

Business

THE BOSTON GLOBE WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2002

STEVE BAILEY

Downtown

Campus builder

They had what we like to call vision. They were the builders, the shapers of modern Boston: Ed Logue and Steve Coyle, the city's great planning directors of their time. Boston Mayor Kevin White. Norman Leventhal, the developer who gave us a reborn South Station and Post Office Square, to name just two. And Ben Thompson, the architect who saw in Quincy Market not its past but its future.

Here's one name I doubt you know: Robert Silverman.

Robert who, you ask? It is a fair question. "I am a completely obscure person," says Silverman, who works from a small, plain office overlooking Boston Common.

Obscure he is, but the work Silverman has been doing so well and so quietly for the past two decades no longer is.

In Allston, new Harvard president Lawrence Summers is moving ahead faster than anyone expected on what will become of the

100 acres the university acquired in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Summers is thinking big: Will it be a new home for Harvard Law and other professional schools? Or will it be the linchpin of Summers' grand goal of creating a science park that could become the next Silicon Valley?

In downtown

Boston, another campus is nearing completion, cobbled together over the past decade from existing buildings at the corner of Tremont and Boylston streets. Emerson College has neither the endowment nor the ambitions of a Harvard, but in the late '80s it was ready to pull up stakes from its home in the Back Bay and head first to Bedford and then to Lawrence. Both college and city are better that it didn't.



Robert Silverman's work has helped shaped Boston.

Rob Silverman is the link between the two schools and their futures in Boston.

As Harvard's director of planning in the '80s, Silverman drew the road map for the university's expansion into Allston. It was his work that convinced Harvard president Derek Bok and others that the university was running out of space in Cambridge far faster than expected, and he identified most of the Allston parcels the school would later acquire — secretly — after he left.

Emerson hired Silverman in 1992, shortly after the school abandoned former president Allen Koenig's expensive and ill-conceived plan to build a new campus outside Boston. Since then, Silverman has managed the sale of most of Emerson's 16 brownstones and apartment buildings in the Back Bay and bought four much larger buildings and two parcels on the edge of the Theater District — an appropriate location for a school that specializes in the performance arts and the media. Work is under way on an 11-story performance center behind Emerson's Majestic Theater; a 14-story student center and dormitory is not far behind. The college, nearly broke when Silverman arrived as head of administration and finance, is now in an enviable financial position.

"This is an example of someone without any public identity shaping the city in some pretty fundamental ways," says Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation and former head of external affairs at Harvard. "In both cases — what he engineered in Allston and at Emerson — they are immensely positive developments for the city of Boston. He is a visionary."

Silverman, 54, thinks cooking and campus-building have a lot in common: "You make a campus the way you make a good reduction sauce," he says. "You keep adding ingredients, boil off the water and skim off the fat. You have to be patient. And it all boils down to something that is very appealing."

Higher education and the hospitals are more important that ever to Boston — the two areas that continue to give us an advantage in a global economy. Far from the headlines, Rob Silverman has done more than most to secure that future, not on one campus, but two.

Steve Bailey can be reached at 617-929-2902 or by e-mail at bailey@globe.com.