

The Radiant University: Space, Urban Redevelopment, and the Public Good

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Abstract

In 2003, Columbia University announced its plan to expand its Morningside Heights into a 17-acre area of West Harlem known as Manhattanville. The University's expansion plan called for the acquisition and demolition of all but three buildings in the project's footprint and the construction of a state of the art campus over a roughly 30-year period. This article examines the discourses, debates and politics surrounding the project and, in particular, the University's demand for exclusive control of the site and ultimate pursuit of eminent domain. To that end, university officials claimed that the expansion would bolster the city's knowledge based economy and, as a consequence, serve the "public good"—a requirement for the exercise of eminent domain. By contrast, critics of the project argued for a mixed-use redevelopment plan that would include affordable housing and other community-defined amenities. [New York City, university, gentrification, eminent domain, housing]

One brisk morning in February 2009, a neighbor told me about a rally that was to take place later that day at La Floridita, a Cuban-owned restaurant in West Harlem. Floridita was a popular and affordable restaurant that attracted ethnically diverse customers from the immediate area and beyond. The rally had been organized by Columbia University's Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification (SCEG), and was being held to protest the imminent closing and demolition of the restaurant, pursuant to the University's plan to expand its Morningside Heights campus into a 17-acre area of West Harlem known as Manhattanville.

The University's US\$6.7 billion expansion plan called for the acquisition and demolition of all but three buildings in the project's footprint and the construction of a state of the art campus over a roughly 30-year period. Columbia had been buying properties in Manhattanville for nearly a decade and, in 2004, purchased the squat building at the corner of Broadway and 129th Street that housed Floridita, an Eritrean social club, and three other commercial tenants. On July 18, 2008, the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC), a New York State agency charged with promoting economic development, approved the University's expansion plan and, after determining that Manhattanville was suffering from conditions of "urban blight," cleared the way for the exercise of eminent domain; that is, the state appropriation of private property with compensation but without the consent of property owners.

The use of eminent domain was a lightning rod for community opposition to the expansion plan. Although critics of the project recognized Columbia's right to expand its campus, they opposed the University's demand for exclusive control of the project's 17-acre footprint. For its part, the University maintained that the research that would be done at its new campus would serve the public good; directly, by researching cures for illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease and, indirectly, by helping to usher the city into a knowledge-based economic future.

I arrived at the protest late. About fifty persons, most of them Columbia students, had gathered inside Floridita where its owner, Ramon Diaz, treated them to a free lunch. Diaz's uncle had opened la Floridita in 1965 and Ramon had taken it over in 2006. When I arrived, the youthful crowd was spilling out onto the street. Some carried signs, reading "Good Neighbors Respect their Neighbors" and "*Hasta la Floridita siempre!*," a word play on Che Guevara's famous sign off in his last letter to Fidel Castro, "*Hasta la victoria siempre!*" [Always towards victory!].

The protest was to take the form of a walking tour of the 17-acre project site. The tour was to be led by three community activists who had been staunch opponents of the University's expansion: Nellie Bailey, president of the Harlem Tenants Council, a tenants rights organization; Vicky Gholson, a member of West Harlem's Community Board 9, which had opposed the campus expansion plan; and Mario Mazzoni, an activist working with the Coalition to Preserve Community, a community organization that had been formed in 2002 to resist the expansion plan. Once the crowd had gathered on 129th Street, Gholson raised her bullhorn and directed the group to make its way to a gas station located further along the triangular shaped block. The station was one of two in the area owned by Gurnam Singh and his wife Parminder Kaur, immigrants from the Punjab in Northern India. The couple had started the Manhattanville businesses 25 years earlier (New York Times, 20 Sept 2008). In 2009, Singh was one of two property owners who had refused to sell to the University. The other property owners, whose buildings housed a motley assortment of car repair shops, meat wholesalers and small manufacturing shops, had already sold their properties to the University, according to some, under considerable pressure. The second holdout, Nick Sprayregen, owned Tuck-It-Away, a self-storage company that occupied three large buildings within the proposed project's footprint. The crowd gathered around the gas station's office where Singh, a stately, bearded man of 47, was standing. He listened as Bailey recounted the history of the conflict over the expansion and summarized what she believed would be its negative consequences. Singh then took the bullhorn and explained that, although University officials had offered to relocate the couple's two gas stations, it would take years to reestablish the businesses elsewhere. Located on 125th Street, a principal east west route, and in close proximity to the entrance and exit ramps of the Henry Hudson Parkway, the gas stations enjoyed ideal locations.

At each stop along the tour—a large self-storage facility, a booming barbeque restaurant and two recently renovated apartment buildings—



Figure 1. Rally at the gas station of Gunam Singh. Photo by author.

Gholson, Bailey and Mazzoni situated each site in history and in space, challenging the State’s finding that the neighborhood was “blighted” and the University’s characterization of the area as an “obsolete” former manufacturing district. At a car repair shop, Mazzoni paused and raised his bullhorn. The repair shop was bustling with activity. Cars in various states of repair filled the garage and curbside parking spaces. A half dozen or so mechanics looked on with curiosity. “This is a good example of the kind of business that Columbia says is blighting the area. But this repair shop provides good jobs and provides a service that people in the community need. Why should Columbia, using the threat of eminent domain, have the power to decide what the needs of this community are? Or determine which jobs and businesses are valuable and worth saving?”

This article examines the debate and politics surrounding Columbia University’s expansion plan and the state’s approval of the use of eminent domain. I am interested in how supporters of the expansion plan constructed the significance of urban space and history in relation to assertions about the city’s economic future. Columbia and its supporters represented Manhattanville as an obsolete, former manufacturing district that was no longer capable of contributing to the city’s economy—an area that was lacking in vitality and stalled in time. In support of this narrative, the project’s boosters mustered a visual rhetoric that stoked modernist anxieties about urbanism and, more to the point, the disorderly street. The project’s designers proffered a symbolic economy rooted in an aesthetic of “transparency;” a symbolic economy that they maintained was better suited to the city’s post-industrial future.

I argue that this discourse of transparency—framed as a solution to urban blight—served to elide the asymmetrical power relations that underpin urban land use decisions and, as a result, masked the social consequences of elite-driven development policies. A critical analysis of these discourses and their related practices can shed light on the

spatial ideologies that are mobilized to support neoliberal development strategies. Just as economic neoliberalism imagines “free” markets unencumbered by state regulation, this discourse of transparency evoked a spatial economy unencumbered by history; that is, by the spatialized interests, practices and struggles of the past.

Some background

As early as 1991, West Harlem’s Community Board 9 had begun preparing a comprehensive redevelopment plan for the area

In the fall of 2003, Columbia announced its plan to expand its Morningside Heights campus into Manhattanville. The area’s potential for redevelopment had long been recognized by public and private planners due to its extraordinary access to subway, rail and water transportation, and to the Henry Hudson Parkway. As early as 1991, West Harlem’s Community Board 9 (CB 9) had begun preparing a comprehensive redevelopment plan for the area pursuant to Section 197-a of the New York City Charter.¹ CB 9’s redevelopment plan underscored Manhattanville’s potential for creating jobs and business opportunities that would benefit the residents of West Harlem. CB 9’s plan was revised in 2001 and again in June 2005, when it was certified as complete for consideration by the NYC Department of City Planning. In August of 2002, the NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) published the West Harlem Master Plan for the redevelopment of Manhattanville. The plan was informed by EDC consultations with an array of community organizations and local businesses. A key long-term objective of the Master Plan was the creation of an “intermodal hub” that would improve public transportation access to Manhattanville and the piers area. This plan included the extension of bus service to 12th Avenue, establishing ferry service to the recreation pier, and the construction of a Metro-North station at 125th Street, thus restoring the area’s link to rail service along the Hudson River.

Although the Master Plan envisioned the growth of “multiple uses and a mixture of new and existing jobs,” a goal that suggested broad community participation during the plan’s implementation, the Economic Development Corporation had already ceded “lead responsibility” to Columbia for the institutional and economic redevelopment of the area, and “joint lead responsibility” with the EDC for its necessary rezoning. In January 2003, the University submitted the Columbia Master Plan to the EDC, which asserted the University’s *exclusive* control over the Manhattanville industrial area. Columbia officials claimed that exclusive control was necessary in order to construct a “bathtub” below the site; that is, a seven story subterranean basement that would conceal the new campus’s infrastructure and enable pedestrian traffic between buildings.² In that same year, the EDC included in its plan documents supporting the exercise of condemnation proceedings in Manhattanville, pursuant to the City’s Eminent Domain Procedure Law (EDPL § 207). To that purpose, the EDC retained the consulting firm Urbitran Associates, Inc. to determine whether or not Manhattanville was “blighted”—a prerequisite for the approval of eminent domain. In 2004, the NYS

Empire Development Corporation (ESDC), the only state agency empowered to approve eminent domain, began promoting the Columbia Master Plan, convening a series of meetings with University officials, lawyers and consultants. Beginning in 2002, Columbia accelerated its acquisition of properties in Manhattanville; by 2005, the University had acquired 28 of the 67 properties in the area (*Tuck-it-Away v. ESDC* 2009). According to community activists and property owners in Manhattanville, Columbia pressured tenants to vacate university owned properties, and refused to renew leases for longer than one year—a commercially unviable term (*New York Times*, 21 Dec 2007).

In short, by 2004, Columbia had “harnessed” the power and resources of public authorities (e.g., the EDC and the ESDC) in support of a plan that called for the University’s *exclusive* control of the 17-acre project site—an assertion that could only be realized through the exercise of eminent domain (c.f. Hirsch 1998). Despite these facts on the ground, Columbia publicly expressed its openness to community input. In 2004, the University convened a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to provide “feedback and guidance from a broad spectrum of community leaders” (CAC 2004:2). Committee members included representatives from not-for-profit organizations, Community Boards and other interested parties in Northern Manhattan: Peggy Shepard, a long time environmental justice advocate in Harlem, chaired the committee on environment, and the Reverend Earl Kooperkamp, pastor of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Manhattanville, chaired the committee on Economic Development.

The Committee’s draft final report, issued on September 10, 2004, addressed a broad range of economic, cultural and environmental issues, maintaining that “community engagement must continue to be embedded in University development plans, recognizing the University cannot be an island to itself” (2004:3). The Committee’s report voiced community concerns about the exercise of eminent domain and the project’s impact on affordable housing, cultural diversity and economic equity.

Although the CAC had called for ongoing dialogue with University officials during the course of the planning process, the Committee was summarily dissolved following the publication of its final report.

Hell no we won’t go!

Columbia’s proposed expansion into Manhattanville and the State’s proceedings to exercise eminent domain did not go unopposed. The Harlem Tenants Council (HTC), a community-based tenants organization, convened public meetings and conferences on the Columbia plan, linking the campus expansion to the Council’s broader stance against gentrification and illegal evictions. Founded in 1994 by Nellie Hester Bailey, the HTC had long been an advocate of affordable housing and tenant rights. A second community based group, the Coalition to Preserve Community (CPC), was founded in 2002 with the

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express purpose of opposing the Columbia expansion plan. Led by Tom Demott, a Columbia University graduate (CC'80), the Coalition convened local residents, students, members of CB 9 and representatives of other groups opposed to the expansion. In the years after its founding, CPC sponsored demonstrations in front of the University and elsewhere, and provided testimony at public hearings.

On Saturday, June 10th 2006, the Coalition to Preserve Community joined with the Harlem Tenants Council and other community groups to march and rally against the gentrification of Northern Manhattan Harlem under the umbrella group, *Nos Quedamos* (Project Remain). *Nos Quedamos* had been founded in 2006 by New York State Assemblyman Adriano Espaillatt (the first Dominican-American to be elected to a state legislature) and the City University of New York Law School to help tenants in Northern Manhattan fight illegal evictions and landlord harassment. Supporters of the Harlem Tenants Council and Coalition to Preserve Community gathered at 9:00 A.M. in Marcus Garvey Park, located in Central Harlem, where a range of speakers voiced their opposition to tenant evictions and to Columbia's "land grab" in West Harlem. HTC and CPC spokespersons, as well as representatives of the Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification argued that the University's exclusive control of the Manhattanville site, ensured by the State's impending exercise of eminent domain, were inciting rent hikes and landlord speculation in surrounding neighborhoods.

"Why are we here?" Nellie Baily asked the assembly. "Why are we here? We are here today because, if we don't do something, if we don't organize, Harlem will cease to exist. It will become just a bus stop on tour buses from downtown. Columbia now wants to expand its campus into Manhattanville. And they don't want to work with the community. They have ignored all the proposals that were made by the Community Board and others. What they can't buy they are going to take using eminent domain. And we have to stop them!"

After the rally in Marcus Garvey Park, the protestors would join *Nos Quedamos* groups that were assembling at Broadway and 135th Street in front of the Riverside Park Community Houses, a 1,192-unit apartment complex that was at the center of an illegal eviction controversy. Many community activists believed that the rent increases and evictions at Riverside Park had been provoked by the Columbia expansion plan since the apartment complex bordered on the project footprint. When the speeches ended, about 150 persons began their march along 5th Avenue towards the rendezvous with the predominantly Latino *Nos Quedamos* rally. As we marched past the new, glass-encased condo developments and chic sidewalk cafes on Lenox Avenue, I struck up a conversation with Rosalind, a middle-aged African-American woman who, as a long-time resident of the Delano Village Apartments, was facing eviction. As the marchers chanted "Hell no we won't go!" Rosalind expressed her thoughts about the Columbia expansion: This is nothing new," she began. "Columbia has been running rough shod over Harlem for years. In 1968, they tried to build a gym in Morningside Park on public land! And

the community stopped them. Now they want to take all this,” she said, gesturing to the project footprint with a sweep of her arm. “And they don’t want to give the community any say at all.”



Figure 2. HTC supporters march to *Nos Quedamos* rally. Photo by author.

When we arrived at the Riverside Park Community Houses, feeder marches were arriving, representing Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, the Mirabal Sisters (a Dominican community-based services provider), and youth groups from Washington Heights. State Assemblyman Adriano Espaillat and other elected officials gave interviews to the Spanish language network Univision (channel 41) and to other media present, although the major English-speaking networks were absent. The lack of coverage by the major news networks of the march and other housing-related events curbed public awareness of the campus expansion and, more broadly, of the forces and effects of gentrification in Northern Manhattan.

Riverside Park Community Houses was completed in 1976, using subsidies made available by the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program, a New York State program, established in 1955 that provided low-interest mortgages and property tax exemptions to developers in return for commitments to provide housing at below market rents. In 2005, the housing complex’s owner, Jerome Belson, opted out of the program by prepaying the subsidized mortgage. This enabled Belson to adjust rents to market levels. As a result, many tenants saw their rents skyrocket while maintenance services were neglected. Many activists and tenants of the complex believed that Belson’s decision to leave Mitchell-Lama was influenced by the Columbia expansion plan and the promise of rising property values.

By 11:00 A.M., when the protestors were scheduled to begin their four-mile trek to Dyckman Street, at the tip of northern Manhattan, the crowd had grown to about 600 persons. Along the route, bystanders shouted their support, taking up the chant, “*Aqui estamos, y no nos vamos*” (Here we are, and we’re not leaving!). The march culminated at Post Avenue, where Latino and African-American and other activists



Figure 3. Local elected officials interviewed in front of the Riverside Park Community House. Photo by author.

made speeches addressing a wide range of housing and community development issues facing Northern Manhattan, including Columbia's expansion plan.

By all accounts, the *Nos Quedamos* march was a success, marshaling a multi-ethnic and multi-neighborhood coalition in support of affordable housing. The march and rally publicized pressing issues that were perceived to threaten low- and moderate-income tenants in Northern Manhattan: Columbia's expansion, the demise of Mitchell Lama Housing, and the widespread pattern of landlord harassment, price gouging and evictions that was occurring in neighborhoods experiencing the speculative and inflationary pressures of gentrification. However, the broad-based and improvised *Nos Quedamos* coalition, though demonstrating the potential power of the public, was too unwieldy and unfocused to engage effectively in the tactical skirmishes that characterized the Columbia project's process of public review. The protracted road to approval required the rezoning of the project area (i.e., from light manufacturing to mixed use), review and approval of the project's Environmental Impact Statement and General Project Plan, and a decision by the ESCD approving the use of eminent domain. At each step along the process, public hearings were held before such entities as Community Board 9, the City Planning Commission, the Manhattan Borough President and, in the end, the New York City Council. However, community input at these public hearings was restricted: public comments were typically limited to two minutes, and the opinions and judgments expressed by speakers were merely advisory.

On March 8, 2006, Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University, appeared on the Brian Lehrer Show, a radio talk show broadcast on public radio station WNYC. The subject was the University's expansion plan. Midway through the interview, Lehrer (BL) asked President Bollinger (LB) about the possible use of eminent domain.

LB: First of all, eminent domain is itself a part of our constitutional system to help achieve public purposes and, if we want to build a national park and private property stands in the way, it's very important for the collective good that we be able to have eminent domain. Columbia is a non-profit, public institution. It's not a private developer. We're not trying to make money and if a party stands in the way of developing neuroscience work which may actually find a cure to Alzheimer's—the second gene to Alzheimer's was just discovered by a Columbia scientist—that is a proper use of eminent domain.

BL: But let me just challenge you on that for a second because you just called Columbia a *public* institution. SUNY [State University of New York] is a public institution, the railroad is a public institution, Columbia is a *private* institution isn't it . . . a not-for-profit, private institution?

LB: It's a not-for-profit but it's a public institution in the sense that it—not in what we do for profit. We are funded by the Federal government to do research on issues like . . . matters like Alzheimer's. We do things in terms of like educating people in all kinds of areas.

The use of eminent domain was a lightning rod for community opposition to the Columbia expansion plan. Although CB 9 recognized the University's right to expand its campus, it opposed the latter's demand for exclusive control of the project's footprint. Moreover, some argued, Columbia's expanded campus would serve a private and not "public use," as required by the State Constitution for the exercise of eminent domain. For its part, the University maintained that the research done on the expanded campus would serve the public good. For example, on the University's website, "Manhattanville in West Harlem," it was asserted, "This kind of smart growth will not only generate thousands of new local jobs for a diversity of people, but also result in maintaining Upper Manhattan as a world center for knowledge, creativity, and solutions for society's challenges"³. The University's assertion that the campus expansion would contribute to the public good were rooted in broader claims in the media and academic literature about the increasing importance of the "knowledge economy" in producing economic growth in postindustrial cities. A concept that was first popularized by Peter Drucker in *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969), the knowledge economy has generally been used to refer to the use of knowledge technologies (information and communication technologies) and knowledge intensive activities to produce job creation and economic development.

Key to the concept is the claim that, under postindustrial conditions, intellectual capabilities have become more important to producing economic growth than physical inputs and natural resources associated with the manufacturing sector (Powell and Snellman 2004). However, some critics have argued that the rise of the knowledge industry is a presumption rather than empirically established fact since "the stock of knowledge embodied in production is difficult to measure and compare

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across time” (Chandrasekhar 2006:73). The appeal to the knowledge economy made it possible for Columbia to construct the public good in abstract and future oriented terms (the often cited promise of a cure for Alzheimer’s) while ignoring, if not discounting the needs and aspirations of surrounding communities. Ultimately, before the courts, public officials and much of the public, the appeal to the knowledge economy provided justification for the exercise of eminent domain.⁴

Transparency and the future of the city

Space and light and order. Those are the things that men need just as much as they need bread or a place to sleep.

Le Corbusier

In September 2006, the Empire State Development Corporation entered into contract with Alee King Rosen & Fleming (AKRF), a planning and engineering consulting firm, to conduct a Neighborhood Conditions Study (NCS) to determine whether or not Manhattanville was suffering from “urban blight.” Columbia indirectly funded the study since the University had agreed to fund all of the ESDC’s costs in connection with the Project (Pickel 2011). If the study determined that blighted conditions existed, the ESDC could approve the use of eminent domain to acquire private properties. In fact, AKRF had been retained by Columbia in 2004 to provide assistance in planning the campus expansion and to act as the university’s agent in seeking the regulatory approvals necessary for the project. The selection of AKRF to conduct a study that could potentially benefit its client raised serious concerns about the impartiality of its results. The AKRF study was conducted from September 2006 to April 2007 and released on November 1, 2007. The study involved a survey and analysis of the project site, and included an evaluation of building conditions, community infrastructure and land use, and environmental conditions. In the opening paragraphs of the NCS’s Executive Summary, AKRF summarized its conclusions:

Physical conditions in the study area are mainly characterized by aging, poorly maintained, and functionally obsolete industrial buildings, with little indication of recent reinvestment to reverse their generally deteriorated conditions, particularly in industrial properties. [2007:i]

The notion that Manhattanville’s buildings and, more generally, the area as a whole were “functionally obsolete” was a leitmotif that ran throughout narratives supporting the University’s expansion. For example, in his interview with Brian Lehrer, President Bollinger had opined, “it’s not realistic and it won’t help the people who live there to think that, or to act on a policy that manufacturing will return. It’s just not going to happen. And indeed, for several decades people in the

Harlem area have tried to figure out how to develop this small area we call Manhattanville in West Harlem, and nothing has happened” (8 March 2007). Columbia officials typically referred to the area as “the old Manhattanville manufacturing area,” as though it were already in the past. In fact, as noted above, C.B. 9 had already produced a 197-a plan for the redevelopment of the area, which proposed, among other things, the construction of affordable housing and the retention of manufacturing jobs.

This narrative of functional obsolescence—that Manhattanville was temporally locked in its industrial past—was strengthened by the contention that it was physically and “visually isolated” from surrounding neighborhoods. The AKRF study maintained that the 17-acre project area was isolated from Harlem to the east by the elevated IRT subway viaduct. On the north, the study maintained that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s bus depot separated the study area from the neighborhood of Hamilton Heights. These facilities, the study argued, impeded if not blocked the flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic through the area. Moreover, AKRF argued:

Pedestrian movement through the study area is also affected by changes in topography across the study area from north to south and east to west, a condition exacerbated by the absence of significant business or recreational destinations within the study area and lack of sidewalk amenities. This physical and visual isolation, together with the types of land uses in the study area, results in limited use of the area by pedestrians, particularly after dusk. The area is essentially treeless, uninviting to pedestrians, and bleak. [2007:iv]

This rhetoric of “blockage” and “opacity,” was echoed in other planning and publicity documents associated with the expansion plan, and gestured to an anxiety in modernist architecture and urban planning associated with obscure, illegible and blocked urban spatial forms and relations—qualities of the built environment that formed the discursive foundation of AKRF’s Manhattanville analysis. The modernist architect, Le Corbusier, expressed this anxiety, if not paranoia, in his 1929 article, “The Street.”

The street . . . rising straight up from it are walls of houses, which when seen against the skyline present a grotesquely jagged silhouette of gables, attics, and zinc chimneys. At the very bottom of this scenic railway lies the street, plunged in eternal twilight. The sky is a remote hope far, far above it. The street is no more than a trench, a deep cleft, and a narrow passage. And although we have been accustomed to it for more than a thousand years, our hearts are always oppressed by the constriction of its enclosing walls. [quoted in Vidler 2011:44; cf. Jacobs 1961]

By contrast, “transparency,” achieved in modernist architecture through glass construction, was associated with a greater openness in

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society, the transcendence of archaic ways of thinking and, for Le Corbusier, “the end of superstition and irrationality” (McQuire 2003:109). This preoccupation with the use of glass architecture had its roots in the *neues Bauen* (new building) movement in Weimar-era Germany, and was closely associated with the designers Paul Scheerbarth and Bruno Taut (Jarosinski 2002). Scheerbarth envisioned a revolutionary “glass culture” that would yield a new transparent landscape and an enlightened civilization, one that would progress through technology and the transformation of the built environment. Writing in 1930, Taut observed:

The old times can never be resuscitated, and it must be their atmosphere of mold and decay that exercises that strange power of suggestion which fogs the brains of the otherwise clear thinkers of the present. The resort to graveyards and the love of ghosts seem in truth to express a passion for the past. [quoted in Jarosinski 2002:68–69]

If the “atmosphere of mold and decay” recalls the rhetorical strategy of the AKRF study, then Taut’s verdict on the past brings to mind Bollinger’s certainty that the decline of the city’s manufacturing economy was irreversible: “It’s just not going to happen,” he had presaged during his interview on WNYC. In contrast to Manhattanville’s obsolete, neglected present, visually revealed by its lack of transparency, Columbia proposed the opposite: a glass campus that would shepherd the university and the city into a future of scientific innovation and “smart growth.” An article about the campus expansion in the *Architectural Record* summed up its architectural vision as conceived by architect Renzo Piano:

Punctuated by tree-lined quads, his buildings are meant to bring a new, open sense to the neighborhood. Their ground floors will host retail stores and restaurants. “We put the dirty functions—garbage, ramps, parking, and loading—underground, because they make a very *opaque* environment, and we put the research facilities up higher so that everything on the ground is more transparent and public, [Piano] says.” [Davis 2007:1; emphasis added]

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In contrast to its gated Morningside campus, the project’s boosters asserted that the glass structures of the new campus would be more accessible and inviting to residents of Harlem and elsewhere. “New buildings will not only be open to the public,” the project’s website, *Neighbors*, observed, “but will also look and feel open because of transparent glass at the street level” (<http://neighbors.columbia.edu/pages/manplanning>). Dirty and disorderly functions, reminiscent of Manhattanville’s obsolete past would be concealed below ground, while research functions oriented toward the future, ascend into the sky. Like Le Corbusier’s *Radiant City*, the new campus design would erase the present in order to discard history and annul memory.

If the rhetoric of transparency promised deliverance from the area’s murky industrial past towards a radiant economic future, then it also proposed a utopian ideal of community, “an urge to unity,” as Iris Young

put it, in which the self is transparent to the self and to others (1990:229). Michel Foucault, noting the complementary relation of Jeremy Bentham's panoptic schema and its will to "universal transparency" to the "Rousseauist dream," explained:

It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogative of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each. [1980:152]

This ideal of transparency and the more strategic claim that glass architecture would "look and feel open" to residents of Harlem and elsewhere not only privileged vision as a way of comprehending the world, but also elided the complex, historically constituted relations of power that existed between the university and its surrounding neighborhoods and, more generally, Northern Manhattan—asymmetrical power relations that yielded varied consequences to the act of "being seen." Like Bentham's quest for universal transparency through the carceral Panopticon, the glass campus would render the street and public space more vulnerable to surveillance than the research laboratories housed inside. Far from welcoming social differences, this will to transparency "represses the ontological difference of subjects," as Iris Young put it, discounting asymmetries in the effects of visibility between those who exercise power and those who are subject to its gaze (1990:230).

Indeed, although the project's plan promised openness and transparency, its progress through the complex process of public approval had been far from transparent. For example, the AKRF Neighborhood Conditions Study failed to report that the west side of 12th Avenue (the study excluded the west side of the avenue) had been undergoing something of an urban renaissance. More generally, as Tuck-it-Away's 2009 petition to the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division against the ESDC argued, the AKRF report was bereft of any economic analysis of the area. In 1995, Fairway, a 35,000-square-foot supermarket, opened on 12th Avenue in a former meat packing plant. A combination gourmet and wholesale food store, Fairway boasted a 250-car parking lot and drew customers from as far away as New Jersey and Westchester County. In fact, the *Columbia University Record* had celebrated Fairway's opening in 1996. In an article entitled "Fairway Brings Crowds to Harlem," the *Record* proclaimed, "On the sidewalks of Broadway and 125th Street, from the clogged West Side Highway off-ramp, in taxis and shuttle buses, people are heading toward Harlem's new sprawling discount supermarket on the Hudson River waterfront at 133rd Street" (1996:1).

Fairway's success attracted visitors and other businesses to the area. In 2004, Dinosaur Bar-B-Que opened on the east side of 12th Avenue at 131st Street. The popular barbeque restaurant featured live music and

attracted throngs of customers from Harlem, Washington Heights and as far away as Connecticut. Soon afterwards, a plumbing contractor bought an abandoned railroad freight warehouse on the west side of 12th Avenue, just north of the Columbia project area. Encouraged, in part, by the planned \$18.7 million renovation of two nearby Hudson River piers, the new owner leased the 20,900 square foot building to restaurateurs, prompting the New York Times to describe the area as an emerging “restaurant row” (Gregor 2006). By 2008, the area had acquired the nickname “ViVa,” for Viaduct Valley (Salkin 2008).

In this light, the AKRF study’s assertion in 2007 that pedestrian and vehicular traffic to the area was “impeded” by the MTA’s bus terminal and by the Broadway subway Viaduct, and worsened by a lack of “significant destinations” was dubious at best. To be sure, well before the AKRF study was conducted, 12th Avenue had been a busy conduit for vehicular traffic not only because of its proximity to the entry and exit ramps of the West Side Highway, but also because the founding of Fairway, Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, and the businesses on “restaurant row” had turned 12th Avenue into a destination for pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The AKRF Neighborhood Conditions Study had simply ignored the west side of 12th Avenue and the street life that it had generated.

The AKRF

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the west side of

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the street life that

it had generated

The NCS also noted that 72 percent of the properties surveyed were either owned by, or under contract to Columbia, leading critics of the expansion to charge that the University had been complicit in their deterioration. In fact, of the 18 color photographs documenting blight presented in the NCS’s section, “Current Conditions,” all but two were taken in properties owned by the University at the time of the study’s release on November 1, 2007. The coincidence of neglect, underutilization and “lack of transparency” with Columbia ownership prompted critics of the project to charge that the University was itself responsible for the “blight” since, in many cases, their vacant status and underutilization was a consequence of their purchase by the University. As a member of Harlem’s Community Board 9 put it to me, “Columbia has basically blighted the neighborhood by buying it up and by keeping most of what they bought vacant. You know, the life was drained out of the neighborhood. A whole lot of what was going on in the footprint, economic activity, social life, is no longer going on. It’s a dead zone.”

The fact that, at the time of the release of AKRF’s Neighborhood Conditions study, the majority of buildings in the study area were owned by Columbia, presented something of a paradox. On the one hand, since Columbia owned many of the “blighted” buildings, why had the University not taken steps to remove building code violations and conduct repairs to ensure the safety of the tenants and public? On the other hand, if the University had brought the properties up to code, how could the area still be described as blighted? In an appendix to its General Project Plan (GPP), the university described the building condition of the 37 buildings that it owned along with the “stabilization efforts” that had made to repair them. Although the conditions of the buildings varied, each of the 37 descriptions included the boilerplate sentence: “It

appeared that prior to Columbia University's acquisition of this property there was an extended period of neglect and failure to maintain equipment and systems in the building."

On March 3, 2007, the West Harlem Business Group, a coalition of Manhattanville property owners who had resisted the University's efforts to buy their properties, filed an Article 78, Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) petition in the New York State Supreme Court. The petition alleged that the New York State Economic Development Corporation (ESDC) had colluded with the University by hiring AKRF, and sought the release of relevant ESDC documents. On June 27, 2007, State Supreme Court judge Shirley Werner Kornreich ordered the ESDC to release 117 documents and correspondences that shed light on the ESDC's relationship to Columbia and the latter's consultant, AKRF. Justice Kornreich ruled in her decision that, "while acting for Columbia, AKRF has an interest of its own in the outcome of respondent's action (i.e., the ESDC's), as AKRF, presumably, seeks to succeed in securing an outcome that its client, Columbia, would favor" (New York Times, 30 June 2007).

The ESDC appealed the court's FOIL decision, arguing among other things that a "Chinese wall" had been erected between the AKRF team working for the ESDC, and the AKRF team working for the university. Consequently, the ESDC argued, AKRF's Neighborhood Conditions Study was not biased towards Columbia's interests. On 15 July 2008, the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court upheld the earlier court's ruling. Justice Catterson, writing for the majority, concluded:

It is undisputed that AKRF has worked to promote ESDC's adoption of Columbia's GPP [i.e., General Project Plan]. AKRF has been participating in project planning since at least June of 2004 through meetings with ESDC. While in Columbia's employ, AKRF has studied technical, engineering and environmental issues, helping thereby to determine the size, shape and configuration of the proposed project. *AKRF has consistently acted as an advocate for Columbia in seeking ESDC's adoption of Columbia's proposal.* [Catterson 2008:19; emphasis added]

If the overall analysis presented in AKRF's Neighborhood Conditions Study had been tainted by its preexisting relationship to the University, so too, it could be argued, were the more detailed assessments of building conditions. Thornton Tomasetti, Inc., a structural engineering firm, was subcontracted by AKRF to conduct the analysis of building conditions in the area. The Chairman and co-founder of Thornton Tomasetti was Richard Tomasetti, an Adjunct Professor at Columbia in the Department of Civil Engineering and Engineering Mechanics (<http://www.civil.columbia.edu/directory>).

On July 17, 2008, two days after the Appellate Court's ruling, the board of the Empire State Development Corporation met in Manhattan and approved the university's General Project Plan (GPP). In its finding, the ESDC concluded that, "[The project] would maintain the status of the city and New York as centers for higher education, for new graduate

programs and scientific research, [and] allow Columbia to maintain its position as one of the foremost educational and cultural institutions in the world” (Philippidis 2008). At the meeting, Avi Schick, president and chief operating officer of the ESDC, also announced that the AKRF Neighborhood Conditions Study was not the sole basis for determining that Manhattanville was blighted: a second NCS had been conducted by a consulting firm not associated with Columbia which had confirmed ARKF’s conclusions. The second study, conducted by EarthTech, Inc., had been completed on May 2, 2008, two months before the ESDC’s approval of Columbia’s GPP.

The EarthTech study further detailed Manhattanville’s transparency problem and included an expanded section entitled “Neighborhood Isolation and Visual Conditions.” The EarthTech study reiterated the claim that Manhattanville was isolated from Harlem and Hamilton Heights and identified additional barricades (e.g., the Riverside Park Community Houses on the north) that formed “visual barriers” between the study area and surrounding residential communities (2008:2–7). To support its account of Manhattanville’s “visual clutter” and “grimness,” the EarthTech study included photographs of, among other things, cracked sidewalks, windowless building facades and a dead rat. EarthTech’s visual analysis concluded:

The neighborhood is visually isolated from its surrounding community, offering few attractions to local residents and creating unappealing traverse for pedestrians oriented to the new waterfront piers (under construction) at the terminus of W. 125th Street or the popular Fairway supermarket west of 12th Avenue. [2008:2–20]

AKRF’s blight study and EarthTech’s subsequent “audit” of its conclusions emphasized the visual and spatial isolation of Manhattanville from surrounding, largely residential areas, suggesting by implication that its razing through the exercise of eminent domain would have few if any consequences beyond its borders. This isolation claim not only discounted, by implication, the loss of jobs, businesses and affordable housing that was already occurring as the University acquired properties, but also the impact that the proposed plan would have on affordable housing throughout Northern Manhattan. Both neighborhood conditions studies proffered a spatial analysis and ideology that defined old and mixed-use buildings as “streetscape clutter” and a lack of transparency as telltale signs of neighborhood blight and obsolescence. “Although the majority of buildings are low-rise,” the EarthTech study opined, “building heights vary, creating a discordant skyline and limit any perception of coherent design” (2008:2–11).

On August 15, 2007, prior to the release of the AKRF blight study, CB 9 held a public hearing on Columbia University’s 197-c application to rezone 35 acres of West Harlem, a prerequisite for the approval of the University’s GPP. The hearing, held at the Manhattanville Community Center, drew a crowd of about 300 persons: representatives of community organizations opposing the expansion plan, and university officials and

others supporting the plan, including President Lee Bollinger and former Mayor David Dinkins, then a professor at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs. In addition, there were members of a recently formed pro-expansion group, the Coalition for the Future of Manhattanville. The Coalition had been organized by Bill Lynch, a paid Columbia consultant (at an estimated US\$40,000 per month) and Dinkins-era deputy mayor (Gonzalez 2007). Lynch had been retained (along with public relations firm Sunshine, Sachs & Associates) by the University to drum up community support for the expansion plan. The Coalition included residents, businesspersons, and others such as Hazel Dukes, President of the NAACP’s New York State Conference, and the Reverend Reginald Williams of Charity Baptist Church in Harlem (New York Times, 16 Aug 2007).

During the five hour hearing, the *Columbia Spectator* reported that 22 people testified in favor of the expansion plan and 73 against. The raucous crowd booed President Bollinger, David Dinkins, Hazel Dukes and other expansion supporters. Opponents of the plan criticized the University’s failure to engage CB 9’s alternative 197-a plan, as well as its intended resort, via the ESDC, to eminent domain. After the hearing, CB 9’s Zoning Committee voted 17-1 against the Columbia expansion project, indicating that its support would be withheld unless ten conditions were met, including the construction of low-income housing and the use of higher environmental standards. Five days later, the General Board voted 32-2 in support of the Zoning Committee’s earlier vote and 10-point resolution. Following equally contested public hearings, the Department of City Planning approved Columbia’s 197-c proposal on November 26, 2007, as did the New York City Council on December 19.

By contrast, the majority of local, citywide and state level elected officials supported the expansion plan and the use of eminent domain. Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel, State Assemblyman Keith L. T. Wright and City Councilman Robert Jackson all expressed their support at key stages in the public review process. Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer gave his support to the expansion after the University agreed to contribute \$20 million dollars to start a fund to build affordable housing in the area and provide funds for local parks in 2007 (New York Times, 27 Sept 2007).

In May of 2009, following the approval of the expansion’s General Project Plan by the Public Authorities Control Board (a final benchmark in the approval process), Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose administration supported large-scale development projects and the use of eminent domain to support private development (see Brash 2011), and Governor David Patterson issued a joint press release praising the expansion. Mayor Bloomberg’s comments echoed the language used by Columbia to promote the project as well as more general claims about the leading role of the “knowledge economy” in promoting urban economic growth.

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Columbia’s plan, which was adopted by the City Council in 2007, will transform 17 acres in West Harlem into a modern, academic mixed-use

development with 6.8 million square feet of new state-of-the-art facilities that will help solidify New York City as a world-renowned center for higher education and scientific research and enhance New York's ability to attract skilled talent. [PR 233-09, 20 May 2009]

Governor David Patterson, for his part, stressed the benefits that would be experienced by surrounding communities, "The expansion of one of New York's oldest educational institutions will enhance the vitality of both the University and its neighboring community, while meeting the long-term needs of its residents" (PR 233-09, 20 May 2009). The only public official to express strong criticism of the project and attend anti-expansion rallies was Harlem State Senator Bill Perkins. In a letter to the *New York Times* Perkins expressed his opposition to the eminent domain laws and the process of public review, "New York's eminent domain laws are in need of reform. The Empire State Development Corporation's attempted taking of private property on behalf of Columbia University illustrates how the current process lacks accountability, transparency or meaningful public review (20 Dec 2009).

On December 18, 2008, the Empire State Development Corporation voted unanimously to invoke eminent domain against properties in the project footprint that were not owned by Columbia. On January 21, 2009, Tuck-it-Away Storage owner Nick Sprayregen and gas stations owners Gurnam and Parminder Singh (the last remaining holdouts) filed separate lawsuits in the New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division, challenging the EDC's blight finding and approval of eminent domain. In a surprise decision, the Appellate Division ruled 3-2 on December 3, 2009 that the State's use of eminent domain "to benefit private an elite institution" was in violation of the Takings Clause of the U.S. Constitution and article 1§7 of the New York State Constitution (*New York Times*, 1 Jan 2010). In the joint ruling on the Sprayregen and Singh-Knauer suits, the court also determined that the finding of blight was made in "bad faith," and that the ESDC's definition of blight was unconstitutionally vague. Justice Chatterson wrote, "the blight designation in the instant case is mere sophistry. It was utilized by ESDC years after the scheme was hatched to justify the employment of eminent domain but this project has always primarily concerned a massive capital project for Columbia" (*Wall Street Journal*, 1 Jan 2010).

However, on 24 June 2010, the New York State Court of Appeals, the State's highest court, overturned the Appellate Court decision by unanimous decision. Arguing that a private university can serve a "public purpose," Judge Carmen Ciparick wrote, "the indisputably public purpose of education is particularly vital for New York City and the State to maintain their respective statuses *as global centers of higher education and academic research*" (*Columbia Spectator*, 24 June 2010; emphasis added). Ciparick's ruling echoed the language and line of argument that had been used by Columbia to justify the exercise of eminent domain and fulfill its 'public purpose' requirement. Finally, on December 13, 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal filed by Nick

Spreagen, one of the two last holdouts opposing the University's expansion plan. The Empire State Development Corporation, rehashing Columbia's justification case for expansion, commented:

ESDC is pleased that the petition for certiorari with the U.S. Supreme Court that was filed by opponents of the Columbia Manhattanville project has been denied and that the New York Court of Appeals decision stands. This victory represents a significant step toward achieving the many goals of the project, including strengthening New York as an international center for premier education and academic research programs, improving facilities and infrastructure within the footprint and the surrounding community, generating thousands of jobs for New Yorkers and creating much-needed open space in the neighborhood. [New York Observer, 13 December 2010]

In early 2011, Columbia University began the demolition of structures in Manhattanville. From the 15th floor of the building where I lived (a Columbia faculty residence on the edge of the footprint), I watched buildings vanish, as if overnight, obliterating the spatial traces and relations of a 200-year history. However, this article has been less about romanticizing the past, than about understanding the political, legal and discursive strategies that were deployed—and hotly contested—to re-imagine and reorder the socioeconomic, cultural and political uses of the built environment.



Figure 4. Post Demolition Construction begins in 2011. Photo by author.

No person or organization, to my knowledge, contested the University's right, as a property owner, to expand its campus into Manhattanville. As a faculty member, I too was well aware of the University's chronic need for space. Rather, it was the University's insistence on exclusive control of the footprint—in the name of a subterranean “bathtub”—and the State's approval of eminent domain that incited outrage and protracted resistance among a broad spectrum of community-based interests. To that end, Columbia fashioned a narrative that constructed Manhattanville as a

postindustrial dead end, whose salvation could best be achieved through “smart growth”—growth that would resurrect Manhattanville “as a world center for knowledge, creativity and solutions for society’s challenges.”

The contrast between an obsolete present and a “smart future” provided the discursive framework for the blight finding and case for eminent domain. The AKRA Neighborhood Conditions Study (and EarthTech Inc.’s subsequent “audit”) employed a rhetoric that emphasized the footprint’s visual and physical isolation from surrounding areas, and the deteriorated state and “functional obsolescence” of existing structures. To overcome this opacity the University promised “transparency,” an architectural ideal rooted in a modernist glass utopia, and in anxieties concerning the disordered diversity of the street. This discourse of transparency and of a smart, cutting edge future found its way into the documents of government agencies, the statements of politicians and, perhaps most significantly, the decisions of the courts. Considerable evidence also suggests that the Empire State Development Corporation colluded with University officials in finding Manhattanville “blighted”—a prerequisite to the approval of eminent domain. The ESDC hired Columbia’s own consultant, Alee King Rosen & Fleming, to conduct the Neighborhood Conditions Study and financed the study; EarthTech’s subsequent “audit” was no more than a rubber stamp on AKRF’s findings.

Finally, although the University signed a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) with the West Harlem Local Development Corporation (WHLDC) in 2009—a memorandum of understanding to provide amenities and/or mitigations in return for development—activists questioned the degree to which it was legally binding. The agreement called for Columbia to provide a total of US\$150 million in benefits, including US\$30 million for a university-run public school, US\$20 million for in kind services, US\$20 million for affordable housing and US\$4 million for legal assistance. In addition, US\$76 million was set aside for as yet undetermined community programs to be implemented over a 16-year period.

Activists also questioned the degree to which the WHLDC and its process of negotiation represented the interests of residents. For example, Community Board 9, which authorized the formation of the LDC in 2006, had not intended it to include elected officials. However, at its first meeting, the LDC ignored this intention and appointed elected officials or their representatives to its board. In response to this and to what they described as a lack of transparency in the review process, six member of the LDC resigned in 2007, including Tom Demott of the Coalition to Preserve Community and Earl Kooperkamp, pastor of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church. Following their resignation, seven of the fifteen member of the WHLDC were politicians.

State Senator Bill Perkins raised concerns about the CBA: “It’s a lesson in what not to do. These community benefits agreements, you have to be very careful because all that glitters is not gold, especially from the perspective of the people who live in the community, the little people” (Wall Street Journal, 28 Nov 2011). In 2011, members of

Community Board 9 argued that the WHLDC should be disbanded since it was not fulfilling its mission—as late as 2011, the WHLDC had no office, website or staff, and had not disbursed any funds in the two years following the CBA’s approval. As an activist, who had fought the expansion, lamented to me in 2012, “It was a battle between David and Goliath, and David lost.”

*It was a battle
between David
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David lost*

Notes

¹New York City is divided into 59 community boards, composed of up to 50 members appointed by the board’s Borough President. Manhattan Community Board 9 encompasses the area from 110th street to 155th street on the west side of Manhattan, the neighborhoods of Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, and Hamilton Heights. Though the Community Boards review urban land use decisions, their role is merely advisory.

²The 80 foot deep bathtub stirred controversy among opponents of the expansion on environmental grounds. Some argued that, given the project footprint’s location in a potential flood zone, the bathtub and facilities that it contained were vulnerable to flooding caused by storm surges. Columbia geophysicist Klaus Jacob, a respected authority on urban environmental issues, warned Columbia officials that a storm surge, worsened by the effects of climate change, could lead to a wide-scale disaster. According to Jacob, his concerns went unheeded. “My original concern was to help Columbia solve its own problem,” he told the Village Voice. “But for some reason, they weren’t interested. I was naïve enough to think that by mentioning something, I could make something happen” (Village Voice 1 Oct 2008; see also, Columbia Spectator, 30 Nov 2008).

³Columbia University. “Neighbors.” <http://neighbors.columbia.edu>.

⁴Akin to the concept of the knowledge economy is the notion of the “creative economy” popularized by Richard Florida (2002). The core claim advanced by Florida and others is that the creative industries—e.g., advertising, TV and radio, software development, and the arts—have become increasingly important, if not critical to economic development or, as Florida put it, “human creativity is the ultimate economic resource” (2002:xiii).

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