

Before The Porch



The Porch 1.0



The Porch 2.0



The evolution of The Porch at 30th Street Station from parking strip, to activated sidewalk, to a lushly planted public space.



Introduction



In 2010, the southern boundary of Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station – home to Amtrak, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), New Jersey Transit and their combined 27,000 daily commuters – was a drab strip of concrete. The area seemed to exist exclusively for cars entering and exiting the Schuylkill Expressway, or whizzing down Market Street through six lanes of traffic. Despite the grandeur of the historic station – which opened onto views of the Schuylkill River, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and downtown Center City – the site was barren, with no trees, shade or character to speak of. It certainly did not serve as a welcoming gateway to the region or Philadelphia’s flourishing University City neighborhood.

But this corner of Philadelphia was changing, and change was going to come quickly. In addition to the millions of passengers who stream through 30th Street every year, 16,000 people worked within a five minute walk of the station. At the time, the Internal Revenue Service was in the process of relocating 5,000 employees to a building across the street that had previously housed the Philadelphia General Post Office, while Drexel University, Brandywine Realty Trust and others were beginning to pursue large scale development projects.



When the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) started rehabilitating bridges in the area, an opportunity arose to reimagine the physical environment outside the station. Over the course of a year, University City District (UCD) – a partnership of anchor institutions, businesses and residential communities with the mission of community revitalization in University City – worked with stakeholders to transform 33 parking spaces into a pedestrian-friendly public space adjacent to 30th Street Station. In November 2011, UCD unveiled The Porch at 30th Street Station, featuring moveable furniture, lush landscaping and a vision for how public space can transform a community.



Today, after ongoing iterations and increasing amounts of investment, The Porch offers a variety of comfortable and intimate spaces for people to lounge, unwind and enjoy landscaped surroundings, festive lighting, creative programming, and food and beverages. 150,000 visitors came to the 30,000 square foot space in 2015 alone. It has become an animated spot to stop and rest on the walk between Center City and University City; linger over a food truck lunch with a friend; or enjoy a few minutes outside while waiting for a train. And now Philadelphia has a bright and welcoming way to greet visitors, giving them a palpable sense of the city's creativity and vibrancy as soon as they exit the station.



Over the past five years, UCD has learned a great deal about how to create and run great public spaces. During that time, urban centers across the country and world have experienced a surge in population and investment, sparking an international conversation about urban amenities and placemaking. This document includes five of UCD's most important lessons learned from managing The Porch. We hope our findings can help other cities and communities work together to transform underutilized space and create dynamic public places.



LESSON 1 | **First, make friends. Then, make a great public space.**



Visitors flock to a WXPN Free at Noon performance at The Porch.

From the start, The Porch’s success has been based on strong collaborations with partners who have provided critical leadership and support in planning, funding and creating the space. Often the nimble, entrepreneurial organizations that are best equipped to shape and steward great public spaces don’t own the land they wish to build on, and don’t control the resources necessary to create change at scale, making creative partnerships critical to the development of public space.

When PennDOT initiated structural improvements to the bridges surrounding 30th Street, a core group of partners – including Amtrak, Brandywine Realty Trust, the City of Philadelphia, Drexel University, PennDOT, Schuylkill River Development Corporation and the University of Pennsylvania – began exploring ways to improve an area destined for increased investment and activity. The partners converged around a vision of ‘Station Square’ on the public right of way adjacent to the station. As a result of ongoing planning and buy-in, PennDOT agreed to make additional infrastructure and surface improvements and installed a 55’ x 500’ stretch of sidewalk along Market Street. This new sidewalk became the foundation upon which The Porch was laid. “We [PennDOT] can be part of things getting better,” says Charles Davies, PennDOT’s Assistant District Executive for Design. “The Porch is a better space than it used to be. We played a very important role in making it happen, and it’s a good thing when transportation infrastructure can add to that vision.”

As UCD began to create a schematic vision for the new space with our design partner Lager Raabe Skafte Landscape Architects (now known as Ground Reconsidered), we worked with a range of organizations to develop concepts and ideas. Project for Public Spaces (PPS), placemaking thought-leaders and advocates, inspired our thinking around how to quickly enhance the site and track data needed to make improvements over time. The William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia’s premier public space grantmakers, saw the space as a prime opportunity to explore the activation of Philadelphia’s undervalued assets. Their financial investment and interest in mixing design, programming and data was critical to The Porch’s launch and ongoing success.



BalletX performs at The Porch.



WXPN's Free at Noon concert featuring Man Man.

Partnerships have also been critical to daily operations at The Porch. Since the space now serves as the front door to Amtrak's third busiest station and office for nearly 2,000 employees, UCD has worked closely with the railroad to ensure The Porch meets the needs of both passengers and employees. The City of Philadelphia allows UCD to enhance the public right of way, and has been a champion of our efforts to transform the area. UCD has collaborated with a range of organizations – including the Philadelphia Orchestra, BalletX, WXPN 88.5FM and the Please Touch Museum – to bring diverse and exciting programming to the space.



The Philadelphia Flyers celebrate the playoffs at The Porch.

Along the way, there were – of course – issues that needed to be ironed out between stakeholders: partners had different visions for the site design, for example, and there were concerns that increased pedestrian activity at The Porch would strain services inside of the station. But in a geography marked by the presence of large scale institutions, including hospitals, universities and developers, progress is contingent upon collaboration. By bringing a broad set of actors to the table and investing time and energy into a rich collaboration, we have developed a shared commitment to the success of the space and surrounding community.



Local vendors offer wares at The Porch.



LESSON **2** | Every desert needs an oasis.



When UCD began to pursue its vision for The Porch, we were working against the (reasonable) assumption that the sidewalk sandwiched between the station and a congested road was not an ideal place for a new public space. But UCD imagined a different and more impactful reality.

Before The Porch was even a glimmer on the horizon, UCD had given a great deal of thought to University City’s gateways. 30th Street Station is a beautiful and historic building, but after walking out its doors, the drab concrete and jam-packed roadways didn’t make a great first impression on people coming into the neighborhood, or visiting Philadelphia for the first time. The Porch could be a grand entrance to Philadelphia as well as a great public space: a building block that made University City more attractive to local residents and workers, interested developers and passersby.

UCD envisioned an inviting green space that would serve as a respite from the surrounding concrete and the traffic, and so the whimsical plans featured extensive ornamental horticulture, abundant colorful furniture, and lights to brighten the area. UCD imagined a public space that could foster social interaction, so the design eschewed traditional concrete benches – which tend to drive people apart – for moveable chairs and innovative seating models in order to encourage visitors to engage with one another. The team wanted to create a space that prioritized people and not cars, and so we carefully changed the space to meet the needs of pedestrian visitors over time.

From pocket parks to plazas and beyond, the public spaces that dot our street corners come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. But UCD believes that all well-managed spaces have the ability to bring people together, enhancing quality of life for the whole community. We felt that the potential rewards were well worth the risk of pursuing a new public space at the station. Over the years, The Porch has gone through several iterations and redesigns, but since day one, it always contributed to the betterment of University City.



LESSON **3** | **Launch. Test. Measure. Fail. Tinker. Succeed. Repeat.**



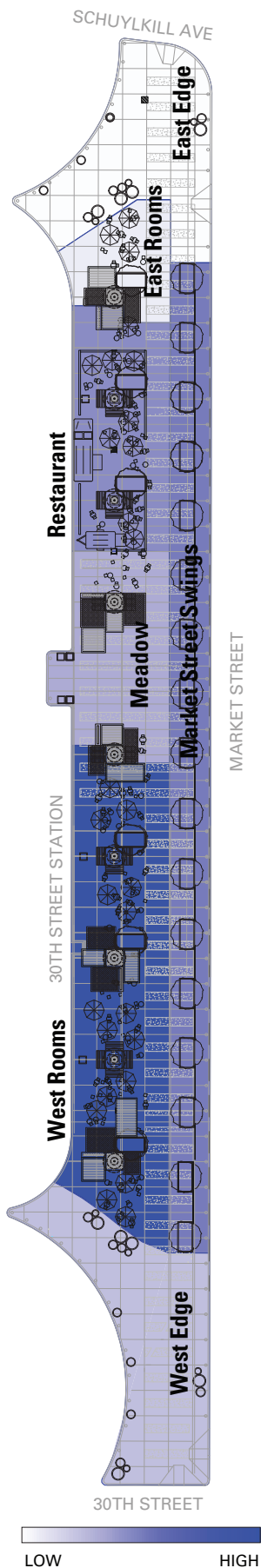
Many public spaces start with a formal plan, intensive build-outs and large upfront costs; in contrast, UCD launched The Porch with modest, removable interventions. This approach was in line with the PPS “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” principal of public space transformation, which UCD used to guide the creation and management of The Porch. By introducing the space with simple tables, chairs, umbrellas and planters – and an initial capital investment of just \$375,000 – we had an opportunity to test interest in the space (and minimize our risk if that interest was lacking). “We genuinely had no idea if [The Porch] was going to be successful or not,” explains Prema Gupta, UCD’s former Director of Planning and Economic Development who now serves as a Senior Vice President at the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC), which oversees the Philadelphia Navy Yard. “What’s really exciting was our approach: everything was temporary and inexpensive. It could disappear overnight, most of the things could be used elsewhere, there was no harm done. And it worked, and what it showed was the tremendous unmet demand for places like The Porch. Places that could be pretty simple but places where people could sit down, take a break from the daily grind, interact, and play.”

Luckily, people were immediately drawn to the space, and we continue to take an iterative approach to our site. Instead of pursuing a permanent design that may not have worked for the space, we have invested incrementally as we learned what our visitors like. UCD constantly tinkers with The Porch – changing plantings, seating, programming, and food options – and then evaluates the changes to see how visitors respond.

When UCD unveiled The Porch, we had to re-introduce the space to the public, and demonstrate that a formerly traffic-choked sliver of concrete could be a nice spot to sit and relax. In that first year, UCD provided heavy programming onsite, using free concerts, flea markets, yoga classes, mini golf

Relative Porch Use by Functional Space

(April 1 - October 31, 2016)



and more to draw people in. We viewed every change as an experiment that would teach us how to make the space a better fit for our visitors. Through it all, we weren't afraid to fail: in the past five years, we have learned that farmers' markets don't work well in that location, alternating food options are better than one static offering, and many people don't feel comfortable practicing yoga between a train station and a heavily trafficked road. We are confident that there will be more lessons down the line.

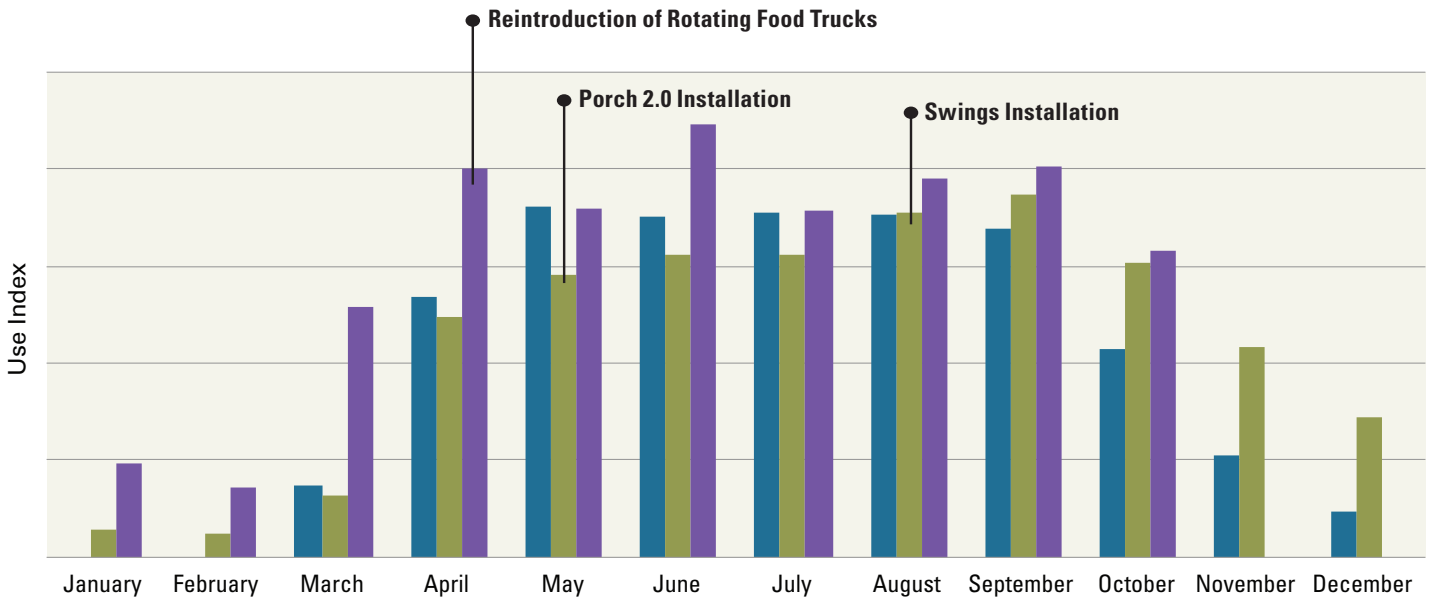
Our iterative approach to the design and management of The Porch would not work without our unwavering commitment to innovative data collection and analysis. Quality space management must be built on a foundation of data, which guides all our decisions at the site. From the very beginning, data have been pivotal to The Porch's success: we only pursued the development after researching the average number of site visitors, commuters, workers and pedestrians, and determining that there were enough people passing through the site to make it a vibrant public space.

Our commitment to data has only grown, as we have developed an extensive and unique data collection methodology that informs every decision we make onsite. Through pedestrian tracking, counts and surveys, we have an in-depth understanding of how visitors interact with the space. Among other things, we know: how use of The Porch changes based on the season, day of the week, weather and time; whether people prefer to sit in shade or sun; the types of seating options people favor; how many visitors are carrying luggage; and the most common entry point into the space. When UCD revealed The Porch 2.0 in the spring of 2015, with elements designed by Groundswell Design Group and Gehl Studio, every alteration – including decisions on where to site a restaurant space and swings – was based on data we had been collecting and analyzing since the 2011 opening.

By launching, testing, experimenting, measuring and proving the concept, we have also attracted investment in ways that would have been impossible with merely a plan. Our 2015 updates to The Porch, which included brightly colored, custom-designed swings, plus new plantings, lights, and seating options, required significantly more funds than our initial design. Our vision was made possible through the support of national funders ArtPlace America and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, who were attracted to our work as we built up a track record of success. Not only has our data-driven decision-making process paid off by attracting more funding, it also allowed us to appeal to more visitors: after launching the redesign, visits to The Porch increased by 33% over the previous year.

MONTHLY INDEX OF USERS AT THE PORCH

(January 1, 2014 - October 31, 2016)



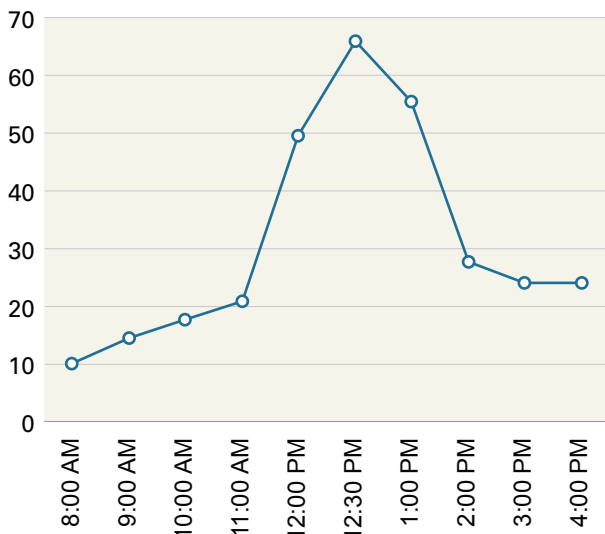
Use has increased substantially after UCD introduced each of the featured interventions at The Porch.

2014
2015
2016



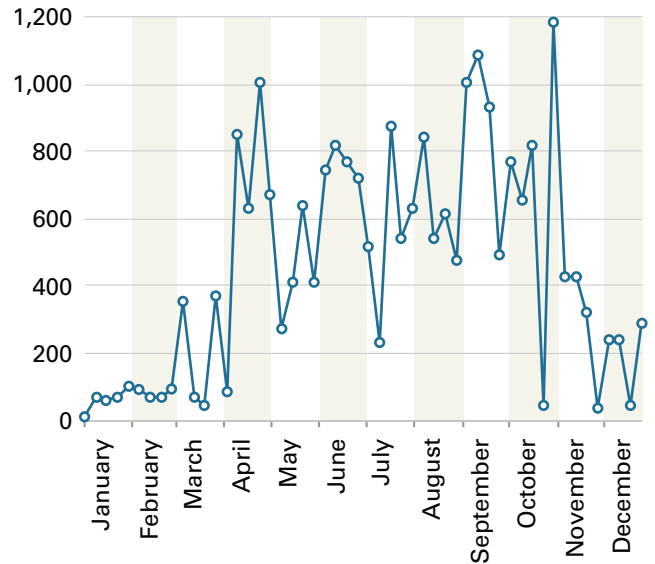
AVERAGE HOURLY USERS AT THE PORCH

(Wednesdays, April 1 - October 31, 2016)



DAILY USERS AT THE PORCH

(Wednesdays in 2015, 8AM - 4PM • Estimated from hourly counts)



Users are those individuals who stop at The Porch, as opposed to those who simply walk through the space.



LESSON 4 | **The end is just the beginning (and maybe even life-changing).**



UCD believes that rigorous onsite stewardship is critical, since a beautiful design and landscaping can go to the weeds if left untended. UCD runs a Public Maintenance program throughout University City, and the team keeps The Porch clean and well-maintained. We also deploy a Porch Ambassador, who is onsite five days a week to keep the space running smoothly, collect user data, answer visitors’ questions, guide food trucks, vendors, and performers onto the space, and generally serve as the eyes and ears of the site.



UCD’s public space and safety staff keep The Porch clean and safe.

Most exciting is that we’ve used our commitment to stewardship as a springboard into expanding economic opportunity. As we delved more deeply into our placemaking work across University City, our landscaping fees began to pile up. So we took a hard look at our spending – as well as our organizational strengths – and made the decision to launch Green City Works, a landscaping social venture that employs local jobseekers.

The foundation of Green City Works’ job creation and employment training elements rests on UCD’s nationally recognized West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, which connects unemployed West Philadelphians seeking opportunity with



Green City Works making University City a greener, more beautiful neighborhood.



West Philadelphia employers seeking talent. The Skills Initiative has placed more than 90% of its graduates – who had been unemployed an average of 53 weeks when they entered our program – in life-changing jobs with major employers in the area. Green City Works was created to build on this work by employing those who have been shut out of the job market, including the formerly incarcerated. The program builds career pathways into the landscaping field, offering customized professional development training and on-the-job work experience, and then provides employment opportunities for those ready to join our venture on a full-time basis.



Today, Green City Works is on a rapid growth trajectory, propelled by the expanding footprint of our anchor partners and UCD's own growing role in greening and beautifying the district. As we expand, revenues are plowed back into the business, affording UCD the opportunity to train and hire more individuals. UCD is also committed to offering our employees good wages and benefits, full-time positions and advancement opportunities in an industry where financial and professional growth is rare. Green City Works ensures that The Porch is verdant and lush all year round, and shows us the potential of using public space as an impetus for advancing economic opportunity.



LESSON 5 | Imitation is the best form of flattery.



Rendering of Drexel Square, Schuylkill Yards' inaugural project



Amtrak Station Plaza



Hammocks at Spruce Street Harbor Park

When The Porch opened in 2011, the success of a public space stuck between six lanes of traffic and a train station seemed unlikely. Five years later, it is an unequivocal success, and not only because the space is so well-used. It has also set the tone for future development in the neighborhood, and catalyzed additional public spaces in University City and across Philadelphia.

Today, 30th Street Station is the epicenter of tremendous transformation in University City, as Brandywine Realty Trust and Drexel University begin their ambitious Schuylkill Yards development, and Amtrak and its partners pursue the massive 30th Street District Plan. The Porch helped demonstrate that University City required civic infrastructure commensurate with the commercial development rising around us. It proved that there was an unmet demand for green spaces and public gathering points. Many of the high profile projects rising across University City prioritize green space; 40 acres of open space and 18 million square feet of new development are planned in the years to come. These places increase quality of life for everyone, while helping to revitalize and activate neighborhoods in surprising ways. “The success of The Porch was a significant piece of the way the 30th Street Station District Plan evolved for the outside of the station, both because The Porch was successful, and because it was a good partnership model,” says Rina Cutler, former Deputy Mayor for Transportation and current Senior Director of Major Stations at Amtrak. “So The Porch contributed significantly to where we are as partners on the master plan.”

As UCD saw The Porch transform the area, we knew we could do more to improve the pedestrian experience on the eastern edge of University City. With funding from the William Penn Foundation, UCD has launched a series of greening projects over the past few years that continue to activate and beautify



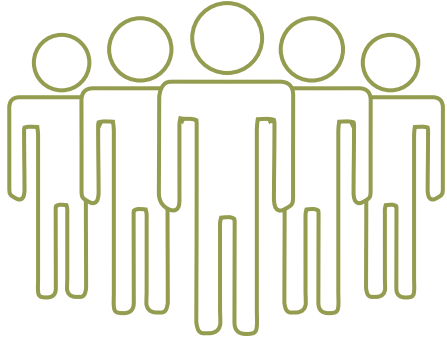
the large concrete superblocks and bridges surrounding the station. In order to extend the vibrancy of The Porch in advance of the 2015 Papal Visit, we added bleachers and planters to the Market Street Bridge, which create a beautiful gateway between Center City and University City, while encouraging people to linger, socialize and enjoy the vista. And just this year, we installed Schuylkill Gardens, a 500 foot hanging garden that lines the Schuylkill River and improves the aesthetic experience for commuters. None of this work would have been possible without that first critical step of activating The Porch.

Beyond the boundaries of University City, The Porch was early in a line of successful public spaces that have popped up and energized the city. Independence Beer Garden, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Pop-Up Gardens, Spruce Street Harbor Park: these places share common features with The Porch – landscaping, moveable seating, food, drink, programming – and have prompted an exciting regeneration across Philadelphia’s neighborhoods. “Our sense is that you need to create an infrastructure of public spaces to make cities and communities attractive to residents, workers, and investors,” says Shawn McCaney, William Penn Foundation’s Interim Executive Director and the Director of Creative Communities and National Initiatives. “Those spaces have to be effectively programmed and activated to promote a positive public perception of public places. The Porch has been an early demonstration of how to do that in an iterative, experimental, and relatively low-cost way. I feel like you could draw a direct line of inspiration from The Porch back in 2011 all the way through to Spruce Street Harbor Park today. The Porch really launched this concept of iterative public space activation in Philadelphia and now places like Spruce Street Harbor Park are benefitting from the lessons of The Porch.”

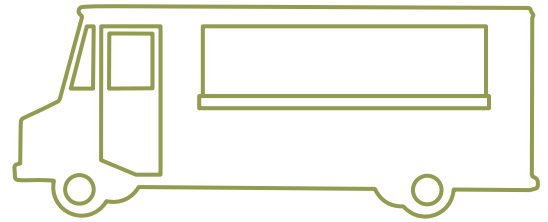
From the long-neglected Delaware riverfront to underutilized office building aprons to vacant lots, these areas have been reclaimed by public spaces that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. The Porch helped make the case that people were clamoring for these kinds of spaces, and that with minimal investment, it was possible to transform and energize whole areas of the city.



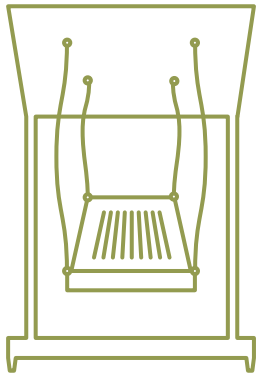
The Porch By The Numbers



**1,500
TO
2,000**
UNIQUE
DAILY USERS



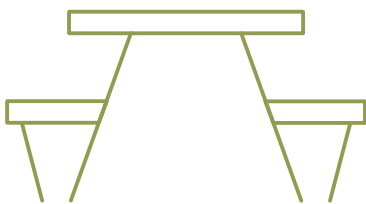
38 ROTATING
FOOD TRUCKS
IN 2016



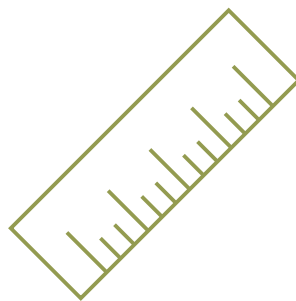
14
CUSTOM
BUILT
SWINGS



APPROXIMATELY
300
USERS TRY
THE SWINGS DAILY



405
PIECES OF
FURNITURE



30,000
SQUARE FEET



7,000
PLANTS INSTALLED
IN 2016



Conclusion



Amtrak's 30th Street District Plan – which will wholly transform University City – includes a new vision for the station. The plan calls for a series of public spaces around the station, inspired by the success of The Porch. UCD and its partners are excited to prepare The Porch for this next phase, relying on our lessons to ensure that the space continues serving the public in concert with an ever-growing number of companion places in the neighborhood.

Looking back on five years of The Porch, we're often reminded of the refrain we (constantly) heard while we pursued our vision of a vibrant public space at 30th Street Station: "No one is *ever* going to relax next to six lanes of traffic." Our greatest lesson learned is that the best public spaces are those that respond to and evolve with the needs of their users, no matter where they are located. We believe this is the case here in University City, in Philadelphia, and throughout the country, and we are honored to contribute to the conversation about how bold public space agendas can transform the fabric of a community.



University City District

3940 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
215.243.0555

To make a secure, online donation to UCD, please visit:
www.universitycity.org/donate

 universitycity.org

 [universitycity](https://www.facebook.com/universitycity)

 [@ucdphl](https://twitter.com/ucdphl)

 [@universitycity](https://www.instagram.com/universitycity)

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2016