

UNITED STATES

A new body for USC, but not enough soul

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The University of Southern California or USC recently opened a new campus – ‘USC Village’ – adjacent to the main campus in downtown Los Angeles. The three-year undertaking is the largest development in USC’s history, cost US\$700 million, and is an interesting mix of a private-public partnership.

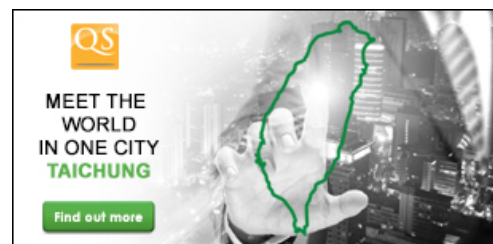
After negotiating with the city, the university demolished an underused shopping mall, built a US\$16 million fire station and employed roughly a quarter of the construction workers from the neighbourhood. They also gave the city US\$20 million for affordable housing. The Village is environmentally state-of-the-art and ultimately will create thousands of local jobs.

In addition to classrooms, dorms and a spiffy fitness centre, the Village also boasts a department store (Target), a grocery store (Trader Joe’s) and a panoply of trendy restaurants. All of the businesses and a community room are open to the local community.

The 15-acre campus houses 2,500 students. The buildings are all adorned with neo-Gothic architecture. The centrepiece of the new campus is a statue of Hecuba, the mythological Queen of Troy who looks imploringly toward the old campus and the iconic ‘Tommy Trojan’ statue. Still others may wish that, rather than a mythological Greek queen, a sculpture more reflective of the city’s history or multicultural heritage would have been commissioned. But the sculpture is consistent with the university’s Trojan iconography; the sculpture is of a woman, and multiple cultures are represented at its base. One might also forgive the brainchild of the sculpture being Nikias, who is of Greek ancestry.

The university, rightly, has celebrated the opening with a series of speeches, parades and acclamations. It’s not every day that a university adds an entirely new campus a stone’s throw from the downtown of a global megacity.

It is fair to say that the campus would not have been completed without USC President Max Nikias’s charisma and vision. He spearheaded a capital campaign that, at just over its halfway point, has raised US\$6.3 billion. Lest anyone forget whose leadership made the campus possible, Nikias’s name is etched 14 times on the buildings and at every perimeter entrance.

Theme park

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There has been some initial carping about the campus. The gates to the Village promptly close at 10pm, keeping locals out until dawn. Some find that discomfiting. Others have noted the redundant architecture. The Village's buildings exemplify what postmodernists call a simulacrum – a bland version of reality that is not actually real.

Indeed, the consistency – some might say monotonous regularity – of the buildings feels like a theme park rather than a campus that is engaged with its surrounding neighbourhood.

The lack of a 'destination building' may also be a missed opportunity. Visitors to Los Angeles want to visit Disney Hall, the home of the LA Philharmonic, because of architect Frank Gehry's stunning vision; no such architectural gem sits in the Village.

Still others may wish that, rather than a Greek goddess, a sculpture more reflective of the city's history or multicultural heritage would have been commissioned. But the sculpture is consistent with the university's Trojan iconography; the sculpture is of a woman, and multiple cultures are represented at its base. One might also forgive the brainchild of the sculpture being Nikias, who is of Greek ancestry.

The consumers – the students – certainly seem content. The fitness centre is jammed; the carefully-manicured walkways are full of students sipping coffee, walking with groceries or skateboarding to class. The classrooms are state of the art. The students' parents are relieved that, even in the middle of a sprawling metropolis, their children are safe at night.

Silence

Any important event, of course, is also framed by conditions in the larger environment. USC President Nikias has yet to find his footing – or voice – with regard to national challenges pertaining to US President Donald Trump's various initiatives.

Many of USC's peer institutions have presidents who have spoken eloquently on behalf of undocumented students and international faculty, staff and students. President Nikias has been silent.

USC's undocumented students have not felt supported. The international community of USC, particularly faculty, staff and students of Iranian descent, have felt unsettled by the president's reticence to publicly support them.

Nikias's silence has been both surprising and disappointing, partly because his career personifies the American dream that is now under attack: he is an immigrant from a poor family who came to America's shores, earned a doctoral degree, raised a wonderful family and has been a remarkable success.

Equally surprising is the unfolding scandal that broke a month ago on the front page of the [Los Angeles Times](#). It was alleged that the former dean of USC's medical school has a history of well-documented drug abuse where he supplied drugs to, and partied with, young people.

According to the *LA Times* the president and his staff [were contacted repeatedly about the allegations in 2016 but did not take action until recently](#). *LA Times* reporters made numerous attempts to speak with President Nikias but their calls were not returned and a letter requesting an interview was returned unopened. Even though the former provost and many faculty had significant reservations about the dean, he was reappointed by the president.

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The president has admitted no personal responsibility, instead appointing an outside consultant who will provide a private report to the president and executive committee of the Board of Trustees.

In a system where shared governance ostensibly functions, one might reasonably assume that the Academic Senate's leadership also would be briefed so they might help the faculty understand how such egregious behaviour might have occurred. The Senate, however, has had virtually nothing of substance to say and is largely irrelevant.

A university is more than a series of buildings. To be sure, in the 21st century, a top-tier institution needs an enviable campus and President Nikias has brought USC's campus into the limelight. However, the soul of the university is its ability to speak out on pressing national issues – and to forthrightly address institutional mistakes.

An organisation's body, especially in an earthquake zone such as Los Angeles, can always be rebuilt. The soul of a university, however, must be nurtured for the institution to achieve greatness, and its president and faculty are responsible for its care.

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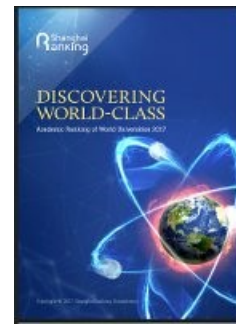
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