



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the City Planning Commission
By Lisa Kersavage, Director of Advocacy and Policy
Regarding Community Board 9's 197-a plan; Columbia University's 197-c action; and
the West Harlem Special District
October 4, 2007

The Municipal Art Society of New York is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art. In 1989, the MAS created the Planning Center to support and provide assistance in the creation of 197-a plans and to find ways to strengthen the role of 197-a plans in the city's overall planning process.

I am Lisa Kersavage, Director of Advocacy and Policy, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society. The MAS is pleased to submit comments on Community Board 9's 197-a plan; Columbia University's 197-c action; and the West Harlem Special District.

The challenge before the decision makers is that the 197-a plan and Columbia's Expansion Plan contain contradictory visions. While we are strong proponents of community-based plans and the consensus-driven process and voices they represent, we also have respect for Columbia University as a stakeholder in West Harlem with a clear and real need to expand its facilities to meet the challenges of a 21st century university. Our hope is that through dialogue, perhaps aided by City Planning, the community and Columbia can agree to important changes to both the 197-a and the 197-c plans, which would accommodate Columbia's growth while being guided by the community's planning goals.

What follows is a list of recommendations, some of which attempt to bridge the gap between the 197-a and 197-c plans, and others are new ideas that we believe would improve Columbia's proposal. Those new ideas include relocating Columbia's primary public park, maximizing the potential of the Viaduct to create a dynamic urban room, and the need for a public process related to the demapping of the streets. These recommendations are based on planning principles MAS has applied to review of many projects (drawn in large part from Jane Jacobs), including keeping streets and open spaces public, involving the public in the process, keeping a mix of old and new buildings, and a mixture of uses.

Under the grand filigreed arches of the historic viaduct, we see potential for 12th Avenue becoming a new vibrant core of a dynamic neighborhood. The lively mix of relocated park, new campus, dynamic small manufacturing uses like art galleries and printers, would be tied together by the soaring and highlighted viaduct. Twelfth Avenue could consequently become an exciting, stimulating focus of student and community life — in the same way as Union Square in Manhattan— and serve to connect Columbia's new campus as well as the surrounding community to the waterfront.

Public Open Spaces

Columbia's plan calls for several small public park spaces, and one larger park (between 131 and 132 Streets). The siting of the park in the center of the campus is problematic as it will be surrounded by relatively tall buildings, and thus at certain times of the year covered in shadow. It is also the least accessible to the most public and trafficked streets.

MAS recommends an alternative location for that park space that would maximize public access. Moving it to the site of buildings #9 and #10 (between 131st and 132nd Streets, 12th Avenue and the pedestrian way) would make it feel far more public, because it opens onto the more heavily trafficked avenue and would be completely surrounded by streets. It would also be more open to light and air because of the relative low height of the Studebaker building and the lack of a building on 12th Avenue. The park would serve to highlight some of the most striking historic features of the district - the Studebaker building and the Riverside Viaduct. And it would create a better link to Riverside Park. The West Market Diner is currently located on the site, and once un-clad, it could remain in the park and be used as originally intended.

MAS Recommendation: Move the primary park space in the Academic Use Subdistrict A in order to maximize public access and light and air to the surrounding areas.

Historic Resources

One of the most striking visual elements of the neighborhood is the Riverside Drive viaduct above Twelfth Avenue, spanning the ravine that forms Manhattanville. The space below the Viaduct is framed by low-lying buildings that create a public room, yet barely confine the Viaduct itself, allowing light and air to penetrate, and for its sculptural qualities to be fully viewed. It is important that new buildings not block views of the viaduct, or overwhelm the room underneath it.

Requiring height limitations close to the Viaduct (as the 197a plan calls for), and setting back taller buildings from the Viaduct (as the 197c plan requires) would help achieve those goals. Moving taller structures even further back (as in the 197a plan) would go further in assuring that views of and from under the landmark Viaduct are protected, as would reuse of any existing buildings. Moving the park space slightly north and west to abut the Viaduct, as we would recommend, would allow great views of and an invitation to the viaduct room and the riverfront park just beyond. The viaduct's spatial qualities would be celebrated if Columbia were to light up the filigreed steel arches, perhaps drawing inspiration from lighting design employed at the Coney Island Parachute Jump.

There are a number of historic buildings and sites throughout Columbia's project area, some that have been identified as significant and others that play a role as contributing to the character of the area. We support Columbia for their plans to retain and reuse some of the most important buildings, including the Studebaker Building (615 West 131st Street) the Former Warren Nash Service Station building (3280 Broadway), the West Market Diner (659 West 131st Street) and the Claremont Theater (3320 Broadway). Columbia plans to move the diner, which we support, but we encourage keeping it in the project area. We recommend that in a separate action the Landmarks Preservation Commission designate those buildings they found eligible -- the Studebaker Building and, just outside of the Columbia project area, the Former Lee Brothers Storage Building (571 Riverside Drive).

Overall, we urge Columbia to retain as many historic buildings as possible. Doing so would better knit the new campus into the existing neighborhoods and create a more lively development. To that end, we urge the retention of the Former Sheffield Farms Stable (3229 Broadway), which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The stable is a companion building to the Sheffield Farms Dairy
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(632 W 125 Street), currently in use by Columbia. Both were designed by the same architect, Frank Rooke.

MAS Recommendation: Highlight the area's most striking visual resource, the viaduct, through zoning devices that include a wider adjacent setbacks and moving the central campus park. Retain as many historic resources as feasible, including the former Sheffield Stable building. Urge LPC to designate Studebaker and Lee Brother Storage Buildings.

Public Streets

It is important that the streets through and around Columbia's project area remain legally public, and also "feel" public. To that end, we support both Community Board #9's 197-a plan and Columbia's 197-c application, which call for all east-west streets to be open. To increase access to the waterfront, we urge the city to extend 131st Street west from 12th Avenue to Marginal Street and the park, as recommended in the 197-a plan. We support Columbia's plan to add a north-south pedestrian way at mid-block between Broadway and 12th Avenue connecting 125 and 133 Streets. While that would not be a mapped public street, it does accomplish the time-proven goal of creating short blocks that will improve pedestrian circulation and increase the choice of routes. To further the public feel of this private street, we urge Columbia to allow for ground-level retail uses that would encourage people to walk through the campus.

MAS Recommendation: MAS supports ensuring public access and a public "feel" to all east-west streets and Columbia's plan to add a north south pedestrian way in the proposed Academic Use Subdistrict A, and encourage retail uses along that pedestrian way. To increase access to the waterfront, we urge the city to extend 131st Street west from 12th Avenue to Marginal Street and the park.

Public Process

Columbia has chosen to seek ESDC power to override the City map in order to build an extensive below-grade component, which many are referring to as the "bathtub." In order to ensure real community involvement, and ensure that the public streets remain truly public, we recommend that the City demap the volumes for Columbia's cellar, pursuant to ULURP, rather than the ESDC overriding the City Map.

Furthermore, while the proposed "bathtub" may have positive attributes, the community has not been provided any of the details necessary to understand the myriad of environmental impacts of such a substantial underground structure. In order to ensure that those details are brought to the public, we recommend that Columbia release the details, when known, and provide a forum in which the public can comment on the construction of the "bathtub." We suspect that it will be necessary for Columbia to conduct a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, which would further disclose the impacts of the "bathtub" on our environment.

Site acquisition remains something to be addressed through further dialogue between Columbia and property owners. While Columbia has agreed not to pursue eminent domain for the remaining residential properties in its proposed campus, the non-residential properties are still at issue. Every effort should be made by Columbia to negotiate directly with these property owners.

MAS Recommendation: The City demap the volumes for Columbia's cellar, pursuant to ULURP, rather than the ESDC overriding the City Map. Columbia release the details and provide a forum in which the public can comment regarding the construction of the "bathtub,"

perhaps in a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. Every effort should be made by Columbia to negotiate directly with these property owners.

Diversity of Uses West of 12th Avenue

The 197-a plan proposes rezoning the area west of 12th Avenue to a low density, light manufacturing district that permits a wide range of small high performance manufacturing and related retail uses, such as specialty food manufacturers, brew pubs, art studios, set designers, printers and photographers, interspersed with restaurants and cafes, all of which would create a vibrant nexus of activity along Twelfth Avenue and enhance the experience of the “viaduct room.” The 197-c plan would allow a range of retail and service uses that would be likely to replace industrial production and sales uses.

We support the 197-a plan’s recommendations because the zoning would better protect those manufacturing uses that remain, increase the likelihood of adding new, high-performing manufacturing uses, and effectively support the existing character and economy of the neighborhood. Twelfth Avenue could consequently become an exciting, stimulating focus of student and community life — in the same way as Union Square in Manhattan— and serve to connect Columbia’s new campus as well as the surrounding community to the waterfront. We further suggest that an incentive for manufacturing use be included in the zoning for the area east of 12th Avenue.

MAS Recommendation: Support the 197-a plan’s Manhattanville Special Purpose District for Subdistrict B (the area west of 12th Avenue).

Affordable Housing

Community Board #9’s 197-a plan has determined that there is a great need for affordable housing in the community, and proposes various approaches to protect existing housing and to add affordable units. Columbia’s development will eliminate existing housing in the campus, and may cause its cost to increase. We understand that Columbia, at the urging of the Borough President’s office, has agreed to create a \$20 million affordable housing fund to in part alleviate displacement. While that amount alone will not go very far in addressing local housing need, it can be leveraged with other funding sources to create a bigger pool of funds, and it is a good starting point. The next step is to understand the details of how and when the Columbia fund will be disbursed, managed, and leveraged.

The existing housing in the project area is concentrated in a row of buildings along the west side of Broadway between 132nd and 133rd streets, and we urge the retention of those buildings for housing. If the row of housing were kept it would preserve ¾ of the existing housing in the project area and reduce shadows on the playground of IS 195 across Broadway. The retention of the row would reduce the lot area of Columbia’s new buildings but need not constrain the size or shape of their floors.

We also support the Borough President’s 197-c initiative, which will accomplish many of the recommendations in the 197-a plan concerning housing – including contextual zoning, inclusionary zoning, anti-harassment, and redevelopment of underbuilt sites – apply outside of the project area.

MAS Recommendation: Retain the existing housing on Broadway between 132 and 133 Streets. Support Columbia’s affordable housing fund and the Borough President’s 197-c initiative.

Conclusion

Finally, as we stated in our testimony to the Borough President, we believe that Columbia and the community working together could create a better urban design solution. While Columbia has a grand vision for an urban campus, it is important that the new development be knitted into the existing urban fabric. This is no small task, but it seems possible that if Columbia adopts some of the goals of the 197-a plan, including maintaining more of a mix of old and new buildings and some mixture of uses, the plan would be improved.