



Joseph R. Gromek



David E. Van Zandt

Keeping The New School New

An Interview with Joseph R. Gromek, Board Chair,
and David E. Van Zandt, President, The New School



Rendering of the new University Center
at 65 Fifth Avenue in New York City

EDITORS' NOTE In November 2012, *The New School* announced that Joseph Gromek had been unanimously elected to serve as Board Chair. Gromek is an influential leader in the global apparel industry, responsible for a complete turnaround at Warnaco Group, Inc., where he served as President and CEO from 2003 until February 2012. Gromek became a Trustee at *The New School* in 2011 but has been playing a leadership role since 2005 when he was elected to the Board of Governors of Parsons *The New School for Design*.

David Van Zandt became President of *The New School* in 2011. Prior to that, he served as Dean of the Northwestern University School of Law beginning in 1995. Van Zandt received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the London School of Economics. He graduated with a B.A. from Princeton University in 1975, received his J.D. from Yale Law School in 1981, and clerked for Justice Harry A. Blackmun, United States Supreme Court.

INSTITUTION BRIEF A leading university in New York, *The New School* (www.newschool.edu), was founded in 1919 as a center of intellectual and artistic freedom. Today, *The New School* is still in the vanguard of innovation and experimentation in higher education with more than 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students in design and the social sciences, liberal arts, management and public policy, the arts, and media. Committed to public engagement, *The New School* welcomes thousands of New Yorkers yearly to its celebrated public programs and maintains a global presence through its online learning programs, research institutes, and international partnerships. In 2014, *The New School* will open a new University Center, which will bring together the range of disciplines and serve as a campus hub.

How did *The New School* evolve into what is has become today?

Van Zandt: The New School was founded by a group of prominent academics that wanted to create an entirely new kind of learning environment. Even then, it was a place for tolerant discussion of important political and social issues of the day.

For our first 10 years, guest academics would come to lecture or teach a class. Adults would come – often after a full day of work – and the school quickly became part of the fabric

of New York's Greenwich Village during an artistic and intellectual heyday. In 1933, *The New School* opened its doors to a large number of German Jewish social scientists exiled by Hitler in his purge of universities. Within a number of years, *The New School* started to offer Ph.D. and Masters degree programs in the basic social sciences, philosophy, and history. For 30 or more years, that was the heart of *The New School*.

In the late '40s and early '50s, *The New School* began a degree completion course aimed originally at GIs returning from the war. Over time, we met the growing need for a more traditional university with full-time undergraduate students, a schedule of recurring courses, and even dormitories.

Today, the heart of the school is the connection between our historic strengths in the social sciences and new strengths in design through Parsons, which became a part of *The New School* in 1970. Of course, "design" at Parsons is broadly construed. Our students learn to design objects, environments, communication, systems, and organizations that meet social and human needs. We're still focusing on creativity, innovation, and questioning the status quo, along with social engagement in New York and around the world.

How does *The New School* experience differ from a traditional college experience?

Van Zandt: The New School is not a traditional undergraduate college with a leafy green campus and dozens of sports teams – students don't come to us for that. It's also not comprehensive in terms of offering every subject in the academic universe. Our focus is on the social sciences and design, as well as the liberal arts, public administration and management, the arts, and media. We are all problem-solvers, focused on the social and the human end of the spectrum.

How successful has your international outreach been?

Van Zandt: One of our strongest assets is our location at the center of the greatest global city in the world.

About 30 percent of our undergraduate student body is from outside the U.S. Parsons, which is known all over the world, is nearly 40 percent international. We are reopening a campus for Parsons in Paris in the fall of 2013 and developing a presence in Asia, another place where Parsons is highly regarded. Every economy in the world is looking for people who can be creative, who can devise new solutions to global problems. That is an area of real intellectual strength for us.

Joe, what is the significance of your role at *The New School*?

Gromek: Today, higher education is in a state of flux, so I'm approaching my role with an eye towards anticipating what will be needed in the future. As the Board's leader, I mean to ensure that we have the financial stability that *The New School* needs to continue to thrive for another 100 years.

Pricing and tuition keep going up. Is dialogue taking place to enact change in this area?

Van Zandt: The dialogue is occurring all the time, but there is no clear answer. We face pressure from new entrants like online schools, but I am convinced that only positive change comes from that healthy competition. We are learning from our peers and improving our delivery, so we can successfully compete with an array of rich academic offerings.

It's important to understand that our goal is not to cut costs to attract students, but to optimize what we do well, which is providing the highest quality education. As I've indicated, we specialize in a few areas that are underserved by most colleges and universities but remain critical to the future of economies around the world.

Joe, do you approach your role from a business perspective?

Gromek: Administratively, there are dozens of lessons from the world of business that can benefit *The New School*. I want to ensure that we use technology appropriately to gain efficiencies, which can go a long way in helping contain the cost of higher education. I want to be certain our brand is deployed effectively. And I support David's commitment to providing students with superb services, both inside and outside of the classroom, and to inspire the faculty and the staff.

How do you envision your role at *The New School*, beyond your leadership with respect to administrative matters?

Gromek: As David mentioned, one of the key values and strengths of *The New School* is its focus on innovation – a quality in great demand today. I plan to continue to leverage my connections in the business world and design industries to connect graduates with professional opportunities and increase support of the university. I've been Chair since November, and I'm now more convinced than ever before that things are happening at *The New School* that could never happen anywhere else. ●