely advantageous position in that it already owns consolidated lots in highly desirable locations. The back area of these lots should be used to create ideal infill development and provide a compatible transition from the taller campus buildings such as Stauffer Library to the smaller residential homes just north of campus. In general, it was noted that Queen’s should play a more active role in developing a strong partnership with the City of Kingston and accept its role as a major stakeholder in the Kingston housing market. While Queen’s is primarily an educational institution, there would also be a large financial benefit for Queen’s to develop its current student rental properties.

Mixed use developments are seen as an important tool to help revitalize the University District. Private real estate developers should use mixed-use developments to ensure the inclusion of local businesses in new projects and create a more complete community, with both retail and residential uses and new spaces for public use. Furthermore, it is critical that developers foster a consistent, positive relationship with students and the broader community by implementing proactive public consultation in addition to the mandatory public meetings at Planning

¹ This has been noted in conversations with developers such as Podium Developments and Varsity Properties, landlords such as Robert Reid of Reid and Smith Properties and Joan Jones of Queen’s University who has offered housing advice to students for the past 20 years.



committee. Oftentimes, proposed development projects have been the subject of much criticism from neighbours and have frequently cost developers' time and money seeking legal opinions and defending their projects at the Ontario Municipal Board. Developing a trusting relationship by proactively seeking input on future projects among students and residents, will aid developers in both proposed and future development applications by avoiding activist appeals to the Planning department, City Council or the Ontario Municipal Board by alienated residents.

The City of Kingston must consider more consultative methods to consult with community members through the formulation of its Planning department reports. Several City planning reports have been completed since the 1980's regarding the challenge of accommodating the student population within the University District. These reports have rarely included an open consultative period for residents to identify key areas of concern. As the City continues to research the neighbourhood through various reports, holistic planning and consultation would benefit this process immensely in helping to find more long term solutions to persistent issues. This should include reaching out to student and community leaders to inform and involve them in the drafting of Planning reports, as well as seeking public input into proposed recommendations for the area prior to the matter appearing before Planning committee and City Council.

Finally, the committee recommends for the AMS to continue its representation of students to the City and University through the Municipal Affairs Commission. Students, being the predominant residents in the University District, should carry a large responsibility in the upkeep of the area and promoting more pedestrian and cyclist friendly infrastructure. The AMS has implemented important programs and resources such as the Student Maintenance and Resource Team (SMART), the Housing Grievance Centre (HGC), the Holiday Housecheck program, the Golden Key Award, the Greenovations retrofit committee and the University District housing website. These programs should continue to expand their reach in order to have more impact within the University District. Important political positions on crosswalks, bike lanes, transit use and snow removal from sidewalks should continue to be developed and actively lobbied on.

Summary

The University District is a neighbourhood with great potential, where many residents live, work, play and study. It contains two of the largest institutions in the City of Kingston, two public education schools, multiple museums and art galleries, as well as top quality recreational facilities. The high level of pedestrian and cyclist activity embodies the ambitious sustainability goals set by the City of Kingston for the City in general. Residents of the University District also contribute thousands of hours and dollars towards local philanthropic efforts, the impact of which is felt throughout the Kingston community.



In visioning a future for the neighbourhood, it is important to recognize the residential nature which distinguishes Queen's from many other Canadian universities. Student frequently cite the desire to belong to a community as the main attraction of Queen's and Kingston. It is critical for the urban fabric of the University District to embody this ideal.

The work of the University District Urban Design committee has established that students want a more diversity of housing choices while retaining the neighbourhood feel of the University District. The locational pattern of undergraduate students has consistently confirmed that proximity to campus remains a top priority. Locations such as corner lots on busy intersections such as Johnson and University should be utilized to create more high density, mixed use developments. Infill development has the highest potential for increasing density and green space in the University District. As Queen's owns a high concentration of clustered properties, it has the greatest potential to take a leading role in revitalizing the neighbourhood. In any case, new development projects in the neighbourhood should accentuate pedestrian use and create safe and inviting public spaces.

Moving forward, the University District has the potential to become a diverse, vibrant neighbourhood which connects Queen's employees and students with downtown Kingston and the Williamsville and Sydenham neighbourhoods. The future of the University District is therefore tied with a necessity for the City of Kingston, Queen's and other local stakeholders to work in partnership in order to build a sustainable and inclusive community.

