
Harvard dawdles, Allston waits

By Paul McMorrow

June 27, 2011

IF YOU'RE IN THE HABIT of passing through the Allston tolls, then you're probably well acquainted with the biggest white elephant in Boston real estate. It's been a ghost building for 10 years now. Drive by this afternoon, and the hulking steel-and-concrete structure will be doing the same thing it's done for the past decade: looming over the Mass. Pike, dark and empty and begging to be put to good use.

Get one last look while you still can. After a decade of disuse, the Lincoln Street building has finally found a purpose — as the trade bait in a neighborhood-wide game of Monopoly. The vacant building's owner, Harvard University, is flipping it for a couple of run-down properties down the street. When the trade is finished, the facility at 176 Lincoln St. will be razed. It's an ignominious end for a property that has been cursed since the day it opened. And it speaks volumes about the development dynamics in Allston, where commercial development is dominated by a single investor that just happens to be the country's wealthiest university.

Harvard's habit of buying up real estate under the cover of darkness has earned it the enmity of many Allston residents. But when it comes to 176 Lincoln St., the massive empty complex overlooking the Pike, the university was supposed to be rescuing the neighborhood from a real estate deal gone terribly wrong.

The Lincoln Street property was originally a pure dot-com bubble play. A developer tried turning a moving-company warehouse into something to sell to the scores of Internet companies that were cropping up along Route 128. The dot-coms disappeared before the building ever opened. What was supposed to be called Boston Internet City was rechristened as a biotech facility. Biotechs never came, though. Companies preferred being in Cambridge, or Lexington, or anywhere other than that terrible concrete box overlooking the Allston tollbooths. So the building sat empty, a concrete shell the size of a city block in the middle of a residential neighborhood.

Harvard scooped up the property in late 2006. The school dropped \$16 million on the vacant facility around the same time that it was advancing ambitious plans to create a life sciences hub in Allston. Neighbors assumed the Lincoln Street building factored into Harvard's life sciences strategy. Why else would the school buy a lab-ready building while making a major push to expand its lab presence?

Harvard never announced what it planned to do with the Lincoln Street complex. It's become obvious that the school never had a plan. The building has been in Harvard's hands, collecting dust, for more than four and a half years. It sat vacant in 2007, when Harvard's endowment was flush with cash. It was vacant at the recession's depths. It's vacant today, as the school is unveiling its latest plan for building out its Allston campus. Soon, it'll be gone entirely.

Earlier this month, Harvard announced a land swap with the owners of a figure skating rink along Western Avenue. Harvard will take the old rink and an aging motel next door, and the rink's owners will construct a new facility on the site of the vacant Internet City building.

Between the cost of the property, the taxes it paid on the empty building, and the land value it's losing in the land swap, Harvard's Lincoln Street adventure will wind up costing the school more than \$20 million — real money to some folks. The land swap does allow the school to consolidate its holdings along Western Avenue. It has shared no immediate development plans for those parcels.

That's the problem. The school doesn't operate on the same timetable as the rest of the city. It banks land to ensure that it has room to grow in the coming century. But Harvard's own long-term interests don't square with its neighbors' more immediate concerns. Allston residents have watched in recent years as spots like Kenmore Square and Brigham Circle have received drastic makeovers, thanks to ambitious private development. In Allston, all development is tied to Harvard, and Harvard is in no hurry to build. The school says it has plans to remake the

neighborhood, but it's not really in the neighborhood-building business. Which is why every time Harvard rolls out a new plan for reshaping Allston, the refrain is: We'll believe it when we see it.

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