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# Crossing Beyond the Boundaries: Columbia University in West Harlem

Marilyn Taylor

Situated on New York's Upper West Side, Columbia University in the City of New York has long been one of America's most urban universities. Yet, like virtually all such major institutions, Columbia today has a tremendous need for space, particularly to serve growing needs for interdisciplinary academic and research initiatives including science, engineering and technology.

Development of such buildings is bringing nearly all urban universities into contested neighborhood settings. However, rather than approach this need incrementally, ad hoc, Columbia's leaders have chosen to propose a plan to be implemented over three or more decades, with commitment to distinctive urban form and active public engagement.

## A Bypassed Neighborhood

Here is a picture of the West Harlem area into which Columbia plans to invest.

As the Upper West Side of Manhattan extends north from 50th Street, its topography rises dramatically from riverfront edge to a series of highlands whose names we know as the major neighborhoods of this part of the city: Morningside Heights, Hamilton Heights, Sugar Hill, Washington Heights. But between Morningside Heights and Hamilton Heights, the ground plane dips to the level of the river, and 125th Street cuts diagonally across the city grid to follow the valley to the river's edge. This accident of topography created one of the city's most interesting, yet



The implementation of this plan entails the rezoning of 35 acres currently zoned for manufacturing, of which some 17 acres are intended for Columbia's future use. These sites are located on contiguous blocks between Broadway and 12th Avenue, from 125th to 133rd Street, as well as on three blocks east of Broadway.

Today, the area includes industrial buildings, many of which are underutilized and obsolete, and a small residential population (there are approximately 140 apartments in the area, of which half are now vacant). Over time, Columbia envisions that it will acquire, reuse, and recombine sites and buildings in this 17-acre area. These sites offer an opportunity, rare in New York, to create footprints for the broad range of facilities Columbia already needs.

**Above:** Section east to west through proposed Columbia Manhattanville campus. Riverside Drive passes on a viaduct to the west, the IRT tracks to the east. Drawing courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

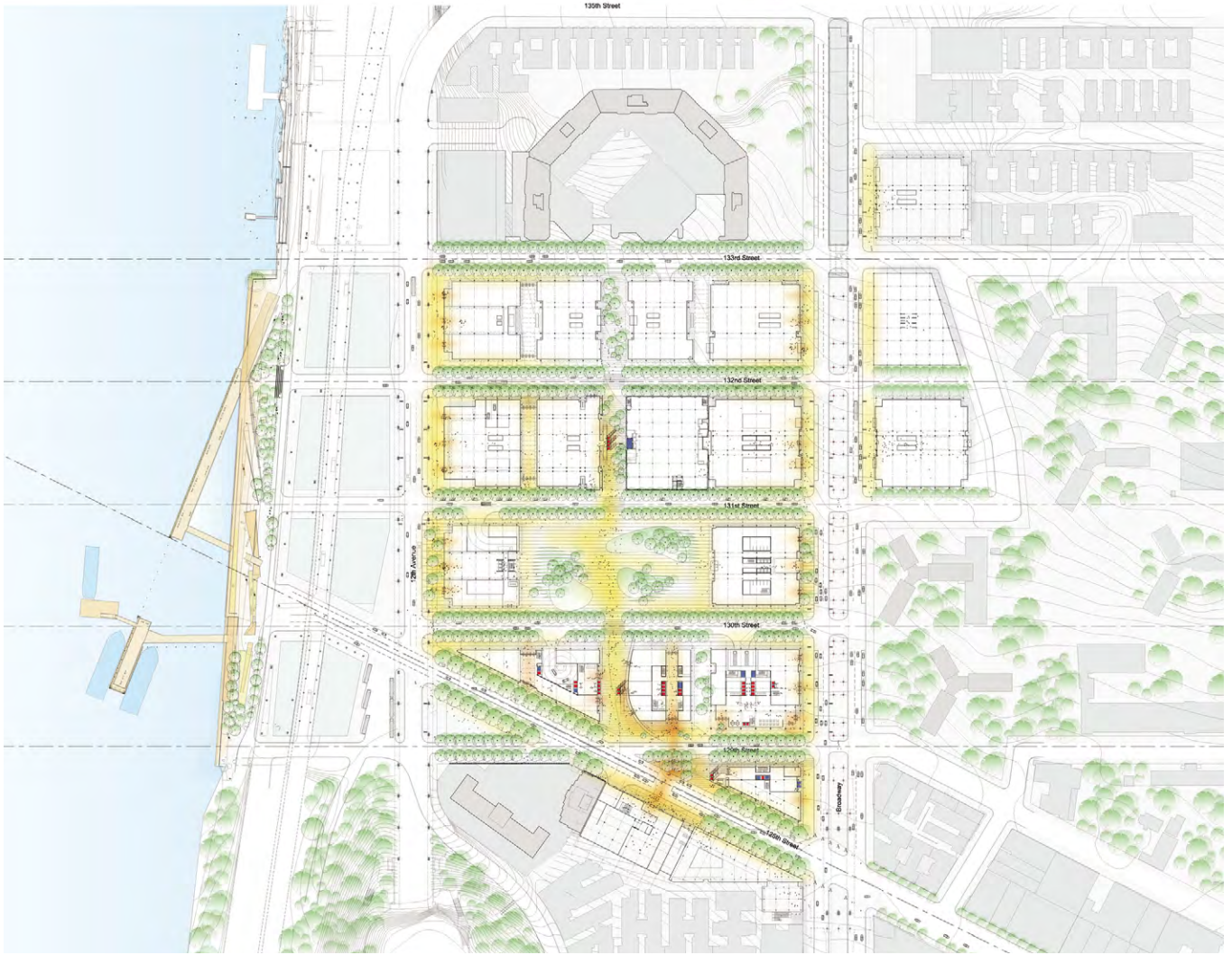
**Opposite:** Plan of the proposed new Manhattanville campus. 125th Street would cut diagonally across its lower edge. Broadway would separate it from existing public housing (winged buildings) to the east (right). Drawing courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, with Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

generally unknown, neighborhoods: Manhattanville.

Manhattanville began as a precolonial village, home to both Patriot and Tory families, serving hillside farms. Over time it became a stagecoach stop, with connections to lower Manhattan, and then, given the abundant water supply and river connections, it began to attract various industries to serve the growing city.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Manhattanville was also the site of two significant public works that were both to link it more firmly to the region, while simultaneously beginning the process of "passing it by." One was the IRT subway, which was built below-grade, along Broadway. At Manhattanville, however, the IRT was designed to emerge from its tunnels onto an elevated structure some twelve blocks long, keeping the trains at level grade while spanning the valley. To the west, Riverside Drive followed suit, riding above gracious bolted metal arches and tying together the Olmstedian landscapes of riverside parkland being created to the south and north. Manhattanville's main industries — milk processing, stables, and increasingly automobile assembly, service, and storage — were now located "between the viaducts."

In the second half of the twentieth century, Manhat-



Manhattanville became the location for a number of initiatives that served the critical need for both public and private housing. To the east in the 1950s, Manhattanville Houses, Grant Houses, and Morningside Gardens were built by a combination of public agencies. These were superblocks that in the fashion of the times created generous open space while overwriting the scale and connectivity of the grid. Construction of the massive Riverside Park Community Gardens on 133rd Street in 1976 added another superblock to the neighborhood. Meanwhile, industries languished, a bus maintenance depot and utility services replaced them, and jobs fled the leftover area between the viaducts.

As these changes were taking place, Columbia's main campus, located immediately to the south on Morningside Heights, continued to grow. As it sought additional land for student and faculty residences, it moved closer to the area in 1964, when it built an apartment complex for faculty just south of 125th Street. But it anchored this acquisition in the uplands to the south by providing it with a Riverside Drive address and only a back door on 125th Street. Today, however, Columbia proposes a major investment into this area as a means of regenerating this neighborhood for a 21st century future.

To a certain extent this view is supported by its neighbors, who have initiated plans to reclaim the waterfront as parkland and to create a mixed-use district in this area. Among the issues are economic ones: will Columbia offer — and deliver — much-needed jobs and economic activity in return for the opportunity to invest and become an important presence in Manhattanville?

### **Campus and Not Campus**

Renzo Piano of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop and Marilyn Taylor of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP are together leading the urban design and planning work for Columbia. Our collaboration, still in preliminary stages, is intended to create a place of transparency, porosity, and urbanity. Of these, the principal quality we imagine is urbanity: a place that promotes interaction, among communities of the university, neighborhood and city. In future years, the major advances and breakthroughs in higher education and research will likely occur in the intersection of disciplines, of ways of thinking. Achieving positive relationships with communities also requires understanding the intersections of their goals and the opportunities to meet them.



This twenty-first-century urbanity is in direct contrast to the twentieth-century version that created the character and “gravitas” of the Morningside campus. The introspection and formality of this classic space created a magnificent presence. But it was one conceived as fundamentally separate from the surrounding city. In Manhattanville, we envision the energy of the city and academy flowing together.

We hope this will create a place that is simultaneously “campus” and “not campus.”

We envision a connective network of accessible open spaces, including a central “square,” several smaller piazzas, and a continuous north-south passage breaking down the 800-ft. dimension of New York’s West Side blocks. Columbia will retain legal ownership of these spaces, but in keeping with the larger vision for the area, their quality and success will be measured by the sense of invitation they offer and the mix of people who will enjoy them.

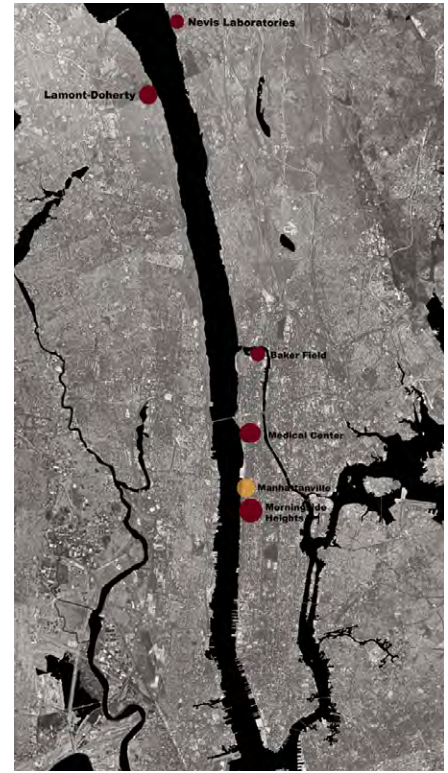
Another, more functional but essential aspect of the plan will be an extensive and contiguous basement area that Columbia will own. One might think of this multistory

below-grade space, extending beneath three cross-town streets, as a “factory” that will support the academic and research activities above. Among other things, it might accommodate an energy center, support services for the sciences, central loading and distribution, athletic facilities, and parking. Locating these uses below-grade instead of above, and combining them instead of distributing them, will enhance the quality of the public realm and the efficiency of university operations. It will also leave above-ground spaces for the development of an enlivened public realm.

While the above aspects of the plan recall a more traditional campus setting, other aspects will be deliberately “not campus.” For example, we envision a broad mix of uses in buildings of different size and articulation, each with a highly transparent and porous ground floor. The floors closest to the street would thus become an “urban layer,” where most activities would not be university related, but rather neighborhood-serving shops, cafes, restaurants, bookstores, exhibit and meeting areas, and perhaps theaters and performance spaces as well.

Another “not-campus” element will be the fully public nature of all streets crossing the site. During the decades

Rendering, looking northwest, of 125th Street as it would cut through the site. Drawing courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with Renzo Piano Building Workshop.



of change to come in Manhattanville, we expect that many existing and new uses, other than Columbia's, will continue to be a part of neighborhood. For example, we hope the rezoning will encourage the emergence of a wonderful and distinctive 12th Avenue market and entertainment district, between this site and the river, building on the existing food market (Fairway) and serving the neighborhood at large.

### A Neighborhood Image

Our thinking also envisions that this new area of Columbia will be realized through a distinctive architecture that builds on Manhattanville's industrial past. This will make reference to the neighborhood's history of bold industrial forms, viaducts, and factories by revealing primary structure and enriching the reference through metal-and-glass curtain walls, canopies, double skins, and stairs. As in the factories for car assembly and milk pasteurization that formerly occupied this area, the buildings will be designed for transparency. The metal and glass vocabulary will be complemented by the warmth and color of terra cotta panels, screens, and interior wood.

The result will be more public than civic, with a sense of place not dependent on formality. In the end we hope

it will contribute another distinctive neighborhood to the many already existing in New York. New York's look, if it has one, is built on thousands of individual, entrepreneurial actions that have come together to make an extraordinary city. We want to add to that.

A remarkable array of great urban institutions across fields of health science, research, education, and culture will be essential to the next wave of job creation and economic vitality, particularly for world cities and for America. Jobs will look different, be different, and occur in different places than we have previously experienced. The boundaries between the academy and the workplace will become less defined. So too will the distance between the city and the academy diminish. This will create a new urbanity, energized by learning, characterized by interaction. Only time will tell whether we call that a "campus."

**Left:** Aerial view of site looking southwest. Columbia's main Morningside Heights campus is just off the top (south) of the image. Photo courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

**Right:** The new campus would be one of several Columbia facilities along the Hudson River. Photo courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with Renzo Piano Building Workshop.