



CHAPTER

1

A New Heart of USC

On a warm August morning in 2017, a first-year USC student—with a half-hour to spare before her morning class—sat at the heart of the new USC Village, less than a week after its grand opening. A business major, she opened a nineteenth-century novel, the last of the books she had assigned herself to read over the summer.

The central piazza serves as a meeting place for so many in the USC community. Between classes, students and faculty pass time in its expansive, tree-filled space, occasionally finding themselves sharing impromptu meals and conversations.



A few minutes later, she was joined by a faculty member, coffee in one hand, a stack of syllabi in the other. He noticed her book, and that soon inspired a discussion—one that touched on timeless lessons from classic literature and the value of setting goals for one’s learning. Their conversation eventually turned to the student’s summer job, her aspirations for grad school, and even the historic solar eclipse that had taken place the day before.

Their time together spanned less than 15 minutes, but as a human exchange, as a meeting of two minds, it elegantly captures the dreams of those who worked so hard to realize the USC Village. They were driven by a wish to nourish human connections and a practical plan to create a center for communities—space for USC students to build lifelong relationships with each other and their faculty mentors. The USC Village also would serve the local neighborhood in a similar way, providing a center in which to shop, dine, and spend time together.

Planning for this dream began as far back as 2009. At the time, the university’s president, C. L. Max Nikias, served as provost, and spoke often of the important role universities play in fostering students’ intellectual, creative, and personal growth. He pointed to a critical window of time in a young person’s development—the years between 18 and 22—as being exceptionally transformative.



The USC Village is easily accessible from the University Park Campus, as a primary entrance aligns with the northern portion of the campus. The tall buildings shield the central piazza from the cacophony of traffic along Hoover and Jefferson, creating an oasis for conversation, reading, and relaxing.



“During this age period, young men and women are wrestling with what it means to be fully human, and to live in the society of other humans,” he often said. “It is in this corridor of transformation that much of their identity and many of their lifelong affiliations are formed.”

While this belief peppered a number of his key speeches and writings, another point moved to the fore: USC was considering options for the 15 acres of land that extended from the northern border of the University Park Campus. For USC, and for the local neighborhood, this was extraordinarily well-situated land that awaited a dreamer’s vision and a doer’s leadership.

PASSION BEHIND THE PROJECT

Once the dream was articulated, it quickly gained traction. Lofty goals became nuts-and-bolts proposals, and wish lists gave way to blueprints. This progress was guided by Nikias, who had become USC's president in 2010. By this time, plans for the USC Village were moving full steam ahead.

What quickly stood out was the passion this project generated. Among the first to see its potential was the local community. These neighbors—many of whom had lived in the area for more than three decades, and who had children attending college-prep classes on the USC campuses—lent their voices to public discussions, and helped elected officials understand the project's benefits. This accelerated the approval process, which culminated with more than 1,100 community members converging on City Hall, and the council's unanimous approval of the project.

The community's passion was matched by the architects' energy and the construction workers' dedication. The architects imagined an entirely new living community—more than 1.2 million square feet of space that would give life to the project's vision, a Collegiate Gothic home for a campus-centered education for students. And their ideas rapidly translated into enduring buildings and carefully planned spaces, as more than 5,600 construction workers clocked 2.6 million hours on the project.

Meanwhile, during nearly 900 days of construction, a number of the university's top benefactors stepped up with financial support. USC Trustee Kathleen Leavey McCarthy led the way in naming the McCarthy Honors College, and was joined by David Bohnett, Charles and Jessie Cale, Ray and Ghada Irani, William and Leslie McMorrow, and Shelly and Ofer Nemirovsky. They all provided naming gifts for one of the eight residential colleges, as did an anonymous donor who named a residence hall in honor of A.C. Cowlings.

Their support—as well as gifts to support other features, from the bustling paseos to the picturesque fountain—allowed the university to build the USC Village on its own land and with its own resources. The scope of this project—the largest in the history of South Los Angeles—made this a particularly special achievement. It also signaled the university's transition to a truly residential university—another landmark achievement, given that, just a generation earlier, USC was viewed primarily as a commuter campus.



Long before any bricks were laid, or any cement was poured, the USC Village inspired passionate support among the local community, as the project came to life in evocative renderings (above).



The USC Village is a dramatic example of how far the University of Southern California has come in a short amount of time. To appreciate this growth, consider that August morning at the heart of the USC Village, and those two individuals who were drawn to discussion by a book written before the university's founding.

Could they have possibly imagined all the dreaming, doing, and passion that allowed them that singular moment?