
MARTIN MEYERSON



BACHRACH

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THE WORLD lost one of its most interesting men on 2 June 2007 when Martin Meyerson died at Penn-Presbyterian Medical Center after a long struggle with cancer. He was eighty-four years old. In the long-term future, Martin may be best remembered for his presidency of the University of Pennsylvania from 1970 to 1981, but his contributions to the international world of ideas and of higher education go well beyond that chapter in his life, significant though it was.

Born in Brooklyn, Martin soon showed his intelligence and ravenous curiosity. He did his undergraduate work at Columbia University and earned his master's in city planning at Harvard. After working briefly for the Philadelphia Planning Commission, Martin went to the University of Chicago as an assistant professor in 1948. He moved to the University of Pennsylvania as an associate professor in 1952 in the Department of City and Regional Planning in what is now the School of Design but was then known as the Graduate School of Fine Arts. Harvard called him back in 1957 to be the Williams Professor and director of the Joint Center for Urban Studies of Harvard and MIT. He became dean of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley in 1963. Even this bland recitation of his career track implies something important about Martin. He was circulating among elite institutions, and he was a standout even in that context.

During these relatively early years in a stellar academic career, he produced several important books. With Edward C. Banfield, he authored *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing in Chicago* (1955), and *Boston: The Job Ahead* (1966). With other colleagues in these same years, he produced *Housing People and Cities* (1962) and *Face of the Metropolis* (1963). He was a proponent of the then-innovative idea that physical planning had to be integrated into socio-economic planning, and both had to be part of a political process. That this approach seems similar to the idea of "polytechnics" in the work of Lewis Mumford should come as no surprise. The two were friends and frequent correspondents. Martin was clearly among the influential leaders in his chosen field.

Then, at Berkeley, his career shifted. The raucous Free Speech Movement was making normal life impossible, and the university was being squeezed by radical students on one side and a conservative Board of Regents on the other side. Such a situation is not good for presidents and chancellors. After the distinguished incumbents of those two positions had been dispatched, Martin became the acting chancellor of the Berkeley campus and managed to restore a semblance of civility so that the university could function again. Interestingly, he did that in part by tilting toward the students in the political tug-of-war, restoring the open

forum that had characterized Sproul Plaza. He also made several high-profile gestures that humanized the university, which was being criticized as a machine that “processed” students. That achievement brought him to the attention of the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he went in 1966 as president. In 1970, he was lured back to Penn as president.

After the nationwide disturbances on college campuses in the spring of 1970, most campuses simmered down for the duration of the 1970s and 1980s. Penn did not. The spring 1970 demonstrations were initiated because of the invasion of Cambodia by an administration that had been claiming that it was de-escalating the war, but the protesters were also pushing all the other elements of sixties progressivism: racial equality, gender equity, student power, and countercultural values. All those themes appeared in the active plotting of campus politics at Penn in the 1970s. In addition, Martin had to deal with a dire financial situation. He had inherited a deficit budget, followed quickly by the loss of one third of the value of the modest endowment because of the bankruptcy of the Pennsylvania and New York Central Transportation Company, in which the endowment was heavily invested.

Not only did Martin steer the university through the financially difficult era of stagflation, but he made a number of organizational changes that fundamentally altered Penn. He merged the College for Women into the all-male College of Arts and Sciences, and he combined the College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the College of General Studies, and the social science departments of the Wharton School (economics, political science, sociology, and regional science) into the new School of Arts and Sciences. In addition, a real campus was emerging from the urban grid in response to a far-sighted program of closing off streets, combined with imaginative landscape design. College Green became Blanche Levy Park, a delightful place where students and faculty lounged and mingled, and where demonstrations for or against the current outrage could be mounted. With a bow to Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, Martin started what is now known as the college house system, student residences that are also communities, rich in extracurricular activities, and with an on-the-ground faculty presence. The new residential university was taking shape, with the liberal arts and sciences at its core and with the motto of “One University” guiding interdisciplinary teaching and research in a way that put Penn at the forefront of such activity.

Martin’s tenure also saw the beginnings of affirmative action for women and members of minority groups, as well as the organization of the West Philadelphia Corporation, the entity through which the major institutions of West Philadelphia cooperated to improve the quality of

life for residents. There was also a successful capital funds drive, "Program for the Eighties," that provided much-needed financial stability.

Martin stepped down from the presidency in February 1981, but remained active in the university. As his successor, I counted myself extremely lucky. He was not only a delightful friend, but he was the ideal predecessor. He did not give advice unless asked, but he would put aside everything else to help when called upon. He provided leadership for the University of Pennsylvania Foundation, the University of Pennsylvania Press, the Institute for Research in Higher Education, the Monell Chemical Senses Center, the Fels Center of Government, and the Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies. In partnership with his wife, Margy, he led the Friends of the Library. Meyerson Hall, on College Green, is named for him, and in the Van Pelt Library, on the second floor, is the Margy and Martin Meyerson Conference Center. There is also a Meyerson Professorship in Urbanism.

Even while he was president, Martin was an exemplary citizen and an involved internationalist. From 1988 to 2005, he chaired the selection committee for the Philadelphia Liberty Medal. He was an adviser on urban and industrial development to the United Nations, as well as to several West African nations, and to the governor of the Tokyo Metropolitan area. He founded London's Centre for Environmental Studies and Japan's International Centre for the Study of East Asian Development. He served as chairman of the International Institute for Education and as president of the International Association of Universities. His involvements in American organizations devoted to urban affairs, education, science, foreign policy, and the arts are too numerous to list. He served on several White House task forces and on the councils of several agencies of the federal government. All of this implies not only a lot of travel, but constant thinking of problems and their possible solutions. That was Martin. He was on the go and always reading and thinking.

Martin was very active in the American Philosophical Society, but that did not prevent his involvement with numerous other honorary and beneficent organizations: the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; the American Association for the Advancement of Science; the Royal Society of Arts in Great Britain; the American Institute of Certified Planners; the European Academy for Arts, Sciences, and Letters; the Council on Foreign Relations; and the National Academy of Education. He was honored by the governments of France, Italy, and Japan, and he received twenty honorary degrees and numerous other prizes and awards.

Martin is survived by his wife of sixty-one years, Margy Ellin Meyerson, their sons, Adam and Matthew, and their daughters-in-law,

Sandra Meyerson and Nina Shea, along with seven grandchildren. His daughter, Laura, died in 1988.

Elected 1977; Committees: Audit 1986–2007; Development/Campaign National 1990–93; Executive 1996–2003; Finance 1998–2007; Library 1987–93; Long-Range Planning 1988–93; Two Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary 1987–93

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