On Campus

Smart Growth

Columbia’s got a long-range plan to advance academics and revitalize West Harlem.

By
David J. Craig
|
Summer 2006

Standing atop a spacious, grassy plateau in northern Manhattan in the early 1890s, Columbia officials liked what they saw: ferryboats creeping up the Hudson, farms scattered across the lush Harlem lowlands to the northeast, and the city grid just a few blocks away to the south. The city would come within a stone’s throw in a few years, and yet, up here, the University could be set off slightly from the noisy urban bustle and provide a measure of tranquility.

Also alluring was a rustic village nestled in a deep valley a quarter mile upriver. Long known as a summer getaway for wealthy merchants, Manhattanville prospered as a trade and transportation hub, too, in the late 19th century. Here, barges could deliver, and local tradesmen could work, the massive quantities of limestone, granite, lumber, and steel necessary to build what writers soon would call the “Acropolis of America.”

And so it happened that over the next decade, Columbia, along with the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine and a handful of other institutions, built one of the city’s most architecturally stunning neighborhoods, Morningside Heights, on a rocky hill where farms and an insane asylum once stood. The construction rush, which accelerated when the subway was extended to the area in 1904, transformed Manhattanville as well. By 1910, its streets were crammed with warehouses and tenements and its middle and upper classes had fled to newer, quieter neighborhoods on the valley’s crests. Swallowed up by West Harlem in the 1920s, Manhattanville remained a working port for a few more years, says local historian Eric K. Washington, but by mid-century it went the way of most manufacturing enclaves on the Hudson River waterfront, declining in prominence.

Today, walking north on Broadway, away from Columbia's tidy Beaux-Arts campus, you know that you've left Morningside Heights when this industrial tract appears beneath the iconic subway viaduct at 125th Street. Manhattanville, like most of New York City, is much safer now than it was a couple decades ago, but some things haven't changed. Its eerily quiet cross streets, dominated by warehouses and auto repair shops, indicate that the burst of economic investment that affected many parts of Harlem in recent years skipped this area.

When Columbia officials look down these streets now, out toward the slow-moving Hudson framed by the gigantic arches of the Riverside Drive viaduct, they see big-time potential. They envision glass-sided academic buildings whose ground-level shops are woven into the fabric of the surrounding community, a place that's part academic enclave, part town square, where professors and students mingle with local residents in shops, in arts centers, and on lawns. The $7 billion, 18-acre project that Columbia has proposed building here would solve a critical space crunch for the University, which has all but built out its Morningside Heights campus. Columbia officials also hope that the development, which currently is being weighed by the city and neighborhood groups, will help improve the University's historically strained relationship with Harlem. They point to the thousands of local jobs and new town-gown partnerships that could be created and to the tens of millions of dollars that would be funneled to the city in annual payroll tax revenue.

"We want to build in a way that matches the sensibility of our time," says President Lee Bollinger. "That means merging physically with the surrounding community rather than being isolated from it. To do that in Harlem, with its distinctive arts and culture and its legacy of social engagement and achievement, is a great opportunity for Columbia. It's also a challenge, because sometimes Columbia is seen as being up on a hill. So to go out into Harlem successfully, in a human way that doesn't reinforce that sense of distance, is a very meaningful and important task for us."

Case for space

At the corner of Broadway and 129th Street today is an Amoco gas station flanked by a storage facility and a pay-by-the-day parking lot. Ten years from now, a neuroscience research and teaching center could stand here.The Jerome L. Greene Science Center, to be led by renowned neurobiologist Thomas Jessell and Nobel

laureates Richard Axel and Eric Kandel, all Columbia professors, will advance the University's interdisciplinary studies on the mind, brain, and behavior. It is already supported by a $200 million gift from Dawn Greene and the Jerome L. Greene Foundation in memory of Dawn's late husband, a prominent lawyer who graduated from the College in 1926 and from the School of Law in 1928. The center is the best example of "a crucial academic initiative that will exist finally because we have space for it," says Robert Kasdin, the University's senior executive vice president.

Space is a precious commodity for urban universities these days, and for none more so than Columbia. Among the Ivies, CU has the fewest square feet per student, with just half that of its most space-constrained peer, Harvard. Despite its cramped Manhattan surroundings, Columbia has managed to acquire about 200,000 square feet annually since 1994, but that hasn't kept pace with the University's institutional growth. Faculty and students have inadequate facilities, classes are packed, and academic departments are being shuffled to outlying properties as the University buys them, one by one.

Campus construction around the country, meanwhile, has exploded. Annual spending on building projects at U.S. higher education institutions nearly tripled between 1993 and 2003, according to an analysis last year by *American School & University* magazine, and the trend has barely slowed since. The growth is fueled in part by the need to replace or renovate facilities built during the enrollment boom of the 1960s and '70s, the desire to develop biotechnology research parks, and favorable economic conditions. Among Columbia's peers, Harvard and Penn currently are undertaking massive expansions, of 200 and 40 acres, respectively.

When Bollinger became president in 2002, he ranked space acquisition among his top priorities. He also decided that future growth should follow a comprehensive, long-term strategy. "The University's growth in recent decades had an ad hoc quality, picking up a building here, a building there," he says. "If that's the only way your institution grows, it stifles your imagination and intellectual agenda."

Columbia commissioned a planning study in 2003 that identified Manhattanville as the best area for a full-fledged campus extension. A key selling point was its locale, nearly adjacent to the Morningside Heights campus and between it and the CU Medical Center at 168th Street. The University previously had considered developing a satellite campus in New Jersey, in Westchester, N.Y., or on Manhattan's West Side below 72nd Street, but Bollinger wanted to stay in this community.

“I have a strong belief in the virtue of proximity for a university,” he says. “It’s important for scholars to feel that they are part of a community that values what you might call an ‘academic temperament,’ which is difficult to sustain in the modern world. If we start having suburban satellite campuses, the numbers of people there would be too small to sustain that kind of community.”

Another factor in choosing Manhattanville is that the 18-acre area Columbia would develop is sparsely populated. University officials say significantly fewer than the existing 140 residential units in the project area are occupied. They have said that Columbia will relocate the residents to similar or better apartments nearby if the city gives the project a green light.

In the City of New York

Starting at 125th Street and extending north about four blocks and one block west from Broadway to 12th Avenue, parallel to the Hudson, Columbia’s new complex would consist of 16 to 18 buildings, to be developed gradually over the next 30 years. The project’s first phase, which Columbia hopes to complete by 2015, would be situated on the southern end of the proposed expansion area, near 125th Street. According to preliminary plans, it would include the Jerome L. Greene Science Center, new School of the Arts facilities, an academic conference center, and at least one other major academic building. Also part of the first phase will be a new public secondary school for math, science, and engineering, which Columbia plans to operate jointly with the city and to open in a temporary location in fall 2007. The magnet school for high-performing students will reserve space for youngsters from northern Manhattan, above 96th Street.

In contrast to the inward-looking campus on Morningside Heights, with its gates, stone walls, and tall fences, Columbia would create in Manhattanville a “light, inviting, and transparent” public realm, says architect Marilyn Taylor, a partner in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. She is planning the campus with Renzo Piano, the renowned Italian architect who created the Pompidou Center in Paris, renovated New York City’s Morgan Library and Museum, and is designing a new skyscraper on 8th Avenue for the New York Times Company. Their design for Columbia’s new campus calls for all streets to remain open to traffic, but with wider sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly landscaping. One goal is to encourage public access to a long

corridor of green space that eventually would stretch the north-south length of campus, as well as to a new $18 million public waterfront park the city is building directly west of 12th Avenue.

Columbia's buildings would be 12 to 25 stories tall, matching the height of the high-rise housing across Broadway, but they would be set back from the street with green space, Taylor says, creating a spacious atmosphere and offering expansive views of the Hudson. The bottom two floors of most buildings would be designated for restaurants, shops, and community centers, and would feature all-glass exteriors to emphasize their accessibility.

The plans are inspired by Manhattanville's history, embodied especially by a few old buildings that Columbia would preserve and by two immense barriers that dramatically frame the area — the viaduct that carries the subway above Broadway and, running parallel to it, the Riverside Drive viaduct above 12th Avenue, nearer the Hudson. "Both were built in the first decade of the 20th century, and I think that they speak to man's ability to bring places together, to make connections," Taylor says. Columbia's new campus, she points out, will help connect the thousands of local residents living east of Broadway to the waterfront just west of the development. "This area has always had a hard, industrial quality to it," she says. "It was for trains, boats, and trucks. But now it will be for people. It's really a wonderful land resource. The way the sunlight falls on this area from behind the Hudson in the afternoon and early evening really is one of the city's finest moments."

According to preliminary plans, the campus eventually would also include CU housing, athletics and recreation facilities, a retail center, additional academic and research buildings, and a huge subterranean complex for swimming and diving pools, parking, and maintenance facilities. An important function of the deep basement, Kasdin says, is keeping unsightly mechanical equipment like cooling and heating systems and truck docks below ground, thus preserving the scenic and pedestrian-friendly character of the public spaces above. The entire development would give the University an additional 6.8 million square feet.

"We can't say precisely how Columbia will use some of these buildings because our successors will determine that, in accordance with their research agendas," says Kasdin. "Part of our goal is getting future generations the resources they'll need."

Columbia now owns more than half the properties in the proposed expansion zone and is negotiating for others. It would remove most of the red brick and concrete buildings in the area, but properties not needed in the project's first phase likely would remain standing for several years and continue to support commercial and other uses. Columbia will preserve three historic properties: the Nash Motor Car Company on Broadway, which Columbia already owns, and the Studebaker Building on 131st Street, for which it holds a long-term lease with an option to buy, will be used partly for offices; and Prentis Hall, an old milk-bottling plant on 125th Street that Columbia has owned since 1949 and already houses CU art studios, will be renovated. Work on these buildings is moving forward, as they don't require rezoning.

When finished, the new campus, together with existing University facilities in the immediate area, would directly support about 9000 jobs, primarily administrative, technical, clerical, and support positions at the University, as well as retail and restaurant jobs. According to an Appleseed survey of employers, approximately 1200 people worked in the proposed expansion zone as of February 2004, which is about 35 percent fewer than in 1984. (CU officials say that about 700 of those 1200 jobs are with public agencies or large private employers, including Columbia, whose jobs likely would be relocated or, in the case of the University's jobs, remain.) Preliminary estimates indicate that the construction would support the equivalent of more than 1000 full-time jobs annually; CU would continue its current practice of contracting with companies that are owned by and employ minorities, women, and local residents. Operating expenses for the completed campus would provide the city $33 million in annual tax revenue, and the state $29 million.

Commoner ground

Columbia's plan likely will be submitted to the city for rezoning approvals this fall, and urban planning experts say it has a lot going for it. "The area is ripe for redevelopment, and Mayor [Michael] Bloomberg has been very supportive of large revitalization projects," says Susan Fainstein, a Columbia urban planning professor. "Manufacturing is not among his top priorities, and he values the role of higher education in the city's economy, which makes him different from some previous mayors."

Columbia, in fact, paid nearly $720 million to New York City vendors for goods and services in 2004, not including construction. The University has spent more than $200 million annually on construction in recent years, with more than 80 percent of contracts going to firms based in the city. CU is the city's seventh-largest nongovernmental employer, with 31 percent of its 15,000 employees residing in northern Manhattan.

Speaking at a Columbia press conference on March 20 to announce the $200 million gift for the Jerome L. Greene Science Center, Bloomberg said the center "will make a major contribution to the city," and he credited Columbia with helping lead a bioscience boom in Manhattan. U.S. Representative Charles Rangel also spoke to praise the center.

The tricky part now is gaining the support of neighbors. The University convened a 38-member community advisory committee to get feedback in 2003 and has since held more than 100 town hall–style meetings, open houses, and walking tours, but there is vocal opposition to some of the plan's details. Neighbors want Columbia to erect shorter buildings than its plan calls for and to preserve more architecture, and they want to attract manufacturing back to the area. A pervasive concern is that Columbia's development would alter the character of the area because rents would escalate, edging out longtime residents and business owners. A booming real estate market has dramatically transformed Manhattan in recent years, and Harlem, with its large stock of century-old brownstones, is changing rapidly. "The overwhelming majority of Harlem residents are renters, and that's certainly true in the West Harlem neighborhoods just north of where Columbia would develop," says David Maurrasse, a Columbia adjunct assistant professor of public affairs and the author of the recent book *Listening to Harlem: Gentrification, Community, and Business*. "There's little public housing in those areas, as well. You've got an open market, and the susceptibility to gentrification and displacement is high."

Another matter of contention involves Columbia's desire to have all the land in the four-block area in question to create a cohesive campus and to make room for the underground complex that will house mechanical and other facilities. A handful of property owners don't want to sell, and the University has said that it is unwilling to take off the table the possibility of asking the state to exert its authority on eminent domain. Bloomberg has strongly supported the use of eminent domain for private development, but many community members are opposed to its use in Manhattanville. "The sticking point has always been eminent domain," says Maritta

Dunn, a member of the neighborhood's official planning group, Community Board 9 (CB9). "That is what originally marshaled the community so hard."

Columbia officials say that they are still working to negotiate the purchase of the properties that they do not yet own in the expansion zone.

Currently, the University is working with CB9 to find compromises on several matters. The University also is preparing for the city the required environmental impact statement on how its development might affect the neighborhood's physical and socioeconomic environment, examining everything from air quality and traffic to housing and gentrification. The report will detail what steps Columbia will take to offset any detrimental effects, including the potential displacement of nearby residents whose rents increase as a result of the area's revitalization. In addition, the University will negotiate with neighbors a legally binding community benefits agreement; through these agreements, developers outline benefits such as those involving employment preferences and job training for local residents or affordable housing initiatives. Community leaders currently are organizing a local development corporation, a legal entity to negotiate with Columbia. The University has already promised that the campus will not contain a Level 4 biocontainment lab, where research is conducted on the most hazardous materials, such as biotoxins.

And how might local residents benefit from the educational and cultural resources on the new campus? Informal discussions between University officials and community leaders about potential town-gown collaborations have already begun. Columbia currently has hundreds of outreach programs in Harlem, and the Manhattanville campus is expected to generate new ones.

"We expect to have a major arts presence on the campus, and we've already had preliminary conversations with people from the Harlem Arts Alliance about the range of possibilities," says Maxine Griffith, Columbia's executive vice president for government and community affairs. Developing collaborative science programs with local schools, she says, is another possibility. "There's going to be a lot of energy directed at working with children in Harlem, and we're eager to have broader conversations about other types of community benefits."

The development's ultimate success, say Columbia officials, depends on balancing the University's responsibility to its immediate neighbors with its commitment to the larger public good, exemplified by its research and teaching mission. "Columbia has

been in this neighborhood for 100 years, and the new campus will show our continuing commitment to the area," says Robert Kasdin. "It also will give us the laboratories we need to continue making discoveries that, for example, improve health and patient care through neuroscience research."

Those discoveries, Bollinger says, are waiting to be made. "Universities live on dreams," he says, "dreams about what knowledge can be, about what students can learn, and about what the next generation can do. But dreaming is a lot harder if you constantly confront the question, Where are we going to get the space? When I arrived as president, it became clear to me that Columbia's need for space, if not addressed, had the potential to inhibit the evolution of the institution, and that if it were addressed in a major way, it could unlock incredible potential. In Manhattanville, we have an opportunity to do that — to serve society by advancing education and research, while also contributing to the surrounding community and creating the intellectual capital that is essential for New York City to remain an economic and cultural leader."

Turning the Page on '68

As Columbia officials and representatives appointed by Community Board 9 prepare to negotiate a community benefits agreement as part of the University's proposed redevelopment of Manhattanville, there is a specter in the background: the historic tension between CU and Harlem, embodied most famously by the University's ill-fated plans in 1968 to build a gym in Morningside Park, with a separate entrance for local residents. The anger that boiled over then toward Columbia, from both student activists and Harlem residents, was caused in part by the University's disengagement from the local community.

"[Then president] Grayson Kirk's attitude was that Columbia was an international institution that happened to be in this neighborhood, and that it wasn't appropriate for Columbia to focus on the areas immediately surrounding it," says Roger Lehecka '67CC, '74GSAS, a former dean of the College who retired last year after 30 years at CU. As a student in 1965, Lehecka helped found the Double Discovery Center, which every year brings more than 1000 public school students from Harlem and surrounding communities to Columbia to be tutored by undergraduates. Back then, he says, Columbia provided little institutional support for such projects.

That began changing soon after 1968, Lehecka says, and by the 1980s, Columbia and Harlem were collaborating extensively. “Michael Sovern was the first Columbia president to have really meaningful community outreach planning, and George Rupp took it a notch higher,” he says. “Lee [Bollinger] and his team now are building on those changes.”

Today, Columbia offers hundreds of programs and services targeting the needs of Harlem, Manhattanville, and Washington Heights. The Public School Teacher Development Project, for instance, provides technical assistance and training to public school teachers in the community; law students provide a wide variety of free legal aid services there; and through Community Impact, undergraduate students serve 8000 people each year, providing food, shelter, clothing, job training, and companionship. In addition, the University opened a career center at Broadway and 125th Street last year to help place local residents in Columbia jobs. Columbia researchers also address the needs of the local community: for example, the Center for the Health of Urban Minorities in 2003 received a $6 million grant to study health challenges faced by minorities in northern Manhattan.

“I’m sure that as part of the new campus, Columbia will invest more resources in Harlem,” says David Maurrasse, a CU faculty member who heads the nonprofit management consulting firm Marga Incorporated. “And it’s important that Columbia does that the right way, by taking inventory of what the community wants, assessing which programs work best and which do not, and generally establishing a cohesive strategy for communicating with Harlem about its needs. The fact is that people in Harlem still don’t expect much of Columbia. There is residual tension from 1968, and there is a sense that communication between Columbia and Harlem still is not great. So it’s good that their relationship is in the spotlight. For both sides, it’s a teachable moment.”

For Columbia, “building a strong, lasting, and beneficial relationship with our neighbors is tremendously important,” says Maxine Griffith, CU’s executive vice president for government and community affairs. “Preliminary discussions . . . have led us to appreciate the wide range of [new] partnerships and collaborations possible with our community and neighbors, and we’re eager to move these discussions forward.”

Read more from ***David J. Craig***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **David J. Craig***