

Lance Collins and Building Technology Partnerships

By Brad Stager

How a partnership between Cornell University and Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, a public university in Haifa, Israel, was chosen to fulfill a high-tech economic initiative and civic dream by establishing a new teaching and research campus in New York City was the story Lance Collins told attendees of his Eminent Scholar Lecture Series presentation.

Professor Collins is the Joseph Silbert Dean of Engineering at Cornell University and was also part of the leadership team that won the bid to create what is known as Cornell Tech on Manhattan's Roosevelt Island.

According to Collins, the genesis of the new campus was a comprehensive study in 2008 that gave then-mayor Michael Bloomberg insight to as to how to develop and strengthen the city's economy.

"He took those inputs and concluded there was a real opportunity to dramatically boost the amount of activity that goes on in the tech sector by building an applied sciences campus," he said, adding that Cornell, with its home campus in Ithaca, New York and an existing presence in the Big Apple with its medical school took note. "We realized this was an immense opportunity."

The selection process was a quick one, said Collins, lasting about one year from the time the Bloomberg administration sent an email requesting "expression of interest" for the project in December 2010.

Interest was expressed by 28 universities from around the world, including Cornell and Technion who then teamed up for the final stage which involved choosing from among 7 full proposals. The competition came down to a head-to-head faceoff between the Cornell and Technion union versus tech powerhouse Stanford University.

“If you know anything about technology, you have to know that is a very formidable opponent,” said Collins who earned his PhD in chemical engineering from the Pennsylvania State University.

The lure of becoming Silicon Valley East was an enticing prospect for New York City officials but Cornell, an Ivy League institution, played up the local angle and prevailed. The message Collins and his associates delivered was straightforward he recalled.

“Cornell is in the state of New York, we’re the land-grant school for New York, we’re not going to abandon this campus, ever. This is something right at home with what we do.”

The announcement by Mayor Bloomberg that the new campus would be created by the Cornell-Technion alliance was delivered in December of 2011 and Cornell Tech began offering classes in Google’s Manhattan building in the fall of 2012 and the Roosevelt Island campus was dedicated on September 13, 2017.

The new campus of Cornell University is expected to promote innovation and growth of the city’s tech sector while complementing existing economic strengths, which include a high concentration of international advertising, communications and health companies. Anticipated benefits to the city’s local economy include addressing an existing shortage of tech talent by providing another resource for residents to acquire needed skills and then find employment or become entrepreneurs and start companies of their own. The combination of education and economic development reflects attributes of Cornell and Technion.

Besides the academic credibility of Cornell’s highly-ranked College of Engineering which was founded in 1870, Collins says the partnership with Technion - Israel Institute of Technology brings an element that academia is not known for. “They’re incredibly entrepreneurial and they brought that spirit to the campus for us.”

Current graduate programs combine technical depth with real-world experience by bringing together elements of engineering, business and design to form interdisciplinary hubs such as connective media, built environment and healthcare/life.

“Technology is not just technical,” said Collins who added that these hubs would be closely linked to New York-based industries such as advertising.

There are currently about 300 graduate students studying for degrees in areas such as computer science and connective media. The first of three construction phases has been completed, developing about 5 of Cornell Tech’s 12 acres. You can learn more about Cornell Tech by visiting online at tech.cornell.edu.